

Geek Mafia: Mile Zero

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by Rick Dakan

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Rick Dakan

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This is a work of fiction. All characters in this book are fictional and events portrayed in this book are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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Acknowledgments & Dedication

I dedicate this book to the memory of my uncle, Rick Nugent. Not only am I named after him, but he's also one of my biggest inspirations in life. He led the way, living life as a full-time artist on his own terms, giving me the confidence to do the same thing myself.

I want to thank all the people who helped out in the early stages of this book by spending the time to read it over and give me some feedback. Karen Dakan, Stephen Dakan, Mark Friedman, Neil Hendrick, Austin McKinley, Sherrie McKinley, Brian Ries, Laura Roberts, Laurie Roberts Porter, Rebecca Stults.

And especially Judge Wayne Miller in Key West for giving me a guided tour of the city's seedier side.

Prologue

SHE moved through the crowded streets like she owned the place. Hell, if things went as planned in the coming months, she might in fact own the place. Or some other place if that's what she wanted. If things went as planned, there was no limit to what she could have. She smiled to herself as a crowd of sunburned, middle-aged men broke ranks to let her pass on her way toward Mallory Square. They had no idea who she was, but she liked to think that they could sense her strength and that it intimidated them. Not enough to stop them from staring openly at her chest of course, but what did she expect? They were still men.

Duval Street, Key West's main tourist drag, buzzed with early evening activity. The sun had set less than an hour ago, and the throngs moving up from the nightly sunset ritual in Mallory Square now wandered about, trying to choose between the dozens of bars and restaurants vying for their attention. She moved against the general flow and seemed to know exactly where she was going. She knew these streets well and had planned out her route ahead of time.

But something bothered her. That nagging feeling in the back of her brain that she'd long ago learned to heed even though it was wrong as often as it was right. You couldn't survive in her world without learning to pay attention to such feelings, and she'd more than survived - she'd prospered beyond the dreams of any young hacker or con artist. Heeding the subliminal warning, she changed plans and stepped out into the crawling Duval Street traffic. A purple taxi honked angrily but she just smiled as she strode across the street and stared intently at a display of cheap, tasteless Tshirts in a storefront window.

She had no interest in wearing anything with the phrase "Fart Inspector" on it, whatever that meant, but she did want a chance to get a quick 360-degree look at her surroundings and the people in them. A young couple, their baby strapped into a stroller and grabbing in vain at passersby. Four good-looking men in their 30s, probably gay, chatting amiably with one another. A pair of slightly chubby, badly sunburned young women headed into the bar next door. Dozens of other tourists and a few locals. Nothing out of the ordinary for... no, wait. There.

An older man with a well-groomed beard, indistinguishable from the others except that he was alone. She'd seen him earlier, somewhere. She couldn't quite remember where, but he'd been alone then too. He was too professional to

jaywalk after her, but he'd gone up to the next corner and was now crossing over to her side of the street. She let him finish crossing before she turned and started walking again, headed back up the way she'd come from. At the corner of Petronia she turned right, toward Truman Annex.

Losing him now would be simple, assuming he was alone. But he could have help, and she wanted to string him/them along a little and see if anyone else had taken an interest in her. It didn't occur to her to be scared. She doubted that he/they meant her immediate harm, and besides she had plenty of friends in town if things got nasty. It was far from the first time she'd been followed by mysterious strangers, and she knew what she was doing.

She continued south on Petronia for the next block, which soon took her out of the crowded restaurant and bar scene. She risked a glance to her left, which allowed her to catch sight of her new friend in her peripheral vision. He was still there, only now he was talking on his cell phone. Or at least pretending to talk on his cell phone. He could be calling for backup. She thought for a moment about making a call of her own, but his presence where she could easily spot him indicated that he was either unprofessional or working alone and afraid of losing her. If he had nearby backup, they should have taken over the tail once she doubled back. She decided to have a little fun with him and see just how afraid of losing her he was.

They were now in Truman Annex, a small, upscale neighborhood of old-looking Key West style houses that had been built in the last twenty years. It was how Key West would look if designed by a corporate marketing team - neat and tidy and perfectly pleasant but bereft of any soul or history. The tree-lined streets gave her some cover, so she took another sideways glance. He was still there, although he'd crossed to the other side of the street, perhaps hoping that it wouldn't be quite so obvious that he was following her. He had put away his cell phone, so if he'd called backup they were probably on the way. That was ok. Soon he'd be forced to either expose himself or give up.

She came out the other side of Truman Annex, her shadow still with her. The road continued south, where a pair of large Civil War era cannon guarded the way to Fort Zachary Taylor Park. The entrance was well lit, with a booth where a park ranger would take your five bucks and let you into the national park and beach. But that was during the day. After sundown, the park shut down and a chain-link gate closed the road off to all foot and vehicle traffic. She knew there

might be a ranger or two inside the park and probably security cameras too, but she didn't mind the risk of getting caught. It would be edifying to see if her pursuer felt the same way.

Breaking into a fast sprint, she dashed toward the gate and jumped up onto its side and then, agile as a monkey, clambered up and over the top, dropping down into a crouch on the pavement below. She looked through the steel mesh to see the man running toward her. It didn't look like he'd thought twice about it. She could probably keep him from getting over the fence, but that would attract a cop or a ranger for sure, and she didn't want that. She wanted some time alone with this creep. She smiled and winked at him before turning and dashing down the road deeper into the park. He didn't smile back.

The road to the actual park was about a quarter mile of asphalt that curved through trees and brush, so it only took a few seconds of hard running before she was out of his line of sight from the front gate. She heard him slam into the chain link fence and what she thought might be the sound of him hitting the ground on the other side with an "oof." Up ahead of her was the main parking lot and beyond that the beach. Ideally she would like to confront him there, among the pine trees and sand where she had plenty of room to maneuver. Unfortunately, there were headlights headed her way from the parking lot - hopefully just a ranger leaving at the end of his shift and not responding to some alarm - but either way she had to get off the road.

Ahead on her right was a dark hole in the tree line with a small sign marked "Nature Walk." She veered toward it and plunged onto the dim, overgrown trail. She slowed to a halt a dozen feet off the road and crouched down, waiting for the vehicle to pass. Peering through a break in the foliage, she saw a park ranger on an ATV speed by on his way to the front entrance. She wondered if her follower would be able to avoid capture. As loud as the four-wheeler was, he should be able to hear it coming. She shifted position and waited, watching to see what would happen next.

She swatted a few mosquitoes and flicked a palmetto bug off her shoulder in the fifteen minutes it took for the ranger to drive to the gate and then drive back by on his way wherever it was he bided his time. He couldn't have caught the man who'd been following her, otherwise he would have stayed around and waited for the cops. She stayed put, and five minutes later her patience was rewarded. The stranger came creeping along the side of the road, hugging the shadows of

the trees. She knew he was kicking himself, sure that he'd lost his prey. She decided to give him a ray of hope.

Standing up, she purposefully kicked at a bush, causing a rustle of branches and dead leaves. She smiled as the man froze in place and peered into the darkness. She retreated down the path, headed toward the abandoned Civil War era fort that squatted another few hundred yards away. Like a good little dog, he followed after her.

She found a convenient shadow behind a large pine tree and waited for him. He crept along the path, eyes darting every which way. She scooped some sand into her hand and pictured all the ways she could hurt him if it came to that. There were a lot of them. He moved past her and she counted to five before stepping out behind him.

"Can I help you, motherfucker?" she asked, her fist cocked, ready to swing.

He jumped in surprise and whirled around to face her. He wore a T-shirt and shorts - no sign of a weapon of any kind.

"Christ! You scared me!" he said, smiling.

"Good," she replied. "Now what the fuck do you want?"

"Actually, I just had a question for you," he said, anger creeping into his voice. "You don't mind answering a few questions, do you?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," she snarled.

"Oh, well, that's too bad," he said as he stepped forward. "Because I have to ask them anyway."

Now it was her turn to smile. "Well, you can try, motherfucker. You can try," she said as she flung the sand in his face and charged.

Chapter 01

PAUL Reynolds doodled idly on a bar napkin as he sipped at his margarita. All around him tourists of every size and shape were donning paper pirate hats and plastic eye patches. They were part of a relatively new Key West tradition called the Booty Hunt - a glorified bar crawl where participants followed a “treasure map” that led them from bar to bar, with occasional stops in private homes, and where the chief treasure to be found was the pleasure of being surrounded by fellow drunks and saying “Arrrr” a lot. Paul had participated a few times himself and was kind of embarrassed at how much fun it was. His pen drew a rough sketch of the crowd, although in his version they were actual pirates, in full dress with real swords and pistols and parrots.

He took another sip and glanced around the bar, wondering where his drinking companion had gotten to. It was still early - just an hour or so after sunset, and Crooked Pete’s was only half full. Located on Simonton, a block off the tourist-choked sidewalks of Duval Street, the bar hadn’t hit its stride for the evening yet. The real crowd and the regulars would come later, once they had gotten a bite to eat and were ready for some serious, cheap drinking.

He saw his friend Sandee emerge - finally - from the bathroom, smiling at Paul from across the bar while maneuvering through the gaggle of barhopping buccaneers. Thick, cascading black curls complemented Sandee’s black sequined mini-dress that clung to every slim curve and emphasized shapely breasts. Sandee winked at one of the tourists, blowing the man a kiss as he ogled in naked admiration.

“Did you miss me?” Sandee asked, sitting down beside Paul.

“Of course,” Paul replied, sliding another margarita to Sandee. “But your drink missed you more. All your ice is melting.”

“Oh, the poor darlings,” Sandee cooed, licking the salt on the rim suggestively before taking a long swallow that emptied a third of the contents. “There, now they have some more room.”

“So where’s The Party tonight?” Paul asked. “I assume you’re going.”

“Of course I’m going, sweetie. You know I can’t resist The Party two nights in a row.”

“And it’s just not the same without you there.”

“Nothing’s the same without me there, Paul.”

“Don’t I know it,” he replied as he made a show of looking Sandee up and down. “Rrrrow! You look amazing. I’m always impressed.”

Sandee gave him a playful shove. “You big tease. You better be careful, talking to me like that. I’ll tell Chloe.”

“Like she doesn’t already know. She probably had Bee bug this place too,” he joked. He looked around the bar again. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea...”

“You crazy kids and your little spy toys. I swear! You won’t be satisfied until there’s a camera on every corner and a bug in every bar. But not Pete’s, ok? He’s got enough of the real live bugs already.”

“Good point,” said Paul, taking another sip of his drink. “But there’s no stopping Bee once she gets an idea in her head.”

“There’s no stopping any of you three when you get an idea in your heads.”

“Another good point.” He finished his drink and smiled at Sandee. “But back to my question. Where is The Party tonight?”

“Have you really lost track of it? It’s your party.”

“I know, I know, but I lost control of it long ago. Giancarlo said that we couldn’t have upstairs at Vesuvio, but he said you had something lined up instead of the normal backup.”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Sandee smiled with pride. “I finagled us the house on Eaton.”

“The Crawford place?” asked Paul, surprised.

“The very same.”

“That’s great! God, I love it when we can get that place. How long?”

“Thirty-six for sure, maybe as long as fifty.”

“Perfect. Who’ve you told?” asked Paul, standing up.

“My kids. Jesse of course. I haven’t hit the girls yet.”

“I was heading over there anyway. I’ll tell them.”

Sandee winked. “I bet you will. Chloe trusts you more than I would.”

“Chloe trusts me with you, doesn’t she? She’s obviously not risk averse.”

“I’ll bet no one ever accused her of that,” said Sandee.

“No one that’s lived to tell the tale,” Paul agreed. He caught the bartender’s eye and waved, signaling him to put the drinks on his tab. The bartender smiled and nodded back at him. “I gotta get going then, make sure everything’s set.”

“There is one more thing,” said Sandee. “New place, new money.”

“New money?” asked Paul, surprised. He’d thought there was plenty in the party fund to cover anything Sandee might need for tonight. “Why...”

“We had to pay for damages at Max’s, and then there was the whole sordid affair with The Gringo. We’re tapped out.”

Paul sighed and dug into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. “I’ve only got \$600 on me,” he said as he leafed through the bills. “That was going to be my bribe money for the night.”

“If you can spare it, it’d help. I’ve already doled out all my cash on hand to secure the place and get the liquor. But we still need...”

“I know, I know,” said Paul, handing the money to Sandee. “Let’s just try and make tonight kick ass so we can earn that back as quick as possible.”

“We should be flush by dawn, my dear,” Sandee assured him. “Just you wait.”

“That’s the plan anyway. But would you explain that to Chloe for me?”

“What is Chloe doing tonight, anyway?” Sandee asked. “I was hoping to get her to come out with me and check out the new help at the Hyatt.”

“She’s busy getting everything set up for our visitors. She’s kind of freaking out about all the little details.”

“Oh my, are they coming in tonight? I thought that was next week.”

“Nope, it’s tonight.”

“Well, I guess I won’t be seeing too much of you three anytime soon.”

“We’ll see,” said Paul. “I’ll try and swing things and introduce you around. It’s still kind of a big mystery as to why they’re coming here in the first place, so we’ll have to wait and see how things play out.”

“I understand, sweetie. And hey, if you can, bring some of them by The Party. I’ll show them a good time.”

Paul leaned forward and gave Sandee a quick kiss on the cheek. “Ok, I’ll let you know. Have fun.”

“You too,” replied Sandee. “But not too much fun unless I’m there.”

“We’ll see,” said Paul.

Sandee looked past Paul’s shoulder and grinned. “Look who’s back.”

Paul turned to see a squat, bald man in his early 60s bearing down on him. He gave Paul a crooked smile full of yellow teeth as he slapped him on the back. “What’s up, friend. Long time no see!”

“Bernie!” said Paul, turning to the old man and shaking his hand. “Where the fuck have you been? I heard Miami PD picked you up!”

“Nah, nah, nothing that dramatic,” Bernie said, shaking his head. “I just had some family shit to take care of up in Coral Gables. Pain in my wrinkled old ass, I tell you. But I’m back.”

“That’s great, man. Actually I’m glad I ran into both of you here. It means I

don't have to track down Cuban Eddie." Bernie was a fun-loving old man who loved, loved, loved strip clubs. He financed this expensive habit by selling air purifiers on eBay and growing high quality dope in his house, most of which he sold to strippers and bartenders. Cuban Eddie was a 70-year-old coffee shop owner who was his main competition among the local bar and restaurant workers.

"Pffft, that old bastard? You are lucky I came back when I did. What do you need, sport?"

"We got The Party going tonight," said Paul.

"The party's always going when I'm around," interjected Bernie.

"Yeah, of course; that's the point, right? But it's rotated to the Crawford place tonight. And since you're here, you can make the delivery yourself, and I don't have to get someone to run the shit over from The Cuban."

Bernie raised his drink in salute to Paul, "Your wish is my command. How's about three hours?"

"Whenever's good for you, Bernie. Just check in with Sandee when you get there." That was some good news anyway. Things always went well when Bernie was in the house.

Bernie blew Sandee a kiss. "Will do. Mind if I join you two for a drink? I wanna tell y'all about this wild club I went to while I was up in Miami..."

Just then Paul's pocket started singing The Clash's, "I Fought the Law."

"Hold on a sec," Paul said. He scooped the phone out and saw "KW Tele-market" on the caller ID. He sighed as he answered, "Hey, Bee, what's up?"

"It's Chloe," said Bee, her voice tight and nervous. "She needs you."

Chapter 02

THE classic Key West-style house just off Fleming looked much like the rest of the residences on the block - two-story wooden frame walls and peaked roofs with shallow porches nearly butting up against the sidewalk. Chloe's rusting blue Vespa was tucked away beside the house, in the narrow space separating it from the neighbors. To anyone walking by outside, everything looked quiet and peaceful.

Inside, Chloe was pissed. Everything had been going great and then those stupid fuckers had decided to show up a week early, forcing her to scramble to pack a week's work into a single day. She wore a black bandana wrapped around her head, covering her buzz cut pink hair. Numerous smudges of dirt on her cheeks and the tip of her nose testified to the heavy-duty cleaning she'd been doing for the past five hours. She wore loose fitting shorts and a tight-fitting tank top that had once been white. In her bare feet she pushed a mop across the hardwood floors, grumbling to herself.

She heard the door open and looked up to see Paul standing in the doorway. Even though it wasn't his fault, she glared at him as he came in. As much as Chloe liked a clean house, she hated housework, and this wasn't even her house. This particular space was sparsely decorated with just a few worn pieces of furniture and some bad condo art on the walls. After six months of being sealed up tight with the air conditioner off, it smelled of dust and mildew and needed a good airing out.

"What are you doing?" asked Paul, closing the door behind him.

"Mopping," she said, her voice flat.

"Right. But why are you mopping here? Whose house is this anyway?"

"It's one we just added to the roster last week. The cleaning service hasn't had a chance to get in here yet."

"I see that," said Paul. "So why're you cleaning it tonight?"

"We're cleaning it tonight because the Guidarizzi's decided to make a surprise

visit to their winter home in Key West. They're coming in tomorrow afternoon. Every other decent place is filled up, so we have to use this one instead."

"Oh fuck. Is there another mop?"

"There's another bucket and a scrub brush in the kitchen if you want to get started in there."

"Sounds like a plan," he said, taking careful steps as he crossed the freshly mopped floor on his way back to the kitchen. She was glad he'd showed up when he did - he could clean the kitchen and deal with whatever horrors might be hiding in the fridge.

"Lucky thing we got this place when we did, then," he called out to Chloe.

"Yeah," she yelled back. "It's a little smaller than the Guidarizzi place, so it might be a little cramped. I'm not sure how many people he's bringing with him."

"I thought he said three or four."

"I said I thought it'd be three or four. He didn't say at all."

She finished the living room floor and went into the kitchen. Paul had filled a bucket with hot water and soap and was scrubbing away the dirt and stains he found hidden below the dust. The kitchen's last encounter with food hadn't ended with a very thorough clean-up. "I'm going to go upstairs and try and make the bedrooms habitable," Chloe said. "Bee's supposed to bring by some clean sheets from one of the other houses, so keep an ear out for her."

"Ok," Paul muttered in reply. She knew he wasn't happy that his normal evening of partying and dealing with stripper contacts had suddenly taken a dramatic turn into domestic chores, but then neither was she. She wanted to make a good impression on her visiting friends, and putting them up in a filthy house was not the way to do that. Fortunately, there was no such thing as getting to The Party too late. He'd just have to wait a while for his evening's fun and games.

After about half an hour of scrubbing the upstairs bathroom, she felt a pair of arms snake around her torso from behind. She leaned back into them and felt Paul's chest pressing against her back. She sighed.

“How’s it going, hot stuff ?” she said.

“All finished downstairs,” he said, giving her a neck a long, soft kiss. “You know, I never thought a life of crime would involve so much housework.”

“I did tell you it would be glamorous and exciting, didn’t I?” she teased. “No one can say I’m not a woman of my word.”

Paul motioned for her to put down the scrub brush and then pulled her to him. She turned around to face him as he drew her close and kissed her again. Then one more time. She nuzzled against him, nipping playfully at his neck. “You smell good,” she said.

“Thanks,” he replied, his hands roaming down her back to her ass. He gave her a squeeze.

“Actually, you smell like a stripper.”

“Sandee says hi.”

“I’ll bet,” said Chloe, still kissing his neck.

“You know the party’s moved back to the Crawford place.”

“I know.”

“I like the Crawford place. It has those back rooms...”

“Oh, I remember.” She pulled away from him just enough to make room for her hand to caress him through the front of his pants while she looked him in the eye. “I remember very well indeed.”

“We did just watch the video last week,” he reminded her, closing his eyes as he moaned in pleasure under her touch.

“That was you in that video?” she said.

“Not the Kennedy Assassination video, the other one.”

“Oh right. That video,” she laughed. “That was you, wasn’t it?”

“It sure was. Maybe we could...”

Then Paul’s pocket started singing The Clash again. “Did I do that?” asked Chloe. Then her pocket started singing as well, although for her it was The Misfits.

“No,” sighed Paul. “I think that must be Bee.”

They both took out their phones and looked at the caller ID screens. Paul’s read “Verizon.” Chloe’s read “Keys Taxi Disp.”

“She loves that new trick of hers,” said Chloe as she answered the phone. “Heya, Bee, what’s up with the sheets?” Paul answered his phone as well and was instantly conferenced into the conversation.

“I’m having Pia bring them by. I picked something up on the cameras and I thought you might want to see it.”

“What is it?” said Chloe. “We’re almost finished here.”

“I got a boat coming in at the marina. I’m pretty sure it’s your friend.”

“Really?” said Chloe, excited and nervous. “Are you sure?”

“Nope. That’s why I thought you might wanna come take a look.”

“You’re right. We’re on our way. Can you call Pia and tell her the key’s under the rock by the back door?”

“Sure thing,” said Bee. “See you soon.”

Paul and Chloe hung up their phones and looked at one another. Chloe had a big smile on her face.

“Are you nervous?” he asked her.

“What? Are you kidding? Of course not. I’m just psyched to see him again. Aren’t you?”

“Definitely. I still owe him a lot. He’s the only person who ever got shot on my behalf,” said Paul. “I just thought you might be nervous. That’s all.”

“Why? Because I’m going fucking crazy trying to get this place hospitable before he gets here?”

“No,” he said. “That’s just being a good host. I thought you might be nervous for the same reason I’m nervous.”

She looked at him for a long moment. They’d been dancing around this subject ever since he’d told them five days ago that he was coming to Key West.

“You’re wondering why he’s coming at all,” she said.

“It’s a long way to come. Especially in a boat.”

“I’m sure he got the boat once he got to this coast.”

“Either way, it’s a long way to come. And people like him - which is to say, people like us - don’t make long trips without a reason.”

“And I’m sure he’ll tell us his reason,” said Chloe. “Fuck, that’s why I’m so excited! I want to hear what he’s got up his sleeve. We need a little damn excitement around here. We’ve fallen into a rut. I thought you’d be excited too...”

“I am, I am,” Paul assured her, although she suspected that he might be lying.

“I’m excited and I’m nervous. You know what I mean.”

“Like a teenager on his first date,” said Chloe.

“Yeah, sort of.”

“Well don’t worry. I promise Winston won’t try to cop a feel in the back seat.”

She kissed him then. “But I might, so you better watch yourself.” Another kiss.

“Come on, let’s go. Bee’s waiting.” She disengaged, turned, and headed straight for the front door.

Chapter 03

BACK at their house by the cemetery, Paul and Chloe found Bee in her room, what Paul referred to as her sanctum sanctorum - although no one else ever got the joke, and he refused to explain the comic book reference. As always, lighting was minimal (as opposed to Bee's workshop out behind the house, which was flooded with fluorescents). A bank of TV sets and computer monitors covered one whole wall, arranged on a precarious system of metal shelves that Bee had installed herself. A low, flat coffee table squatted below the glowing displays, supporting three keyboards, a bank of video editing tools and four different phone carriages. Bee sat in her accustomed place - in the midst of a pile of cushions on the floor, fiddling with a mouse in one hand and typing on one of the keyboards while she talked quietly into her headset.

Paul and Chloe didn't bother to knock as they came in - Bee already knew they were there. Paul glanced at one of the screens mounted on the wall. Its display, divided into four quadrants, showed various images from inside the house, including the front door they'd just come through and the stairs they'd just climbed. The screen next to it - which Paul himself had salvaged from a bar on Duval that'd recently renovated into a fine dining restaurant - showed images from four other cameras that covered the house's exterior. Nothing happened within fifty yards of their Crew's house that Bee didn't see, and if she had her way, that omniscience would soon extend to cover the entire island.

"So, Bee, how goes Project Big Brother?" Paul asked.

"I wish you wouldn't call it that," she replied.

"Sorry, but I have to call it something."

"You could call it something nice. Big Brother sounds so mean."

"What's mean about a reality show?" said Paul, joking.

"What isn't bad about a reality show?" countered Chloe, stepping in to defend her friend.

"Hmm, you got me there. Although there's an idea! Maybe that's how we can

find more members for our Crew - have a reality-showstyle elimination contest. The winner gets a place in our outlaw life of crime.”

“It’s actually not the worst idea you’ve ever had,” Chloe said. “I can think of worse, anyway.”

“Are you talking about the turkeys? I thought turkeys could fly.”

“Oh my God,” said Bee. “Was that a WKRP in Cincinnati reference?”

“Guilty as charged,” admitted Paul, chuckling.

“Fuck, you two watched too much TV as kids,” said Chloe.

“What’ve you got for us, Bee-Bop?” Chloe asked, plopping down in the pile of cushions beside the short, stocky Asian engineer.

“Take a look,” she said, eyes never leaving the screen, “at this.”

Over the past six months, Bee had pressed the rest of the Crew into helping her plant hidden security cameras all over the most heavily trafficked areas of Key West. Paul had originally balked at the idea of so blatantly invading the populace’s privacy. He didn’t mind conning a select few of them out of their cash now and then, but the camera thing was so indiscriminate - it caught everybody. But Chloe had really liked the idea and pointed out that cops in other cities were putting surveillance cameras up and that she trusted herself a whole lot more than she trusted the police to use them responsibly. Sandee wasn’t entirely comfortable with the idea, but Sandee loved being on camera and went along with Bee and Chloe in the end. Outvoted, Paul went along with the plan and had spent more than a few hours of late wearing a Verizon Telephone Services nametag and installing cameras hidden inside innocuous looking metal boxes on telephone poles all over old town. Actually, he’d spent far less time doing this than the others had, mostly because he wasn’t very good with the electronics part and Bee had to keep fixing his mistakes.

Right now one of those cameras was showing the entrance to Artist’s Alley, a row of small galleries and shops near the marina. The image was tinted green because of the night vision (in fact, there were two cameras in the boxes - one for day, one for night), and it was hard to make out faces.

“What am I looking at?” asked Chloe.

“Watch this gallery here,” said Bee, moving a cursor on the screen to point at the shabby front of one of the ships closest to the camera. “I think your friend’s in there.” They waited and watched.

“Jesus,” said Chloe, “What’s he doing, buying a painting or something? Are you sure he’s in there?”

“I’m not sure - I’ve never seen anything but a sketch of him. That’s why I called you over here, so you could see if it’s really him.”

“Why don’t we just run the video back so we can see if it was him when he walked in?”

“That was going to be my next step - I was assuming he’d come back out any sec, but he’s been in there a while,” said Bee, mousing over the controls.

“Who would’ve thought he’d actually find something in one of those dumps to occupy him this long,” said Chloe.

With a few quick clicks, Bee switched the adjacent monitor’s display to show the same shot as the live feed. Then she ran it backward at x16 speed for a few seconds before stopping it. “There.”

Chloe and Paul both leaned forward to look closer at the screen. It showed a couple walking down the alley from the direction of the marina. On the left was a broad built, attractive woman in her 30s who wore a nondescript sweatshirt and jeans with a backpack slung over one shoulder. Paul recognized her as someone who’d been introduced to him as Lily. Next to her stood an older man, long, stringy hair tied back in a ponytail, his potbelly protruding beneath a flower-print shirt. He smiled broadly and said something funny as the two walked past the Southernmost Wedding Chapel. It was, without a doubt, their old friend Winston.

“That’s him!” said Chloe, excited. “Did you see how he got here? Which boat he came in on?”

“Yeah, hold on, lemme switch over to those cameras.” A few clicks and keystrokes switched a third monitor away from its live feed of the marina to a

moment in time twenty-seven minutes earlier. This camera, mounted in a plastic owl perched atop the Key Wharf Bar and Grille's roof not only kept the seagulls at bay, it provided video coverage of the dinghy docks. Here the many locals who lived on sailboats offshore could rent small slips for their boats, allowing them a reserved place to tie off when they came back onto the island.

They watched a small Zodiac putt-putt up next to the dock. As it got closer, they saw Winston and Lily sitting in the boat, along with another, older woman Paul didn't recognize. They clambered out of the small rubber boat and waved goodbye to the boat's pilot. He reversed his outboard engine and pulled away from the dock, turning back out into the darkness. Lily and Winston looked around and stretched their backs and necks, as if they'd been sitting for quite a while. Or they might've been contorting themselves for show, giving them an excuse to look in every direction and take in their surroundings. Finally they started walking, heading toward Artist's Alley.

"No sign of what boat they came in on?" asked Chloe.

"I can look around, but probably not," said Bee. "They're most likely anchored out there somewhere, beyond my cameras. Of course, if we installed on the channel markers like I said..."

"One thing at a time, Bee," said Chloe. "Great catch though. Did you use your facial recognition software on that?"

"No," said Bee "I've just been watching the waterside cameras while I do some other stuff. You said he was coming in by boat."

"And so he has," said Chloe. "We should go surprise him! Before he comes out of that place."

"Good plan," said Paul. "I wonder though, how would Winston like the idea that he was being watched by a network of hidden cameras, à la Big Brother?" Paul asked. Winston wasn't his real name, of course. He'd taken the alias decades ago when he first went underground, naming himself after Winston Smith, the protagonist of George Orwell's novel 1984.

Chloe stared at Paul for a moment, thinking about what he'd said. "Good point. Nobody mention the cameras."

“Agreed,” said Paul. “Now let’s hurry. I know the old stoner who owns that place. If we leave those two old hippies alone, they’ll talk for the rest of the night.” He held out a hand and helped Chloe out of Bee’s cushion pile.

“We’ll be back in a while, Bee,” said Chloe. “You have the con.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” Bee said. “I’ll watch your back.”

And Paul knew that she would. Sadly, that’s almost the only thing that Bee did these days - watch.

Chapter 04

OLD TOWN - the heart and soul of Key West and the place most visitors spend their time - is only one mile by two. The Crew's house by the cemetery was less than half a mile from where they'd last seen Winston. Walking, it might've taken ten minutes to get there, but on Chloe's Vespa it was a hair-raising three-minute ride away. When they got there, Paul saw no sign of either Winston or Lily, so he assumed they were still inside the rundown shack that passed for a gallery. They parked a block away and approached at a brisk walk, Paul almost jogging to keep up with Chloe's excited strides.

Winston was Chloe's mentor in what they referred to as "The Life," this being a euphemism for a whole range of different activities, groups and lifestyles that fell under the general category of living underground and off the information grid. Paul, after defrauding his former partners and then running afoul of the law in a very public way, had been living The Life for almost a year and a half now. Chloe, as near as he could tell, had been doing it for almost a decade. Winston had started in the late '60s as a 16-year-old member of the notorious Weather Underground. He not only led his own Crew, he was also in contact with dozens, maybe scores of other such groups all over the world, including Chloe and Paul's little Crew of four. On top of all that, he'd once taken a couple bullets while helping Paul out, so, like Chloe, Paul had a soft spot in his heart for the old man.

They hadn't seen him since that bloody night, but Chloe had been in communication with him off and on over the last sixteen months. Winston and his Crew were old school and didn't trust much in the way of electronic communications. Mostly it had been encoded, hand-delivered letters and arcane classified ads in various newspapers. Chloe found this particular breed of paranoia on Winston's part annoying, but Paul admired it. It reminded him of old John le Carr novels. Winston had sent them a particularly detailed and yet cryptic message just five days ago, telling them that he was coming to Key West and asking them to arrange a secure place for him and some of his Crewmembers to stay.

The gallery door stood wide open, and Paul could see walls covered with pastel colors - watercolor and oil paintings of sunsets, palm trees, dolphins and more sunsets. Winston stood there talking to the owner, a worn, deeply tanned local who ran the gallery and sold paintings on behalf of a dozen different island

artists. The two were deep in conversation about something. Beyond them he saw Lily, staring with bored eyes at a particularly pink painting of a dolphin splashing in the waves during a sunset.

Paul glanced to his side at Chloe, who wore a mischievous grin. “You ready?” she asked.

“Ready for...” But Chloe was already through the door, striding in with her chest puffed out, her right hand raised.

“Everybody freeze! This is a raid!” she shouted across the small room. Lily reacted first, her head snapping toward the door and her hand darting into the pocket of her sweatshirt. Winston and the gallery owner turned as well, surprise on both their faces.

“What the fuck...” said the owner, who didn’t seem to believe Chloe was a cop at all. But then he noticed that Winston was laughing and started to relax. So did Lily. Winston stepped forward and swept Chloe up into a bear hug, lifting her off her feet.

“Ha HA!” cried Winston. “You little vixen! Are you trying to give this old man a heart attack?”

“Always,” she said as he set her back down.

Winston turned his attention to Paul then, embracing him in a hug as well. Paul was thankful the old man didn’t try and lift him off the ground. “Good to see you again, brother. Good to see you.”

“Same here,” replied Paul. “Welcome to Key West.” Looking over he saw Chloe and Lily hugging as well. He waved with a smile to Winston’s right-hand woman. “Hey Lily, good to see you too.”

“Thanks, Paul,” said Lily. “It’s nice to be back on solid ground.”

“I’ll bet,” agreed Paul. He noticed the gallery owner had retreated a few paces and was watching the love fest that had suddenly taken over his shop.

“Come on,” said Chloe, linking arms with Lily and Winston. “We’ve got you a great place all lined up.”

But Winston wasn't ready to leave yet. "One moment, Chloe. I still have to buy a painting from this man." The gallery owner, who might have been worried about losing a sale, was visibly relieved.

"Do you need me to wrap it up for you?" he asked Winston. "I've got today's paper around here somewhere."

"Not necessary, friend. I'd like to admire it as it is," Winston said as he dug into his pocket and pulled out a worn leather wallet. "We agreed on \$700?"

"Sure...yeah, that sounds great, man," The gallery owner said, surprise in his voice. Paul guessed that this was more than he'd expected, but Paul knew that Winston had a generous heart, especially when it came to artists and musicians.

The owner reached behind him to a large piece of plywood that was leaning against the wall. He flipped it around and displayed it to the room. The artist had used the same spectrum of sunset reds and oranges on display elsewhere in the room, but in this piece they came together to form a rather striking portrait of Hunter S. Thompson. Paul was actually a little jealous that Winston had snagged this piece - he wouldn't mind owning it himself.

"Very nice," said Paul.

Winston handed the owner seven wrinkled \$100 bills and took possession of his new prize. "Quite good, isn't it?" he said to no one in particular. Then, to the owner, "Thank you again, brother. It was a pleasure meeting you."

The two older men shook hands. "Yeah, man. Great meeting you. Enjoy that painting, and, uh ... thanks, man."

"Be well," said Winston. "And try and spend that cash on something equally wonderful."

Outside, the four of them walked in a line down the alley, Winston still admiring Hunter's portrait.

"I can't believe you paid \$700 for that," said Lily, although it was clear she was just teasing her friend.

"I knew him you know," said Winston.

“You did not!” protested Chloe.

“I did indeed,” Winston assured her. “I met him several times in the early ’80s. And once more in ’92 or ’93. I even sold him herb once.”

“What was he like?” Paul asked. He’d been a huge Thompson fan since he read *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* while in high school.

“Much like you’d imagine I suppose. I don’t think I ever met the real Hunter - just the persona he showed the world. Or maybe that was the real Hunter. Maybe he did live a life without artifice. I’d like to think that’s true. Certainly he was a great inspiration to me when I was getting started.”

“How so?” asked Chloe. “You never struck me as much for journalism. Even gonzo journalism.”

“Oh, I’m not. I’m not,” said Winston, looking at the painting again. “But I loved his fearlessness in the face of convention. No, that’s not right. Not his fearlessness - his eagerness. His eagerness to defy convention and just be outrageous, even as he did one of the most dangerous things a man can do in this society.”

“Ingest vast quantities of drugs?” asked Chloe.

“No,” Winston chided. “Speak truth to power.”

“Oh yeah, that.”

“It’s a lesson we can all stand to learn again and again. An example we can all follow.”

Paul was surprised to find that Winston’s elegy for Hunter S. Thompson had touched him on some level. He’d always just loved the sort of “wacky adventures” side of the gonzo journalist’s work, but Winston’s description of him gave Paul a new perspective to mull over. They arrived at Chloe’s scooter and all looked at the painting for a silent moment.

“Ok, did you guys have some bags or something?” asked Chloe. “The place is just a short walk away, but we could get a cab if...”

“Pardon me, Chloe, but can you tell me where the La Concha hotel is?” asked Winston.

“What?” she said. “Why?”

“We have a meeting there, and I’m afraid we’re already a little late.”

“You have a meeting at the La Concha?” asked Chloe.

“Atop the La Concha actually,” he said. “Apparently, what that means will become obvious to me once I get there.”

“Yeah, sure,” said Chloe. “Ok. It’s hard to miss.” The La Concha loomed over the city on Duval Street and was also the tallest building in Key West. It had a bar and observation deck on its top floor that gave views of the entire island.

“Would the two of you mind escorting me there?”

“No prob,” said Chloe.

Winston handed the painting to Lily saying, “Can you get us set up in the house Chloe’s provided for us? I’ll go ahead to see Isaiah.”

“Of course,” said Lily. Chloe handed her a key to the house they’d just cleaned and gave Lily directions. She offered the use of her scooter as well, but Lily declined. Paul wasn’t sure how she’d have driven it with the painting anyway. She struck off to the north on her own while Winston, Chloe, and Paul headed for Duval, leaving the scooter locked up where they’d parked it.

Underground etiquette forbade them from asking Winston what the meeting was about or who this Isaiah was, but Paul could tell that Chloe was as eager to know what was going on as he was. Winston didn’t make them wait any longer.

“How far to this hotel?” Winston asked.

“Four or five blocks,” Chloe replied.

“What if we take a slightly less crowded route?”

“If we avoid Duval until the end, then it’ll only add a block or two.”

“Good, that should be enough time to fill you in on what’s going on.”

Chloe just nodded, but Paul said, “Great, I’m all ears.”

They turned up Simonton, which runs parallel to Duval but tends to be less thronged with foot traffic. Winston maneuvered between Chloe and Paul, putting an arm around each and drawing them close as he talked in a low voice.

“The first thing you both need to know is that, as of right now, yours is not the only Crew operating in Key West. And I’m not just talking about me and Lily. There are others who’ve come to town as well, or who will be arriving soon.”

“Why here?” asked Chloe, concern in her voice.

“Because I suggested it,” replied Winston. Chloe started to say something, but Winston talked over her. “Let me explain everything first, then I promise I’ll answer all your questions.” He took a quick glance up and down the street. “As you heard, we’re meeting with a man named Isaiah. He heads a Crew - a very large and experienced Crew - out of New York. He is, without a doubt, one of the more interesting and inventive men I’ve ever met, which is no faint praise. He’s also very ambitious, albeit not in the traditional American sense of the word.

“Isaiah’s Crew has been active since the ’80s. I don’t know much about their early history or about Isaiah’s background. As you both know, the secret to a long and happy life in our world is knowing how to keep your secrets. Isaiah has been more careful than most. While his own Crew has grown and prospered, he’s kept apart from the larger underground society. I only got in contact with him recently, which should tell you something, no?”

Paul thought about the implications of that statement. Winston had contacts all over the country - probably all over the world. That another large Crew could operate in his underground world for any length of time without Winston becoming aware of them was definitely an accomplishment. Winston seemed to know everyone, which was impressive in its own right, but what really impressed Paul most about Winston’s network of contacts was that, according to Chloe, Winston kept all of the details and contact data in his head - he didn’t trust computers and he never wrote anything down.

“Are you sure he’s one of us then?” asked Chloe. “Not mob or some other

gang?” What exactly constituted “one of us” was open to interpretation, but generally it meant someone who lived a secret life, as outside the scrutiny of government and corporate power structures as possible. People who weren’t afraid to break a law or three to live free, but at the same time weren’t traditional, bloodthirsty gangsters either. Like art or pornography, it was something you knew when you saw it (although opinions varied depending on the viewer).

“He is one of us, yes,” said Winston. “Indeed, his motives seem more pure than most of us. He was the one who first contacted me, and since then his and mine have cooperated on two separate projects and have exchanged useful information on several other occasions.”

“You’ve been feeling each other out,” said Chloe.

“Exactly. And so far, nothing has raised any alarm bells.”

“That’s cool and all,” said Paul. “But why is he here in Key West?” He was worried about having two such powerhouse organizations in his little slice of paradise. He and Chloe and Bee had just about got things running the way he wanted, and the thought of someone disrupting his life made him anxious.

“Don’t worry, Paul,” said Winston. “It’s just temporary, I assure you. I suggested to Isaiah that we meet here. And I did that because you two are here, and there’s no one I’m closer to in this part of the country. Six days ago Isaiah contacted me, wanting a meeting in the Southeast US somewhere, and he suggested Miami. I’ve had some bad times in that city and wanted friends on the ground. I countered with Key West and he agreed.”

“Does he know about us?” asked Chloe. “Are we invited to the meeting?”

“He knows I have a friendly Crew here. I didn’t tell him anything about you, but I have no way of knowing what he’s managed to learn on his own. He and his crew are all computer experts and I urge you not to underestimate them on any front.”

“Great,” said Paul.

“As for the meeting,” Winston continued. “Yes, you are invited. At least to meet with Isaiah. There is a certain etiquette to these types of things. We live in a

world without rules, but it's only polite to introduce yourself when you knowingly visit another Crew's turf. Especially if you're there to do business. So Isaiah has said he wants to meet you."

"Which means he gets to learn what we look like, try and put a tail on us, and learn all kinds of things that he might or might not have known before," said Chloe.

"The choice is yours of course," Winston said. "You don't have to meet him, although I'd be surprised if you didn't. I think you'll like him. Besides, I know you're too curious to stay away." He paused and looked meaningfully at Paul. "Of course, I encourage you not to play all your cards at once. It never hurts to hold some options in reserve."

"Oh no," said Paul. "I'm not skipping this meeting. I've never been to a gang summit before. Besides, we've got our other aces hidden in their respective holes." He looked to Chloe, and she nodded in agreement.

"Fine, fine," said Winston. "I'm sure you'll both find the whole thing very interesting. As I said, Isaiah wants to be as polite as possible, but etiquette runs both ways. He'll expect some politeness from you in return."

"Meaning it would be rude to spy on him while he's here," said Chloe.

"Yes, well, you do have to admit. It would be rude," agreed Winston. "As would tapping his phones, hacking his computers, following him around or otherwise interfering in his business."

"He has diplomatic immunity," said Paul.

"Only as long as he doesn't fuck with us first," said Chloe.

"Of course," Winston said.

Chloe thought this over for a moment and looked to Paul. He nodded his assent. He was more curious about Isaiah than he was nervous - but just barely. "All right," she said. "Sounds like a plan. What's this meeting about anyway?"

Winston didn't answer right away, seeming to mull over his response. "I'm not entirely sure" he finally said. "Isaiah's been reticent to share any substantial

details with me. But he has a proposition of some sort for me.”

“Some sort of con he wants help on?” asked Chloe.

“No, no. Nothing that simple. Like I said earlier, Isaiah is an ambitious man. A dreamer. And whatever his plan is, I can promise you, it’s no con. Or at least not just a con.”

“Didn’t he give you some kind of hint?” asked Paul.

“He did,” said Winston. “He said he wants a revolution.”

Chapter 05

KEY WEST, with its scattering of 19th-century wooden homes, is one of the few places in Florida where an 80-year-old building isn't far and away the most ancient manmade structure in town. Even so, the La Concha Hotel, built in 1925, is certainly the largest historical building on the island that's still being used for its original purpose. At all of seven stories, it would scarcely qualify as a boutique hotel in a big city, but for this island it served as a skyscraper.

The three of them walked into the marble-floored lobby, instantly chilled by the hotel's powerful air-conditioning (one of many post-1920s updates in the building, along with the computer reservation system and the Starbucks franchise). Winston peered around the crowded room, focusing in particular on a tall, gaunt man wearing a black suit and top hat and carrying a gnarled wooden cane. The dark stranger was ushering a gaggle of camera-wielding tourists out the side door and into the hotel's driveway.

"Ghost Tour," Paul explained to Winston. "They walk around town, and the guide tells tales. It's fun."

"It does sound interesting," said Winston, chuckling.

"We've been trying to get a piece of that," said Chloe, "But the owners are pretty stubborn. It would be a nice compliment to Paul's fake s💎ance racket."

"You perform fake s💎ances?" Winston asked Paul.

"Not unless I have to, no. But I... what's the word... oversee a couple who do. Sometimes I step in and lend a hand if one of them is sick." In fact, Paul had written the original scripts and come up with the gags and tricks the performers used to put on their little show. Once he'd perfected it, he'd recruited two actors to do the nightly ritual and handle all the details. It provided a small but steady revenue stream for the Crew, and their hidden cameras sometimes picked up other useful information as well.

"It's pretty cool," Chloe told Winston. "We do two shows a night in a little storefront up on White Street that we filled with scavenged Victorian knock-off furniture and all this occult stuff like skulls and candles and shit. Bee came up

with some little remote-controlled gadgets and tricks and fireworks so we can really scare the piss out of the customers. They know it's all fake, of course, but they scream like it was real. You should check it out."

"I will," said Winston.

They had made their way down a short corridor behind the bar and waited in front of an out-of-the-way elevator door. Despite the observation deck's popularity, it was surprisingly difficult to find your way up there. The first two times Paul had come into the hotel, he hadn't been able to locate it. They made way for an older couple who were exiting the elevator, and then the three of them stepped inside. Winston glanced around meaningfully at the corners of the stuffy metal box, his eyes warning Chloe and Paul that there might be hidden bugs or cameras. The elevators hadn't been renovated as recently as the central air-conditioning or the Starbucks, and the seven-story journey was hot, stuffy, and involved more rattling and shaking than most people liked in their vertical travels.

They stepped out into a small lobby area. Straight ahead was a glass door that led out onto the wraparound balcony and observation platform that was the main attraction. To their left was the bar itself, which had a few customers perched on stools, chatting quietly under the cover of innocuous soft jazz from the stereo system. Beyond the bar was a glass wall that separated the bar from the small ballroom beyond. Normally you could see right in, but tonight heavy red drapes hid the room's contents. A sign by the door to the ballroom said "THOMAS TEW CONSULTING, ANNUAL MEETING."

"An odd time and place for an annual meeting," said Paul, pointing to the sign.

"Hmm," was all Winston had to say, frowning.

"What is it?" asked Chloe.

"Wait here for a moment," the old man said, walking toward the door to the ballroom. The bar patron closest to the door - a thin, African-American man in a white dress shirt and khaki pants - casually stood up as Winston approached. He leaned forward, shook Winston's hand and whispered in his ear. The stranger, or guard as Paul now thought of him, opened the door just wide enough for Winston to slip inside, and then closed it behind them. He never even looked at Chloe and Paul.

Chloe turned her back on the guard and the bar, screening Paul from view. "Let's step outside for a sec," she said. As they walked out into the night air, she leaned in close and whispered, "Can you get on your phone and have Sandee get over to the house and then back here right away? I'm going to call Bee and have her throw together a quick surveillance kit. We should have a camera on that elevator - it's the only way up or down that doesn't involve setting off a fire alarm. I want pics of everyone who comes and goes from this place for the next twelve hours."

Paul pulled out his phone and started dialing Sandee's number. "What about the whole 'don't spy on friendly visitors,' etiquette thing that Win was talking about?" he asked.

"Screw that," said Chloe. "This is just taking reasonable precautions." Paul couldn't have agreed more. He didn't like all these strangers in town and he really didn't like not knowing what they were up to.

Sandee picked up after the fifth ring. Paul could hear music in the background. "Hey hot stuff," Sandee said over the noise.

"Hey, San. Listen, can you do me a favor? I'm starving and I'm just craving a pizza from Slice O' Love. Can you pick one up for me?" This was a code phrase for something that was urgent but not a life-or-death emergency. Slice 'O Love was open 24 hours, so it was always a good cover.

"Sure," said Sandee. "But I'm a little short on cash." This was code too - Sandee's way of asking where to meet Paul.

"Just have them put it on my tab. They know who I am," replied Paul. The final piece of code, it indicated that Sandee should go back to the house and that Bee or Chloe would explain what was up.

"Glad to help, sweetie," said Sandee. "See you in two shakes."

Paul hung up and slipped his phone into his pocket. He saw that Chloe had finished sending a text message to Bee and had received a confirmation in return. They both glanced inside at the guard on the door, but he was busy chatting with the bartender and pretending not to watch them. They stepped back inside and resumed their former places, waiting for Winston - or someone - to come out and acknowledge their presence.

After five minutes of standing in place and receiving curious looks from the bartender, they decided to take a seat at the bar. The only open pair of adjacent seats were near the guard. He nodded to them as they sat down, but said nothing. Paul and Chloe both ordered beers and sat in silence, waiting for something to happen. Paul tried his best not to steal glances at the guard, but when he finally did, he was embarrassed to find the young man looking back at him with a grin.

Then, apparently responding to some unseen signal, the guard broke the silence. He tapped Paul on the shoulder and said, "You two can go on inside if you want."

"Oh," said Paul. "Thanks."

Chloe was already on her feet and headed toward the door. The guard had to break his nonchalant pose to hurry to the door in time to open it for her. Paul followed close on her heels. And then they were inside.

THE "ballroom" wasn't much more than a thousand square feet, about the size of a dining room in a medium to small-sized restaurant. Large picture windows looked out to the west and north, although more red curtains shut out the outside world. To Paul's left was a lavish buffet table, laid out with shrimp, sushi, mini-quiches, various fruits and cheeses, and even crab legs on ice. Three elegantly appointed round tables clustered in the room's center, draped in crisp white tablecloths and sporting orchid centerpieces. In the far corner was a serve-yourself bar, lined with wine bottles, top shelf liquors, and a bottle of Veuve Cliquot in a bucket of ice. Paul felt like he'd stumbled into a cozy, classy wedding reception instead of a meeting of outlaws and would-be revolutionaries.

In the room's center stood a handsome, 40-something African-American man in an ivory linen suit and burgundy silk shirt. He was of medium build, maybe an inch shorter than Paul, and stood with a slight forward hunch to his posture - a common affliction for anyone who'd spent their formative decades crouched in front of a computer. The man, who Paul assumed was Isaiah, stood next to Winston, talking quietly to the old hippie, who was listening with a smile. They both turned to Chloe and Paul as they came through the door.

"Chloe, Paul," said Winston, waving them over. "Please, come meet my friend Isaiah."

Isaiah held out his hand to Chloe and the Paul, looking them each in the eye as

he shook their hands. “Nice to meet you,” he said, his voice deep and soothing. “Winston was just giving me the low down on both of you. Key West is your town?”

“It is these days,” said Chloe.

“Nice,” said Isaiah. “It’s an interesting place. Unusual, from what I’ve seen. Eccentric might be the right word.”

“I’d say the word is wacky,” she said. “Wackier still since we arrived. When did you guys get in?”

“Not too long ago,” Isaiah said, “Haven’t had a chance to sightsee too much.”

“Just let us know if you need a local guide,” Paul said. “We’ll show you a good time.”

“That’s very kind,” said Isaiah. “We’ll see how business goes.”

“Speaking of which...” Chloe said.

“You’re wondering why I’m here,” he said.

“I did give them some tantalizing hints,” Winston interjected. “But I don’t know enough about it to really explain your plan.”

“Well,” said Isaiah. “We’re still waiting for two more interested parties to make an appearance. One of them called and said they’re running late. The other should be here any minute. I’ll wait and explain it to you all at once. I hate to duplicate effort.”

“Sure, sure, no problem,” said Chloe.

Isaiah motioned toward the buffet table and the bar. “They’ve laid out quite a spread. Go ahead and help yourself to anything you want.” With that, he turned his attention back to Winston, ushering him away from Chloe and Paul so they could continue their conversation out of earshot.

“Thanks,” said Chloe to Isaiah’s receding back. Then she whispered to Paul, “This is really not what I expected.”

“No, it’s really not,” Paul said in a quiet voice. “That shrimp looks good though.”

They made their way to the buffet. As they took their time loading up plates with food, Paul whispered into Chloe’s ear. “At least the delay gives Bee and San plenty of time to get everything set up downstairs. We might even catch these other people as they come in.”

Chloe nodded. “Yeah, but what’s with all the fancy food and shit?” she said. “And this place? It’s so public.”

“He’s making a statement.”

“Yeah, but what’s he stating?”

“That’s he’s not worried about being seen?” suggested Paul.

“Or that he’s not going to say anything real important tonight.” She looked around the room. “I certainly wouldn’t. We have no way of knowing who’s just outside on the balcony, maybe listening in.”

“I’ll bet the guard at the door has a friend or two out on there.”

“Yeah, probably,” agreed Chloe. “Still, it’s really fucking weird.”

Their plates full, they sat down at one of the tables and started to nibble at their food. Isaiah and Winston still stood sequestered in the corner. From afar they looked to be having a quiet, amiable chat. But Paul knew that, assuming Isaiah was as experienced as Win, the two men could be exchanging death threats and an onlooker across the room would never suspect a thing.

They sat there a lot longer than Paul would have imagined, waiting for something, anything to happen. He tried not to just stare at the two men talking in the corner, but they were the only thing even vaguely interesting going on. He wished he smoked, so he’d have an excuse to step out onto the observation deck and see if he could pick out Isaiah’s other Crewmembers. Finally, Winston and Isaiah shook hands as if they’d agreed upon something, and then the two of them came over to sit down at Paul and Chloe’s table.

“I’m going to have to reschedule the meeting,” said Isaiah. “It doesn’t look like

we'll have a quorum tonight."

"Who're we missing?" asked Chloe.

"Two other interested parties, like I said."

"Didn't you say one of them was late but hadn't called in? Are you sure they're coming?"

"I'm..." Isaiah started to say, but then seemed to change thoughts mid-sentence. "There must have been some mix-up. Maybe a miscommunication."

"Although it really isn't like her to be late like this," Winston interjected. "Not if she's as interested as you say she is."

Isaiah glanced at Winston, although Paul couldn't ascribe any particular meaning to his look. "No, that's true. It's not like her."

"Who're we talking about?" asked Chloe.

"A woman named Raquel," Winston said before Isaiah could get a word out. If he'd wanted Winston to keep this fact a secret, he hid his annoyance well.

"She's rather important to my presentation," Isaiah said. "But I'm sure she just got held up somewhere. Maybe lost track of time. She's kind of a party girl."

"Well," said Paul, "This is more than kind of a party town. I know from personal experience how easy it is to forget oneself in some of these bars."

"He's not kidding," teased Chloe. "Trust me. If he didn't keep his comic books at the house, I'd never get him to come home."

"Maybe we could help you find her," suggested Paul. "We know a lot of people - especially bartenders and club owners."

"I don't know if that's necessary," said Winston. "No need to put yourselves out."

"Winston's right," said Isaiah. "We don't want to crowd Raquel's style. She'll show up when she shows up."

“Sure, sure,” said Chloe, “I understand. When do you want to meet...”

“But what if something’s happened to her?” asked Paul. The other three all looked at him, curious.

“What do you mean?” Isaiah asked.

Paul waved his arm around the room, “You obviously went to a lot of effort to set all this up. And I know Winston wouldn’t have come all the way to the East Coast if this meeting weren’t about something important, right? And you said that, that...what’s her name? Raquel? That Raquel was excited or interested in what you’ve got going on. Now I haven’t been doing this as long as any of you, but I do know that precision and timing are vitally important in our line of... work.”

Everyone nodded in agreement. Before Paul could continue, Isaiah said, “You’re right, Paul. No point in taking needless chances. Something bad might’ve happened to her, and if it did, we better find out right now. And if she’s just late, well...” he glanced at Winston. “That tells us something about her too.”

“Exactly,” said Paul.

“It’s your town,” Isaiah replied.

“Do you have anything more for us besides a name?” asked Chloe. “A pic, a description?”

“Give me a secure e-mail address and I can send you everything you’ll need,” said Isaiah.

“Are you certain that’s wise?” asked Winston. “When Raquel finds out you’re sending her picture all over town, she won’t be pleased.”

“Then she shouldn’t have been late,” Isaiah replied. “In any case, I’m sure Chloe and Paul will be discreet in their search.”

“Of course we will,” said Chloe. “Always.”

“Let’s get started then,” he said, standing up from the table.

“One more thing,” said Paul. “What do you want us to do if we find her?”

“If she’s fine, ask her to come here ASAP,” Isaiah replied. “If she’s in trouble, help her. Either way, your first call is to me.”

Chapter 06

CHLOE didn't like being told what to do. Especially in her town.

Most especially by a complete stranger. "That Isaiah," she said to Paul as they exited the elevator back on the ground floor. "He's not afraid to give fucking orders, is he?"

"No," laughed Paul. "Not at all."

She glanced over and saw Sandee sitting at the hotel bar, sipping on something that could have been a vodka tonic, but was probably just a tonic and lime. She gave Sandee the slightest of nods and motioned with her eyes to meet them outside. Given how prepared Isaiah had been upstairs, Chloe would have been very surprised if he and his Crew didn't have someone (or some camera) surveiling the lobby. She and Paul made straight for the front door and stepped out onto the street.

They headed west down Duval and turned left at the first cross street. As soon as they were out of sight from the La Concha they both pulled out their cell phones and started dialing.

"Wait," said Chloe. "Who're you calling?"

"I was calling Bee," said Paul.

"I was going to call Bee," she said.

"Oh, ok. Then I'll call San."

"No, you call Bee, I'll call San."

"What're you going to call me?" said a voice from behind them. They both turned around to see Sandee standing there, still stunning in tight dress and dagger heels.

"Ok, you call Bee, I'll talk to San," said Chloe. Paul nodded and resumed dialing. None of the Crew had any numbers or information of any kind stored in their phones. Likewise, Bee had modified them all to erase their outgoing and

incoming call histories after every call. You never knew when you might lose a phone, and you certainly never knew who might find it. Or steal it.

“I put two of Bee’s little watchers in the lobby,” said Sandee. “One’s in a plant, looking down the hallway to the elevator. The other’s in a plant in the bar where it can cover both main doors.”

“See anything unusual?” Chloe asked.

“Besides my presence in the bar at La Concha? This will do no good for my reputation, you know. No, nothing unusual.”

“Ok, well, now we’re looking for a woman.”

“Who isn’t?”

“We’re looking for a specific woman. Name’s Raquel, although she’s probably going by some other name.”

“A wise choice. Raquel is very ’70s, isn’t it?”

“More than Sandee, certainly,” said Chloe.

“That’s Persephone Petals to you!” insisted Sandee, referring to the stage name often found on the marquee at various clubs around town.

“Sorry, Persephone. Anyway, we should be getting a pic of this Raquel chick any minute. Bee will forward it to your phone. Can you ask around at your usual haunts and see if she’s been in? Be discreet, of course.”

“Of course,” Sandee said. “I’m the soul of discretion.”

“That’s what your mom said.”

“Well, mother is most definitely not in the slightest bit discreet,” said Sandee with a wink. “Toodles, chica. I’ll check in if I find your woman.” Sandee started to turn and walk away but stopped as Chloe gently touched a bare shoulder.

“Check in even if you don’t, ok?” said Chloe. “There’s a lot of strangers in town tonight.”

“I know,” said Sandee, giving Chloe a kiss on the cheek. “I’m one of them.”

Chloe watched Sandee sashay up the block, back toward Duval. She reflected for a moment on how lucky they were to have found San for the Crew. Without the help of a Key West native - or conch as they preferred to be called - she and Paul might never have cracked this town. Now they practically had the whole island in their grasp. Assuming this Isaiah fucker didn’t screw everything up with whatever he was up to.

“Bee just got the pic,” said Paul, breaking her out of her reverie. “Should be on your phone any minute.”

“Ok,” said Chloe. “Where do you want to cover?”

“I was planning on hitting the mega-bars and tourist traps tonight anyway to recruit for the party, might as well make my rounds as planned.”

“But maybe no party recruiting, right?” chided Chloe. She immediately regretted her tone as soon as she saw annoyance flash across Paul’s face. He hated being reminded of the obvious. “As you already no doubt knew...”

“Right,” said Paul. He didn’t seem angry, but then, just one of the things she loved about him was that he was good at letting little things like that go. “But I need to pass out new addresses to a few bartenders and waiters tonight. So I figured I’d show Raquel’s pic around at the same time.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Chloe. “San has central Duval covered. I’ll hop on my scooter and tour the periphery.”

“And when and if we find her, I assume our first call is most definitely not to Isaiah,” said Paul.

“Of course not. Let’s hear her side of the story first. She no doubt knows more about Isaiah and whatever the fuck he’s up to than we do.”

“She would have to - we don’t know anything.”

“Not yet,” Chloe said. “But the night is young.”

“I put Bee on Isaiah as well,” said Paul. “She’s digging around looking for

anything she can find on him and where he might be staying.”

“I hope she’s careful,” said Chloe. Bee was an amazing engineer and the best with gadgets, but she was no hacker. She knew her way around a computer, but from what Winston had said, Isaiah was a primo, oldschool hacker. He’d sniff Bee’s digital scent a mile away if she got close to anything sensitive.

“She’ll be fine,” Paul assured her. Chloe wasn’t as confident, and decided to give Bee a warning call once she was alone.

“You’re probably right,” she said, pulling him close for a kiss. “Now let’s get on this thing. And remember, Raquel’s probably not at the Pirate’s Den.”

Paul laughed. Chloe teasing him about the strippers at the Pirate’s Den was now an old joke between them even though, truth be told, Chloe usually had more fun in the Den than Paul did. “You can never be too thorough in these matters,” he said. “I’ll leave no stone unturned.”

Then they both checked their e-mail on their phones, downloading Raquel’s picture onto their screens. She was a pretty, if severe, looking woman. Latin features and coloring, short, black hair. The pic looked like it came off a security camera - she certainly didn’t seem aware that her picture was being taken. Still, it was a good, clear shot, and if the woman still looked the same, anyone who’d seen her recently shouldn’t have any problem recognizing her.

Chloe watched Paul as he followed Sandee, heading back toward Duval. She took off at a jog, headed back to Artist’s Alley where she’d left her scooter. Considering the Vespa’s security system and the thumbprint recognition device in the left handlebar, it should still be there. At her current pace, she would be in the seat and motoring in less than five minutes.

Since the weather had finally, finally, finally turned from unbearably hot to pleasantly warm, Chloe had been jogging a lot lately, usually covering six or seven miles as she zigzagged through Old Town’s streets or covered the island’s perimeter. She memorized street names and house numbers and explored alleyways as she ran. Although she was somewhat frustrated by Key West’s small size, she did feel like she was getting to know every little nook and cranny of its streets, which gave her a certain sureness of place she’d never quite felt in the vast sprawl of Silicon Valley.

Chloe turned left on Simonton, retracing the path she and Paul had walked earlier with Winston. With fewer people on the sidewalk she increased her pace, running west to her Vespa. She got a few stares from drivers passing by, but she decided that time was more important than avoiding attention. Right now all she wanted was to find Raquel before Isaiah's Crew tracked her down. At the very least it would be a sign that she really did have some pull in this city and might therefore strengthen her position. If she was lucky, she could make some deal with Raquel or learn something that she and Paul could use to their advantage going into this negotiation or revolution or whatever it was.

Closing in on her destination, Chloe slowed her pace to a trot and then a quick walk as she turned onto the more populated streets by the marina and saw a pair of cops standing not fifteen feet away. Nothing attracted police attention like someone running. They were right between her and where she needed to be, but she wasn't worried. Key West cops kept the drunks in line and harassed street dealers and street walkers. They had no idea about the Crew or any of the crazy shit she and Paul were up to. She saw that the two officers, dressed in white shirts marked "Police," shorts and heavy black belts weighed down with pistol, nightstick and radio, were doing one of their other favorite duties - harassing the homeless.

In this case though, Chloe recognized the young woman they were questioning so intently. And at that moment the young woman noticed and recognized her as well. She was small, with pixie-like features and long, stringy brown hair. She wore a pair of dirty, gray men's suit pants that she'd slit up the sides to her thighs and tied at the ankles and around the waist with rope salvaged from some dock. Her worn, faded blue spandex halter top looked like it came from the same dumpster as the pants. As usual, she wore a pair of chipped but serviceable roller blades in place of shoes.

"Hey, hey!" said the woman, pointing at Chloe. "She can tell you! You can tell them, right?"

Outwardly, Chloe flashed the cops a pleasant smile, but inside she was groaning. "Hey Cassie," she said. "What's up?" Both cops turned to look at her. Chloe recognized them as officers Hurley and Gutierrez. She'd taken the time a few months ago to memorize the names, faces and, where possible, the records of every officer on the Key West police force. They, on the other hand, didn't seem to recognize her at all, which was good.

“You need to tell them,” Cassie said. “Tell them it’s ok.”

“You know this woman?” Officer Gutierrez said to Chloe, his eyes suspicious in that bored cop way.

“Sure, sure,” said Chloe. “Why? What’s up?”

“They wanna shut me down, man!” Cassie interjected. “They want me to stop... stop...”

“Stop what?” Chloe asked.

“Stop...” Cassie said, calming down as she tried to remember what was going on.

“Stop her from making a nuisance of herself,” Officer Hurley offered.

“I wasn’t...”

“You weren’t skating into pedestrians on the street?” Gutierrez said.

“No...” Cassie mumbled into her chest.

“Cassie,” the cop continued, his voice level and calm. “We saw you. You skated right by us and nearly knocked that woman over.”

“Oh,” said Cassie. “Really?”

“Now, take off the skates and we’ll have a patrol car come pick you up,” said Hurley. Cassie’s eyes widened at this and she tried to back away, but Gutierrez grabbed her. Chloe absolutely didn’t have time to get involved in this shit right now, but she didn’t want to leave Cassie hanging like that. She knew that the homeless girl had a pathological fear of being held in custody.

“Can I just take her home?” Chloe asked, not believing it even as she said it.

“Excuse me, ma’am?” asked Hurley. He knew as well as she did that Cassie didn’t have a home and he no doubt wondered why Chloe was sticking up for her.

“I could, you know, just take her home. Let her chill out a little. Sleep it off, you

know?”

“This woman lives with you?”

“She stays over sometimes. It’s no big deal. I just thought maybe...”

“Please!” said Cassie. “I’ll be good and quiet and sleep like a bug in a rug and not run into anybody, I promise. Promise, promise, promise.”

The cops gave each other a look. Chloe hoped that they were now tired of the entire encounter and willing to turn responsibility over to her so they could get on with their evening. They weren’t quite there yet.

“If that woman decides she wants to press charges...” Gutierrez said. Chloe knew this was bullshit of course. If the woman wanted to press charges they would’ve had Cassie in handcuffs already. They just wanted to extort some sort of penalty from Cassie in order to make it worth their time.

“You could take her skates,” Chloe suggested. “She doesn’t go anywhere without them. I’ll bring her by tomorrow to pick them up and you can question her then if you still need to.”

“And until then she’ll be staying with you?” Hurley asked.

“Yes,” said Chloe. She pulled out her wallet and handed the officer a driver’s license with the name Jennifer Kimball and the address of an apartment in New Town. The cop copied down the info and asked for a phone number. Chloe gave him one for a throw away cellular she kept back at the house. Meanwhile, Cassie was stripping off her skates, and suddenly the whole area around her smelled like feet.

“You know what,” said Hurley, leaning back away from the stink. “Why don’t you keep those.”

“Are you sure?” asked Cassie.

“Yes, go on and keep those on,” agreed Gutierrez. “But you head right back home with Ms. Kimball here. We won’t see you again tonight, right?”

“Right,” said Cassie.

“Absolutely right,” agreed Chloe.

“All right then,” said Hurley. “You folks have a good night.”

“You too, officers,” said Chloe.

“Yeah, you too!” Cassie chimed in.

The cops had made their deal and seemed happy with it. As long as they didn’t see Cassie bothering anybody for the rest of the night, they were willing to let things go. Cassie and Chloe stood and watched them saunter back up the street toward the main tourist areas.

“So we’re going to your house?” asked Cassie once they were out of earshot, her voice full of hope.

“No. You’re going to go somewhere out of sight for the night. I’m going to go back to doing what I was doing.”

“Oh,” said Cassie, disappointed. Chloe felt a pang of guilt - Cassie sticking up for me though.”

“I’ll have you over some other time, Cassie, ok?” said Chloe. “It’s just really crazy right now.”

“That’s me,” she said. “Crazy. Crazy Cassie they call me. I know.”

“Yeah,” said Chloe. They did in fact call her Crazy Cassie. Everybody did. “But you know...”

“Ok, thanks. Bye-bye,” the homeless woman said as she strapped her skates back on. “Thanks, thanks.” She gave Chloe a big hug and then pushed off into the street, skating north into the shadowy streets of Old Town before Chloe could get in another word.

Christ, Chloe thought, she was such a fucking softie. Time to get back to work. She found her scooter a couple of minutes later, right where she’d left it. She disengaged the security system with a fob on her keychain and thumbed the ID pad. The engine started right up and she zipped away, heading toward the beach hotels along Atlantic Boulevard.

CHLOE moved as fast as she could through the chain hotels. Her Crew didn't have anywhere near the contacts in these corporate-owned places that they did in the scores of guest houses and small inns that blanketed Old Town. She started her search at a small motel down the street from the Southernmost Point marker; a massive, brightly colored concrete tourist magnet that marked the beginning (or end) of the highway that ran from Miami down through the keys. As you drove that stretch (which she'd done many times now) the miles counted down to zero until you ended up here, with no road left to travel. Mile zero was the end of the line, and more and more she was worried that it was a dead end for her and Paul and the crew as well.

She showed Raquel's picture around, pretending that she was looking for her sister-in-law, whom she was trying to surprise. Most of the hotel clerks seemed to buy this story, especially when she slipped them a \$20 bill for their help. Unfortunately, there was no hint of recognition in any of their faces, and when they checked their reservation computers they didn't find any Raquels. Chloe would've been surprised to find her at any of these places, but you had to be thorough.

A little over an hour after she'd started, Chloe got a reprieve from her fruitless search when Paul called. "I think I've found her," he said, breathless. "Or at least where's she's staying."

"Where?" asked Chloe.

"The Weaver House."

"Off Grinnell Street?"

"Yep."

Chloe knew the place. Off the main roads, small, quiet, cheap. A good place to lie low, although a little ratty. If she were Raquel she might've picked a place much like it. "Are you there?" she asked Paul.

"Down the street. The day desk clerk's name is Carlos. He's dating Kyle, who's on our housing plan right now."

"Do we know the night clerk?" asked Chloe.

“No. She’s new. Even Carlos doesn’t know her.”

“Fuck. Ok, well, I’ll be there in a few. If you could scope the place out...”

“Already done. Just the one entrance in front. A little pool area along the side where there’s a gate to the alley behind, but it’s locked.”

“Fuck again. Ok. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Chloe mulled over plans in her head. The sister-in-law line might or might not work, depending on this new clerk. Anyone working a nightclerk job at a small guest house in Key West obviously needed money, so maybe they could just bribe her, although she’d definitely remember that if it happened, and Chloe didn’t like being memorable in that way. It was possible the place had its computer reservation system online, but Chloe doubted it, and without a skilled hacker, they didn’t have time to break into the system anyway.

She found Paul standing on the corner, talking on his cell phone. She pulled up next to him and said, “How much for a quickie?”

He smiled and hung up the phone. “\$15 around the world.”

“Damn, you’re cheap!” Chloe said, climbing off the Vespa.

“My pimp believes in volume discounts. She’s weird that way,” he said, giving her a kiss.

“Yeah, she must be. Who were you talking to? Has Bee or San scared up anything new?”

“I wasn’t talking to anyone, but I thought it looked better if I had a reason to be standing around on the corner. In case you’re wondering, the time is now 10:47, and the temperature is a balmy 70 degrees.”

Chloe was pleased with Paul’s improvisation. He’d come a long way in their year together, and thinking like a paranoid was now second nature for him. For a moment she considered the possibility that this transformation was not actually a cause for celebration, but she pushed such doubts aside. There was work to do.

“So,” she said. “How’re we getting in? Do you have any angles on this

nightclerk woman?”

“I thought we’d just get a room,” said Paul. “They’re only half-full, so we should have our pick.”

“Well sure,” said Chloe, mentally kicking herself for not thinking of the obvious. “If you wanna do things the simple way.”

“Sometimes, simple is best. This hot chick I know told me that once.”

She took his arm in hers and they started down the quiet street to the guest house’s front entrance. “Come on lover, let’s get a room for the night.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” said Paul.

The Weaver House was like most of the guest houses in Key West - a converted old Key West house that had been added onto, subdivided and re-subdivided over the past five to ten decades. It was independently owned and operated, and odds were that the proprietors lived in the building or next door. The small front porch had two comfortable looking bench seats and a rocking chair. Inside, the small foyer-turned-lobby had just enough room for the receptionist’s desk and the door leading into the interior rooms. Behind the desk sat a thin, middle-aged woman with reading glasses who looked up from her crossword puzzle as Paul and Chloe entered.

“Hi!” said Chloe. “Can we get a room?”

“Oh... yes, of course,” the woman said with a distinct French accent. “For how many nights?”

“Just the night,” said Paul.

“Maybe only a few hours,” Chloe added, giggling. They didn’t have luggage and it was almost 11:00 p.m. The only legitimate excuse they had for getting a room was to fuck, or do something unusual. Chloe wanted to leave no doubt in the French woman’s mind that they were here for the fucking.

The receptionist, wanting to be professional, tried to stop herself from smiling but failed. “Of course,” she said. We have one room left with a king-size bed,” she said, looking over the register in front of her. Apparently the place didn’t

even have a computer for registrations, so hacking wouldn't have been an option anyway.

"Actually," said Paul, "the bed doesn't matter so much." He seemed embarrassed. Paul leaned over and looked down at the register himself. "We might be better off with a room that was sorta private. I mean away from..."

"Of course," the woman said with a knowing nod. Together she and Paul looked down at the list. "Why don't we put you in room 11?"

"Sounds perfect!" said Chloe, running a hand through Paul's hair. "The sooner the better."

"Will that be cash or charge?" the receptionist asked with a wink.

THE second floor room was small - a single bed and a small dresser. But they weren't staying long. Chloe peered through the door she'd opened just a crack, watching as the French woman headed back down the stairs to her crossword puzzle.

"There weren't any Raquel's on the register," said Paul. "But there were only two single occupancy rooms, so we should probably start with those. Room 9 two doors down is one, and then room 5, which is somewhere downstairs."

"We'll start with 9," said Chloe, opening their own room door and examining the lock mechanism. Not hotel grade at all - just the kind of lock you'd have on a bedroom door inside a house. She could pop it with a credit card. "The lock's no problem," she told Paul. "Let's go."

They listened close at room 9's door and heard nothing. Chloe popped the lock as quietly as possible, but the hinges squeaked as she pushed it open a few inches. She winced, but a quick glance inside told her that the room - a mirror image to their own tiny room - was empty. They both ducked inside. A quick look at the XXL Tshirts in the dresser and the men's shoes by the bed and Chloe knew this was the wrong room. They slipped back out into the hall.

The only danger was that the receptionist would notice them coming down the stairs. Fortunately there was a door between the stairwell and the front desk, and the steps didn't creak too loudly as they crept down. Room 5 lay at the back of the guest house. The lock opened just as easily as the first one, and at least this

one didn't squeak as she pushed it open a few inches to peer inside.

Oh shit! There was someone lying in the bed.

The room was much bigger than theirs, with a queen sized bed, a large armoire, and a table and chairs. Someone lay prone on the bed, face down. A woman, Chloe thought, judging from the smooth, shapely legs. But this was Key West. Plenty of men had smooth shapely legs as well. Could that be Raquel? Could she have just overslept?

Chloe withdrew, but left the door open for Paul to take a look. "I think that's her," he whispered to Chloe. "Don't you?"

Chloe just nodded. Should they wake her up? She might not appreciate two strangers breaking into her hotel room to rouse her from a deep sleep just because Isaiah wanted to see her. Chloe knew that she wouldn't want to be woken under those circumstances.

Paul closed the door again and they both stepped back a few feet. "What do you think?" she asked him in a low voice.

"I think we should wake her up," he said.

"Me too."

Chloe walked back to the door and knocked lightly. She waited and knocked again, louder this time. Still nothing. She looked at Paul, and he shrugged and motioned for her to open the door.

She knocked again as she swung the door open, calling into the room. "Hello?" she said, "Raquel, is that you?"

It was Raquel, but she was in no condition to answer. She was dead.

It only took Paul a few minutes to get back to the La Concha on

Chloe's scooter. Paul had noticed the odd look the receptionist had shot them as he and Chloe left again so quickly after checking in. She must think I'm pretty quick on the draw, he thought. "We'll be back," he'd assured her, and he didn't think she even tried to hide her smirk this time. Chloe had called Bee while he

mounted her scooter to head back to Winston and Isaiah.

On the drive over to the hotel, Paul had called Sandee. “We found her,” he’d said. “You can call off your hunt.”

“Thank God,” Sandee had said. “I’m not cut out for this gumshoe gig. I’m much too delicate for this kind of work.” Paul had laughed, knowing that San was anything but delicate, not when it mattered.

“Don’t go thanking me so quick; I might need you to go watch another place for us.”

“I was thanking God, not you,” Sandee joked. “You’ve never answered any of my prayers.”

“Who brought you those two sailor boys for your birthday?” Paul asked.

“Mmm, sailor boys. Ok, that one...”

“Please San, this is getting pretty serious,” Paul said. “Chloe’s on her way back to the house. I just want to make sure you stay by your phone and are ready when we need you.”

“Serious, huh? Ok, honey,” Sandee said. “I’m all over it like brown on rice.”

“Thanks, I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“No worries, sweetie. Anything for you.”

Paul hung up, and a minute later he parked the Vespa beside the side entrance to La Concha and paid a bellboy to ignore the fact that it was illegally parked. He headed for the elevators and the mysterious conspirators waiting for him on the top floor, nervous as hell about having to face them alone with the news he was bringing. But he and Chloe had decided that one of them needed to take care of the Raquel situation right away, before the others got involved, and Paul had volunteered to be the bearer of bad news while Chloe went to get Bee to help her.

Little had changed in the rooftop bar over the past two hours. Isaiah’s guard still sat at his seat by the door to the ballroom. Some of the other customers were still

there as well, along with several new faces. Paul noticed more people outside on the observation deck as well. He headed straight for the guard, who just nodded at him and motioned toward the door with his eyes.

Inside he found Winston and Isaiah, still sitting and engaged in deep conversation. They'd been joined by a woman in her mid-40s, with light brown skin and striking features that Paul had a hard time ascribing to any particular ethnicity. She sat next to Isaiah and had a small laptop open in front of her, its screen hidden from Winston's line of sight. All three of them looked up expectantly at Paul.

"You have news," Isaiah intoned.

"Not good news," said Paul. He looked directly at the new woman, stepping forward to offer his hand. "Hi. I'm Paul."

The woman stood up to shake hands, introducing herself, "Amelia." Her voice had a slight accent to it. Possibly Caribbean, maybe African.

Apparently tired of common courtesy, Isaiah interrupted. "What do you know?"

"Raquel's dead," said Paul.

None of them looked surprised at the news, but Paul chalked this up to years of living the dissembling life. Isaiah and Winston certainly weren't the kind of people to show any emotion they didn't want the world to see, and apparently neither was Amelia.

"Go on," said Isaiah.

Paul glanced to Winston for some guidance and he gave a slight nod. "We found where she was staying, got into her room and found her lying dead in bed."

"Do you know how she died? Are you even sure she's dead?" asked Winston.

"She's definitely dead," he said. Paul shuddered inside as he remembered the staring dead eyes and the cold skin. "As for how, I have no idea. There wasn't any blood, but her face was covered in bruises. We didn't stay around to figure out more than that."

“How did you find her?” asked Isaiah.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Paul. “What’s important is that she’s dead, right?”

“Exactly,” agreed Winston. “We have to assume she suffered a violent death, and furthermore, we need to assume that whoever killed her did so because of something to do with this meeting of ours.”

“That’s a lot to assume,” said Amelia. “Raquel had many enemies in this world. And she liked to take a lot of risks. We have no idea what happened to her. And until we do, we can’t make an informed decision on what to do next, so finding out what happened to her must be our top priority.”

“I agree,” said Isaiah, surprising Paul by showing a bit of tenderness for the first time as he gave Amelia a supportive pat on the knee. Paul had assumed Amelia was the other missing attendee besides Raquel. But now, looking at their body language and the way she sat with her computer screen exposed to Isaiah, he suspected they were partners, if not more.

“Which hotel was she at?” Isaiah asked.

Paul paused before answering. Her location was their one ace, and he didn’t want to reveal it yet. “Excuse me,” said Paul, looking at Winston. “But I’m still a little in the dark over here. Why would you suspect that someone would kill Raquel because of this meeting? What the hell are we meeting about that would get a woman murdered?”

Amelia and Isaiah exchanged a look. Although Paul couldn’t read its meaning, he was now sure they part of the same Crew. He’d had equally communicative glances with Chloe often enough to recognize them in others. But it was Winston who spoke next.

“Do you want to explain, Isaiah. If you don’t tell him, I will,” the old veteran said. “They’re in it now.”

“I suppose so,” said Isaiah. “I can at least give you a broad overview of what we’ve got planned, and knowing the background could prove vital in discovering what happened to Raquel.”

“Great,” said Paul, taking a seat at their table and resting his hand on his pocket.

Under the table, out of sight, he snuck his cell phone out and thumbed a switch on the side, activating a special digital audio recorder Bee had installed. If they were going to reveal big secrets, Paul wanted to catch every word.

“First of all, a little history on Raquel,” Isaiah began. “No reason you shouldn’t have all the background data the rest of us have.”

Amelia, who’d been looking at her laptop screen, interrupted him before he could continue. “Could you turn off any phones or electronic devices you have operating right now?” she asked.

Isaiah looked expectantly at Paul and he tried to hide his surprise as he took out his phone and plopped it down on the table. Amelia looked up from her screen. The laptop probably had some sort of RF detection built into, and the whole room might’ve been wired to detect electronics for all Paul knew. These people definitely came prepared. “Thank you,” she said in her lilting voice.

Isaiah didn’t seem mad, continuing as if the interruption hadn’t happened. “Unlike the rest of us here, Raquel is not part of any Crew. She is - sorry, was - a strictly solo operator. She’d been in this game for fifteen years and she was very good at it. In this particular case, I’d approached her about consulting for us on some law enforcement issues...”

Winston interjected at this point, “What you have to know about Raquel is that she was a bon vivant. She loved to party, have a good time and to scam her way through life. And she was amazingly good at it. She didn’t work for Crews. Crews worked for her, but only when she allowed it or when the score was too big for her to handle alone. She was like the James Bond of grifters - all charm and confidence and chutzpah.”

“What Winston says is true,” said Isaiah. “But what made her so effective is that she had the smarts and did the homework necessary to back her brashness up. She was particularly adept at infiltrating, manipulating, and taking advantage of bureaucracies of any kind. Particularly law enforcement agencies.”

“Most of us, wisely I think, keep as much distance between ourselves and the police as possible. Not Raquel,” Isaiah continued, admiration and respect creeping into his voice. “She cultivated cops and special agents as contacts. While the rest of us ducked for cover in the post 9-11 security crackdown, Raquel rode the institutional paranoia and limitless homeland security spending

like a wave.”

Paul listened in wonder and creeping panic as Isaiah praised Raquel’s skills. All this was way, way, way beyond his league. Cultivating cops? Homeland Security money? What the fuck was Isaiah drawing them into?

“Raquel had invited my Crew to work with her on several occasions,” Isaiah said. “And I believe you had worked with her too, right Winston?”

“Indeed,” he said. “It was always interesting.”

“So I asked Raquel to use some of her contacts...”

“Her law enforcement contacts,” Winston interjected.

“Yes,” said Isaiah. “Her law enforcement contacts. I asked her to do some background checking and look into a few things for us.”

“What kind of things?” asked Paul.

Isaiah paused, searching for words. “It’s complicated,” he said. “Let’s just say that...”

“Ok, hold on,” said Paul. He’d had enough of this cryptic bullshit. He just wanted to know what the fuck was going on. “Can you please, dear God, please, just tell me what the fuck is going on?” he asked Isaiah.

“That’s what I was trying to do,” Isaiah replied, his voice cold.

“I know, I know. I’m sorry,” said Paul. “But can you give me the onesentence synopsis, just so I can get my bearings.”

Isaiah stared at Paul for a long, uncomfortable moment. Paul met his gaze at first, but then broke eye contact, looking down at the table, then over to Winston for support. The old man just nodded, which could’ve meant anything.

Paul started to say something, but Isaiah held up a hand. “Give me a second,” he said.

It took more than a few more seconds, but finally Isaiah started to explain

himself. When he did, Paul could scarcely believe what he was hearing.

“As the man said, I have a dream,” Isaiah began. “It started out as a very personal dream - just a bunch of things I wanted for me and my family. This was when I was in my teens, hacking with the school computers and on a cobbled-together machine my uncle had in the back of his shop. I grew up. So did the damn dream. After, it was just me; it was just me and a few friends. Kids who didn’t like playing the street gang game any more than I did. We were made our own gang - The Kobra Kommandos, if you can believe that G.I. Joe-inspired shit. Just a bunch of black and latino hackers trying to stay out of the drug life but still wanting a taste of the thug life. We wanted cash to buy shit. We wanted to see cool shows and wear expensive clothes and drive fast cars just like everyone else we knew, but we didn’t want to have to fuck with gangbangers or cops or any of that bullshit.

“But really there was always just one dream - to be left the hell alone by everyone else. The cops. The gangs. The school teachers. Our parents. Why the hell wouldn’t they just let us do our thing? That’s what we were always asking ourselves. Now I’ll be the first to admit I’ve never had a real job. I grew up in this life, and I’ve never known anything else. And I love this life. When I was 18, I disappeared. Whoever I was before then vanished - dead or never existed, depending on who you asked. And ever since, I’ve lived without leaving a trace, even as I live a great life.”

Isaiah turned to Amelia at this point, smiling as he put a hand on her shoulder. “I found a beautiful wife. I’ve got two great kids.” This last revelation shocked Paul. The idea that someone could raise children living the way he and Chloe did astonished him. “But it’s getting harder,” Isaiah continued. “Even with a Crew that’s like family and that, in all modesty, is as kick-ass a group of Net-thugs you’re ever gonna meet, it’s getting harder. And this world of ours? It’s sure as hell getting meaner.

“I’ve come to realize that, in these days when every flavor of organized crime is getting into our cyber-business and when paranoid government bastards are letting loose their own viruses to get in everyone else’s shit, that a small Crew like mine - or like any of yours - we can’t survive. We’ll get swallowed up. That’s why we have to evolve. Evolve or die.” Isaiah paused for a moment to catch his breath. He’d been talking fast toward the end there, excited by his own rhetoric.

Paul was intrigued to be sure, swept up in Isaiah's story. But so far it was just words and concerns, not a plan. "Evolve into what?" Paul asked.

Isaiah looked at him and for the first time since Paul met him, he smiled a broad, wolfish grin. "Into something that's too big and tough for anyone to swallow."

"You want to organize the Crews?" asked Paul. "Form one big Crew?"

"In a way..." Isaiah began.

"That's just asking for trouble, isn't it?" Paul asked. "They have a name for that kind of thing - organized crime. And organized crime has FBI task forces assigned to fight it and gets involved in mob wars with other outfits. Not the best way to be left alone if you ask me."

"You're absolutely right," agreed Isaiah. "And that's not what I'm talking about. Besides, ain't none of us the kind of folk who like to take orders from others, right?" Paul nodded in absolute agreement. Out of the corner of his eye Paul saw that Winston was watching him closely. What did Winston think of this plan, he wondered.

"Capos and mob bosses and all that Sicilian bullshit is most definitely not the way to go," said Isaiah. "Evolving into something like them would be like evolving into dinosaurs - a big step backwards. We're already smaller, and smarter, and freer than the Mafia. I don't want to give that up any more than the rest of you."

"But for all our freedom, we're not the freest people in the world. We still operate in one country or another. We still have to play by their rules to a certain extent. But the nation-state is dying, my friends. It feels power and control slipping from its grasp, and in its death throes it's tightening its grip. Rather than get crushed in that grip, I propose joining the ranks of those that are killing it. I'm talking, of course, about the rise of the stateless transnational corporation."

"You want to incorporate?" asked Paul, somewhat disappointed. Winston had said something about revolution. What was revolutionary about a corporation?

"To start with," said Isaiah. "But that's only the beginning."

"What good does that do us?" asked Paul. "Other than create a paper trail that

could lead some IRS investigator right to our front door.”

“Well to start with, the company won’t be anywhere that the IRS can investigate it. The company won’t be anywhere at all but in a series of post-office boxes in the Caymans or Belize and secure servers hidden away in secret data havens. Look at Enron...”

“Here we go,” Winston interrupted. Paul got the impression that Isaiah and Winston had already debated this example a fair amount. “Why not model ourselves after the paragon of right-wing capitalist greed and exploitation?”

“Why not, indeed?” Isaiah countered.

“Because they got caught?” Paul suggested.

“They got caught because they were tied into real world enterprises and stock markets. Because there were people, the SEC could make arrests and parade them in front of the TV cameras. But if you look at what they were doing - which is the same thing a thousand other corporations are still doing today - they had hundreds of fronts and holding companies and shell corporations, each nothing more than an account number and a file somewhere. They moved money and assets and God knows what else without anyone ever noticing what was going on. Sound familiar? It should. It’s what all of us do all the time.

“I’m not talking about going public and selling stock. I’m talking about a privately held, foreign-based holding corporation that can let us pool our resources, launder money, provide ready-made cover, establish untraceable lines of credit, even buy and sell real estate and big ticket property. Hell, even provide health insurance. All without any of it being traceable past the corporate facade.”

“You’re asking us to give up and join the enemy,” said Winston. “To become part of the establishment that we devote our time to subverting.”

“What better way to subvert than from within?” asked Isaiah. “I use the best, I use the rest. I use the enemy.”

“I use Anarchy,” said Paul, completing Isaiah’s quote from the Sex Pistols.

“And make no mistake. This is classic anarchy I’m talking about. No

government control, the workers - us - controlling everything from the ground up. No one telling us what to do. Better than that - no one even knowing what's happening."

"Corporations are the traditional tools of Fascism," Winston intoned. "How can forming a corporation be a tool of Anarchy?"

"Don't get caught up in the labels," Amelia chimed in from beside Isaiah.

"When he first told me about this plan, I was as skeptical as you. But look at the reality, the essence of what's being proposed. A modern-day corporation has all the rights but few of the responsibilities that a person has. And a transnational corporation is a person without any steady lord or master. A person who can travel anywhere in the world in search of opportunity."

"Or prey," said Winston.

"Or prey," agreed Amelia. "That's exactly right. And what does that sound like? Who else in history have enjoyed such freedoms?"

"Pirates," said Paul, understanding dawning on him. "You're saying corporations are the modern pirates."

"Exactly!" said Isaiah, pointing at Paul. "That's it exactly. We've modeled our crews after the Pirate Crews of old - democratic, beholden to no one, taking what we need and living free. But it's time to evolve. Time to become the true pirates of our age."

"The corporation isn't what we are," said Paul. "It's just a new ship for us to sail in." He'd been entranced with the pirate mythos the Crews wrapped themselves in ever since he first met Chloe. The comparison added a veneer of romance and daring that helped mask the sometimes brutal and tough parts of living underground. But he knew that Winston had never liked the metaphor, and looking at him now, Paul didn't see anything in the old man's stern visage to make him think he'd changed his mind.

"That's it," said Isaiah. "I'd never thought of it that way, but you're exactly right, Paul. It's just another kind of ship. A ship that's just as quick and dangerous, but with bigger guns and better armor that can slip in and out of any port in the world without being noticed."

“Ok, ok, I get it now,” said Paul. “But before we get pulled into a big philosophical debate, let’s get back to the real point here. How did this plan of yours get Raquel killed?”

Everyone stopped and stared at him. It was almost as if they’d all but forgotten about the dead woman in the guest house less than ten blocks away, or at least stopped worrying about her. He certainly hadn’t, and of course they probably hadn’t either. Paul found it more than a little disquieting that they could all talk business and theory with such ease after hearing about Raquel’s murder.

“We don’t know that it did,” said Isaiah.

“But it seems rather likely, doesn’t it,” said Winston.

“Yes, I admit that it does,” Isaiah conceded.

“Well, the first thing we need to do then is figure out what happened to her,” said Paul.

“I didn’t tell anyone she was coming,” said Isaiah. “Not even Winston.”

“I had no idea she was involved in this scheme until Isaiah told me earlier this evening,” Winston added.

“And of course we didn’t know,” said Paul. “What about this other Crew that called in late?”

“I didn’t tell them either. And as far as I know, Raquel never had any contact with them. But of course I have no idea who Raquel has worked with. They may be the best of friends or the worst of enemies for all I know. I mentioned them to Raquel, and she claimed not to have heard of them.”

“You told Raquel about them?” asked Paul. “Did you tell her about us too?”

“I did,” said Isaiah. “And about Winston. Part of what I wanted her to do was check up on all of you, to make sure that none of you had any law enforcement heat on you.”

Paul didn’t like that he’d been secretly investigated. In fact, he did have some legal heat on him, although he didn’t think there were any active investigations

going on. “What did she find?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Isaiah. “She was supposed to give me a report tonight.”

“So, basically we don’t know anything about who or what she knew,” said Paul. “Other than the fact that she was digging around into other Crews, getting in touch with her law enforcement contacts and generally sticking her nose where it wasn’t wanted. But since we don’t know what she found, we don’t know who she might’ve pissed off enough for them to murder her in her hotel room.”

“That seems to sum it up,” said Isaiah.

“What a fucking mess. Before we do anything else, I want to figure out what happened to her,” said Paul.

“We’ll help you...” Isaiah started to say.

“No, that’s ok,” Paul said. “We’ll handle it to start with. It’s our town, our responsibility. Chloe’s already working on it. If we end up needing help, you can be sure I’ll let you know.”

Isaiah was about to say something, but Amelia tapped her laptop screen, stealing his attention. He glanced at the display and narrowed his eyes slightly, then nodded. Amelia typed into the keyboard for a few seconds.

Looking up from the screen, Isaiah said, “Well, it appears our fourth and final potential partner has arrived.”

“I thought they said their ship had been delayed,” said Winston. Paul thought he detected a note of suspicion in his tone.

“That’s what they said when they contacted me,” said Isaiah. “Either they found a way to get off the ship and to this island, or they misled me. Either way, they’re here now.”

“Here in Key West?” Winston asked.

“Here in this hotel. In the elevator by now I suspect.”

“Then let’s pause our conversation until they arrive,” said Isaiah.

Paul looked around at the other three in the room and nodded. They were all very experienced, intelligent criminals, and now there were more of their kind on the way - men or women who might be murderers. He wished Chloe was there to help him deal with all this shit, but she had her own challenges. He needed to concentrate hard and watch out for anything and everything they might throw at him. Otherwise he was in dire danger of being swallowed by all these big fish he was suddenly swimming with. As Isaiah had said, time to evolve or die.

Paul sat and reflected for a moment, wishing for a pen and paper to doodle on - anything to release his nervous energy. He had started to wonder if maybe Chloe should've stayed at the meeting and let him investigate the dead body with Bee. Chloe didn't have any more experience investigating murders than he did. Less even, if only because he'd read more detective novels in his life than she had. But most importantly, she did have experience dealing with Winston and people like Isaiah. Paul most certainly did not have any expertise with people like Isaiah or Amelia or whoever these new guys were. On the other hand, at least he wasn't having to deal with a dead body, which was why he'd volunteered to return to the meeting in the first place.

That things had gotten so serious and scary all of a sudden didn't surprise him. When they'd first heard from Winston about his visit, Paul had felt an anxious pang that he couldn't explain at the time. He imagined it's how he would've felt if he were married and he learned that his in-laws were making an unexpected visit - no real reason to be worried other than wild fantasies about all the ways it could go wrong. Well, it had now officially gone more wrong than he had ever imagined. And as interesting as Isaiah's insane corporate/pirate ship scheme sounded, if he could've wished them all away, he would have.

No one had much to say as they waited. Amelia typed into her laptop, possibly communicating with Crewmembers outside. Isaiah just watched as she typed. Winston, who might've offered Paul some support, had gotten up from the table and was now standing in the corner with his back to the rest of them, fiddling with something in his hand. A cell phone maybe? Paul couldn't tell.

There was a knock at the door, and Paul twisted around in his seat to see who was there. He blinked once in surprise. It was as if a fraternity field trip had just walked through the door. Leading the way was a broadchested short man with wavy bleached-blond hair tucked under a blue baseball cap. He wore red surfer shorts and a loose-fitting cream-colored shirt that was unbuttoned to halfway

down his chest, revealing a gold chain nestled in tufts of brown chest hair. Behind him came another man who could've been his older, thinner brother, also blonde, in sandals and a throwback New York Knicks jersey with a laptop tucked under his arm.

"What's up, guys," said the first one in a voice two levels too loud for the room. "Sorry we're late."

Isaiah and Amelia stood up, and Paul followed suit, offering his hand to the man. "Hi," Paul said.

"Hey," he said to Paul. The newcomer gave his hand a quick squeeze and a smile, but his attention was already focused on Isaiah.

"And you must be Isaiah," he continued, pumping the older man's hand. "Great to meet you, bro. I'm Eddie."

"I'm surprised to see you tonight," Isaiah replied, his voice revealing nothing as he reclaimed his hand from Eddie's grasp and took his seat.

"Yeah, I know I said we'd be late, but I caught a different boat. It's f'ed up, man. But anyway, we're here. Did we miss anything?"

"As a matter of fact, rather a lot," said Winston from the other side of the room. He was heading back from his corner.

"Really?" said Eddie. Following Isaiah's lead, he and his companion took seats at the table between Paul and Isaiah, across from where Winston had been sitting. I guess we don't get to know the other guy's name, thought Paul, as he sat back down.

"There's been a bit of a complication," explained Isaiah.

"That's an understatement," said Winston. "One of our fellow guests has died."

"No way!" exclaimed Eddie, his face startled as he turned to look at his companion. "What the hell happened?"

"We're not sure yet," said Isaiah. "It's being looked into."

“Who was it?” Eddie asked, looking around the assembled group.

“Her name was Raquel,” said Winston.

“You’re shitting me!” said Eddie. “No way...”

“You knew her?” asked Winston.

“Yeah. No. Not really. We just met a couple weeks ago, down in Jamaica. We were working this...” Eddie stopped, apparently realizing that maybe he’d revealed more than he meant to. Or maybe he just wants us to think that, thought Paul, reminding himself that everyone at this table was a shark.

“She hadn’t mentioned that she knew you.” said Isaiah.

“Really?” asked Eddie, a hint of annoyance. He leaned back in his seat.

“Whatever. The point is, this is pretty fucked up. What did you say happened?”

“We don’t know yet,” Isaiah repeated. “We’re looking into it.”

“Looks to me like you’re sitting around on your butts on top of this crappy hotel,” said Eddie. “If she was murdered, then, well, I gotta know that shit.”

“What makes you think she was murdered?” asked Paul.

Eddie turned toward Paul, seeming to only now really notice him. “Who’re you?” he asked.

“I’m Paul. Why do you think she was murdered?”

“I don’t,” he said, smiling in a condescending way that Paul hadn’t seen since college. “I was just asking if she was.”

“Well, we’re looking into it,” said Paul.

“You’re looking into it? Looks to me like you’re...”

“Sitting on my ass in this crappy hotel. So you’ve said. But hey, guess what? There are more things on heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Eddie.”

“Your point being?”

“It’s being looked into,” said Paul.

“Ok, ok, I get it. Sorry to be a pain in the ass,” said Eddie, suddenly friendly as he leaned over and gave Paul a pat on the shoulder. “Just trying to get the lay of the land, you know?”

“Ok,” said Paul. He had to admit, if he walked into a room and someone told him that someone he knew was dead, he’d probably have asked the same questions as Eddie. Given the kind of people who were in this meeting, murder was the most likely cause of death. He decided not to think about what that meant for his own personal mortality statistics.

“We’re deciding how to proceed at this point,” Isaiah was saying. “We have no reason to believe that Raquel’s untimely demise is directly related to our endeavor here.”

“And no reason to believe it isn’t,” said Winston.

“He’s got a point,” said Eddie. “It doesn’t seem like a very fucking likely coincidence.”

“I agree,” said Isaiah. “It is probably related in some way, but it may well be entirely tangential to our actual purpose. As you know well, Raquel was a busy woman with a lot going on. We’re not going to make any decisions in regards to her until we know more.”

“We’re not?” asked Eddie, with a laugh. “So you’re making the decisions about what we are and aren’t going to do?”

“Of course not,” said Isaiah, although Paul thought that was exactly what he’d been doing. Despite himself, he was glad Eddie had called him on it. “We’re all free to do as we please, but I for one plan to keep going, taking all necessary precautions, of course. I’m not going to panic.”

“Who’s panicking?” asked Winston. “I just want us to be realistic and careful.”

“And we will be,” said Isaiah.

“Great. Sounds fucking great,” said Eddie. “Now would someone like to tell me just what it is we’re being so damn careful about? Isaiah, buddy, why’d you want to meet like this?”

Isaiah paused and took a deep breath. “As the man said, I have a dream...” he began again, launching into the same speech he’d just given half an hour earlier. Paul sat back in his chair, prepared to be bored as he heard the spiel again. To his surprise, even knowing what was coming, Isaiah’s dream sucked him right in. Maybe it was the pressure or the adrenaline or shock from finding Raquel’s body, but Paul was starting to think that this scheme might actually be a good idea.

Chapter 08

CHLOE watched Paul drive off on her scooter for La Concha. He

drove it so much slower than she did. After he turned the corner, she dialed Bee, who picked up before the phone had a chance to ring.

“What’s going on?” asked Bee, anxious.

“Lots and lots,” said Chloe. “I need you to meet me at the place.”

“The place?” she asked. “You mean where you and Paul...”

“Yeah,” said Chloe. “And I need you to bring a forensics kit.”

There was a moment’s pause. “You need what now?”

“A forensics kit.”

“Like on ‘CSI’?”

“Yeah,” said Chloe.

“I don’t have a forensics kit.”

“Sure you do,” said Chloe. “You just haven’t put it together yet.”

Another pause. Chloe knew Bee was running through her mental catalog of all the gear and gadgets in the house. “I can do a fingerprint powder I think. Some graphite. Tweezers, plastic bags, magnifying glass, a black light...”

“What’s the black light for?” asked Chloe.

“I dunno. Don’t they always use a black light for finding fluids and stuff? And those special orange glasses.”

“Do you have special orange glasses?”

“No...” Bee admitted. “Ok, no black light.”

“Bring the good camera.”

“Video or still?”

“Both I guess. Still for sure. And anything else you might find useful.”

“Ok, ok...” She heard Bee typing in the background, making her list and no doubt checking it twice. “I’ll be there in an hour.”

“Hah! You’re kidding. I need you now,” said Chloe.

“Ten minutes then?” said Bee.

“Are you pulling a Scotty on me again?” Chloe asked.

“Moi? Never.”

“Ok,” said Chloe. “I need to pick up a bottle of whiskey, and I’ll see you there.”

CHLOE waited on the same street corner near where she’d found Paul a couple hours earlier. She called and gave San an update on what was going on. Sandee wanted to continue with party prep, and after a moment’s consideration, Chloe agreed. They might well need the party later, and San was the queen of organizing good times in Key West. More importantly, they needed the revenue.

She saw Bee come ambling up the street, a backpack slung over one shoulder and her ubiquitous laptop tucked under one arm. Chloe was momentarily surprised that she hadn’t driven and then realized that the guest house was indeed uncomfortably close to her own home. Fuck, this is a small town, she thought for the million-and-first time since she’d moved here last year.

Bee saw Chloe and hurried her pace, bouncing along the sidewalk as she trotted up to the corner. “Sorry I took so long,” said Bee. “But I couldn’t find the graphite powder for fingerprints.”

“No worries, hon,” said Chloe. She took the bottle of Jim Beam from its brown paper bag and unscrewed the top.

“Why’re we drinking?” asked Bee.

“We’re not,” said Chloe, even as she took a gulp from the bottle and sloshed the fiery liquid around in her mouth. She spat it out into the bushes and then poured half the bottle’s contents after it. “We’re having a party.”

“Gotcha,” said Bee, drawing in a deep breath and then another before taking the bottle from Chloe’s hand. She took a sip and sloshed it around in her mouth for a second before spitting it out with a grimace. “Yuck!”

Chloe reclaimed the bottle and then took Bee by the arm. “Come on honey, pretend like you’re having a good time, ok?”

“Ok!” said Bee, giving a fake, schoolgirlish giggle.

Arm in arm they staggered up the stairs of the guest house and through the door. The Frenchwoman was still behind the desk, still working on a crossword puzzle. She looked at them in mild astonishment, but smiled. Chloe figured that she’d already made her for a bit of a tramp when she checked in with Paul earlier. The whiskey and the way she held Bee close against her would help reinforce that idea in the woman’s mind and force out any other suspicions she might have.

“Hello again,” the woman said.

“Heya,” said Chloe with a wink and a leering smile. Bee giggled again, too loudly and, to Chloe’s ears, too fake but she didn’t think the receptionist would notice or care.

They walked right past the front desk without breaking stride and into the back of the building, heading for the stairs. Once they were out of sight from the lobby, Chloe motioned for Bee to stay still and quiet while she marched up the stairs, making enough noise that she was sure the Frenchwoman could hear her. Then she crept back down and led Bee back to Raquel’s room.

INSIDE, the room was just as she and Paul had left it. Chloe had only gone in far enough to check Raquel’s pulse and feel the cold, clammy skin. She’d known then and there that it was a murder scene, and that she was in no way prepared to investigate it. More importantly, she hadn’t wanted to leave any evidence that might connect her or Paul to the crime scene, so they’d left as quickly as they’d come in. Now, snapping on a pair of latex gloves that Bee had brought, she had no more excuses. It was time to investigate.

Unfortunately, she had absolutely no idea how to investigate a crime scene. She didn't even like cop shows, and the few movies and books she'd read on the subject all glossed over the boring details of looking for clues. Sadly, no montage of thoughtful scenes and dramatic music was going to save her tonight. Hoping that Bee might have a better idea on how to proceed, she turned to her friend for support.

Bee stood by the door, stiff and scared as she stared directly at Raquel's corpse. Chloe had last seen that look on her face in a squalid little motel room in San Jose, and there had been a body there, too. She knew that Bee remained obsessed and on some deep level very disturbed by what had happened that night. Maybe bringing her to another murder scene hadn't been the best plan Chloe ever had, but there was no one else.

"Are you ok?" she asked Bee.

The small woman clutched her laptop to her chest and nodded. "Yeah. It's just so like..."

"I know, I know," said Chloe, coming over and giving Bee a hug. "But it's not the same. It's not. We didn't have anything to do with this. But now we have to find out what happened to her."

"Got it," said Bee, resolve returning to her voice. "Sure thing. Not a problem."

"Good," said Chloe, "Because I have not one fucking clue as to what we should do next."

Bee stared around the dim room and then un-shouldered her backpack and placed it on the floor at her feet. She pulled out a flashlight and slowly, not moving from her spot by the door, started to scan every inch of the room. Chloe noticed that heavy curtains had been closed across the room's sole window and decided to take a chance. They didn't have that much time. She flipped the light switch.

Bee jumped as the room lit up. "Hey!" she said in an angry whisper.

"Sorry," said Chloe.

"Ok, ok. But don't do anything else yet. I want to preserve the scene." She put

the flashlight away and pulled out a small but very expensive digital video camera. Chloe watched as Bee walked from one side of the room to the other, panning slowly in every direction. She noticed that Bee avoided filming Raquel's corpse until there was no more ignoring her.

Raquel lay face down on the bed, her head turned away from the door. Although it had been hard to see in the dim room when Chloe first found her, with the lights on it was easy to discern that there was in fact clotted blood in her hair on the back of her head. None on the bed itself, though. Chloe moved around to the other side of the bed, where Bee was squinting in discomfort as she videotaped Raquel's face. It was a mass of bruising, with two black eyes and a badly bruised cheek. Her dead eyes stared back at the camera.

"Watch out there," said Bee as Chloe approached the body. "There's some powder or sand on the floor here."

Chloe looked down and saw a scattering of white sand on the rug. She bent down and touched it with her finger. "Beach sand," she told Bee.

Bee just nodded as she panned up and down the dead body. Raquel wore stylish red shorts and a tight black tube top. She didn't have any shoes on. Chloe scanned the room, looking for signs of footwear that she might've worn to the beach. She saw a suitcase propped up against the bathroom door, but a quick check revealed a small padlock. Chloe estimated that she could pick it in under a minute, but she'd come back to that.

"Do you mind if I check inside the dresser?" she asked Bee, who had just finished videotaping Raquel and was now headed for the bathroom.

"Just be careful with prints," she said without looking up from her camera's display.

Chloe gingerly opened the armoire cabinet, revealing a TV that looked untouched. The drawers below were also empty. She hadn't even had time to unpack, and there were no shoes, sandals or footwear of any kind in sight. And there was no closet. She bent down low and peered under the bed. "Any shoes in there?" she asked Bee.

"Uh-uh," Bee replied as she walked back into the bedroom, closing the camera's display. "Nothing in here at all."

“She didn’t even unpack,” mused Chloe.

“Or the killer took her stuff,” said Bee.

“Why take her shoes though?”

“Some weird foot fetish thing?”

“Maybe,” said Chloe, although she didn’t think this was about sex. Raquel was a good-looking woman, and if the murderer had a thing for her, she doubted he’d have left her clothes on like that after he went to the trouble of beating her to death.

Chloe went back to the body and looked at Raquel again. Her knuckles on both hands were bruised, and there were scratches on her arms. “She fought back, whoever it was.” She bent forward for a closer look at the hands. She didn’t quite have the nerve to touch them yet. She smelled something then. Not rotting yet, but salt water. She touched the sheets around the body but couldn’t feel anything through the latex gloves. She pulled off one glove and touched the sheets. Damp. But only around the lower half of the body. Check that. Only around her shorts, which were soaked through. But her shirt was dry.

“Check this out, Bee,” she said, turning to see what her friend was doing. Bee was using her magnifying glass to look at the window frame. “What’re you doing?” she asked.

“I think somebody recently unscrewed this window,” said Bee. “And then screwed it back in again.”

“What’s out there?” Chloe asked as she came to see what Bee meant. She saw that all four screws had been undone recently, or at least since they’d been painted over. She inched the shade up a bit and peered outside. A back alley, dark, with a fence across the way. Bee had picked up a fleck of paint with her tweezers and showed it to her. Chloe nodded.

“Ok,” Chloe said, turning back toward the body. “No shoes. Shorts are wet. Sand on the floor. No signs of struggle when she was obviously in a hell of a fight. No way she was killed here.”

“She was at the beach and someone attacked her,” said Bee. “And then brought

her back to her room through the window. That's kinda weird, isn't it?"

"That's fucked up is what that is," said Chloe. "Why would they do that? One look at her and you can see she didn't die in her sleep."

"I heard sometimes that bruises don't show up right away when you're dead. Maybe they didn't know how bad she looked?"

"Maybe... but that doesn't sound too likely, does it? And what's with the shoes?" Chloe went over to the suitcase and got out her lock picks. "While I'm opening this, do you want to take fingerprints or something?"

"I...um...I couldn't find any graphite. I told you."

"Oh, well, ok. Maybe you could scrape under her nails for tissue for a DNA test?" suggested Chloe, sure she'd seen that in a movie.

"Do you know how to do a DNA test?" Bee asked.

"No. How hard can it be? We'll check on the Internet." She knew this sounded pretty farfetched, but she wanted to cover as many bases as possible. Maybe she could use a police contact to do it or something like that.

"Ok," said Bee, although she didn't actually move any closer to the body.

It ended up taking just over a minute to open the lock, but only because her picks were a little big for something that small. Inside she found clothes, toiletries and two pairs of shoes and some sandals, none of which had sand on them or were damp. She unpacked everything in the case, placing it in neat piles on the floor. Chloe felt around the edges and the interior, looking for the hidden storage space she assumed had to be there. She had them in all of her luggage.

And there it was, tucked into the base of the suitcase, built into the actual plastic frame. She used the edge of her pocket knife to lever the small compartment open and was surprised to find it entirely empty. She found it very unlikely that Raquel hadn't found any use for the hiding spot. As she carefully replaced Raquel's clothes exactly where she'd found them, and locked the case again, she realized that she probably wasn't the first person to do that tonight. The killer had probably already done the same thing, except he got all the good stuff and took it with him.

“Fuck,” she said, looking over at Bee, who was using an Exacto knife to scrape under one of Raquel’s fingers, depositing the contents in a small ziplock bag.

“What?” asked Bee.

“There’s nothing fucking here,” she said exasperated. “No phone, no computer, no PDA. Nothing. Whoever did this already took everything good.”

“Does that mean we can leave?” asked Bee.

“Yeah,” she said. “Just as soon as we search every last goddamned inch of this place one more time.

They did just that. Bee used an RF detector to look for bugs and hidden cameras. Chloe mentally kicked herself, realizing that they should have swept for bugs before they started talking. Bee probably would’ve thought of that if she hadn’t been so freaked out by the whole dead body thing. Not that Chloe could blame her. She was pretty fucking freaked out as well. Chloe tapped and prodded at every surface that might hide something. A check of the mattress revealed no cuts or sewn seams, so she assumed there was nothing in there either.

After half an hour she finally said, “Fuck it. Let’s go.”

Bee, who’d taken apart the smoke detector, looking for cameras, said, “This thing’s clean. Do you want me to put a camera in here?”

Chloe looked at her, surprised. “You brought a camera that’ll fit that thing?”

Bee smiled. “I always have a camera that’ll fit things like this. Do you want a bug in the clock-radio too?”

“How long?”

“Ten minutes. Maybe less since I’ve already got this thing open.”

“Let’s do it,” said Chloe. “They say the villain always returns to the scene of the crime.”

“I think that’s only in movies,” said Bee.

“That’s ok; what I’ve seen in movies is all we’ve had going for us so far anyway.”

Chapter 09

“YEAH, yeah, I get all the anti-corporate, anarchist bullshit. Yadda, yadda, yadda,” said Eddie. “But can you please just explain to me how the hell any of this is worth my time?”

Isaiah had outlined his plan in detail from beginning to end, just as he had for Paul. Eddie and his companion (whose name turned out to be Marco) sat quietly and listened. Marco had tried to fire up his laptop to take notes, but Amelia had asked him not to, for security’s sake. He had shrugged and shut it off, and still hadn’t said a word to anyone. Paul had watched Eddie as his attention had floated around the room, maybe listening to Isaiah, maybe not. Now he’d apparently had enough theory and wanted some practical examples. Paul didn’t blame him.

“We have a very specific plan in mind. A plan that will net each participating Crew millions of dollars.”

“And you need to form this alliance thing to pull it off ?” asked Eddie, the mention of millions having obviously regained his interest.

“What we want do to is something akin to paradigm ju jitsu. We want to use the corporate power structure to take down the corporate power structure, and forming our own corporation is the first step.”

“There are a thousand different advantages and we can go into details if you like, but none of this means anything if we don’t have a goal. A target. An enemy we want to take down. To extend the jujitsu metaphor, setting up the shadow corporation is like buying our gear and training to fight. To put it into practice, we need an opponent. We need a corporation to go after.”

“We steal from big companies all the time,” said Eddie. “What’s new there?”

“I’m not talking about stealing from companies. I’m talking about destroying them. Shaking them to their foundations until they crumble, and yes, making a bunch of money for ourselves in the process. If money’s your goal, Eddie, then trust me; you’ll make more working with us on this than you’ll ever see on your own. Just like I’ll make more working with you than I’d ever see on our own.

Pooling our resources and focusing our energies through the shadow corporation lets us overcome challenges that are otherwise insurmountable for each individual crew.”

“I’ve heard of Crews going this way,” Eddie scoffed, settling back into his chair. “Trying to run a gang like a business, with board meetings and reports and rules of order and all that shit. It doesn’t help. It just confuses people and they end up making dumb mistakes.”

“Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not talking about forming a real business with any of you. Not at all. My Crew doesn’t run like some goddamned corporation and it never will. To hell with corporate structure. All I want is corporate power for my own damn self. For all of us. And I’ve got just the candidate in mind for our first victim.”

“It’s a holding company based in the Caymans but run out of Miami that you’ve never heard of. Nor do they want you to ever hear about them. They’re not publicly traded. They don’t advertise. They do control hundreds of other, equally unknown corporations and front companies, and they’re in the business of making lots and lots of money by one of the oldest, nastiest methods on the planet. They’re in the slavery business.”

“You’re kidding,” said Eddie. “There’s no slavery anymore.”

“What world are you living in, fella?” Winston chimed in. “It never went away.”

“No, it never did,” agreed Amelia. “It might go by different names - forced labor, indentured servitude, sweatshops. But it’s still very much a problem.”

“I’m not sure how it’s my problem though,” said Eddie.

“It’s only your problem if you want it to be, but I would suggest you stop thinking of it in such simple terms. We’re talking about not a problem but an opportunity. A chance to both do some good and make some serious money.”

“Ok, I’ll try to look at it your way,” said Eddie. “Assuming the money really is what you’re saying it will be. What’s the plan then?”

“We’re not going into any specifics on the plan. We’re not going to tell you the name of the company, none of that until we all agree to work together and form

the shadow corporation. What I can do is give you a broad overview. This holding company, let's call them Company X, makes most of its money importing people from Southeast Asia and Africa to work in sweatshops here in the states. They charge the workers a huge fee to come over and then pay them so little for their work that it's impossible for them to ever pay Company X back. The real money of course comes from the employers, who pay money to Company X to provide the so-called "workers," or, to call them by their true names, slaves."

"There's always stuff like this on the news," said Eddie. "What makes these guys so special? And you know, what I never understood is why the people don't get up and leave if the work's so shitty."

"They don't leave because they're locked in and under guard at all times. They're very literally slaves - fed just enough to keep them productive, stored in overcrowded barracks when they sleep, and beaten or killed if they try to leave. Women are typically subjected to rape by the guards or forced into prostitution, and forced to have abortions if they get pregnant.

"As for what makes Company X so nasty, well, there are a couple of factors. First of all, they're very, very good at it. They run slaves into places like Guam, the Marianas Islands, Puerto Rico and other U.S. protectorates so that companies can use the labor and still put "made in America" on the labels. They know all the right officials to pay off, including key congressmen and law enforcement officials. Hell, they've even got their own lobbyists in Washington. And why are they so well funded and organized? Because they have so many investors.

"Company X sells bonds to investors to cover their costs and purchase their slaves. Oh, you couldn't call up your broker and order some - they're only offered to a few thousand select customers who care a lot more about profits than about where those profits are coming from. The bonds have a phenomenal rate of return, sometimes as high as 50 percent for a short term investment. Most of these investors don't necessarily know they're supporting slavery, but they do know that they're turning a blind eye to something shady. And it's that kind of behavior we're going to punish."

"Punish how?" asked Eddie.

"By taking them all down and raiding them for every cent they have. Between

Eddie's contacts in the shipping and finance, Winston's contacts with various crews across the country and the extensive penetration my Crew has achieved into their systems, we have more than enough ammunition to fire through the cover of our shadow corporation. We become investors, offer them a better way of doing things, then take them down from within, draining their accounts even as we expose their rotten investors to the law and the media."

Eddie opened his eyes and slapped his hands down on the table. "Hot damn, it does sound tempting, don't it?" he said. "You've got a way with words, I'll give you that."

"So you are interested," said Isaiah. It wasn't a question.

"Sure, sure," said Eddie. "Hearing it for the first time, I gotta admit it's a hot idea." He clasped Marco's shoulder. "We'll have to talk it over some first. You know how it goes. Hash some things out. Come up with a list of questions."

Marco finally spoke up, saying, "I've got about a hundred off the top of my head. I'll type 'em up for you."

"That's why we're all here," said Amelia. "To answer your questions. Do you have anything I can help you with right now?"

Eddie and Marco stood up. "Not right yet," said Eddie. "We need to get settled into our rooms and all that shit. Get a drink and relax."

"What about the dead woman?" Marco asked.

Eddie snapped his fingers with a sharp crack. "Right! Raquel! Yeah, what's all this corporate mumbo-jumbo got to do with Raquel getting fragged?"

"Maybe nothing," said Isaiah.

"We're looking into it," Paul reminded Eddie yet again.

Eddie looked down at him and smiled. "Right, right. Sure, I forgot." Then, to Isaiah, "Well, before we commit to anything, we'll wanna have all the murder shit sorted out, right?"

"Of course," Isaiah agreed. "Is the contact number you gave us still valid?"

Eddie turned to Marco, who nodded. “Yep,” said Eddie.

“We’ll contact you through that number and tell you where the next meeting is going to be.”

“It’s not gonna be up here?” asked Eddie.

“No. We arranged this place only for tonight.”

“Just as well,” said Eddie. “What’s the point of meeting in a rooftop room if you’re gonna keep the fucking curtains closed anyway?”

Isaiah didn’t have an answer for that. Eddie waved to the table. “Later,” he said.

“Have a good night,” said Amelia, who was the only one to respond. A few seconds later they were out the door and on their way to wherever it was they were staying. Paul hoped the cameras in the lobby caught some good images. Maybe they could trace Eddie and Marco back to wherever they were staying through Bee’s network of cameras. It should be easy if they stuck to the more crowded streets, but if these guys were pros, they probably wouldn’t do that. No more than Paul would have if he was worried about being followed.

“I suppose that means we’re done for the evening?” asked Winston once Eddie was gone.

“Looks like,” said Isaiah. He turned to Paul. “You’ll let us know what your investigation reveals about Raquel’s death.”

“As soon as we know anything, you’ll know it too.”

Isaiah nodded then, to Amelia, “Do you have anything else?”

“No,” she said, shutting down her laptop. “I think we’ve covered as much as we could, given the circumstances. Paul, if there’s anything we can offer you by way of resources or manpower, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“I will, don’t worry. I’m going to go hook up with Chloe right now. I’m sure we’ll be giving you a call within an hour.”

“Then we’re done here,” said Isaiah, standing up. “As I told Eddie, we’ve set up

another location for tomorrow's meeting. We'll let you know when."

"Where are we meeting next?" asked Paul. Maybe if he had a little advance warning they could better prepare before hand. But Isaiah wasn't giving anything away.

"I'll let you know all the details tomorrow," he said.

Paul stood up, shook hands again with Isaiah and Amelia, thanking them for hosting the meeting and said goodbye to Winston. He decided he would try to find time to poke around the other hotels on the island, see if any of them had meeting rooms booked for corporate events. Maybe he'd get lucky. It would be nice to have their own bugs and cameras in place, although he suspected fooling Amelia's counter-surveillance tech wouldn't be easy.

As he headed for the door, Winston called to him. "Paul, could you do me a favor and walk me back to my hotel? I'm not sure I remember the way."

"Of course," said Paul, "No problem." Winston knew full well that he was staying at a house, not a hotel, but no reason to give that info away to Isaiah and Amelia.

Winston clapped him on the shoulder, saying, "Great, let's go. We can catch up on old times along the way."

"Sounds like a plan," said Paul, wondering what it was that Winston really wanted from him. If he was lucky, he'd even figure it out by the time the old trickster was done with him.

Chapter 10

WINSTON made nothing but small talk as long as they were still within line of site of the La Concha. Paul led him away from the actual house he and Chloe had set up for him. He calculated an extra half hour into their trip to lose anyone who might be following them, a delay he found very frustrating, as he was eager to get see how Chloe and Bee were getting on with the investigation.

“So what did you think of all that?” Winston asked.

“Pretty interesting,” said Paul. “Pretty ambitious.”

“That it is. Isaiah doesn’t think small.”

“What about you?” asked Paul. “You seem pretty skeptical about it.”

“As the oldest person in the room, it’s my job to play the skeptic. But I agree with you. It is interesting. And the idea of using the corporate powers I’ve been fighting for so many years as a tool against the fascists, well, that’s a kind of poetry. It’s a wonderful twist. Just wonderful.”

“Wow, I would never have guessed you felt that way.”

“No reason to let Isaiah know what I think of his idea. And I do have my reservations. Quite a few of them in fact. Security for example. And preserving the anonymity of the members. It’s one thing for Amelia to say it in a room on top of a hotel, it’s another thing to actually ensure it.”

“And then there’s Raquel,” said Paul.

“First and foremost there’s Raquel,” agreed Winston. “I didn’t know her well. We weren’t close. But her death saddens me. And her death worries me. I can’t believe that it’s a coincidence.”

“It doesn’t seem likely,” said Paul. “I don’t imagine there are many coincidences when it comes to murder. They say most victims know their killer.”

“What I can’t fathom is why someone would kill her,” said Winston. “We haven’t even formed Isaiah’s Corporation of Crews yet, and our first target

doesn't even know we exist."

Paul had been devoting as much spare brain space as he could to this exact question, and he'd come up with a few possibilities, although no suspects. Maybe Winston could help him sort it out. "I've been working on that," he said.

"Good, good," said Winston. "What are your thoughts?"

"It seems to me it had to be something she knew. Either that or something she was going to do. She'd obviously talked with Isaiah about this project beforehand and may have even been planning it with him from the beginning."

"It might even have been her idea," Winston pointed out. "We have no way of knowing."

"Good point. I hadn't thought of that. Plus the fact that she had worked with Eddie and his Crew very recently can't be a coincidence either. My guess is, she was checking them out for Isaiah. Seeing if they were trustworthy or competent or had the money-moving experience they claim they have. Something like that."

"Go on," said Winston.

"So my guess is that, in all her checking stuff out, she found something. Maybe through her law enforcement contacts. Maybe when she was working with Eddie. Maybe something that we have no hint of. But she learned something that would have impacted this plan in a big way. And someone didn't want her to pass that info on to the rest of us."

"That makes sense, as far as it goes," said Winston. "But I find it hard to believe that someone would kill her over a piece of information that might scuttle a project that hadn't even been launched yet."

"Ahhh," said Paul, possibilities bubbling up in his brain and coming out his mouth before he could censor them. "But what if it wasn't something that would have stopped Isaiah from proceeding? What if the killer was someone who didn't want us to do this corporation thingy? Maybe Raquel would've sealed the deal, but now that she's dead it throws things into doubt."

"That is a devilish possibility," Winston said. "And on the other side of the coin,

someone who has become passionately attached to the plan might no longer be thinking rationally. And once rational thought leaves the equation, senseless violence often finds its way in. Trust me, I speak from experience.”

Paul knew that Winston had started his underground life as a member of the violent, anti-war group The Weather Underground. In the '70s they'd bombed government and corporate buildings in an effort to “bring the war home” and exact a cost for the Vietnam War. Paul suspected that Winston regretted the bombings in his past as very misguided, counterproductive acts of protest.

“So, either way, we're talking about someone with an agenda here,” said Paul. “Someone who really wants this thing to succeed or someone who really wants it to fail.”

“That sums it up nicely.”

They fell into silence then, neither of them quite willing to say out loud what they both had to be thinking. The only person likely to be passionately interested in seeing the plan move forward was Isaiah. As for possible player haters, Paul didn't have any suspects, but that was only because he didn't know enough yet.

“Winston, can I ask how much of Isaiah's plan you knew before you came out here?”

He laughed. “I admit, I knew more than you. I knew he was trying to organize the Crews in some way. I didn't know the corporation angle. I didn't know he had a target in mind.”

“Did you know about Raquel and Eddie?”

“I knew Raquel was somehow involved. I didn't know anything about Eddie until I met him at the same time you did.” Winston seemed like he was about to say something more, but then he didn't.

“So Eddie could've known more too,” Paul mused. “We all played dumb in there a little. Well, except me. I genuinely didn't know what was going on. But still, Eddie could've already had the skinny on Isaiah's plan.”

“And so he might've already formed an opinion about whether or not he wanted it to go forward,” Winston concluded.

“We just don’t know. Something else to find out.” Speaking of which, thought Paul. He needed to check in with Chloe and see what they actually had found out. “Do you mind giving me a minute to make a call?”

Winston glanced around the empty side street they’d found themselves on. There was no one in sight. “I can make my way home from here,” he said. “You go help Chloe. I’m sure the two of you have a busy night ahead.”

“Thanks,” said Paul, relieved to be freed. Like all gamers, he hated escort missions.

“And if you need any help, Lily and I are just a phone call away,” Winston said.

“You bet,” said Paul. He’d never had so many offers of help since he’d gone underground. Unfortunately he didn’t think he trusted any of them except Winston. “You’ll hear from us soon, I’m sure.”

“WE need to move the body,” said Chloe. She, Paul, and Bee were standing in the alley behind the guest house where Raquel lay dead in her bed.

“I was afraid you’d say that,” said Paul.

“You’re not surprised?” asked Bee.

“I was going to suggest it and then hope you two would talk me out of it. We can’t let the police get involved in this thing. Definitely not in a murder investigation. And the maid is going to find her tomorrow morning or she’s going to start smelling, and then they’ll find her for sure.”

“That’s what she said.” Bee pointed to Chloe. “I don’t know if I can...”

“Actually Bee,” Chloe interjected, “If you could run home and get the car, that’s all you have to do.”

“Ok,” she said. “Um... where are you going to put her?”

“In the freezer,” said Chloe.

“The freezer in my workshop?” asked Bee.

“I’m afraid so. It’s the only place...”

“For how long?”

“Not long,” Paul assured her. “We can’t keep a body in our house. We’ll get Winston or Isaiah to help us...” he was going to say get rid of it, but that sounded so cold and heartless. “They’ll help us.”

“This is crazy,” said Bee.

“Yep,” Paul and Chloe both replied at once. They smiled at each other, although nothing they were talking about was very funny.

“Christ,” said Chloe. “We’ve spent too much time together.”

“Not enough lately,” said Paul before he could think. This was not the time for that argument, and Chloe shot him a glance that said as much.

“Ok,” Chloe said. “Let’s get this show on the road. Time’s a wasting.” She looked around the dark alley they were standing in. There were street lights at either end, neither of which provided much illumination here in the middle. “I don’t want to spend any more time here than we have to.”

“Sure,” Bee said as she set off at a trot down the alley. Paul knew she was hating every minute of this dead body stuff. That made two of them.

“So,” he said to Chloe. “How’re we getting her out of there?”

“The same way they got her in. Through the window there.”

Paul looked at the window. It was certainly large enough to easily fit a body through, assuming you removed the panes. “Do we have to go back in through the front?”

“Fuck no. Bee and I unscrewed it from the inside. Actually that’s how we left, just to make sure we could.”

Paul walked over to the window and looked close, but it was hard to make out any details in the darkness. He touched it gently and found that the sliding pane was just leaning against the frame, not inside it. “Can you reattach it from out

here?”

“No,” said Chloe. “And neither could the killer. He had to have done it from the inside.”

“Which means he didn’t leave out the window,” concluded Paul. “Our tenant comes on duty as receptionist tomorrow. We’ll ask her if she saw anyone that might be our guy. You said Raquel was moved here after she was killed?”

“From somewhere wet and salty,” said Chloe. “But I don’t know how long she’s been dead. The body felt cold to me, but I can’t translate that into a time of death.”

“I’ve always said this Crew needed a team forensics expert,” joked Paul.

“I thought you wanted to stay small,” said Chloe.

“I was kidding.”

“I know.”

“But you weren’t?”

She looked away from him. “Well I don’t want a team forensics expert. Unless they’re also a kick-ass hacker.”

“But you do want a bigger Crew?” asked Paul, knowing full well that he was starting an argument he didn’t want to have, and yet he seemed incapable of stopping himself.

“It sure would be useful right about now. Four is small.”

“Four is Fantastic,” countered Paul. Chloe groaned at the pun. “Seriously. We know we can trust each other. And Bee. And now Sandee. And we’ve never needed more.”

“On this fucking island, no, we haven’t.”

“So what’s the problem then? It’s not like we’re going to make a habit of hosting gang summits and investigating murder scenes is it?”

“God, I hope not,” said Chloe. “But what about off the island?”

“We’re just now getting things set up here the way we like them,” insisted Paul. “We’ve only had an almost positive cash flow for like two months. The party’s in full swing. Bee’s cameras need another six months to cover the island. A few more properties to manage and...”

“I know, I know. Secure base of operations. Vaguely dependable income. Total security. It’s not like we haven’t had this conversation three or four times a week for the last year.”

“Then why...” Paul started to say, but stopped himself. She was right, they had had this conversation over and over again and he had started to lay out his next argument as if it were a line in a play, he’d said it so often. He was tired of fighting about it. And looking at Chloe’s expression, she was too. He bit back his words and remained silent.

“Why what?” she asked.

“Never mind.”

She glared at him a moment then turned away, walking back to the end of the alley. After a minute loitering in the dark, Paul followed her to the corner. They stood in silence, waiting for Bee.

“How was the meeting?” Chloe asked.

“Pretty interesting,” said Paul, glad to talk about something less likely to end in yelling. “Isaiah’s got some ambitious plans.”

“So I gathered. Did he give any specifics yet?”

“Yeah, he got into specifics. Or rather Amelia did. She laid out a plan to go after this big corporation that’s up to no good. The fourth Crew guy, Eddie, he wasn’t interested in the theory stuff. He wanted practice.”

“Sounds like my kind of guy,” said Chloe.

“Actually he’s kind of an asshole. But he seems to know what he’s doing. His Crew must have some mojo for Isaiah to put up with his shit like he did. I could

tell Winston didn't care for him much either."

"Hmm," said Chloe. "Well, give me the Cliff 's Notes version."

Paul recounted everything that had happened at the meeting, including Amelia's details about the target corporation and how going after them would benefit the member Crews and how Eddie had reacted to everything. He then filled her in on his talk with Winston about possible suspects.

"So basically it could be anyone," said Chloe. "Either someone who really likes the idea or someone who really hates it or someone who had a beef with Raquel."

"Yep," said Paul. "Or just some random psychopath, although that's not likely."

"I guess we need to start investigating our guests, huh?" she asked.

"Well, I know we didn't do it, so yeah. The other question is, when do we bring the others into the loop? Isaiah and Winston both offered to help any way they could."

"I'll bet they did. But we should keep as much to ourselves for as long as possible, at least until we know more."

"They're not going to like that," said Paul. "But then, I don't like people getting murdered on my island."

"Your island?"

"Our island."

"Our island?"

"This island."

"This goddamned island," said Chloe. "It's too small..."

Paul didn't rise to the bait again. "Anyway, it's our turf and I agree with you, we'll handle it without their help. Letting them into the investigation will inevitably reveal other aspects of our operations. The only problem is, there's

going to be insane pressure from Isaiah for details. And from the others, too. I don't think Eddie's got much respect for us."

"I'll handle those guys," said Chloe. "Don't worry. I've got a plan."

"An abso-fucking-lutely brilliant plan?" asked Paul.

As he hoped, she smiled at this reference to the day they'd first met. "Of course!" she said.

"Does it involve wigs?" he asked.

"Definitely."

"Then I'll leave them to you."

A pair of headlights swung into view. It was Bee, driving the larger of the Crew's two vehicles, a gray, rust stained conversion van. Plenty big enough to transport a body in.

"Time to get to work," said Chloe.

"This is only the second time I've cleaned up a murder scene," said Paul, remembering the hotel room in San Jose with her and Bee.

"Me too," said Chloe.

"Let's try not to make a habit of it," he said.

"Agreed."

Chapter 11

IT was 3 a.m. by the time they'd secured Raquel in the freezer in Bee's workshop. Bee collected an armful of equipment as they left the air-conditioned shed. Paul knew she wasn't going to want to go back in there until the body was gone, and he couldn't blame her. Having a murdered corpse in their home, even in the secured shed outside, made him nervous as hell.

They rented their house from a property management company that represented several dozen different wealthy owners from all over the world who had winter homes in Key West. Few of them ever visited more than once a year, renting the places out to vacationers or local residents the rest of the time. The owners looked at them as investments, and as soon as they had two years in a row without a hurricane coming through, they would sell them for a massive profit. Until then, the less they had to think about them, the better.

When Chloe, Bee, and Paul had arrived in Key West last year, they'd rented a pair of apartments in New Town while they looked for a more permanent base of operations. Key West was filled with charming old houses that had been subdivided, rebuilt, damaged, refurbished, and worn away again over the years. They had wanted something big enough to set up a solid base, but not too fancy or expensive. This particular house, right across the street from Key West's cemetery and its above-ground stone tombs, had fit the bill perfectly. The faded gray wood exterior hadn't seen a paint brush in years, and it would require a lot of work by the owners before it would be fit to sell. Inside it wasn't too bad though, with scuffed but attractive hardwood floors and a wellappointed kitchen. Plus it had a large, ivy-covered fence around the yard and a screened-in porch out back.

They did their research before approaching the property manager (by breaking into the house to take their own tour). The company, Keys Condos and Estates, was a two-person operation consisting of Norm Lilianfield and his personal assistant Quincy. Norm was an aging gay hipster who'd lived in Key West for thirty-four years. He loved his afternoon cocktails and his evening wine and his late night brandy. He had no love at all for property management, but tourism and real estate were the only games in town, and he needed to put drinks on the bar somehow. He was a laissez-faire property manager who specialized in laissez-faire owners, putting in just enough effort to keep the places clean and

generating vacation rental incomes.

Paul and Chloe had never seen a riper target for their machinations. As it turned out, they didn't even have to con Norm. After digging through his financial records, cutting deals with his drug suppliers and secretly videotaping him in compromising and illegal positions, they'd confronted him. It turned out that Norm was as laissez-faire about blackmail as he was about everything else. He was more than happy to be a figurehead, as long as he got his cut. Surprised but pleased, Paul and Chloe had made a deal.

Now they ran Keys Condos and Estates, and all Norm had to do was sign the odd check and field an occasional phone call. He didn't even have to go into the office anymore. Every week he and Paul met for dinner at Pisces, and Paul gave Norm an envelope of cash while Norm filled in Paul on all the latest gossip from around town. Paul of course always picked up the check, but after the first night he didn't let Norm order caviar anymore. The foie gras was pricey enough.

Their own house got moved off the list of available vacation homes. Chloe and Paul falsified records of occasional renters to keep the owners in New England from asking too many questions. After deducting their management fees from the quarterly checks, they ended up paying about \$300 a month for the entire place, about one-tenth of what it would have commanded on the rental market. Paul had at first figured that they should be able to get away with paying nothing, but Chloe had pointed out that sometimes it was much easier to pay just a little and so avoid the questions paying nothing invariably raised.

As for the other properties, some they ran as straightforward rental businesses, trying to fill them with renters as often as possible. Even those that were always booked got reported to the owners as only partially full so they could divert some of the funds to cover their activities with other properties. The house they'd gotten for Winston and Lilly was one example, but they seldom entertained out-of-town guests. Usually, they just made money. The other rentals were used for Paul's attempt at doing a good deed.

When he and Chloe and Bee had decided to move to Key West after they were forced to flee San Jose last year, they'd planned on making their living on the con, just as Chloe had done for almost half her life. But Paul, less comfortable with stealing for a living, no matter how much fun it was while he was doing it, had insisted that their crimes have some sort of socially redeeming element to

them. He was perfectly happy thinking of himself as a modern day Robin Hood, but he had no interest in becoming another Al Capone. At first Chloe and Bee had seemed as enthusiastic about the stealing from the rich and giving to the poor thing as he was.

As it turned out, being Robin Hood was harder than he'd imagined it would be - they were having enough trouble just keeping their heads above water and their asses out of trouble without being too terribly picky about where the money came from. Certainly they hadn't taken over Key Condos and Estates with any charitable intentions. They'd made the play because real estate, restaurants and tourists were the only sources of money on the island, and they needed to get a piece of all three just to survive.

It was while they were cultivating contacts in the restaurant business that he'd had his Robin Hood-esque brainstorm. The thing restaurant workers complained about more than anything else on Key West was not the long hours or the stingy tourist tips (although they complained about these a lot). It was the sky high rents on the island, with monthly rates that rivaled those in Manhattan or London. Most lived three, four or five to a house, converting dining rooms and sun porches into bedrooms. All of them could use a break from the rent every once and a while, especially if they lost a job or in the summers when money was scarce.

Six months ago, Autumn Schekler, a bartender at Costa Verde and casual friend of Paul and Chloe's, had lost her job. In tears and deep in debt, she'd laid out all her fears to Paul over drinks. They'd just gotten everything set up and were running smooth with Keys Condos and Estates, and Paul knew for a fact that they had a dozen beautiful vacation homes sitting empty all over the island. He offered Autumn and her roommate one of them. They'd stayed there a month, then moved to another when that rented out. Then they moved to a third, a fourth and were now in their fifth. They hadn't paid a dime in rent - just chipping in for utilities.

At Paul's insistence, Autumn had spread the word to other restaurant workers around town. People whom she trusted and who'd lived on the island for at least four or five years. There were now almost two dozen of them living off the books in various Crew-run properties. Stealing rental time from wealthy absentee landlords caused not even a hint of guilt in Paul. It was their propensity for buying up property at inflated prices that had driven the housing market so

high that many service workers had to be bussed in from Miami because they couldn't afford to live here. It was the one thing he'd managed to accomplish in Key West that wasn't entirely selfish.

Chloe had been happy to help Autumn. She was a friend. But Chloe was much less thrilled with having twenty-three "freeloaders" living in their houses. They'd argued about it several times and might never have resolved the disagreement were it not for Sandee, who pointed out that having a corps of friendly bartenders and servers in this town was sometimes worth its weight in gold. The servers heard and saw everything, and likely as not, the people they were serving never gave them a second glance. Paul and Chloe had both been surprised at how right Sandee had been. Time and again their "tenants" proved useful, including earlier tonight when one of them had helped Paul find Raquel's guest house.

From the living room of his own house, Paul called Isaiah and Winston to let them know that the police wouldn't be a problem. In both cases he got voicemail, which made it easier for him to be vague about the details and his assurances that everything was going swell. Upstairs he found Chloe in Bee's room at the top of the house, all of her monitors live and switching between various views of the city. The bars didn't close until 4 a.m. in Key West, but the crowds had definitely thinned, leaving just the hardcore partiers.

"I thought I should go back through today's tapes and see if I can find Raquel on any of them," said Bee. "That new facial recognition software I downloaded last week might help us out. I haven't had any results yet, but this is a relatively limited search."

"Sounds good," said Chloe. "Anything from the cameras we put in Raquel's room?"

Bee clicked her mouse a few times and one of the monitors flashed a night-vision green view of the guest house room. "Nope," she said. "Nothing but you guys getting the body out of there."

"You should probably erase that," suggested Paul, not liking being on record covering up a murder.

"Gotcha," agreed Bee, mousing and clicking a few more times, deleting the fragment of video.

“Can you bring up the cameras Sandee put in the La Concha?” asked Chloe.

“Yeah, I should...” Click. Click. There it was, the hallway in the La Concha leading to the elevators. Also, shots of the front door and side door.

“Rewind?” asked Chloe.

Bee nodded and the image started playing backwards at 16X speed. Moving backward through time, they saw Amelia and Isaiah leave. Then their man at the bar. Then some other customers and workers Paul recognized from upstairs. Then he saw himself and Winston. Then Eddie and Marco. Paul identified them for Chloe and Bee.

“Can we follow them outside?” asked Chloe. “I’d love to see where they ended up.”

“Sure.”

They watched Eddie and Marco walk out the front door of the La Concha and turn left. Bee clicked and tabbed her way through her camera network. Along Duval Street she had cameras at every intersection and in the middle of each block. Most of them looked like small electrical junction boxes. Others were hidden in light fixtures. Some were set up inside shop windows, part of a security system. At Bee’s insistence, the Crew had bribed and cajoled and snuck their way into every place they could get a camera. The coverage was great, but now half of Bee’s week was spent maintaining the network she had, as the cameras were very finicky and went black all the time.

Eddie and Marco walked amiably down Duval, looking to all the world like two fraternity brothers on vacation. Paul watched as they found their way into the Oasis mega-bar. He wondered if they were going to see the girls at the Pirate’s Den. Bee had two cameras in the Oasis, both of them there thanks to help from one of their “tenants” who tended bar there. They watched as the two men went upstairs to the open air bar on the second level and took a table that was just out of view of the camera there. They watched the video at fast forward as occasionally one or the other of the two men would appear on camera as they went to the bar or the bathroom. Then, all of a sudden, the speeding video slammed into first gear. They’d reached real time.

“They’re still at the damned bar,” said Paul. “Jesus, those guys aren’t acting like

they're too concerned about Raquel or the conspiracy or anything else."

"Would we look any different in public? We've got to assume they're good at their jobs," said Chloe. She watched the screen in silence for a moment. "I wish we could see who all they're drinking with."

"Yeah," agreed Paul. He pointed to the bartender on the screen, who they could see. "That's Eli."

"He's our tenant," said Chloe.

"Used to be. He's living with his girlfriend now. What's her name? Ileana..."

"And he's been there all night. He might know something."

"He might," Paul agreed. "Certainly who all they've been drinking with."

"I'm going over there," said Chloe.

"You want me to come?" asked Paul, nervous about Chloe mixing it up with Eddie and Marco and their Crew.

"No, they know you from tonight. I don't want them making a connection between us yet. You guys watch from here. Do you remember where the camera is?"

Bee brought up a database of all her cameras. "It's hidden in an oversized display bottle of Captain Morgan's, up on the top shelf," she said, reading off the screen.

"I'll see if I can get it turned toward them better," she said.

"You want me to call Sandee?" Paul asked.

"Why? I don't think I need backup for this."

"I wasn't thinking backup. I was thinking that maybe you might like to invite them to a party." He smiled, a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"Ooooh, you're a devious one, aren't you." Chloe grinned. "Yeah, call Sandee. Definitely. These guys look like they're ready to party."

Paul looked at the screen, where he could just make out the top of Marco's head. Eddie and Marco had no idea what was about to happen to them.

Chapter 12

CHLOE liked Key West best at this time of night - less than an hour before last call. No blazing sun beating down on her, the night as cool as it ever got, and the tourist hordes thinned down to just the most desperate, drunk and credulous. She sped along on her scooter to Duval street, enjoying the wind in her face, although she kept her head bent forward lest it blow her blonde wig off. Eddie looked like the type who fell for blondes.

The Oasis Bar complex was practically empty. They'd closed up most of the smaller bars, leaving only the pizza by the slice window and the bar facing the street open at ground level. There were three die-hard drinkers here, a young tourist couple smashed out of their gourds and a guy in a white dress shirt who was probably a waiter just getting off duty. She nodded and smiled to the downstairs bartender, whom she didn't know, and went back to the main staircase, which took her up to the dance floor and the sprawling deck area. Here, too, only one of the three bars was open.

Chloe risked just one, quick glance across the bar to where Marco and Eddie were sitting at a corner table with a third, heavysset young man she didn't recognize. He wore a backward-facing baseball cap, matched with a red and blue rugby shirt and khaki shorts and was in the midst of laughing uproariously at something Eddie said. Drunk, she thought. Good. None of them seemed to have noticed her yet.

She sat down at the bar, recognizing the bartender as one of their tenants, but he had no idea that she was one of his "landlords." Chloe kept out of the day-to-day aspects of Paul's own private little version of subsidized housing. She flashed the man her best smile.

"Vodka tonic," she said.

"Sure thing," he replied. "Well or top shelf?"

"Well's fine," she said, although the thought of drinking low-end vodka made her stomach turn. But she wanted to give the impression of a waitress just coming off her shift, not a liquor connoisseur. She assumed that Eddie or Marco or both of them were watching her now, so every little detail mattered. Before

she'd left she'd thrown on a fresh, white shirt like waiters wore, but she'd only buttoned the middle three buttons, exposing cleavage up top and tying the bottom of the shirt up into a knot that exposed her navel. She wore low slung black jeans she knew exposed the top of her panties as she leaned forward on her bar stool. Hopefully Eddie and his pals would notice soon.

Sipping her drink, she looked up at the shelf above the bar, picking out the bottle with the camera in it. There was no way she was going to get up there and adjust its position without being noticed, and she couldn't think of any way of getting the bartender to move it. She could ask to see it, and he might even get it down for her, but when he put it back it would be pure luck as to which way it ended up facing. She decided to leave it be.

As she finished her drink, she felt a hand on her shoulder. "Can I buy your next round?" asked Eddie, who had snuck up behind her. She might have been surprised if she hadn't been waiting for it.

She turned around to face him. He smiled a shit-eating grin as he leered down at her. To his credit, he looked her in the eyes for three whole seconds before his gaze found its way to her tits. Chloe gave him a long, exaggerated examination, looking him up and down.

"You're buying?"

"I sure am," he told her chest. Then, to her face. "Whatever you're selling."

Chloe laughed, wondering if a line like that ever worked for him with a girl that wasn't trying to con him. "I'm drinking vodka tonics," she said, and pointed to the bartender. "He's the one doing the selling."

Eddie leaned against the bar and gave it a slap, his eyes never leaving her. "Two Ketel One and tonics," he said, upgrading her drink and, she assumed, trying to impress her.

"I'm Leo," he said.

"Is that your name or your sign?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact, it's both. My parents didn't have much imagination."

“I’m supposed to watch out for Leos,” she said. “We’re not compatible.”

“Ahhh,” said Eddie, “But I don’t believe in astrology, so it’s ok.”

She forced out a laugh that didn’t sound forced at all. “I don’t either,” she said. The only true thing she planned to tell him tonight. “I’m Gillian. Nice to meet you, Leo.”

“And what’s your sign?” he asked as the drinks arrived.

“I thought you didn’t believe in astrology.”

“I don’t, but I do believe in destiny,” he said, handing her a drink.

“Really? And what’s my destiny?” she asked, cocking her head a bit to the side and ever so slightly pursing her lips. She wanted to look like she was interested in him but was trying to hide that fact from him.

“I don’t know. I have to read your palm.”

Oh Christ, she thought, groaning inside. But outside she made herself giggle a little and held out her hand to him. “What’s it say?”

He took her hand in his sweaty mitt and started stroking her upturned palm with his index finger. “Let’s see here...hmmm... very interesting. I see a very definite sign.”

“Oh yeah?” she said as if she didn’t know what he was going to say. “What’s it say?”

“It’s pointing right over there,” he said, raising her hand and pointing it right toward his table. “Something about having a few more drinks with me and my friends.”

She smiled and stood up, deciding to let him keep a hold of her hand since he wasn’t showing any signs of letting it go. They took their drinks over to Eddie’s table. He introduced Marco as Eric and the other big guy as Quentin. They both seemed very glad to see her and her breasts, although Quentin complained that “Leo” had forgotten to bring them back another round of drinks.

“So what’re you guys doing in town?” Chloe asked, after they’d finished the introductions. Eddie’s knee was pressed against her leg, but at least she’d managed to get her hand back and wipe the sweat off.

“We’re on a cruise,” said Leo. “Cruising the Caribbean.”

“Ooh, that sounds fun,” she said. “I’ve never been on a cruise.” Ok, that was true too, although the thought of being cooped up on a boat for days on end didn’t have much appeal. It sounded even worse than being cooped up on an island.

“Cruises are great!” the big man called Quentin practically shouted. “All you can eat, drink, sleep and fu...” Either Eddie or Marco kicked him under the table, cutting off that last thought.

“You cruise a lot, then?” she asked, pretending to ignore the outburst.

“When we can,” Eddie said. “It’s a nice way to relax.”

“What do you guys do when you’re not cruising?”

“We’re in software,” said Eddie.

“Wow, cool,” said Chloe. “Do you work out in Silicon Valley or wherever?”

“We do,” Eddie assured her. “Big time software company out there. Are you from California?”

She wondered if he’d detected something in her speech patterns that gave her origin away, but on reflection decided that he was probably just fishing for info.

“No,” she said. “I’ve never been west of Texas.”

“Oh,” Eddie said, “You should come out sometime. Silicon Valley’s the best. We’ll show you a grand old time.” He patted her on her thigh under the table.

“I’ll bet,” she said. “I’m sure it’s a real happening place.” She knew, in fact, that it was nothing of the kind.

“You just need a local guide to show you around,” he said. Chloe groaned again inside, before remembering that she’d once said much the same thing to Paul. She wondered how he ever fell for it.

“Still, I bet it doesn’t compare to Key West. We know how to party here!” she said, summoning up all the Jimmy Buffet-inspired enthusiasm she could. “No place in the world like Maragritaville.”

“Whooo!” shouted Quentin again. “Maragritaville!” He was really, really drunk, thought Chloe. But it was Eddie she was focused on, and he seemed to be holding his liquor pretty well.

“That’s why I’m here!” said Chloe with convincing enthusiasm, “Livin’ the Parrot Head dream.” She and Eddie drank to that.

“Last call!” the bartender shouted from across the deck. “Last call for alcohol!”

“Fuck!” said Quentin. “What time is it?”

“Who cares?” said Chloe, laying the foundation for her trap.

“It’s ten ‘til four,” said Marco/Eric, the first thing he’d said since she sat down.

“You’d think having bars open until 4 a.m. would be enough for people,” said Eddie. “But you’d be wrong!” He downed the last of his drink and motioned to the bartender with a swirl of his finger to bring them another round.

“How long are you guys in town?” Chloe asked.

“Not long enough,” said Eddie. “Not long e-damn-nough. Our ship leaves tomorrow.”

“You should come with us!” said Quentin.

“As fun as that sounds...” Chloe started to say.

“Don’t mind him,” said Eddie. “He’s just drunk.”

“I am not...” said Quentin, bobbing side to side in his seat. “I’m drunk.” He was such a typical dumb, big, drunk frat boy that Chloe wondered if he might not be faking the whole thing. Were the three of them playing her? Had they made her? “I’m not drunk,” he repeated. “I just have to... I have to piss.”

Quentin struggled to his feet and then fell back into his chair. Chloe laughed as if

this was the funniest thing she'd ever seen, and the others joined in, including Quentin. She smiled and winked at Eddie, who offered her an even broader smile in return. She followed his eyes as they glanced at Marco before coming to rest on her again.

Having apparently picked up on the signal, Marco rose to his feet and said, "If you pick up the bill, I'll make sure Quentin doesn't drown in the head."

"I never did but that once..." Quentin slurred as Marco helped him to his feet. Then he focused on his friend. "Thanks buddy. I need to piss, you know."

"I know, I know," said Marco. "But remember, I'm not holding it for you."

"That's what your mother said..." Quentin replied.

"That doesn't even make sense."

"You don't make sense..."

"Come on, tough guy. Let's go." Marco slung Quentin's arm over his shoulder and helped him stagger toward the bathrooms, which were inconveniently located downstairs.

Chloe laughed into her drink again. She suspected that Eddie had given them some pre-arranged sign to clear out so he could have her for himself. Quentin's showy drunkenness served to make Eddie look all the more appealing in her eyes. These guys had it down to a science.

"He'll be fine," said Eddie, putting his hand on her knee again.

"I couldn't care less," she said.

Eddie laughed at that. "No, tell me what you really think. He's a good guy, he's just..."

"Drunk," she said. "Nothing sadder than a limp-dicked drunk who can't hold his liquor."

"No one like that at this table," said Eddie.

“We’ll see.”

The bartender arrived with the final round of drinks. “You take two and I’ll take two,” Chloe said, picking up a vodka tonic and a rum and coke that had been meant for Quentin.

“You’re on,” said Eddie.

They downed their drinks in short order. Chloe felt the alcohol flooding through her system and into her head. No stranger to liquor, she could drink most men under the table, but she had a suspicion that Eddie was no novice. Plus he had fifty or sixty pounds on her. But she didn’t need to get him smashed - at least not here and not yet.

Eddie droned on about the cruise ship he’d supposedly come in on, and Chloe nodded appreciatively. When the bartender came with the bill, she saw a momentary flash of worry on Eddie’s face. She’d tightened up a little during the conversation, wanting him to doubt whether or not she was actually interested enough to leave the bar with him.

“Come on, man,” said Eddie. “One more round.”

“Sorry, dude. Not my call. Manager says we shut down, down we shut.” Eddie handed him a credit card. Chloe caught a glimpse and was impressed to see that it was in the name Leo Perry. Eddie was enough of a pro to keep his aliases straight at least.

“So,” he said to her in that casual yet meaningful way people have of speaking to relative strangers after last call. “What now?”

“I go home I guess,” said Chloe.

“You’re kidding.”

“I am?”

“There’s got to be something else going on in this town.”

“It’s 4 a.m.!”

“No after-hour clubs? No parties at your friends’ houses?”

“Nothing unless you’ve got money to burn,” she said, her tone dismissive.

“I definitely have money to burn.”

“You sure?” she asked. “I’d have to make some calls.”

“What’re we talking about here?” Eddie asked.

“There’s a party. Really, they say it’s the party. If you can get in.”

“What’s so special?”

“They have the best of everything. The best drugs. The best drinks. The best people. That’s what I heard anyway.”

“Where is this? Some club...”

“It moves,” Chloe said. “It’s somewhere new each night. But it costs like a hundred bucks to get in. And you have to know who to call to get invited.”

Eddie’s shit-eating grin returned as he pulled a neatly folded wad of bills from his pocket, peeling off two \$100 bills. “Is that all?” he said.

“Some of us work for a living,” said Chloe, trying to look like she was trying to look unimpressed.

“And some of us don’t,” he laughed. “Now come on, I’ve got the two hundred...”

Chloe stared at the two bills for a long moment, milking his anticipation before she let a wide smile crack her face. “And I’ve got a friend I can call.”

He leaned back in his seat, pushing the two bills back into his pocket. “Well then, sweetie. Make the call.”

“Sounds like a party,” she said, taking out her phone. She punched in Sandee’s number. “I hope you’re ready.”

“Oh, I was born ready,” Eddie said.

“That’s what I like to hear,” Chloe replied.

Chapter 13

WHEN he was in high school, Paul's favorite books of all time had been the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy series by Douglas Adams. He'd read the first three novels back to back and then turned around and read them again. He'd even carried around a towel in his car and worn a "Don't Panic" button every day. Funny, sarcastic, inventive and never for a moment anything resembling serious, the sci-fi novels had provided him exactly the kind of smart but carefree escapism that he needed during his awkward teenage years.

Like many geeks of his generation, dozens of quotes, scenes and characters from the books still remained stuck in his brain now that he was in his early 30s (even one of his favorite political bloggers had picked the screen name Majikthise after one of the books' more obscure minor characters). There was one small piece from the third book, Life, The Universe, and Everything, that had always intrigued him - a description of a never-ending party that moved from planet to planet on its spaceship, raiding alien worlds for fresh supplies of cocktails and canapés. When he was an awkward young gamer kid who never got invited to the cool parties, the concept of a party that never ended seemed incredibly enticing. Much later, he'd read a description of a similar, more earthbound never-ending party in a William Gibson novel, and the idea took hold of his imagination once more.

Key West was as close to a real-world never-ending party as any city was likely to get. But upon arriving there with Chloe and Bee, he'd discovered that even this island of revelry had its limits. He'd also discovered his own limits as well. It had taken him a week to recover from the seventy-two hour orgy of indulgence he and Chloe had enjoyed as they broke the new town in. But those three days had awakened dormant dreams of the Hitchhiker's Guide's never-ending party.

The three of them had come here to set up a new Crew and make a new life for themselves. Not just a new life, but a whole new world, and Paul wanted to live in a world where there were fantastic parties that never ended. He'd explained his dream to Chloe and Bee, and while they both agreed that such a party would indeed be cool, they couldn't see much of a practical use for actually doing such a thing. Paul had argued that the whole point of a party was that it didn't have a practical purpose. Chloe had countered that it sounded like a fine hobby for him,

but that they needed money, and unless he wanted to wait tables to finance his dream, they needed to come up with some scams.

The first such scam had been the Keys Condos and Estates racket, which had succeeded beyond their expectations. Then Chloe had found a broken-down dive guide who they'd cleaned up enough to be a front man for selling fake maps to lost gold from the Spanish galleon Atocha that famed treasure hunter Mel Fisher had somehow neglected to find. A few greedy, credulous tourists bought into that, adding to their working capital, but without any big scores looming on the horizon, they needed another regular source of income. So, as Paul had done most of his professional life, and now all of his criminal life, he turned his wild imaginings into a money-making enterprise. Just as his doodles had become comics which had become a videogame which had become a plot to extort his former partners, so did a sci-fi inspired daydream become a plan for an actual party that became the perfect tool for exploiting Key West's party culture to the Crew's advantage.

No party is successful unless the guests want to be there, and nothing breeds desire like forbidding someone from having something. People might or might not come to a 24-hour party that was open to all comers at all hours, but if they did, it would just be for a quick stop on their way to or from something else. But if the party was a secret - an invitation only, \$100-or-more-at-the-door underground bacchanal - well then, people would beat a path to its door. On their way down to Key West, they'd stopped for a night in Miami Beach, and Paul had been both disgusted and impressed with the utter pretentious gall of the club owners there. Long lines of hopeful clubbers waited beyond velvet ropes to pay outrageous prices for the same drinks and techno-pop crap they could find anywhere else. All that mattered was the exclusivity.

Well, there was no hotspot in Miami as exclusive as the no-name party Paul and his Crew ran in Key West, although they had several regulars who flew or drove down from Miami to attend. It was only after they'd met and recruited Sandee that the plan had really come together. Sandee was an island native who knew everyone in the bar and club scene, and whose contacts allowed them to line up the entertainment, drinks, food and drugs necessary to make an underground party really take off and flow, along with the word-of-mouth network necessary to recruit just the right kind of party guests. Now, three months into the party's planned endless run, everything was humming along just as Paul had dreamed it would. Like the spaceship that inspired it, the party moved from place to place,

making a circuit around the island and out onto selected boats and outlying islands when the weather was right for it. Even as it moved, the party continued, never shutting down in one location until things were up and running in a new venue. Most were places they accessed through Keys Condos and Estates. Others were empty restaurants waiting to be refurbished or even vacant offices.

Tonight the party had made its way back to one of Paul's favorite venues - the Crawford House on Eaton. Once upon a time it had been the stately home of a successful wrecker and salvage family (salvaging wrecks had been Key West's main source of income in the 19th century, at one point making it the wealthiest city per capita in the country). In the 1980s, a hotel chain had bought it from the Crawford family and turned it into an ultra-expensive guest house. After a decade of trendiness and full bookings, its popularity had declined, and by 2000 so had its standards. The parent company had spun off a boutique hotels division, which promptly declared bankruptcy six months later. The building had stood empty and unused for the last year while lawyers fought over ownership.

A month ago they'd managed to get their hands on a key and moved the party there for several days before the neighbors grew suspicious. Since then, Paul knew that Sandee had been working hard at setting things up there once again. With its many private rooms and large central dining space, it made the perfect venue. He and Chloe had spent a particularly memorable night there the first time they'd used the house.

"Let's dial up the party," Paul said to Bee as he hung up the phone. Chloe had just told him that she'd reeled Eddie in and was bringing him there. They'd watched Eddie "pick up" Chloe at the bar, and seen Marco and another man leave a short while later. Now one of the monitors showed Chloe and Eddie as they walked out of the Oasis and headed toward Eaton. Paul knew that Bee's spy-cams didn't cover much of the route to the Crawford house, so they'd have to wait until Eddie and Chloe arrived at the party before they could pick up their trail again.

"You want wall-to-wall coverage?" Bee asked as she clicked through her camera options.

"Pictures and sound," said Paul.

"You got it." She brought up a window on her desktop and selected a group of

twenty icons, dragging them over into her control interface on the adjacent screen. The entire wall of monitors flickered and flashed for a moment as the feeds switched over. Then they were looking at two dozen different angles on the interior of Crawford House, where there was one hell of a party under way.

The party took a number of things with it wherever it went. These included a portable sound system, three digital projectors, seven wireless speakers, two collapsible projection screens, a half dozen lava lamps, three laptops, a collapsible bar and seven digital picture frames capable of displaying any images downloaded into them. Bee had mounted hidden cameras in every single one of these items, and there were microphones in about half of them. Sandee had become expert at setting them up just right so that they provided total coverage.

Sandee was nowhere to be seen. Probably waiting outside for Chloe to arrive, Paul thought. But lots of the other regulars were there, including both his stripper friend Erica and her dealer Bernie. Even though it had been less than eight hours since Paul had spoken to Bernie earlier that evening, it seemed like days. So much had happened since then. The Crew itself stayed out of dealing drugs. There were too many ways that could go bad and too many unsavory and dangerous people to deal with. At the same time, you couldn't have a successful underground party without some pot and ecstasy for your guests, especially if you wanted to loosen tongues and wallets in the course of the evening.

Most of the action was centered in the Crawford House's spacious common room, where Paul counted twenty-one guests and locals drinking, smoking and dancing to the music. The room had once been where the guest house served its continental breakfast and held early evening cocktail hours. There were still some tables and chairs and a couple of stained couches along one wall - furniture that none of the lawyers fighting over ownership had deemed worth taking the trouble to remove. They also brought in some oriental rugs and bean bags with them when they set up the party at larger locations like this one. In the center of the room was Jesse, a friend of Sandee who served as both DJ and bartender. He had a laptop hooked up to the sound system, playing his selections straight off the hard drive and into the surrounding speakers. Next to him was the portable bar, festooned with liquor bottles, mixers, and a cooler full of beer on the floor adjacent.

Also adjacent to the bar, as he preferred, sat Bernie. Paul was glad to see the funny old dealer there. He grew his own pot in his house and in those of a few

friends. It was always high quality and he was always very easygoing with the partygoers. His presence made the whole mood lighter and meant that Sandee or Paul didn't have to go outside to a less friendly source. He dealt from the bar, selling loose joints while Jesse sold drinks, both at a premium. Bernie loved people and, especially, loved strippers. He flirted shamelessly, laughed loudly and didn't seem to mind too much that he never seemed quite able to get any of the girls into bed with him.

As for the girls themselves, there were five of them at the party right now. He spotted Erica curled up in a beanbag chair, wearing a loose fitting tank top and low-slung jeans. She was chatting with a good-looking, 20-something man Paul didn't recognize, her party guest he guessed, probably a customer from the club that she'd convinced to take her out after closing. Sandee paid a cut of the entrance fee to every local who brought in fresh fish to the party. The locals, especially regulars like Erica, were free to charge their guests whatever price they could, as long as it was at least \$100. Anything above that they could keep for themselves. If she'd been plying him with drinks and lap dances for the past few hours, Paul knew that she'd probably gotten two or three times that much from him.

Paul recognized the other four dancers as well, three from the club where Erica worked, and two from T's up on Truman who were dancing lasciviously with each other in the middle of the room while a trio of salivating, middle-aged men in Hawaiian shirts looked on, clutching their beers. Off on one of the couches against the wall, two men were making out, alternating between languid kisses and sips from their cocktails. Paul recognized the younger, smaller man as Quincy, who was Keys Condos and Estates' sole employee and a good friend of Sandee's.

Against the far wall was Paul's personal pride and joy for the party, a large screen with a digital projector shining images of gun toting, armorclad warriors onto it. Sprawled out on the floor below were three men and one woman, game controllers gripped in their hands as they fragged one another with rocket launchers on the big screen. In the corner beside them, two drunk, scantily clad women laughed as they tried to keep the beat on the dance pads while playing Dance Dance Revolution. The video games had been a surprise hit, especially for the shyer or younger party guests who didn't necessarily feel like dancing but didn't want to just sit around either.

By party tradition, almost every game involved a wager of some kind, either with shots or money or silly dares pulled out of a hat. Paul saw a pile of twenty-dollar bills tucked under an ashtray by the four first-person shooters and knew they were playing for money. He also saw that one of the four was his friend Javier, a busboy at Pisces and nearly unbeatable at any game involving kicks or explosions. Paul had lost enough money to know better than to challenge him.

Glancing at the other screens in Bee's array, Paul saw that several of the adjacent rooms were occupied as well. In a converted guest room, four people laughed and drank as they played spin the bottle on the floor, taking shots before and after each kiss. In a room that had once been the hotel manager's office, seven men sat around a poker table, playing for cash. Gambling was one of the party's main attractions for locals, and Paul had worked hard to cultivate a regular clientele of card players. He charged them nothing to play, other than the \$100 to get into the party and whatever they ended up spending on booze and drugs.

All told, between what they charged for getting into the party and what they made off drinks, Paul knew they'd bring in around \$6000 for the night, of which maybe \$4000 was profit after paying for the drinks and cutting in Jesse for tending bar and covering other expenses. If there were cops to be bribed over a noise complaint, that could eat up another \$500, but one of the joys of the Crawford House was that it had thick walls and enough distance from the neighbors that complaints were unlikely. For other venues they had portable sound dampening panels that they could hang on the walls to cut down on their audio leakage.

Making money was not, however, the primary purpose behind having the parties. More than anything, they were about cultivating contacts and gathering information. Now that the party had begun to establish a reputation amongst the Key West cognoscenti and cool kids, being allowed into the party had become a bargaining chip. Not just anyone with the \$100 entrance fee could walk through whatever doors they were using that night. First of all, only a select few knew the party's location - just the one's Sandee trusted and passed the info on. And even then, Sandee still had to approve anyone before they could actually come in (having been screened against a picture database of every police officer in Monroe County that they didn't have dirt on or a relationship with, along with various and known undesirables). Piss Sandee or one of the regulars off, and you weren't ever coming back.

The cache this exclusivity gave them was a valuable bargaining chip in their dealings with locals. Everyone who knew about the party wanted an invitation, even those who had only heard rumors. More than a few assistant managers, night clerks and cleaning staff had allowed Crewmembers to come in and access a telephone junction box or alarm system or computer network. Of course none of them ever knew why they were letting these strangers in, but they seldom asked questions, especially if they'd ever been to the party. No one wanted to risk not getting invited back.

And then there were the cameras. They had, of course, been Bee's idea. She'd withdrawn into herself more and more since they'd moved to Key West, and after the first few nights she'd stopped going to the party. But she didn't want to be left out of the loop, and she was responsible for setting up most of the electronics and audio equipment anyway, so it seemed only natural for her to include hidden cameras in her creations. For Bee, including a hidden camera was like drawing another breath - nothing could be more natural. Chloe and Paul hadn't even known about the devices for the first few weeks, discovering their existence by accident when they were up in Bee's control room looking at some of her new camera feeds from Duval Street.

Once Chloe saw the party cams in action, she urged Bee to install more of them. She wanted complete coverage. Paul had wondered if having multiple records on disk of the numerous legal violations they committed at the party every night was a good idea. Chloe had countered that the chance to gain useful tidbits from their guests was worth the limited risk and, besides, their crypto was as tight as possible. Paul still hadn't been convinced by this argument, but some deep down voyeuristic part of him kind of thrilled at the thought of watching the tapes from those spy cams.

Since then, the cameras and microphones had provided a constant stream of interesting info. They certainly knew more about the financial affairs of every restaurant, bar and guest house in Key West than anyone else on the island, including most of the owners. Employees saw or surmised everything, and they repeated the most interesting bits when they got drunk or high. They'd learned similar inside info about real estate deals, local politics and, most useful of all, the bad habits and kinky preferences of more than a few Key West Police Department officers and workers. Sandee and the other hosts knew how to get guests to talk about the most interesting stuff without ever suspecting that they were being pumped for information. When they wanted to impress a beautiful

girl, they all thought telling salacious secrets made them seem important or cool.

Chloe spent a lot of time with the data that came from this covert monitoring. Too much time, in Paul's opinion. Every day she debriefed the hosts about possible choice encounters or intriguing sound bites, and she and Bee often watched the footage in fast forward, scanning for anything that caught their eye. Bee was supposedly working on finding some piece of software that they could use to search through the recorded dialogue for certain key words. She knew that government intelligence agencies used something similar for telephone intercepts, but so far she hadn't found anything that worked.

Paul didn't know what Chloe hoped to find in those tapes, but for the past few weeks she'd been listening to and watching them more and more. She would download them onto her MP3 player and listen while she exercised. She'd eat her morning Cocoa Puffs with the laptop in front of her, streaming images from the party. Whenever Paul asked her how it was going she said, "fine." Whenever he asked her what she was looking for she said, "something good" and asked him if he wanted to help. At first he had tried it, but it was the most mind-numbing thing he could imagine. The difference between listening to tapes of lame pick-up lines and drunken boasting and actually being at the party was like the difference between reading a list of ingredients and eating a five-star gourmet meal.

He hadn't been to the party in over two days and had been looking forward to visiting the Crawford House venue tonight. But it was Chloe who was going to the party, and as Paul and Bee watched on the monitors, they saw Eddie come stumbling through the front door. Chloe was right behind him, and Paul felt a stab of jealousy as he watched Eddie give Chloe a playful slap on the ass. She scowled in surprise, her face turned away from Eddie but toward the camera. Paul knew that in other circumstances Eddie would have gotten a taser to the chest for that, but Chloe was playing a role, and she never broke character during a con. She turned and smiled at him, giving him a playful wink in return.

Behind them came Sandee, who now wore five-inch spiked heels and a form flattering skin tight mini-dress. Sandee, ever the generous host, came up beside Eddie and put an arm around his waist and whispered something in his ear. Eddie nodded enthusiastically. Chloe made a gesture of apology, apparently excusing herself and turning Eddie over to the host's tender care. As he stared long and hard at Sandee's toned ass, Eddie didn't seem to mind much. Chloe

broke away and headed for the bathroom while the other two headed for the bar.

Bee clicked with precision, bringing up cameras in the main room so they could watch Eddie and Sandee on one screen and Chloe in the bathroom on the other. Paul had liked the idea of bathroom cams least of all, but they had quickly learned that some of the most interesting things happened when people thought they were alone in the toilet, including a number of private, revealing phone calls that they'd managed to overhear on several occasions (including one of an off-duty cop calling his wife with excuses while he snorted cocaine - a priceless piece of blackmail material if they ever needed it).

Chloe, of course, knew exactly where the camera was and was looking right at it (hidden in a clock) as she dialed her phone. Paul's own cell started ringing, and he picked up immediately.

"I'm at the party," said Chloe over the phone.

"So I see," said Paul.

"Glad to know you guys are watching my back," she said.

"We're not the only ones."

"Ugh. Tell me about it. That fuck's hands were all over my ass on the way over here. I really don't like him."

"Me neither," agreed Paul. "Did you learn anything?"

"Nothing too useful, no. But he's cocky, and you know how well Sandee handles cocky."

"So you're turning Eddie over to San?" asked Paul, relieved that his girlfriend wouldn't be using her feminine charms to seduce Eddie anymore.

"Definitely," said Chloe. "I'm going to stick around as backup, just in case something goes south or whatever. But now the ball's in Sandee's court."

"We'll keep watching from here," said Paul. "Unless you want..."

"No, stay there and watch and record everything. If he drops anything. Any hint

at all about Raquel, I want it on disc.”

“We’ve got him covered.”

“What’s he doing now?” asked Chloe.

Paul glanced over at the other monitors. “He’s with Sandee and Bernie, smoking out and getting a drink. He looks pretty happy.”

“Let’s keep him that way. But, as much as he’s kind of a dick, he’s not dumb, and I bet he can handle his drinks. I need you to call Jesse and let him know we need him extra loose.”

“You wanna dose him?” asked Paul, surprised. “We don’t know that he’s done anything wrong. And there was all that stuff Winston said about ambassadors and guest rights.”

“Fuck that. I can tell from the way he slapped my ass this guy is no stranger to dosing girls to get what he wants. Time for a taste of his own medicine I say. Nothing too drastic. Just a single to push him over the edge.”

Paul felt his temper rise again at the thought of Eddie’s hands on Chloe’s ass. “Ok, I’ll call Jesse. Next round he gets will be hot.”

“Great,” she said. “I’m going to go back out there and watch the fun.”

She hung up the phone and waved at the camera. Bee waved back, while Paul dialed Jesse at the bar.

Chapter 14

CHLOE stepped out of the bathroom and into the party proper, a wave of dance music rising to meet her as she made her way into the main room. It was a pretty busy night, and there were more than a few new faces scattered amongst all the usual suspects. Her eyes briefly locked with those of Jesse, the bartender/DJ. He had a headphone held to one ear, like he was preparing his next track, but Chloe knew that there was also a cell phone built into the device, and from the wink he gave her, she guessed that he'd just received his instructions from Paul. And then, apparently just to be sure, he nodded to her as well and she looked away, trying to spot Eddie and Sandee, hoping the mark hadn't been watching Jesse's less than subtle signaling. If Eddie was half as good as she was and he noticed the wink and the nod, he'd suspect that there was some connection between Chloe and the bartender. She'd have to remind Jesse to be more careful in the future.

But Eddie's eyes and mind and other body parts were all focused somewhere else. He and Sandee sat close together on one of the couches, passing a joint back and forth while Eddie sipped at a beer. Fuck. He is smart. He was drinking beer from the bottle, which meant it was almost impossible to spike without him noticing. She didn't imagine that was a coincidence. She never drank mixed drinks at strange parties, either.

Chloe went up to the bar and loudly asked Jesse for three shots. He mixed up a trio of kamikazes and handed her "one for her friend" and then the other two. Chloe, maintaining her cover, paid him \$30 for the drinks and then headed over to the couch to join Sandee and Eddie.

He saw her approaching and said in a too loud voice, "Hey! Gillian! I thought I'd lost you!"

"I'm not that easy to lose," said Chloe, as she handed Eddie his shot and gave another to Sandee. "You don't seem too lonely though."

"This is Mystique," Eddie said, passing the joint back to Sandee.

"I know," said Chloe as she sat down beside him on the couch. "We just met outside, remember."

“Right, right. But I thought you might’ve forgotten her name.”

“Honey,” said Sandee/Mystique, her mouth close to Eddie’s ear. “No one ever forgets my name.” Sandee licked his ear slowly. “It’s just not possible.”

“I believe that...” he said with a shudder of pleasure as Sandee ran a hand across his chest and tweaked Eddie’s nipple through his shirt.

“Let’s have a shot,” Sandee said, raising the glass to Eddie.

“Damn straight,” affirmed Chloe.

All three of them downed their drinks. Eddie hesitated for just a beat, possibly weighing the risks. He made the wrong the decision and drank it down in one quick gulp.

“Aaaah!” he said. “Good stuff.”

“Nothing but good stuff here, honey,” said Sandee.

“I see that,” said Eddie as he looked around, nodding in approval. His gaze lingered on the dance floor where two women had stripped down to their bras and were gyrating against one another to the approving cheers of everyone nearby.

“So, you in town for business or pleasure?” asked Sandee, tracing the line of his chin with her index finger.

“Pleasure is my business!” he said, leaning back in his seat and letting Sandee’s finger work its way down his neck to his shoulder.

“That’s what they all say,” said Sandee. Chloe detected just the slightest hint of disappointment in Sandee’s voice - a challenge to Eddie to be more impressive and maybe reveal more about himself.

“Oh do they?” said Eddie, placing his own hand on Sandee’s smooth thigh. “But there’s a big difference.”

“What’s that?” asked Sandee.

“They’re lying.”

“And you’re not?”

“I never lie,” said Eddie and he leaned forward to kiss Sandee, his hand sliding up along the thigh toward the waist. Sandee’s head turned at the last instant and Eddie’s kiss touched cheek instead of lips.

“All men lie,” said Sandee. “It’s what makes them men.”

Eddie laughed and leaned back again, his hand over his heart as if he’d been shot. “Ohh! That hurts!”

“The truth does that,” said Sandee. “Or so I’ve heard.”

“And what about you?” asked Eddie. “Are you here for business or pleasure?”

“Me?” said Sandee, ““I’m just an observer of the human condition.”

“So pleasure isn’t your business?”

“Pleasure is my pleasure. Anything else is just business, and none of yours.”

Eddie didn’t seem to quite follow that last sentence, Chloe thought. Maybe the drugs were starting to kick in. She knew that Sandee was just leading him around by the nose for awhile until he became more pliable. “What was that?” he asked.

“Look at these two over here,” Sandee said, leaning close against his side and pointing across the room at a man and woman in their mid-50s who were swaying against one another off in a corner.

“What about them?” he asked, pressing back against Sandee, his hand creeping back up the host’s leg.

“Oh, you’d never believe me if I told you,” Sandee smiled.

“Try me.”

“He’s one of the biggest drug dealers in Southwest Florida. And she’s his boss.”

“Those two? You’re shitting me,” said Eddie as he rubbed Sandee’s thigh.

“Never without being asked first,” Sandee replied. “No, I’m telling you the absolute truth. Well, the truth as I’ve heard it, anyway. But I’ve not only heard it from them. Others have confirmed it.”

“And they’re dealers?”

“I suppose ‘suppliers’ is the word. I’m not up on all the prim and proper drug business lingo.”

“They import or something?” Eddie asked.

“Yes, importers. That sounds right.”

“And why would they tell you something like that?”

“Oh, people say the most personal things during intimate moments,” Sandee purred, running a hand across his chest and tweaking Eddie’s left nipple.

“You and him?” said Eddie, looking back at the middle-aged couple. “Or was it you and her?”

“Why would it be one or the other?” Sandee’s hand moved down to Eddie’s stomach, rubbing him gently.

“Ooh, you kinky bitch!” he said, leaning back and spreading his legs. He obviously hoped the friendly hand would keep heading south, but no such luck. Sandee’s touch worked its way back to his other nipple. “Are you sure he wasn’t just trying to impress you. Talking big.”

“Oh, he was quite big without having to talk about it.”

Apparently not liking to talk about the size of other men, Eddie seemed to tense at this remark, but he played it off with a smile. “Viagra sure does work fucking wonders,” he said.

“Maybe that was it. He is a drug dealer after all,” Sandee said in soothing tones.

“Drug importer,” Eddie corrected.

“If you say so.”

“Do you think you could introduce us?” Eddie asked.

“Now who’s being a kinky bitch?” Sandee teased. “Do you want both of them to join us or just the ‘big’ man?”

“No, no, no...” said Eddie. His voice had been slowing down and slurring as Chloe watched from the far end of the couch. The drugs were definitely kicking in, she thought. “I don’t want to fuck him or his ugly-ass old wife. I want...” He leaned forward and groped at Sandee. “I want to...”

“Oh, I know what you want, tiger,” said Sandee, shifting position just deftly enough to move a breast out of Eddie’s reach. “But if that’s what you want, why do you want those two?”

Eddie shook his head for a few seconds, as if to clear his thoughts. “Well, if they’re the big drug dealers you say they are...”

“Importers,” Sandee corrected.

“Yeah. If they’re the big importers you say they are, then maybe I can do some business with them...”

“If it’s drugs you need, honey, just go see Bernie by the bar. He’s got anything you want. Well, anything I don’t have anyway. And trust me darling,” Sandee said as she kissed him on the cheek. “I’ve got everything else you need.”

“Damn straight,” slurred Eddie, pulling Sandee close for a kiss.

His hands slipped around Sandee’s waist, grabbing ass. Sandee broke the kiss and gently pushed Eddie back into his seat. “I thought you wanted to see the big man.”

“Well maybe later...”

Sandee glanced over at the older couple. “I don’t know if there’ll be a later. They look like they’re getting ready to leave. And I’d hate to disappoint you...”

Eddie bore down and concentrated for a moment, staring at the pair. “Maybe I

can get their card or something. Leave my number maybe...”

Sandee laughed. “Oh, sweetie, you’re a funny one.”

“What?” said Eddie, confused and growing angry.

“Did you not hear me when I told you he’s one of the biggest drug importers in the state?”

“Yeah, that’s why I wanna...”

“And you think he’s going to take your card? Or give you his number? Sweetie, he’s not going to give you the time of day!”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Because he doesn’t know you. You could be a cop. Or, more likely, some drunk tourist looking to make a buy, which would, I’m sure, annoy him even more.”

Eddie scowled. “I’m not a cop. Not a tourist either. I’m not looking to buy shit from him. I could help him is all.”

“Well how would he know that?”

“You could tell him for me!”

“And why would I do that?”

“Why would...?” Eddie looked confused. Chloe suspected that the conversation in his head might be going very differently than the one the rest of them were hearing.

“He’s a friend, I’m not going to bother him with nonsense. He’s here to have fun.” Sandee gave Eddie’s thigh a squeeze. “Just like you. Don’t you wanna have some fun?”

“It’s not nonsense,” insisted Eddie. “You should tell him it’s not. I’m not.”

“I’m sure you’re very good at whatever it is you do,” Sandee said. “But he’s not interested in small time...”

“I’m not small time!” Eddie practically shouted. “You have no idea...”

“Ok, ok, sweetie, calm down,” Sandee said, “Why don’t you quiet down and explain it to me. Tell me what you want me to tell the big man.”

“I can help him move things. All over the Caribbean and the Gulf. Up and down the East Coast. I can get anything anywhere.”

“You can?”

“Sure as hell can.”

“How?”

“It’s a fucking secret. But I can, trust me.”

“You have planes? Boats or something.”

“Boats? I’ve got fucking ships!”

“Ok, ok,” said Sandee. “You’ve got ships. That’s great.”

Chloe thought that this sounded a lot like boasting to her. Eddie certainly didn’t have any ships did he? How could he? If he could afford multiple ships, then he wouldn’t need whatever help Isaiah and Winston could offer him. This wasn’t working. But she needed to know if Eddie knew anything about Raquel. She caught Sandee’s eye, mouthing “ask about Raquel.” Sandee nodded in understanding.

“So is that why’re you’re here in Key West,” Sandee asked. “Because of your ships?”

“Nah...” said Eddie. “I mean, yeah. Sort of. Just a business meeting, you know.”

“A business meeting? Or a business meeting?” Sandee asked, putting a finger to her nose as she asked the question a second time.

“Do I look like the kind of guy who has boring ass meetings with fuckers in suits about quarterly profits or whatever?”

“Not to me you don’t.”

“Fucking right I don’t.”

“And how’s the meeting going?”

“Ahh, it’s not so bad. Sort of. The guy in charge is a real dick.”

“The world’s full of them,” sympathized Sandee.

“Yeah. Fucking right it is. And this other bitch hasn’t even showed up yet. Got in some kind of trouble or something.”

“People are so inconsiderate.”

“Yeah, right? I mean, this is supposed to be some big deal and she’s all not here and shit. Or dead or whatever.”

“Doesn’t sound very professional.”

“No! It’s not. I mean, c’mon. At least have the decency to phone ahead if you’re going to get killed, right?”

“I suppose so,” said Sandee. “It’s the least you can do. So does this mean your business isn’t going to work out?”

“Did I say that?”

“No, but I thought...”

“Did I say that?” Eddie asked again, louder. Sandee just smiled, knowing to let him rant. “If it were someone else, then yeah, it would be all fucked up. But it’s not somebody else, is it? No. It’s fucking me.”

“So it’s not fucked up?”

“No way. I’ve got a backup.”

“A backup?” asked Sandee. “That’s smart.”

“I’m smart.”

“I know you are, sweetie.”

“I’m so fucking smart, you see, I knew. I knew from working with that bitch before. I knew she was trouble. Always trouble. Always telling people what to do and shit.”

“That does sound like trouble.”

“It’s no way to work with partners.”

“She’s not the boss of you,” Sandee prompted.

“Not anymore she’s not. No fucking way. And that’s why she’s so fucking smart. No. I mean, that’s why I’m so fucking smart!”

“Why is that?”

“Because I was ready. Not like these other fucks like that black fuck and that old guy and the other fuck. All their crazy pie-in-the-sky bullshit. I was prepared.”

“You were prepared,” Sandee agreed.

“I had a backup. Someone else I could bring in. Someone I could rely on if this other bitch didn’t work out. Or if something happened to her.”

Chloe managed to keep the surprise off her face, not that Eddie had paid her any attention at all since Sandee had fixed his attention. Who the hell was this backup he was talking about? Another person like Raquel? Or another Crew maybe? So far, even in his drug-addled state, Eddie was talking mostly in generalities. No specifics yet. Sandee had picked up on this fact as well and started searching for answers.

“That’s very smart,” Sandee said, hands caressing Eddie’s chest once more. “But what do you mean by backup? I don’t understand.”

“A plan B?” said Eddie, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Don’t you know anything? You’ve gotta have a plan B in this business.”

“Of course, of course, darling.”

“I knew there was all kinds of hinky shit with this... this deal I’m working on. New partners and all, right? So I knew that, ok? And I knew I needed - might

need anyway - might need someone else I could trust. You know? Someone I'd worked with before."

"I thought you said you'd worked with this one woman before."

"Yeah, I worked with that bitch. She's why I wanted a backup. Nobody..." Eddie stopped himself, his brain catching up with his mouth. His eyes narrowed and he looked close at Sandee. "It doesn't matter. Are you going to introduce me to those two old fucks or not?"

"Of course, darling, of course," soothed Sandee. "What do you want me to tell them?"

"That I want to talk with them!"

"I'll need something more than that, or I assure you they won't have any interest in..."

"Just fucking ask 'em, will you? Ok?" he sniped.

"Of course, of course. Don't get your panties in a bunch, sweetie. You just wait right here. Do you have a card or something I could give them?"

"No. No cards. Just..."

"I know, I know," said Sandee, standing up. "I'll be right back."

Chloe and Eddie sat on opposite ends of the couch in silence, watching Sandee walk over to the couple as they danced. Chloe knew both of them by sight. The man's name was Garth Mackee, and he owned the Bleu Fandango restaurant. The woman was Connie Abernathy, and she was his long-time girlfriend and the hostess at the restaurant. Although both of them liked to smoke a joint now and then, the only thing Garth imported into the U.S. was food. They just liked to party and they spent freely. Sandee tapped Garth on the shoulder and gave both of them quick kisses on the cheek.

Eddie turned to Chloe again, seeming to just remember she was there now that he couldn't openly stare at Sandee's ass without being too obvious.

"Hey you," he said to her.

“Hey yourself,” she said, forcing herself to sound dreamy and stoned.

“You having fun?” he asked, sliding over next to her. He didn’t waste a moment. Chloe was sick of him and Sandee seemed to have everything in hand, so it was time to blow him off.

“Not as much fun as you two seem to be having,” Chloe said in sarcastic tones.

“What? Her? We’re just...”

“I’m drunk, not blind!” said Chloe.

“What? Jealous?” he said with a smile, reaching for her thigh.

She brushed his hand away. “I don’t give a fuck what you do.”

“Yeah, right. Listen, why don’t you calm down and just join us? No reason we can’t all three have a good time...”

“Ewww!” said Chloe. “You fucking perv!” She started to walk away but he grabbed her by the wrist.

“Wait a sec,” he said. Chloe snatched her wrist away and was fighting the urge to slug him, when all of a sudden Eddie was knocked back onto the couch by 120 pounds of giggling Sandee landed in his lap.

“Ooof!” said Eddie as Sandee laughed in his lap, holding a glossy black business card between two fingers. “What the fuck....”

Chloe laughed and retreated a few steps, well out of Eddie’s reach. “Fuck, Sandee’s good,” she thought. Not only did Sandee back her up when it looked like things with Eddie might be getting ugly, the job had been done without breaking roles. The squirming brunette in his lap had certainly distracted him from any anger he’d felt toward Chloe.

“He says he’ll talk to you,” said Sandee, gently caressing Eddie’s cheek with the business card. “But not tonight. He wants you to call him tomorrow at this number.” Sandee slipped the card into Eddie’s front pocket, giving him a playful squeeze in the process.

“Thanks, babe,” said Eddie. “You’re a princess.”

“Well then,” said Sandee. “You’d better treat me like one and buy me another drink.”

“Anything for you,” he said. Sandee squirmed off of him and he got up to his feet. He pointedly ignored Chloe as he headed over toward the bar, weaving a bit from side to side.

“You gonna be ok?” Chloe asked Sandee.

“This puppy-dog? Nothing easier. He’ll be passed out cold in ten minutes, tops.”

“Was that one of Bee’s cards?”

“It most certainly was. D. W. Oliver.”

“You’re brilliant,” said Chloe.

“I know. See you at home?”

“Eventually.” Chloe glanced toward the bar and saw Eddie headed back their way. She raised her voice, stepping back away from Sandee and throwing her arms up in disgust. “No way! You’re both disgusting! Just leave me alone.”

Chloe couldn’t hear what Sandee and Eddie said as she spun on her heel and stormed out of the room toward the front door. But she knew she’d be able to listen and watch the full replay on video as soon as she got home. The Crew’s secret watchers never missed anything. She just wished she could be there in person once Eddie figured out that Sandee was really a man.

Chapter 15

PAUL watched the three dots diverge on the display screen. The one he knew represented Chloe was moving at a leisurely (or tired) pace through the streets of Old Town. Although she was headed the wrong way at the moment, Paul knew she'd eventually find her way home, once she was sure she'd shaken any followers. The other two dots represented Sandee and Eddie. Since they were both inside the Crawford House still, their dots were right on top of one another, making the display a little difficult to interpret.

The screen Paul watched showed an overhead picture of the entire island, with the street names and block numbers digitally overlaid on top of the satellite image. The city display gathered data from several different kinds of sources, including GPS devices in the Crewmember's phones and on their vehicles along with similar tracking devices hidden elsewhere. But it was hard to find a reliable tracking device much smaller than a compact cell phone - at least one that had enough battery life to be worthwhile for any length of time. It was relatively easy to hide such a device in a car or scooter, but few people in Key West did much driving. If you wanted to keep track of someone, you needed to hide something on their person that they wouldn't notice.

That's where Radio Frequency Identification, or RFID tags came into play. Bee had gotten her hands on a few thousand of the cheap, flexible and easily hidden spy chips. Manufacturers sewed them into clothing, hid them in packaging, or sealed them in products as a way to track inventory down to the individual item. And soon they will be included in every U.S. passport and Driver's License. Thin as a piece of paper and no larger than a quarter, these hidden antennas each contained a unique ID number that they could transmit when pinged with the right radio frequency. Without sending the exact frequency, the RFID tag was inert and almost undetectable. The only drawback was the device's very limited range - the reader sending the signal had to be within, at most, a few dozen feet of the tag.

In stores, these readers are located at doorways and in the shelves, making it easy to achieve complete coverage within an enclosed space. The Crew wanted to be able to track the tags outside on the street, a challenge in any city, even one as small as Key West. So far, they'd failed to achieve the complete coverage Bee dreamed of, but they had managed to incorporate RFID readers into their hidden

camera network that spread out over much of old town. While this still only gave them spotty coverage, it did allow them to track people as they moved through most of the major intersections or past the more popular tourist spots. With that data, Bee could then use her spy camera array more effectively, since the Crew's computer kept a record of every active RFID tag's location at all times (not counting the thousands still boxed up and waiting for use).

The business card that Sandee had given Eddie contained an RFID tag. Chloe had called and told Bee that it was the card with the name D.W. Oliver on it. Bee then activated the tag in the RFID network and assigned Eddie's name to the card in her master tracking database. Now whenever one of their readers registered the tag, Eddie's name would pop up on the screen with the time of detection. Unless he was staying somewhere well off the beaten path, they should be able to easily track him back to whatever hotel or guest house he was staying at. And unless he had an RFID reader attuned to the exact proper frequency, it was unlikely that he'd detect the hidden device. All this assumed he didn't just throw the card away, of course. Then all they'd be able to track is the garbage.

"You got everything covered here?" Paul asked Bee as he stifled a yawn.

"Yep," she said, eyes on the screens in front of her.

"Okay...I'm going downstairs then," said Paul. "Check my mail and stuff."

"You mean check your auction," teased Bee.

"Yeah, yeah, that too. Do you need anything? Coffee?"

Bee was clicking through the network of cameras, looking for something. Or maybe just looking. Bee did a lot of just looking through her cameras. "I'm fine," she said, pointing over her shoulder to a small refrigerator that Paul knew was full of Red Bull and string cheese.

"Ok..." Paul started to say something - what would have been the latest in a series of admonitions to Bee that she should eat and, well, live more healthily. But he knew it would only piss her off. It would certainly piss him off if someone kept hectoring him like that.

He went downstairs, past the second floor bedrooms and down into the main

living space. The old Key West house had a complicated layout, having been divided, subdivided and then remodeled again and again in the hundred or so years since it had been built. He made his way through the kitchen to the back of the house to a room that had once been a porch before being turned into a separate apartment and then reintegrated into the main living space as a sun room. It was Paul's favorite room in the house, filled with light during the day and cool breezes at night (except in summer of course, when there was no such thing as a cool breeze in Key West unless it came with a hurricane).

One table was given over entirely to Paul's art supplies - a pile of sketchbooks, Bristol boards, pencils, charcoal and inks. He gave the pile a guilty glance and then moved over to his laptop. He'd started a new comic book project when he'd moved here and had been going strong on it for a while, but he'd scarcely touched it in months. Too much shit happening in his life. Especially right now, when he needed to concentrate on the crisis at hand. With the whole Raquel-Isaiah- Winston-Eddie-Murder-Conspiracy-Revolution thingy, he didn't have any bandwidth left for anything else.

Well, almost anything else. He fired up his public laptop (as opposed to the secure laptop he had for Crew related activities) and logged into the neighbor's wireless network (for which they'd cracked the wimpy WEP security months ago.) He did check e-mail, although he seldom got much besides spam these days - he'd cut himself off from anyone in his old life who might e-mail him. He thought briefly about trying to do a search for info about Isaiah, but he couldn't imagine that a man like him had left many traces of himself in the Web for someone like Paul to find. Inevitably he pointed his browser to his bookmarks and then, inevitably, to the forums. And then, because he couldn't help himself, he started playing the damn game.

Forty, maybe fifty minutes later he jumped in his seat at the sound of Chloe's voice. "Don't tell me you're playing that fucking game again," she teased. He looked up to see her coming up the back steps into the sun room. She must have snuck in through the neighbor's back yard, thought Paul. She really is being security conscious. He toyed briefly with the idea of shutting the laptop down before she could see the game up on the screen, but decided not to bother. He'd been caught red-handed.

"If I'd known you liked beating yourself up so much, I'd have brought my chains with me from Cali," Chloe said.

“Are they better than the chains on our bed now?” he asked.

“Not really,” she admitted. “But those haven’t seen near as much use as that thing.” She pointed to the laptop.

“That’s only because we never seem to wait until we get to the bedroom.”

“Maybe we should bring them with us to the party next time,” Chloe suggested as she sat down next to Paul and looked at the screen. She pointed to the display, “Are you winning?”

“We’ll see in a few minutes,” he replied.

“Seriously, Paul, why are you playing that fucking game?”

“Because it’s fun.”

“It can’t be fun.”

“It is fun.”

“It might be fun for other people. But it’s not fun for you. I can tell.”

“You can tell?” he asked, growing angry that they were having this conversation again. “What clued you in? That I play it so often? I must hate it if I keep playing it all the time.”

“I can tell because every time you play it you’re in a shitty mood for the next hour or three until some other bullshit comes along to distract you.”

“That’s not...”

“Honey, it is. I know you try to hide it. Maybe you even try and hide it from yourself or some psychological shit like that. I don’t know. But I do know it makes you pissed off.”

“Maybe,” Paul admitted. In fact, he knew she was right. Playing the game did piss him off. Even when he was enjoying it at the time, afterward he felt worse. Like scratching a bug bite or picking at a scab.

“Definitely,” Chloe said. “So why do it? Why drudge that bullshit up? You left

that all behind in San Jose, didn't you? Isn't that why we're here on this insane little island, so we can forget about all this and start over."

"But it's not that easy. I can't just forget."

"Not if you keep playing that fucking thing, you can't."

"But it's mine. My game. My fucking creation..." his voice rose as he spoke, almost to a shout.

"Not anymore," said Chloe, her voice soft. She put a hand on his and lifted his fingers from the keyboard. "They stole it from you, remember. They stole it from you and we took revenge."

"It's not that simple."

"It's never that simple. But you're making it extra complicated by playing the damn thing. You're like the jealous ex-boyfriend who stands out on the lawn and watches the girl you lost fuck the new guy. That's not the way to get over it."

"I know," said Paul. And he did. He knew that she was absolutely right. The game, Metropolis 2.0 was based on a comic book he'd created and written. He'd gone on to be the lead designer on the game until he'd been unceremoniously fired. And while that nasty turn of events had ultimately led to the much more rewarding relationship with the woman he loved, it had still been a traumatic time. He retained nothing but anger and resentment for his former partners and the game.

Paul had been front page news when he and Chloe and Bee fled California. And if CNN had lost interest in his scams and crimes relatively quickly, the computer gaming press had latched onto his story for months. Despite the fact that Paul had tried his crooked best to screw with his former partners, the unwanted publicity of his blown con game had given Metropolis 2.0 more free press than anything the company's marketing department could ever have dreamed of. Every article and Web post about the game included some mention of "wanted criminal and con artist Paul Reynolds" and his role in creating the game.

His old company, Fear and Loading Games, never mentioned his name in their own press materials and did everything they could to distance themselves from their fugitive former designer. When the game came out six months later, his

name was nowhere to be found in the credits or the press releases. Nevertheless, a whole new round of news stories retold his sordid tale, providing even more exposure for the game. It was an immediate best seller (helped a great deal by the fact that it turned out to be a pretty damn good game), topping the PC game sales charts for three months and was, by any measure, a hit. Industry observers all noted that the air of infamy associated with Metropolis 2.0's creator gave the game a mystique and "Net cred" that couldn't help but boost sales.

All through the process, Paul followed the game's progress with a feverish intensity. He'd lurked on the game's message boards and read every post about him. At first he'd been heartened to see that he had plenty of fans who lamented his loss and were dead certain that the game would be a miserable failure, doomed to obscurity. But he quickly learned that this support was just typical Internet hyperbole. The Fear and Loading team steadily and relentlessly ignored Paul - simply not commenting on either his contributions to the game or his crimes. Instead they released a flood of new screen shots, designer diaries and interviews. Within a month, his one-time champions online had all but forgotten about him.

Paul found that not being the center of attention hurt him more deeply than he would have imagined. And when the game came out without his name on it, it felt like a body blow. It really was like seeing the girl you love marry someone else. He'd created the comic, the world the game was based on, and now he didn't have any connection to it at all. As part of his contribution to founding the company, he'd turned over all rights to his original, self-published comic book. The game company included a compilation of his comics in the box with every game, and even there you had to search the very fine print to find his name. They'd literally taken his world from him.

But when the game came out, Paul couldn't help but try it out. He'd loaded it onto his laptop, signing on with a stolen credit card and fake identity, intending to just take a quick look and see what those bastards had done to his creation without him. As it turned out, they'd done an annoyingly good job. The vast, futuristic dystopia he'd drawn in the comics was alive in digital 3D on his screen. He created his cybernetically enhanced freedom fighter and started playing, just to poke around and test the game play. The game play was great - and very different from what he'd originally designed. He kept playing, wanting to unlock more content and see more of the game.

Eight hours later, Chloe had come home, having been out with Sandee scouting a real estate developer as a potential mark. Paul had managed to hide what he'd been doing from them as they came through the door, although Chloe was a little pissed that he'd failed to meet them at the Green Parrot for drinks like he'd promised. But he hadn't been able to hide his new addiction for long. If it weren't for the fact that running and attending the party was insanely fun and enjoyable, he knew he'd have had a much harder time pulling himself away from the game each night. He'd already developed a cabal of online friends who he played with regularly, and he even felt a little guilty when he went too long without logging on and checking in with them.

He stared down at the screen now, as a dead woman lay in their freezer out back and a criminal conspiracy was swirling into existence around them. He watched as the last few seconds ticked away on the display and a message popped up on his screen: "You've won auction for Lvl. 30 Green Crystal Weapon Enhancement. 5,720 credits deducted from your account."

"You won," said Chloe.

"I did," agreed Paul, clicking off the message.

"What's a Green Crystal whachamacallit?"

"I don't know. One of my guild members wanted it for something."

"Huh."

"Yeah."

They sat in silence for a moment, looking at the screen where absolutely nothing of interest was happening.

"You really should..." Chloe started.

"I know," Paul said.

"It's just that..."

"I know, ok. I know. You're right. I should just cancel the damn game."

“I mean, play a game, sure. Why’re we here if we can’t play games when we want to? But try something else. Try World of Warcraft or EVE Online or something else. Anything but that.”

“I just keep thinking that somehow this will work out for me,” said Paul.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know what I mean,” he said, and he didn’t. He just had a sense that somehow if he kept playing that it might lead to him getting even with them for taking his name off it. “It’s like, by playing it in secret like this - it’s like I’m stealing back from them. They have no idea that I’m in there. That I’m still playing a role. And if I get powerful enough I might be able to... I don’t know. Do something.”

“Do something to them?”

“Yeah.”

“We kinda already did some fucking things to them. Worse things than you’ll ever accomplish by playing their game and paying them money.”

“Well, it’s not my money.”

“They don’t care. They’re still getting paid.”

“I know.”

“It’s just stupid.”

“It’s not stupid!” he insisted, even though it obviously was. “Listen, ok. I know it’s weird. But there’s something I need here, ok? Something important to me.”

“No, there’s nothing important in there at all, Paul. Nothing. You’ve got to let that shit go and...”

“I don’t have to do anything.”

“What you have to do is fucking get your head in the game,” said Chloe, her voice turning cold and harsh. “You may have forgotten about Raquel out there in

the freezer, but there's some serious shit..."

"I haven't forgotten anything!" Paul shouted. "You think I'll forget a dead fucking body? I haven't forgotten that. Just like I haven't forgotten that it was your goddamn friend Winston who dragged us into this bullshit with Eddie and Isaiah and whoever else. We had a good thing going here in Key West until all these freaks and geeks showed up and..."

"Don't you lay this on me!" Chloe shouted back. "Don't you fucking dare lay this on me. This is the life. This is the life you chose. I didn't kill that woman, and I didn't ask these people to come here. I didn't choose this insane little island to live on. And I wasn't the one who got fucking fired from my own company for being a lazy clock watcher. So don't lay your shit on me. You're the one..."

"That you tried to steal from," Paul said, cutting her off. "The one you strung along and cock-teased and tried to take three quarters of a million bucks from. The one who you let get set up by your friend Raff..."

"Oh, this again," she said, standing up from the table.

"What do you mean again?" snapped Paul. "We've never even talked through this shit..."

"But it's always there, isn't it?" asked Chloe. "It's always the fucking elephant in the room. You think I don't get your snide little comments and jokes? You think it doesn't bother me when you say shit about me stealing from you? You know I feel like shit for what I did! You know I do! But you keep digging. You can't help it can you? And when you play that fucking game," she pointed at the screen. "Every time you play that it means you're going to be bitchy to me for the next few hours. Guaranteed."

"That's funny," said Paul. "Because you know when I want to play the most? When I need to escape from you constantly giving me crap for how small this town is. How insane this island is. How fucking hot Key West is. How frustrating it is to find good marks here. How much you wish that there was a decent Mexican restaurant..."

Something flashed on the screen in front of him, catching Paul's eye. He looked down at the game on his laptop for a second. There was a message on the screen.

He assumed it was from one of his fellow guild members and was about to resume his tirade when he realized how weird the message really was. He looked closer and read it again.

“Oh that’s fucking typical,” said Chloe. “You can’t even have a fight with me without checking on your auction for a green crystal dildo or whatever the fuck...”

“Chloe, look at this,” said Paul.

“What?”

“Just look at this. Tell me this doesn’t mean what I think it means.”

On the screen was a small, in-game window that signified a priority message from a fellow player. Only those who you had approved as trusted in-game friends could even send you such messages, but Paul had never seen this screen name before. Nor was the name in blue, like it would have been if it was a game master. The message read:

Isaiah2342: YOU SHOULD LOWER YOUR VOICES.

Chloe came around the table and looked at the screen. “What the fuck...” she whispered.

Paul stared at the message, confused. Was this some weird coincidence? That seemed impossible. Chloe sat down next to him and leaned forward, peering close. She typed into the game’s chat window.

Who is this?

After a moment’s hesitation, the mystery sender confirmed Paul’s suspicion.

ISAIAH OF COURSE.

Chloe and Paul exchanged glances. Paul looked out the bank of windows that lined three walls of the room, but saw no sign of anyone out there, much less Isaiah. Not that that meant anything. Bee had cameras and microphones all over town, and no one ever noticed them either. But Paul found the idea that Isaiah had them too very, very disturbing. And the fact that he could monitor them in

their home was beyond frightening.

Ok, we're being quiet, typed Chloe. Now will you stop spying on us?

I'M NOT SPYING ON YOU. BUT IF I WERE, ALL THAT SHOUTING WOULD MAKE IT VERY EASY TO DO SO.

Fine we get it. So are we done?

ID LIKE A STATUS REPORT.

About the body?

Paul watched as the words disappeared almost as fast as Chloe finished typing them.

THIS IS NOT A SECURE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION.

Then stop using it, Chloe typed and then held down the laptop's power button until the screen went black. She turned to Paul and leaned toward him.

"How easy was it for him to do that?" she whispered into his ear.

"I don't know. Not easy. I don't even know how he figured out what my screen name is," he whispered back.

"This was the first time you've played since you met him, right?" asked Chloe, her breath hot in his ear. He nodded. "And you were on less than an hour." He nodded again.

Paul's heart thumped in his chest. He saw what she was getting at. Either Isaiah had hacked his laptop and Metropolis 2.0's chat system in under an hour, or he and his Crew had been digging into Paul and Chloe before they ever met. Neither option gave Paul any comfort at all. Nor did the fact that the two weren't mutually exclusive - he could be skilled enough to hack the game in under an hour and prepared enough to have been checking them out for days or weeks or months. No matter which scenario you chose, there was no denying that he and Chloe were way behind in the game.

Chloe stood up and took Paul's hand, pulling him to his feet. She led him quietly

inside the house and shut the door behind them. They moved upstairs to Bee's room without saying a word and knocked on the door.

"Come in," they heard Bee shout.

Bee and the room hadn't changed in the last hour. She was still perched in front of her wall of monitors in the dark, looking through the camera array. Paul glanced at the monitor showing the map of Key West and saw that Sandee's dot was still at the party, but that Eddie's dot had left a trail of time stamps as he passed within range of RFID detectors. The last one showed him entering the Hyatt resort off Mallory Square about ten minutes ago.

Chloe shut the door behind them and then plucked a roll of tape from a hook on the wall. Bee shot them a look when she heard Chloe start to peel off long strips of tape to seal the cracks around the door.

"What's going on?" asked Bee, a note of panic in her voice. Bee's was the only room in the house well-shielded against surveillance. When they'd moved in they'd put up aluminum sheets and/or screens of fine copper mesh over every surface before hiding them beneath a layer of plaster. The tape Chloe was using had more metallic mesh woven into it. When she was done the room would be, theoretically, sealed off from all kinds of electronic signals and eavesdropping. Even their cell phones didn't work in the room.

"It's Isaiah," Paul explained. "He's spying on us."

"How do you know?" Bee asked.

"He just hacked into Paul's game while he was playing," Chloe said as she applied the last strip of metallic tape. "And he made it very clear that he could hear what Paul and I were talking about."

"You mean yelling about," Bee said.

"Whatever. The point is, he heard us. He's watching us. And from now on we can't be too careful."

"Why did he tell us?" Paul asked, although he was talking to himself as much as to the two women.

“Because he wanted us stop yelling about dead bodies,” Chloe said.

“Which is good advice,” Bee chimed in.

“Yeah, ok. But still...”

“But why tell us like that?” asked Paul. “It’s very flashy. He could’ve just called my phone. I was actually expecting him to call and get his status report. So why hack into the game and contact me there.”

“He was showing off,” said Chloe. “Trying to spook us.”

“And it worked,” Paul admitted. “But actually I think this is a good thing.”

“What?” Bee and Chloe said almost at once.

“How is it a good thing?” Chloe continued.

“Well, ok, not a good thing. But not the worst thing. He’s tipping his hand, right? He’s letting us know not only that he’s watching us, but that he’s deep into our lives. But he’s gotta know that we’re going to be super careful from now on, right? He’s made sure of that.”

“So this is his way of keeping us in line,” said Chloe. “Of making sure we know he’s watching over us so we won’t screw up.”

“Exactly,” said Paul. “If he wanted to just spy on us, he would never have tipped his hand. But I think he’s just trying to make sure we do a good job with the Raquel situation.”

“Plus,” said Chloe, “If he’s as good as he seems and he really has been watching us for longer than we’ve known he existed, then he might well already know everything about us that he needs to know. Maybe even everything that there is to know.”

“That’s a comforting thought,” said Bee as she stood up from her seat and headed for the closet. Paul and Chloe watched as Bee pulled out several boxes of gear from the tiny closet which was stuffed with computer gear, blown monitors, and other tech detritus. Paul recognized the boxes as the containers she kept her bug sweeping gear in. “I’m going to sweep the whole house again,” Bee said.

“It’ll take about five hours. No one should say anything until I’m done.”

Paul and Chloe looked back at each other.

“I’ll bet Isaiah’s calling me right now,” said Paul.

“I’ll bet he is,” she said.

“I should probably call him.”

“Yeah.”

“He’ll want to meet,” said Paul.

“You can handle it,” she replied. “I’m going to help Bee secure the house and then follow up on Eddie.”

Paul started to say something else. Some kind of apology, maybe. But he couldn’t find the words. He just nodded and gave her a quick, awkward kiss.

“Ok, well, I’ll go see him.”

“And, Paul,” Chloe said. “Tell him if he really wants to help, he can come get that fucking body from our freezer.”

Chapter 16

TWO and a half hours later, Paul met Isaiah and, as it turned out, Winston at the Blue Parrot restaurant over in Bahama Village. The restaurant was one of Paul's favorites, and also one of the most popular breakfast joints on the island. Most of the dining area consisted of picnic tables spread out beneath the trees, with chickens scrambling around the mulch-covered ground while the owner's dogs prowled about hoping for table scraps. The ultra-casual setting belied a relatively sophisticated menu that included seafood eggs benedict that Paul craved at least once a week.

Even at this early hour the restaurant was crowded. This time of year, with so many tourists on the island, there would soon be an hour's wait. Most of the tables had happy diners chowing down at them. But Paul didn't see Isaiah anywhere among them. He was about to ask the hostess for a table when his phone started to vibrate in his pocket. It didn't even surprise him when he saw the number Isaiah had been using on the caller ID.

"I assume you're watching me from somewhere?" Paul said as he answered.

"Look up," Isaiah responded.

Paul looked up, first into the trees and then at the second floor of the ramshackle wooden building that housed the restaurant's kitchen and small indoor dining section. On the second floor was another dining room, one usually closed except on the most crowded mornings. He saw Isaiah standing at the top of the stairs. He'd changed into less formal attire - a pair of jeans and a simple, short-sleeve button-down red shirt. Paul nodded at him and shut off his phone as he made for the stairway.

Upstairs he found Isaiah and Winston both waiting for him at a table, along with pitchers of coffee and juice and a platter of muffins and croissants. They had the small dining room to themselves, and Paul assumed they'd paid for the privilege of not being disturbed any further.

"You found my favorite restaurant," said Paul. "You seem to know everything."

Isaiah ignored the barb. "Please, take a seat," he said, motioning to the chair

across from him.

Paul nodded to Winston by way of saying hello, sat down and poured himself a cup of coffee and took a blueberry muffin from the tray. “Is there going to be a waitress coming?” he asked.

“Is there something you need?” asked Isaiah.

“Eggs. Bacon. Toast.”

“If you could wait until we’re finished,” Isaiah said. “It shouldn’t take long.”

“Fine,” said Paul, munching his muffin.

“So, did everything go all right at the hotel?” Winston asked. “Did you...?”

“Yeah, it went fine. We got her out of there.”

“Where is she now?” Winston asked, his voice sad.

“For the moment we’ve got her hidden in a freezer in our backyard,” said Paul. “But that’s not a good long-term solution. It’s not even a good short-term solution. If you could...”

“We’ll help you dispose of it,” said Isaiah.

“I’ll take care of it,” said Winston. Isaiah looked over at the old man and the two stared at each other for half a heartbeat. “She was a friend. I owe her that much.” Isaiah nodded in agreement and they both turned their gazes back on Paul.

“It’s going to be tricky now that the sun is up,” said Paul. “You never know who’s watching. I’m told you can’t be too careful.”

“We can handle it discreetly I’m sure,” said Winston.

“And I guess you already know where we live,” said Paul. Winston nodded and smiled. Paul wondered if Isaiah had told him or if the old man had found out on his own. He was pretty sure Chloe hadn’t filled her old mentor in on her supposedly hidden home base. Hidden no more it seemed. “Ok, well, the sooner the better.”

“It will be my top priority when we’re finished here.”

“Great,” Paul said, his voice dripping with sarcasm although the truth was that this was the first piece of news he’d heard that actually gave him some relief. Having Raquel’s body in his backyard scared him stiff every time he thought about it. One call to the cops and he and Chloe were toast.

“What did you find in her room?” asked Isaiah, bringing the conversation back to where he apparently wanted it to be.

“Not much,” said Paul. He’d gotten a full report from Bee and Chloe about their investigation. “Whoever killed her also ransacked the room. Or at least we think so. The room looked totally neat and undisturbed, but any laptops or other electronic devices Raquel might have had were gone. Also, Chloe found a hidden compartment in her luggage that was also empty. The killers covered their tracks very well.”

“And how was she killed?” asked Isaiah.

“It looks like someone hit her over the head. Or it could be poison or something, but obviously we have no way of testing that. It looks like she was in a fight though. Bee took some skin samples from under her fingernails, so maybe we could do a DNA test or something. Not that we know how to do a DNA test. Do you?”

“No,” admitted Isaiah.

“No,” concurred Winston. “Although I might be able to use a contact of mine up in Miami. I can take the sample and send it to him if you like, but it would still take weeks to get results.”

“Sure,” said Paul. “Might as well.”

“You said she fought back, but the room looked undisturbed,” Isaiah said. “Do you think the killer cleaned up after the fight?”

“We think she was killed somewhere else,” said Paul. “There was beach sand in the room and some of her clothes were damp. And there wasn’t much blood. Nothing broken. Plus someone had removed the window from its frame. Our guess is, they killed her somewhere else and then moved her body back to the

room.”

“They?” asked Winston.

“Well, it would’ve been real hard for just one person to move the body around like that and push it up through the window without being noticed. You gotta figure there was someone else, right? And we seem to come in packs.”

“What do you mean, ‘we’?” asked Isaiah.

“I mean crews, like mine or yours or Winston’s. We’re like packs of wolves aren’t we? Feeding off the herd.”

“That’s a less than lovely metaphor,” said Winston.

“It’s a less than lovely murder,” said Paul.

“And you’re certain that one of us was responsible?” asked Isaiah.

“Well, not one of us in this room, I hope. But yeah, one of the Crews out there. Definitely.”

“Why do you say that?” Isaiah asked.

“Well, it’s a two-man job at least, probably more, and it’s unlikely this is all a coincidence of some kind. And then there’s the whole putting the body back in her room. Why do that? To send the rest of us a message.”

“Explain,” said Isaiah.

“Well, the killers put her back in her room. Why? Not to hide the body from the police, that much is for sure. There wasn’t a Do Not Disturb sign on the door. The maids would have found her body this morning. And then the police would have gotten involved. Plus, if they were moving her body anyway, then they could have hidden it anywhere. Or dumped it in the water - we’re never more than a half mile from the ocean here. No. They put her in her room, where there was every expectation that we would find her before dawn. Hell, we found her in under two hours once we started looking. So I figure they had to be sending us a message.”

“I agree,” said Isaiah.

“Well, that’s nice to hear,” said Paul. “Do you have any idea what the message is?”

“Do you?”

“No idea,” said Paul. And he didn’t. He knew it was a message, but he thought it was a pretty crappy one. “Some sort of warning I guess.”

“I agree with that assessment as well,” said Isaiah.

“And what do you two think the killer was warning us about?” asked Winston. “Assuming that’s what’s really happening here.”

“I assume that the killers are trying to scuttle our new project,” Isaiah said. “By killing a key player in the corporation and then placing her body where we alone would find it in time, they’re hoping to scare us off. That alone tells us something about the killers,”

“What’s that?” asked Winston.

“That they do not know me very well at all. I will not be dissuaded. And I hope you won’t either,” he said, looking both to Winston and Paul. “This should, if anything, strengthen our resolve. We need to find the killers. We need to take care of them. And then we need to move on. Our course is clear.”

Isaiah’s voice never changed from its level, careful tones, but Paul saw real anger in the man’s eyes. From the little he knew of Isaiah, he could guess that he was a man who prided himself on keeping his emotions in check. But behind the calm facade was a hint of fury that he couldn’t hide. “What do you mean, take care of ?” Paul asked.

“That depends on who and what we find. But we obviously need to make sure that whatever group or person killed Raquel can never hurt us again. Absolutely sure. We are all agreed on this point, are we not?”

“Of course,” said Winston.

“I guess so,” said Paul. “I mean, I’m not making any promises. And I’m not

going to turn into anyone's hit man. We'll just have to see how it plays out, won't we?"

"Yes," said Isaiah. "Which is why we need to proceed with the investigation. I know this is your island, Paul. And I know that you have resources and knowledge here that we visitors can't match."

"You seem to have good resources of your own," said Paul.

"Not as good as you think. You were just sloppy. I put this down to your inexperience with such matters and the natural stresses you must have felt dealing with a murder for the first time," said Isaiah. Not quite the first time, thought Paul, but there was no reason to point that out to Isaiah. "Hopefully you have now learned a lesson. My point is this: We probably won't be able to solve this mystery without you and Chloe, so I want you to continue your investigation. If you need anything from me or from Winston, don't hesitate to ask."

"And what're you going to be doing in the meantime?" asked Paul. "Snooping around on your own behind our backs, I assume."

"Winston is going to help dispose of the body. I'm going to continue doing what I came here to do - I will not be dissuaded. Later today I'm meeting again with Eddie to discuss future plans and alternatives to how he might be involved now that Raquel is gone. Hopefully you and Chloe will turn up some more leads by then."

"We're working on it," said Paul, but his mind was elsewhere. He was remembering Sandee's conversation with Eddie, which he'd watched via the party's hidden cameras. Eddie had been pretty careful, but Sandee had gotten him to brag about his prowess as a planner. He'd talked about having a backup plan. How he always had a backup plan. A particularly nasty possibility occurred to Paul.

"I think we're done here," said Isaiah. "We've all got much to..."

"Wait a sec," interrupted Paul. "There's another possibility."

"What's that?" asked Isaiah.

“When you talk to Eddie, there’s a strong possibility that he’s going to suggest someone to replace Raquel in the corporation. Someone or some crew that he already knows and trusts.”

Isaiah stared at Paul for a long, hard moment. “Why do you think that?”

“Like you said, this is my island and I’ve got resources here you two don’t. Just trust me on this one. Eddie’s got someone else lined up and ready to jump into the inner circle now that there’s an opening at the table. I’ll bet you.”

Isaiah sat back in his seat and drummed his fingers on the table. “I don’t bet.”

“Whatever. Just wait and see. It’ll happen.”

“And if it does?” Isaiah asked.

“Well, then that opens up another possibility. No one was sending a message or trying to scuttle the group. They were just trying to change the dynamic of the founding members. They killed Raquel and left her body in her room because they knew we’d find it.” Paul’s mind was racing and he was talking almost as fast, the realizations spilling out of his mouth as they occurred to him. “If they dumped the body in the water, we wouldn’t know for sure that she was dead. They leave it out for the cops to find and, well, now you’ve got the cops involved and no one wants that. Place the body where only we will find it and now we know for sure that she’s dead, but there are no cops. And since we know she’s dead, we also know that we can start looking right away for someone to replace her.”

“It’s an interesting theory,” said Isaiah, his face blank.

“And you suspect Eddie?” asked Winston.

“Yeah, Eddie’s the most likely candidate isn’t he? Or maybe it was the replacement he has in mind who went ahead and acted alone. Or maybe they were both in on it together.” Paul was excited now that last night’s events were finally starting to make sense to him. Something about Eddie had rubbed him wrong from the moment they met, and now he knew why. The man might be a murderer.

“It’s worth investigating,” said Isaiah. “If Eddie does indeed offer a replacement

at my meeting with him, then I'll be sure to keep both him and the new potential player at arm's length while we look into the matter."

"But you need to be careful, Paul," Winston chimed in. "You and Chloe need to take every precaution when you're dealing with Eddie. If he is behind the murder, then..."

"I know," said Paul. "Then he's very dangerous. Well, if I've learned anything in the last twenty-four hours, it's that you can't be too careful."

Winston nodded in approval. "And don't hesitate to ask either of us for help."

"And keep us updated on your progress every three hours," Isaiah added.

"Yes, sir," Paul shot back, not liking Isaiah's commanding tone.

Isaiah ignored the sarcasm and stood up. "Well, we're done here. I'll pay downstairs. If you two want more breakfast, feel free to stay."

"Thank you, Isaiah," said Winston, who remained in his seat. "I too would like some eggs. Paul, will you stay and eat with me?"

"Sure," said Paul, "Sounds good." He'd welcome a chance to talk things over with Winston without Isaiah's intimidating presence in the room. Isaiah gave them both a blank look and then nodded, leaving without another word. Winston poured Paul a glass of juice.

"Now, Paul," said Winston. "Can you tell me what you really think is going on here?"

Paul looked around the room. At the framed pictures on the wall and the clock and the little ceramic sun and the plastic flamingo. They could all have cameras or microphones or both. After Isaiah's morning demonstration of his omniscience, Paul doubted that he would have left him and Winston alone in a room without a bug.

"Sure, I'll tell you whatever you want to know," Paul lied.

Chapter 17

CHLOE fumed as she hit the street. The whole world was spinning out of her control. Nothing pissed her off more than being out of control. Isaiah's little "message" to Paul through that fucking game had been a real shock to her. Despite all her many misgivings about being in Key West, she thought at the very least that they'd managed to create a secure environment for themselves. Between Bee's spy cameras and their own security measures around the house and the network of contacts she and Paul had cultivated, they should have had some hint that Isaiah was poking around in their affairs. But for all she knew, he could have been surveilling them for days or even weeks, and she'd never had a moment's suspicion that he was out there. Could he and his crew be that good?

Once again she cursed the fact that they didn't have a real hacker in their crew anymore. Raff had been brilliant with all the computer stuff, and given the time and resources, there wasn't a system he'd failed to crack for her and her Crew. But Raff had turned out to be a fucking rat bastard. She needed a non-rat-bastard Raff. But surprisingly enough, the city of Key West was known more for its margaritas and bare-breasted festivals than it was for its booming tech industry. Isaiah had her totally outflanked on the hacking front, and that scared her. Their system at home was as secure as they could make it, but she and Bee weren't experts. And when it came to computers, Paul was basically useless.

It took her and Bee an hour to finish sweeping the computer room upstairs. After that, she left her friend to finish the rest of the house. As far as she was concerned, the whole place needed to be treated as compromised from now on, no matter what Bee's equipment found. There would be no talking outside of Bee's safe room about anything important until all this bullshit with Isaiah and Raquel's murder was resolved and these crazy fuckers left her island.

Now Chloe buzzed along on her scooter, on her way to see the girl that had first told Paul where Raquel was staying. She was the receptionist at Raquel's guest house who worked the day shift and was staying in one of the rental properties the Crew controlled. Her name was Riva Lindell, and she'd never done much to earn her keep before as far as Chloe could remember. She was a friend of a friend of Sandee's and had been living for free in a timeshare off Roosevelt for two and a half months. Sandee said she was a good kid, a party girl, and that she'd be cooperative.

The house where Riva was staying was really more of a tiny bungalow, tucked in behind a larger house that the Keys Condos and Estates also managed. The bungalow had been a guest house originally, but at some point the original owner had sold it off as a separate property. It was a cute little place, although it could use a new paint job. Now that hurricane season was over, the owner might actually want to spend money on something like that.

She knocked on the door louder than was polite. Riva wasn't supposed to be at work for another two hours, and odds were that she was still asleep. Getting no response to her first round of knocks, she pounded on the door even harder. It took a third barrage to finally rouse the resident. A heavyset, bleary-eyed woman with a tangled mass of brown hair flung the door open, looking very angry. She wore only an oversized Miami Dolphins jersey that barely came down to her upper thighs.

"What?" she shouted, rubbing her eye with one knuckle.

"Hi," said Chloe. "Sorry to..."

"Who're you?" Riva asked sleepily. "Do I..."

"I'm your landlord," said Chloe.

That woke Riva right up. "Oh, I'm just... it's a friend's place..." she stammered. "I'm just..."

"It's ok, Riva," Chloe assured her. "I'm a friend of Sandee's."

"Oh, shit, thank God," said Riva with relief.

"Can I come in? I've got a question or two. You're not in any trouble, and you don't have to move out or anything. I just think you can help me out."

"Um... sure. Of course," Riva replied, looking over her shoulder nervously. Chloe peered past her into the one-room bungalow and saw that there was someone else lying in the bed. "Sorry about the mess. My boyfriend..."

"Why don't you throw on some pants, and we'll talk out here," said Chloe. She didn't know who this guy in the bed was, but she didn't want to have to deal with him right now.

“Sure,” said Riva. “Just a sec.” Riva shut the door again and Chloe thought she heard anxious whispering between her and the boyfriend. Chloe thought about how well the real estate scam had worked out for them. Taking over Keys Condos and Estates had been a stroke of genius and it continued to pay unexpected dividends. There was no such thing as affordable housing in Key West, and it wasn’t like they were making any more land. Property was king on the tiny island, and the more properties they controlled, the more influence they had.

Riva had thrown on a pair of jeans and some sandals and tied her hair back with a scrunchy. “Sorry about that,” she said as she stepped out.

“Don’t be. I’m the one who should be sorry for waking you up,” Chloe assured her. “It’s just that I have a ton of stuff to do today, and I needed to get these questions out of the way while I had some time. It’s nothing too important, just a few little things.”

“Ok, sure. What do you need?”

“You talked to my business partner last night about a guest at the place where you work.”

“Sure, I remember. That woman.”

“Exactly. Well, I’ve got a few other questions about her, if you don’t mind.”

“What’s this about?”

“It’s a business matter, that’s all.”

Riva looked like she might not be satisfied with that answer, but she nodded.

“Ok.” Living off the books as she was, she couldn’t afford to ask any questions.

“Do you remember seeing her with anyone else?” Chloe asked.

“No, I don’t think so. She came in and out a few times while I was there, but always by herself.”

“And she checked in yesterday?”

“Yeah.”

“Ok. Did you see anyone else come in who was unusual? Or who you didn’t recognize?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Are you sure? Maybe a man? This would’ve been last night, before 9 or 10.”

“I get off at 10.”

“Right, before that then. A man, or maybe two that you didn’t recognize. He would have walked right by the front desk probably. Probably didn’t even look at you.” Chloe was just guessing here, but that’s how she would’ve done it.

“Oh, yeah, that guy! I was on the phone at the time. Yeah, I know who you’re talking about.”

“What did he look like?”

“Middle-aged. Maybe late middle-aged. Kind of a big guy. He had a beard, I know that.”

“And did he come back out?”

“Not while I was there. But I got off about half an hour later.”

“And you got a good look at him?”

“Yeah, pretty good.”

“Are there security cameras where you work.”

“No.”

Chloe thought for a moment, then asked, “Were you talking on your cell phone?”

“Yeah,” Riva admitted. “Making plans to meet up with Gary. My boyfriend.”

“Can you get the phone?”

“Why?” asked Riva, confused.

“I just want to check the exact time of the call.”

“Oh...” said Riva, suspicion creeping into her voice. “Sure, I guess...”

“Thanks,” Chloe said quickly. “I’ll wait out here.”

While Riva went to get her phone, Chloe thought things through, picturing Bee’s camera network and wondering if anything was close enough to have caught this guy on video. There was nothing within five or six blocks (they didn’t have much coverage in the more residential areas). But there might be something close by that caught him on his way here. After a minute, Riva returned with her phone. She scrolled through her call history and then showed Chloe the display, which showed a call to a local number at 9:27 p.m. last night.

“So,” said Chloe. “How long after you started your call did he come in?”

“I dunno exactly. Maybe ten or fifteen minutes?”

“And he came in through the front door?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Do you remember what he was wearing?”

“Um, sure. Nothing special. He had on a blue shirt and dark pants. Maybe black jeans?”

“A T-shirt or a button-down shirt or...?”

“A T-shirt. I don’t think it had any writing on it.”

“Ok, Riva,” said Chloe. “That’s great. Do you remember anything else about him? Tattoos or jewelry or anything like that?”

Riva thought for a moment before saying, “No, not really.”

“Not really?”

“No.”

Chloe flashed Riva a wide, reassuring smile. “Ok, Riva, thanks so much. That should do it. I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“Oh, it’s ok. I’ve gotta go to work in a couple hours anyway. Is there anything I should...?”

“No, no, you’re fine. You should be able to stay here for at least another couple weeks. Sandee will let you know for sure, and then I’ll make sure we find you another place if you need it, ok?”

“That’d be great,” said Riva with a smile, no doubt happy to have her free housing continue as long as possible.

“Ok, I gotta run,” said Chloe, shaking Riva’s hand. “Have a good one.”

“You too,” Riva said as Chloe climbed back on her Vespa.

That was something useful at last, thought Chloe. The guy with the beard sounded like a good lead. At the very least it was a place for Bee to get started with her search.

BACK at the house, Chloe found Bee scanning the living room for listening devices.

“Hey,” she said to Chloe as she walked in. “Any luck?”

“Nope,” said Chloe, even as she made a quick chopping gesture with her hand below waist level, which Bee should recognize as code for “yes.”

“Too bad,” said Bee.

“How ‘bout you?” Chloe asked.

“No luck here either,” Bee replied, her own hand making a slight, downward motion that confirmed that she had not, in fact had any luck. Either there were no bugs upstairs, or she couldn’t find them.

“Ok, well I’m going to go upstairs and lie down. I’m beat.” Chloe, who was looking right into Bee’s eyes, gave a meaningful glance upstairs and then balled her hand into a quick fist and released it just as fast. This gesture indicated that

Bee should follow her as soon as was convenient.

“You look real tired,” said Bee, not acknowledging Chloe’s gesture.

“Yeah. Is Paul back? Or Sandee?”

“Neither one,” said Bee.

“Ok, I’ll be upstairs. Don’t wake me unless the world ends.”

“Gotcha.”

Bee’s bug detecting equipment was as good as it came, just like the rest of their security measures. Chloe doubted that Isaiah had actually gotten inside the house, no matter how good he was, and he probably couldn’t track their movements inside. So she figured it was a safe risk to go directly into Bee’s secure room rather than actually going to bed. Although going to bed sounded really, really tempting.

About ten minutes later, Bee came up and joined her. They said nothing until they’d sealed the room once again, ensuring their privacy as much as they could.

“What’s up?” asked Bee “What did you find?”

“I’ve got a time and a place and a description.”

“Those are all good things,” Bee said as she sat back in her chair. Most of the screens were black, having gone into power-saver mode. As soon as she touched her keyboard, three of them sprang into life, including the big screen with the city map on it. There were no longer dots for her, Paul or Sandee. They’d all agreed to turn off the trackers on their phones in case Isaiah had hacked their system. There had been no new contacts on Eddie’s RFID tag.

“Where and when?” asked Bee.

“He was outside Raquel’s guest house around 9:35 last night, give or take fifteen minutes. He’s a middle-aged guy with a beard, wearing dark pants and a blue T-shirt.”

“I don’t have any cameras there,” said Bee.

“I know,” said Chloe.

“Well, I’ve got cameras there now, but I didn’t last night.”

“I know.”

“Still nothing on those in her room and outside by the way,” Bee said as she called up an activity log for the cameras in question. The one in the room had a motion detector that only picked up the maid service, and there was nothing suspicious there.

“Ok,” said Chloe. “Do you think you...?”

“I’ll start searching right away,” said Bee. “If we had a picture of him, I could try out that facial recognition software.”

“But we don’t have a picture. Just a guy with a beard and a blue shirt. How many of those could there be?”

“Hopefully just one,” said Bee, sipping at a warm Red Bull she’d left beside her keyboard. “Or I’m going to be here a while.”

“Hopefully it’s at least one,” said Chloe. “Otherwise we’re fresh out of leads.”

One of the other screens that had been dark flashed to life, displaying an image of the outside of their house. This was part of their own security system, which was right now showing Winston and Lily standing on their front porch.

“Hey,” said Bee. “That’s your friend.”

“It sure is.”

“I didn’t know you’d told them where we lived,” said Bee.

“I didn’t.”

“Well, they sure know.”

“They do,” said Chloe, wondering if it was Isaiah or Paul who’d told Winston, or if her mentor had been spying on her as well. The doorbell rang. “I guess I better go let them in.”

She padded downstairs, glancing around out of habit to make sure there wasn't anything lying out in the open that she didn't want Winston and Lily to see. Of course, since Bee had just swept the place, there was nothing. She opened the door to see Winston smiling widely at her.

"Fuller brush man," he said.

"You're so fucking old," Chloe joked in reply. "Does anyone even know what the hell a Fuller brush is anymore?"

"I'm not even sure I remember."

"Hey Lily," said Chloe.

"Hello, Chloe. Thanks for setting us up in the house. It's great."

"No problem." Chloe looked past them at the midsize RV parked in the middle of the road. "Did you two bring that?" she asked.

"We did indeed," said Winston. "We're here on official business, I'm afraid. We're going to take Raquel off your hands."

"In an RV?" she asked.

"It was all I could find on short notice that was big enough," said Lily.

"It certainly is big enough," Chloe said. "What're you going to do with her?"

"Lay her to rest in a dignified manner where no one will ever find her," said Winston.

"Sounds good to me. Do you need help finding a place?"

"No, we have everything well in hand, fear not."

"If you say so," said Chloe. "She's your problem now. Follow me, and I'll show you where she is."

Chloe led them through the house to the back yard and over to the workshop. She was relieved beyond words to have the body gone from her house. She'd only seen two other dead bodies in her life, and she'd never had to hide one like

this before. It was unnerving. She'd pushed her worries deep down where they couldn't distract her from the tasks at hand, not thinking about what she would actually do with the body long-term. To have someone take that responsibility away from her lifted a tremendous weight from her shoulders, and the fact that it was Winston, someone she trusted, made it all the better.

"I just had breakfast with Paul," said Winston.

"Oh?" said Chloe. "He give you and Isaiah the updates on everything that's happened since we last met?"

Winston chuckled as he said, "Not everything, I'm sure, but he gave us the highlights. We're leaning toward either Eddie or an associate crew of his as the most likely suspects."

"We?" asked Chloe.

"The three of us agreed with Paul's analysis."

"It was Paul's analysis?"

"Yes," said Winston. "He's developed a rather intriguing theory of the crime. Isaiah of course gave away nothing as to his true thoughts, but he agreed that it was a good starting place."

"Paul's a smart guy," said Chloe. Sometimes she forgot that about him. Well, she never forgot that he was smart. He was, in fact, brilliant. But his strengths were in imagining crazy schemes and coming up with outlandish yet ultimately workable ideas. Like the party for example. But she often forgot about the flip side of his gift, that Paul also had developed a keen eye for unraveling other people's crazy schemes. Of course he hadn't bothered to share his theories about Eddie with her yet. She'd have to question him on that whenever he got home. She wondered where he was now. Why hadn't he come back with Winston? She almost asked her old friend but decided against it. She didn't want to let outsiders - even friendly outsiders - know that she wasn't totally aware of everything her Crew was doing at any given moment.

Chloe unlocked the workshop, disabled the alarm and turned on the light. "She's in there," she said, pointing to the large freezer against the wall. Right next to the large portable generator that had seen a lot of use last hurricane season. "How do

you want to get her out of there?”

“Do you think she’s frozen?” asked Lily.

“I don’t know. It’s been a few hours.”

“We’ve got an oriental rug, a steamer trunk and an oversized suitcase in the RV,” said Lily. “Whichever one works best, I suppose.”

“Ok,” said Chloe. “Let’s get it done.”

They ended up using the rug, which offered the least cover but was the most flexible. They loaded Raquel into the RV like Cleopatra being delivered to Caesar. Chloe kept an eye out on all the neighbors, but never saw any curious faces in windows or passersby who gave them a second look. Just three people and a rug. Nothing to see here, move along. She thanked Winston one more time, giving him a hug and wishing him luck. He and Lily motored off in the RV. She didn’t know where they were taking the body and, at this point, she didn’t want to know.

Exhausted and stinking of old sweat, she locked up the workshop and went back inside to take a shower and maybe — just maybe — get some sleep. She checked in on Bee, who was enthralled in surveillance videos. Knowing Bee had the search for the bearded guy well in hand, she felt she could finally relax a little. At least until Paul got home.

Chapter 18

PAUL came home to find Chloe naked on their bed, lying on her stomach and snoring softly. He stood in the doorway, admiring her for a moment. God damn he loved that ass. Worries and concerns about Isaiah and Eddie and everything else faded away as he looked at her. He slipped off his shoes and socks, unbuckled his jeans and let them fall to the floor. Stripping off his shirt, he slid into bed beside her, naked. Still asleep, she unconsciously snuggled up against him as he wrapped an arm around her chest and pressed up against her backside. He softly caressed a breast as he nuzzled her short pink hair, which was still damp from the shower.

Chloe had stopped snoring when he took hold of her, and now as his fingers played with her nipple, she started to moan, no longer asleep. Paul knew from experience that no matter how tired she was, Chloe seldom resented being woken up for sex. His hand roamed down her body, over her stomach and between her thighs. She spread her legs enough to welcome his touch and pressed her ass back against his hardening cock as she enjoyed his ministrations.

Then, in one swift motion she was wide awake, twisting around to face him and kissing him hard on the mouth. They held each other close, grinding their pelvises together as their tongues darted and slid past one another. He squeezed her ass as she tweaked his nipple. She rolled him onto his back and sat astride him, lifting up and then sinking back down as she guided him into her. He sighed and she moaned as she started moving atop him. As the minutes passed and his hands fondled her breasts, she rode him faster and faster. She pushed his hands away and leaned forward to jam her tongue down his throat as she moved in a frenzy atop him. She shuddered and cried out and, a few seconds later, so did he.

Afterward, they lay beside one another, sweaty and relaxed. Chloe lay on her back, eyes closed and smiling. Paul, on his side next to her, gently stroked up and down her body, petting her just the way she liked.

“Good morning,” he said.

“It’s starting to get good,” Chloe replied.

Paul lay there and stared at her for a while, admiring her skin as his hand moved

over it. He didn't want to break this blissful moment, but there was too much going on out there that he couldn't — and more importantly, shouldn't — ignore.

"Did Winston come by?" he asked.

"Yeah. And Lily. They took care of... everything," she replied, eyes still closed. "Win said you two had breakfast?"

"I brought some muffins. They're downstairs. Cranberry almond."

"What'd you guys talk about?"

"Me and Winston, or when I met with Isaiah and Winston?"

"Either. Both."

"The meeting with Isaiah was pretty short. I told them what we'd found and what we thought happened and all that."

"I don't remember you and me talking about Eddie being our prime suspect," Chloe said in calm tones. Paul wasn't sure if she was angry or not.

"Well, I didn't think of it until I was there talking to Isaiah. It just kind of occurred to me, you know? And it seemed to fit."

"So you just threw it out there?"

"I guess I did, yeah." He knew what she was going to say next.

"You talk too much; you know that, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. I do. I know, but I needed to tell them then and there so I could get them thinking in the right direction."

"How do you know it's the right direction?" she asked, eyes still closed, voice calm.

"Well, I don't know for sure. But it makes the most sense right now. It's just a theory."

"You mean a hypothesis."

“Sure, yeah. But before you ask, I didn’t tell them we had Eddie under surveillance or that we’d set him up at the Party last night. I just mentioned that Eddie might have some friends that he was trying to bring into the corporation thingy. Or friends that were serious enough about staking a place for themselves at the table that they’d kill Raquel.”

Chloe lay there and seemed to mull this over for a few minutes. “That could be,” she said. “That could be it. Makes as much sense as anything at this point. Have you told Bee?”

“No, I came straight in here. I assume she’s up in her room.”

“She is. I got a description of someone who was in Raquel’s guest house around the time that her body might have been dumped. She’s looking for him on the videos.”

“That’s a good lead. If she finds someone, we should try and see if we ever have him and Eddie together.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” said Chloe.

“I should go tell her,” Paul said, sitting up. He was excited about the lead Chloe had found. If they could connect the killer to Eddie or his Crew...

“Not yet,” said Chloe, putting a hand on his leg. “She’s in her zone. Let her find the guy first. She knows what Eddie looks like, so if they’re in a video together, she’ll notice.”

“Ok,” said Paul, lying back down next to her. He wanted some kind of break though, anything that would help resolve this mess and get life back to normal.

“What did you and Winston talk about over breakfast.”

“Mostly about Isaiah’s plan,” said Paul. In fact, that was all they’d talked about for over an hour, bent over the table and speaking in hushed voices while Winston used a signal jamming box that was supposed to interfere with any wireless listening devices in the area.

“What did he say?” asked Chloe.

“A lot. He can really talk and talk. And talk.”

“Don’t I know it,” said Chloe with a smile. “But what was the gist of it? Does he support Isaiah’s plan or not?”

“I’m still not sure. He talked a lot about pros and cons. I don’t think he’s made up his mind one way or the other. There was a lot of concern about how Raquel’s murder might only be a sign of things to come.”

“Winston has a soft spot for signs and portents,” said Chloe. “It’s all that hippie crap.”

“Well, he had a point. Banding together with Isaiah in his shadow corporation means getting into bed with other Crews that we can’t necessarily trust or that we just plain don’t like. Take Eddie and his guys for example. Maybe they’re the killers. Maybe they’re just jerks. Either way, you’d have to have serious second thoughts about working with them on something this big.”

“Hmmm,” said Chloe.

“Hmmm what? You don’t agree?”

“The jury’s still out on Eddie as far as I’m concerned. Obviously if he’s the killer, that’s one thing. I’ll have nothing to do with him. But if he’s not...”

“Then he’s just a jerk.”

“But a charming jerk,” said Chloe, and Paul felt an unexpected twinge of jealousy. When he’d watched her flirt with him at the bar and the party, he’d known it was a con. He’d long ago tamed any qualms he had about Chloe using sex (or at least the suggestion of sex) as a tool of the trade.

“Don’t tell me you fell for his line of...”

“No, no, of course not,” said Chloe. “I didn’t fall for it. But that’s because I’m me and I know the game, and I know he’s a player. But that doesn’t mean he’s not good. And Isaiah wouldn’t have invited him here if he didn’t have some real skills and contacts.”

“So you’d be willing to sign onto Isaiah’s corporation if Eddie was involved?”

“I’m willing to consider it anyway. He reminds me of Raff when I first met him. Charming and ruthless. You gotta respect that.”

“He reminds you of Raff, and that’s good?”

“You know what I mean,” said Chloe.

“I know Raff ruined my life and nearly got us killed.”

“We’re not talking about Raff.” Anger was creeping into her voice now, and she sat up in bed. “Why’re you doing this? You know what I’m trying to say.”

“I know,” said Paul. And he did. Her point was that in their world you had to respect competence and ability, and if you could make someone with both work for you, all the better. He also knew what she meant about Eddie reminding her of Raff. He’d thought the same thing, which is probably why he’d taken such an instant dislike to the man.

“So what else was Winston worried about?” asked Chloe, changing the subject.

“He didn’t want to expose other Crews he knows to any unnecessary risks. He also doesn’t like the whole corporate metaphor angle.”

“Was there anything he did like?”

“Yeah. He sees the potential in Isaiah’s plan and he definitely agrees that the target is worth taking down. He told me that if it worked as promised that it could actually achieve a kind of revolution. Or at least a path for secret secession.”

“Secret secession?”

“A way for people to drop out of society entirely but still live within it to whatever extent they desired. If Isaiah’s right, then more and more people could move out of the public eye and into private, really actually free lives. Secede from the union without anyone knowing.”

“Which is exactly what Winston did thirty years ago,” said Chloe. “And ever since then, he’s been preaching that the ‘Revolution will come,’ but it never does.”

“And I think he realizes that,” said Paul. “Which is why he finds Isaiah’s plan interesting. It might actually achieve what he’s been trying to do for decades.”

“Or, more likely,” said Chloe, “knowing Winston, he thinks he might be able to seduce the rest of us with his own ideology and use the organization for his own goals.” Paul was surprised to hear Chloe talk about Winston’s motives in such Machiavellian terms, but looking at the smile on her face, he realized that she wasn’t expressing criticism but rather admiration for the old man’s scheming.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said.

Chloe must have detected a hint of doubt in his voice, because she asked, “You don’t think so?”

“I don’t know what to think,” said Paul. “It’s all a little crazy sounding to me, either way. I just want them to all go away.”

“And then what?” asked Chloe.

“What do you mean?”

“After they’re gone. Then what? Do you want to join Isaiah’s shadow corporation or not?”

“I don’t know. With all the uncertainty about Raquel and Eddie and...”

“I mean assuming we clear up all that shit. Assuming we catch the bad guy and Eddie goes away or whatever. Assuming it all comes out perfect. Then what?”

Paul looked away, lying on his back and staring up at the ceiling fan. He could sense that this was not a conversation he wanted to have right now, but he couldn’t see a way out of it. “I don’t know.”

“Well,” said Chloe. “It’s something we need to think about. We need to be ready to give Isaiah an answer.”

“Then shouldn’t we be talking to Sandee and Bee too?”

“We will,” said Chloe. “But right now it’s you and me I’m talking about.”

“What about you?” asked Paul. “What do you want to do?”

“I think we should join up if we get the chance.”

“Just like that?”

“Assuming everything checks out, then yeah. Just like that.”

“Why?” asked Paul. “Don’t we have everything we need here? The Keys Condos and Estates deal gives us stable housing and plenty of opportunities. The party is yielding more and more money and results every week. We’re building up a great network here. Bee says she’ll have the whole island covered within the year...”

“And that’s all great,” Chloe interrupted. “But then what? We’re still working our asses off to basically just keep our heads above water. If we’re going to grow, we’re going to make real money, then we need to look beyond this damn island. It’s too small. Everyone knows everyone else, and that’s not the best environment for con artists. And how many cameras did Bee lose in the last hurricane? Something like 50 percent? And the next storm could strip this whole island bare, and then where would we be? This fucking place is a dead end.”

“So you want to leave?” asked Paul. Chloe grumbled about the heat and the bugs and the storms, but she’d never been this explicitly negative about Key West before. Paul found that her anger didn’t really surprise him that much - he’d sensed her frustration but had chosen to ignore it.

“Not necessarily,” she said. “Not right away. But there’s no future here for us, Paul. There’s just more of the same. More of the endless party and more of the fleecing tourists and more watching everyone all the time from Bee’s little fortress of solitude. But then what?”

“What is it you want?” asked Paul. “What more do you need to do? What do you need or want that we don’t have here? We’ve got money, friends, fun. Each other. Plenty of free time to do other things...”

“What other things?”

“Well I do my art... some writing. And just planning the party is fun for me.”

“And of course your damn game,” she snapped.

Anger and frustration rose in his throat. “Let’s just leave out the game, ok?”

“Fine. We’ll forget the game. But those are all the things that make you happy. I need more. I need to move forward and accomplish things. I need...”

“You need a hobby,” he said.

“Fuck that,” she said, rolling out of bed and wheeling around on him with an accusing finger pointed at his face. “Maybe your art’s just a hobby for you now, but it used to be your passion. Well I don’t need a hobby, but I do need a fucking passion. And playing landlord and party pimp is not my fucking passion.”

“I thought I was your passion,” said Paul, hurt and confused by her onslaught. “I love you Chloe. I love you so much...”

“I love you too Paul. You know I love you so much. But that’s not enough. I need more. I need more for myself, for my own ambitions.”

Paul looked away from her. He knew she was right, of course. As far as he was concerned, life on Key West was (hurricanes and murders aside) idyllic. But he wanted Chloe to be happy too; he just didn’t know how to make that happen. She came around the bed to his side and sat back down beside him, stroking his hair.

“Remember when you suggested moving here,” she said quietly. “Remember how you said you wanted to do more socially conscious cons. More like Robin Hood or whatever?”

Paul did remember. That had been their goal at first, but playing Robin Hood was harder than it sounded (and it didn’t sound terribly easy). Like Chloe said, they spent a lot of time and energy just covering their own expenses, which were pretty high. Especially maintaining Bee’s camera network. The party only started paying for itself in the last month or so. Their free housing scam was as close as they came to being socially responsible.

“Yeah, sure” he finally said.

“Well don’t you see? Isaiah’s company thing might be a way for us to do that.

Like Winston said. Secret secession or whatever. Go after the real bad guys.”

“I do see,” said Paul. “But I’m still not convinced it’s a good idea. There are too many unknowns.”

“But if we sorted all of them out...”

“I’ll have to see then,” said Paul. “I just can’t make any promises. The whole thing is too new. Too weird. I’m not going to commit to anything now.”

She took her hand from his hair and stared in silence. “Sure,” she eventually said. “That makes sense.”

She stood up and moved over to the closet. He watched her dress in silence, wanting to say something but not quite knowing the right words or even what it was he really wanted to say. She pulled on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt that said, “I Read Your E-mail.”

“Just remember, Paul,” Chloe said. “There’s going to have to be some sort of commitment to change at some point.”

“I know,” said Paul.

“Because things can’t keep going like this. It just won’t work.”

“Ok.”

Their eyes met across the room and he saw sadness there. “I’m going to go check on Bee,” she said, and left. PAUL snapped awake at the sound of Bee’s voice from the doorway.

“Paul?” she was saying. “Paul, are you awake?” He sat up in bed and looked in bleary-eyed confusion at her. It was bright outside. Past noon maybe? How long had he slept?

“Yeah... I’m up,” he stammered through a dry mouth. “Wassup?”

“We found something. Er, someone. The guy we think.”

That woke him up. “Really?” said Paul. “Where’s Chloe?”

“She took a printout to that girl from the guest house to make sure it’s him. She should be back soon.”

Paul staggered out of bed, still bone tired despite the sleep. He pulled on his pants and dug a fresh T-shirt out of the dresser. “This is the bearded guy, right?”

“Yep. He’s bearded. Big guy too. Wrestler big. Not Hulk big, but you know, not little,” said Bee. “Big.”

“Murderer big,” Paul asked.

“You don’t have to be big to be a murderer,” said Bee, her voice dropping in volume.

Paul knew they’d suddenly strayed into sensitive territory for Bee, and he changed the subject as he pulled on his shoes. “So where is he?”

“Don’t know,” said Bee. “But I know where he was. He was at the guest house. Or, well, two blocks away from the guest house. And then he was on Duval in front of Crabby Dicks. And then he was on Duval in front of Fat Tuesday. And then he was on Duval in front of Freddie’s. And you know who else was there at Freddie’s?”

“I’m gonna guess Raquel.”

“Raquel,” Bee confirmed. “And he followed her to Truman Annex.”

“Do you have cameras in there?” Paul asked.

“Two. Floodlight cams,” said Bee. “And they both went past them both, right on their way to Ft. Zachary Taylor Park.”

“And do you have cameras there?”

“Nope, but they never came out again from the road down to the park. Or at least neither of them came back out the same way they went in.”

“Fucking A,” said Paul. Ft. Zachary Taylor park featured a cool old Civil War era fort and one of the nicer beaches on the island. Paul thought back to Raquel’s damp clothes and the sand in her room. “That could be it then,” he said.

“Chloe wants you to go with her to the park and have a look around. Assuming this is the guy from the guest house.”

“Even if it’s not the same guy, anyone who was following Raquel has got to be a suspect.”

Bee gave him a quick nod. “I’m going to go back to the video records and try to find him again. I wanna try that facial recognition thing I downloaded.”

“I thought that wasn’t working?”

“I got a new patch that might help.”

“Ok,” said Paul, as he finished pulling on his shoes. “I’m gonna get some coffee and get ready to go play Columbo on the beach.”

“Good luck,” said Bee. “And remember, Chloe said to remember someone’s probably listening in on the phones.”

“I remember,” said Paul. “No phones unless it’s an emergency.”

HE and Chloe rode to the beach in silence on her scooter, zipping through afternoon tourist traffic and paying the \$5 entrance fee to the park ranger so they could get into the park. They dismounted in the main parking lot, which was conveniently located between the fort and the beach. It was past noon now, and the lot was more than three-quarters full. It was not only a favorite spot for sunbathers and tourists seeing the fort, but for local fishermen as well.

“So,” said Paul, breaking the silence that still hung between them. “They must’ve both hopped the main fence last night.”

“Yep,” Chloe agreed.

“And aren’t there park rangers on guard here all through the night?”

“I think so,” said Chloe.

“So whatever happened, probably happened somewhere out of sight,” said Paul, looking through the sprawl of pine trees that stood between the parking lot and the beach. “It’s pretty wide open. Even at night a ranger would’ve seen

something out there.”

“Maybe,” said Chloe. “Although there’s probably only the one, and he’s got to cover the beach and the fort and the nature trail.”

“The fort doesn’t seem too likely,” said Paul. “It’s got light all over it, and maybe cameras.”

“Which means the nature trail,” said Chloe, walking back up the road toward the front entrance where the entrance to the trail was. “If he came over the fence after her, odds are that she heard him.”

“And I doubt she would’ve broken in here in the first place if she didn’t know she was being followed,” Paul added.

“So, the first entrance to the nature trail is the most obvious place for her to duck in out of sight and either hide or set an ambush.”

“Makes sense,” agreed Paul.

They walked up the paved road for a couple minutes, the hot midday sun beating down on them even though it was November. Ahead on their left Paul saw the entrance to the trail, a shaded tunnel through the trees that looked inviting and cool at this time of day, but must’ve looked foreboding at night. He and Chloe entered and started to snoop around, their eyes combing back and forth over the ground in search of some clue or another.

After fifteen minutes of searching, Chloe called out to him from a few yards off the sandy trail. “Hey, what do you make of this?” she said.

Paul came over and looked at the clear patch of dirt and leaves that Chloe was pointing to. There in the loose, gray sand, Paul could clearly make out what looked like footprints and several other depressions that he suspected might have come from someone’s knees and shins as they knelt on the ground. Nearby he noticed that someone had scooped a handful of sand from the ground.

“If we were cops, we could take plaster casts and compare them to the victim’s footprints,” said Paul.

“Yeah, but then we’d be cops, and how much would that suck?” replied Chloe.

“Besides, Winston’s probably dumped the body in the Atlantic by now, so we’ve got nothing to compare them to.”

“Still, I think we can assume that she or the killer was crouched here last night,” said Paul. “It won’t hold up in court though,” he joked.

“Yeah, but you know the Lieutenant will have our badges if we don’t make this case, so we gotta do whatever it takes,” said Chloe.

“Well then, I guess we’ll just have to falsify evidence,” said Paul. “Again.”

“It’s what we do,” Chloe agreed, which was kind of funny because it was actually true - they did a lot of falsifying of things, including evidence.

“Still,” said Paul. “Even assuming she was here, we don’t know if she was killed here or not. They could’ve gone somewhere else - he could’ve chased her back out of the park.”

“Or she could’ve chased him and run into his friends,” said Chloe. “But Bee didn’t see them come back out the front.”

“If they hopped one fence, they could hop another.”

“True,” said Chloe. “Let’s keep looking here.”

And so they did, searching for half an hour among the trees for any other sign of violence, but neither of them really knew what to look for. There were so many footprints on the trail that they couldn’t make any sense of them. There were broken branches here and there, but nothing they could say was caused by a fight. They eventually gave up.

“Man,” said Paul, wiping his brow. “This solving crime stuff is thirsty work.”

“If only we were actually solving it,” said Chloe. “But yeah, let’s go up to the beach and get some water.”

Back by the beach sat a wooden building on low stilts which housed both the public bathrooms and a snack bar run by the parks department. There was a line of six people waiting for service, and Chloe and Paul stepped in behind them.

“I assume this place is all locked up at night?” asked Paul.

“Yeah. The bathrooms too.”

“Hmmm,” said Paul. “So probably not worth checking them.”

“Well, I do need to pee,” said Chloe. “Get me an iced tea, ok?”

“Sure,” he said, and watched as she walked around the side of the building to the women’s room. He sighed. Maybe they should go on a trip when this bullshit was finished. Up to Miami or something, do some clubbing, scam some yuppies.

He felt a buzzing in his leg and pulled a disposable cell phone from his pocket. Bee had given them the burners before they left, just in case Isaiah really did have taps, traps or traces on their normal phones. There was no name on the caller ID, just a Miami area code and number.

“Hello?” he said.

“Hey,” said Bee. “I thought I gave this phone to Chloe.”

“Nope, you gave it to me. Do you need to talk to Chloe?”

“Yes! I mean no. You’re fine. I can tell you.” Bee was talking a mile a minute, her voice tense.

“What is it?”

“I found Eddie and...”

“You mean you found where Eddie’s staying?”

“Yeah. No! I found where he is right now...”

“What about the bearded guy?” Paul asked. “I thought you were looking for...”

“No! I mean yes, I was looking for him and then I saw Eddie moving and I thought I’d check on him and then I did and when I did I saw who he was talking to.” Paul only caught about half of what she said, she was talking so fast.

“Was he talking to the bearded guy?” Paul asked. “Because that would...”

“No!” Bee shouted from the other end. “He’s with Raff!”

Paul didn’t register the full meaning of what she’d said. “What was that?” he asked.

“With Raff!” she shouted. “The Raff. Our Raff. The Raff. He’s standing on the corner of Duval and Roosevelt right now and he’s talking to Eddie.”

“Fuck me...” Paul whispered, suddenly very angry and more than a little scared.

Chapter 19

“AND who is this guy again?” asked Sandee, staring down at the picture on Chloe’s PDA.

“Bad fucking news,” said Paul, and Chloe couldn’t have agreed more.

“He doesn’t look it,” said Sandee. “He’s kinda dorky, isn’t he?”

“Don’t be fooled,” Chloe responded, although Raff did in fact look pretty dorky in his tennis shoes and tube socks, pink flamingo shirt, and baseball cap. “He wants people to underestimate him.”

“It’s working,” Sandee commented.

“I need you to follow him,” said Chloe.

“Dressed like this?” Sandee replied. “It’s not the most inconspicuous outfit I own.” Sandee still wore the mini-dress and heels from the night before, although they were now wrinkled and lint-covered, no doubt from having spent the night in a pile on the floor. “Plus, if he’s hanging with that boy Eddie, then I’ll surely be recognized. Assuming he remembers anything from last night - he was pretty blitzed.”

“Fuck,” said Chloe. Sandee had a point. She looked back down at her phone as Bee emailed her another picture from the street camera. Every thirty seconds she received a new one, and for the last half hour Eddie and Raff has been standing at the counter of a juice bar, sipping on smoothies and seemingly passing the time like any other pair of tourists.

Paul, who was looking over her shoulder, said, “That’s pretty ballsy of him, standing around on the busiest street in town like that.”

“Yeah,” said Chloe. “That’s not something he’d do if he was trying to hide from us. Maybe he doesn’t even realize we live here now. I’m not sure how he could’ve figured it out in the first place. It could be a coincidence.”

“Not fucking likely,” said Paul. “Turning up here? Now? No, he’s got to know

we're here. I might've mentioned wanting to move to Key West to him at some point. Or maybe you did."

"I didn't," insisted Chloe, although she wasn't one-hundred percent sure that was true.

"Still, he knows I'm from Florida. He must have found us somehow."

"Then why is he here? And why is he with Eddie?" asked Chloe.

"Maybe he's challenging us. If Isaiah could bug us or hack our system, so could Raff, right? He's a kick-ass hacker. He could've been monitoring everything - all our video feeds. He might have even seen your and Sandee's performance with Eddie last night, and now he's making the guy an offer."

Chloe didn't like the sound of that, but she couldn't rule out Paul's scenario. It was as likely as anything. And as much as Raff had fucked her and Paul over back in California, they'd gotten back at him as well. No one had left their last encounter feeling good about things. Fuck, we need a fucking coder in our Crew, she thought. We're running around with our asses in the wind. "All that matters now is that we know he's here, and we need to find out why. We need to follow him."

"Eddie never saw the real me. I left him alone once he started drooling on himself. I can run home and change real quick," said Sandee. "Or just run down to Fast Buck Freddie's and buy a few things."

"Do that," said Paul. "And you might want to switch genders while you're at it. Eddie won't be looking for a boy."

"Only because you asked so nice," said Sandee, kissing Paul on the cheek before turning to Chloe and saying. "I'll be back in two shakes of a cat's tail."

"We'll keep out of sight," said Chloe. "As long as he's on Bee's cameras, we can watch him without him knowing we're here."

"Unless he knows about the cameras," said Paul.

"If that's the case, then we'll jump him and beat him down until he tells the truth," said Chloe.

“I like the sound of that plan. Let’s just skip ahead to that part.”

Chloe didn’t respond. She wanted to lay into Raff with a lead pipe just as much as Paul did, but she knew they needed to wait. Nevertheless, Paul’s obvious bloodlust surprised her a little. He tended to favor less direct, less confrontational approaches to problems. That was part of what made him good at living life underground - he saw weird angles most people didn’t. But now his fury was blinding him, and if she didn’t watch herself, it might blind her, too.

She used her disposable phone to call Bee again, even as another pic of Raff and Eddie downloaded onto her PDA. Bee answered on the second ring.

“I just sent you a new pic,” Bee said.

“I got it. I need to know if you have any idea where Eddie stayed last night. Might be Raff ‘s there, too.”

“I don’t think so,” said Bee. “I’ve been going back through the video trying to trace them. Eddie still has the RFID card on him - he’s wearing the same shorts, you see - and, well, he stayed somewhere near Mallory Square. Maybe at the Hyatt? Someplace like that. Raff first shows up on my cameras way down at the other end of Duval. Near, like, the Southernmost Point and all that. So I don’t think they’re, you know, together or whatever.”

“Ok,” said Chloe. “I thought it might be worth a shot. Sandee’s getting changed and he’s gonna trail Raff. Keep an eye on them and keep sending...”

“Chloe?” said Bee, her voice nervous.

“What is it, hon?” Chloe asked, although she was pretty sure what Bee was going to ask.

“Do you think he’s still mad...?”

“You mean Raff ?”

“Yeah. Do you think he’s still mad about... about what happened to his friend?”

Chloe paused for a moment, searching for words. Bee had killed Raff ‘s partner, a man whose name they didn’t even know, but who’d been working in secret

with Raff to take down Paul and, by extension, Chloe. The death had shaken Bee deep down, changed her somehow. She didn't talk about it much, but Chloe could tell that she thought about that dead man a lot. Too much in fact.

"I guess he probably is, Bee. But I don't know. Maybe they weren't even that close. Raff betrayed us, right? He probably planned to back stab that other guy too."

"Do you think so?"

"It's possible," Chloe assured her. "Raff is certainly a rat-fuck bastard, isn't he?"

Silence greeted her from the other end of the phone.

"Isn't he?" Chloe asked again.

"Yeah," said Bee. "Definitely."

"Ok then. Let's concentrate on finding out what the rat bastard fuck is up to, ok?"

"Ok," said Bee. "He's still talking with Eddie. I'll send you another pic."

"Great, keep 'em coming," Chloe said and then hung up.

"Bee freaked out about Raff?" asked Paul.

"We all are."

"Yeah," said Paul, although Chloe thought he was talking to himself as much as to her. "Freaked out is one way of putting it."

THE slim, good looking young Indian man in baggy jeans, T-shirt and sandals jogged up to their hiding place. The transformation from nightlife diva to male model surfer dude never ceased to amaze Chloe, even though she'd seen Sandee (short for Sandeep) change in person on multiple occasions.

"He still there?" asked Sandee, adjusting his shirt so it hung just so on his slim frame.

"Yep," said Chloe. "But Eddie just left, so I'm guessing that he's going to be on

the move soon.”

“I’ll saunter on over there and start following him.”

“Just be careful,” Paul reminded him.

“I know, I know. He’s terribly dangerous. Shall I keep in touch on the headset?”

“At all times,” Chloe said, handing Sandee a disposable cell phone and a wireless earpiece.

“God I hate these things,” said Sandee as he slipped the earpiece in. “Will you at least play some music for me?”

“No,” said Chloe. “But Paul will sing for you if you like.”

“Heaven forbid!” he replied in mock horror and then, to Paul, “You know I think you’re divine honey, but you cannot sing a note.”

“Never claimed I could,” said Paul. “But please, remember to be careful.”

“As long as you stop telling me to, I will,” Sandee insisted.

Chloe’s phone buzzed in her hand, and she looked down to see another pic from Bee. “Raff is on the move. Headed toward Mallory Square, it looks.”

“That’s my cue,” said Sandee, blowing Chloe a kiss as he strode off toward Duval Street.

“I hope he’s careful,” said Paul.

“He will be. And even if he’s not, there’s no way Raff can take him in a fight.”

“Not in a fair fight, no,” said Paul. “But Raff doesn’t fight fair.”

“And neither do I,” she said, patting the small of her back where her stun gun was hidden beneath her shirt.

“Come on,” said Paul. “Let’s shadow them up Simonton.”

As they headed west along Simonton parallel to Duval, Chloe listened to minute-

by-minute reports from Sandee, who was staying about a block behind Raff. The street was crowded with tourists, but Raff 's height made him easy to pick out in the crowd.

“He’s heading left toward the wreckers monument,” Sandee reported. “And now he’s looking at the tourist crap by the conch train,” he said a few minutes later. “He’s the perfect tourist.” Chloe and Paul moved over across Duval and up toward Mallory Square, not wanting to be too far from Sandee if trouble started. “Ok, now he’s buying a ticket to go into that dreadful wreckers museum place. God, I hope he’s not going in.”

“Why the fuck would he do that?” Chloe wondered aloud. The Key West Shipwreck Historeum was a tourist attraction that featured an animatronic sea captain putting the best spin possible on the fact that Key West became one of the wealthiest cities in the world in the 19th century purely based on salvaging ships that wrecked on the reefs. The show lasted about twenty minutes and offered access to an observation deck some sixty-five feet above the square, providing one of the better views in Key West. It wasn’t nearly as interesting as Paul’s favorite attraction, the much newer Pirate Experience, which was sort of the same thing, only no view and better animatronics. Chloe couldn’t imagine what Raff would need from the place.

“No, wait,” said Sandee over the phone. “He’s just going and sitting down on some of those crates now. You know, the fake ones they have out front?”

“Yeah,” said Chloe. “I know them.”

“Hey, wait a sec...” Sandee said. “He just stuck something behind one of the crates. Next to a fake barrel.”

“Could you see what it was?” asked Chloe.

“No. Might’ve been just his hand for all I can tell. Do you want me to check it out?”

“No, we’ll do it once he leaves,” she said.

“Well come on over then, sweetie, because we’re apparently on our way. He’s heading toward the Hyatt.”

“That’s where Eddie was staying,” said Paul, who was listening in on his own phone.

Chloe wasn’t sure if there was a connection there or not. It didn’t make much sense, but they didn’t really know anything yet, so it was impossible to draw any conclusions. They moved closer to the square, moving slow to make sure Raff and Sandee had plenty of time to clear the area.

The whole area around the Historeum was crowded with tourists. She scanned the crowd looking for familiar faces, but didn’t see anyone she shouldn’t have. She called Bee. “Can you check all the cameras in the area around the Historeum?”

“I already am,” said Bee. “I got nothing. I did see Raff and Sandee walk into the Hyatt complex, but you know I don’t...”

“I know,” said Chloe, cutting her off. “Keep watching.”

She turned to Paul. “Do you want to hang back and keep watch?”

“Ok,” he said, but he was distracted, looking down at his phone. “Is your phone working?” he asked.

She put hers to her ear and heard nothing. No signal. “What the fuck?” she said. Looking around she saw three or four tourists looking at their phones in frustration.

“Transmitter down?” asked Paul.

“Maybe,” she said. “Bad timing though.”

“Let’s go see what Raff left over there,” said Paul. Before Chloe could object that he’d agreed to stand watch a few seconds earlier, he was already jogging toward the Historeum. No way was she going to stay behind. She ran after him.

Paul knelt down on the fake crate and started feeling around behind it. Chloe swiveled her head back and forth, scanning the crowd as she put her phone to her ear again. Still dead.

“There’s something back here,” said Paul. “A little black box, but it’s super

glued to the barrel.”

“Here,” said Chloe, pulling out her Leatherman multipurpose tool from her pocket and handing it to Paul. “Pry it off.”

“What if it’s a bomb?” asked Paul.

“It’s not a bomb.”

“What if it is a bomb?”

“Do you think it’s a bomb?”

“No,” he admitted.

“Then pry it off.”

“Ok,” he said, as he swung open the tool’s knife blade.

She heard a snap and then Paul said, “Got it. It’s heavy.” He turned toward her and held out the small black box in his hand, about the size of an original iPod. “What do you think?”

Chloe took the box. It was indeed heavy in her hand, maybe as much as half a pound. There was a slight vibration, and she suspected that there was something electronic running inside. But there were no buttons or hinges. Just a line around the edge where it had been sealed shut. “Probably a cell phone jammer. We should get this to Bee.”

“So Bee’s here too?” said an all-too-familiar voice. Chloe and Paul both looked up to see Raff standing there, not five feet away, smiling that awful, smug smile of his. Standing over six foot five, he was lanky and lithe. He’d let his hair grow out, and it was tucked under a San Francisco Giants baseball cap. Both hands were in the pockets of his baggy beach shorts, which could easily have been concealing some kind of weapon. Chloe swung her hand behind her and pulled the stun gun from its holster at her back. She felt Paul stiffen beside her and then sink into a defensive stance that Sandee had taught him.

“Hey, Raff,” said Chloe, fighting with every fiber of her being to sound cool and calm.

“Chloe, Paul. How’re you guys?” he said. His hands were still in his pockets, non-threatening.

“I thought we had a deal,” she said. “We don’t leave you for the cops, and you don’t ever come near us again.”

“I told you a ditch was too good for him,” said Paul. “We should have...”

“Hey, hey, listen guys,” said Raff. “I had no idea you were here, ok? Honestly. No idea. I’m just here on vacation, you know?”

“Bullshit,” spat Paul. “There’s no way.”

“Why not? It’s a great town. Bars open ‘til four. Great weather...”

“Raff, I know it’s been a year, but you can’t believe we’re that dumb,” said Chloe.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Raff. “You’d be surprised what...”

Chloe cut him off, saying, “Cut it. Just cut it. This is our island, and you can’t be here.”

“I’m telling you guys, this has nothing to do with you, ok? Calm down and we can sort all this out, I’m sure. It’s a big island and I’m only here for a...”

“For about thirty more minutes,” said Paul. “Go get on a bus or in your car or on a plane. Go to Miami. Get yourself gone from this place.” Chloe hadn’t heard that much anger and intensity in his voice since they’d left California.

Raff seemed to be considering their words, taking his right hand out of his pocket to rub his chin in a gesture of mock thoughtfulness. Then he took off his hat and wiped his brow. “You see, that really doesn’t work for me,” he said. The hand with the hat in it moved down to his side. Was there a weapon in there?

“I’m right in the middle of my vacation, and I’m meeting friends, so I can’t just leave them like that.”

“We both know you’re quite good at screwing over friends without any explanation,” said Chloe.

“Cheap shot, Chloe. You know I wasn’t ever really your friend.”

“No more of this bullshit,” shouted Paul. “No more!” Chloe was surprised to see Paul lose his cool like that and shout, but then out of the corner of her eye she saw why. He was providing cover.

“Calm down, Paul,” said Raff pointing with his hat at Paul. “Jesus Christ, man. I would’ve thought life in paradise here would’ve mellowed you...”

And then Sandee was on him, leaping up onto Raff ‘s back and wrapping his legs around the tall man’s waist while pinning his arms to his side in a bear hug. “Raff sweetie!” Sandee shouted. “You came!” As far as the tourists could tell, this was merely an over-enthusiastic reunion of two old friends, but as Sandee’s heels dug into his inner thighs and Raff fell to his knees, the expression on his face said something else.

Chloe closed the gap between her and Raff and grabbed hold of his face with both hands, like she was going to kiss him. She didn’t. Instead she said, “Go away, now. My island. My rules. You leave or we take you apart.” She spat in his face.

Sandee emphasized Chloe’s point for her by digging one of his heels into Raff ‘s balls before letting him go and slipping off his back to the ground. Raff wretched onto the cement in front of him.

Chloe spun away and walked at a fast pace toward Duval Street. She thought she heard Paul kick Raff before he joined her at her side.

“Toodles,” she heard Sandee say. “Nice to meet you.”

Chapter 20

THEIR phones still weren't working, so Paul had to use a land line to contact Isaiah. On the way home, he and Chloe and Sandee stopped at the bus station to use the pay phone, leaving a message for Isaiah. The elder hacker called back in under a minute and arranged to meet with Paul in an hour. Then they headed home, with Sandee trailing behind to make sure they weren't being followed.

It took them half an hour to confirm their suspicions that Raff 's little black box was the thing that had been jamming their cell phones, and that was only because its battery ran out and it stopped vibrating. He and Chloe agreed that Raff had probably used the device to ensure that they couldn't call for help or backup when he backtracked to catch them at the Historeum - which of course meant that he knew he was being followed all along.

Paul had just enough time to use the bathroom and get a new phone from the pile of disposables that Bee had assembled and head back out to meet Isaiah, leaving the other three to follow up on the Raff situation, going through the camera logs and trying to identify who else Raff was working with and where he was staying.

The address Isaiah had given Paul turned out to be an empty house on Margaret Street - a small two bedroom Key West classic that had a "for sale" sign out front. Freshly painted with a well-groomed yard, it was probably selling for over a million bucks. Paul sincerely hoped Isaiah wasn't considering buying the place. He wanted all these fucking out-of-town crews to leave and never come back - now more than ever since they'd brought Raff back into his world.

Paul walked up the steps to the front door and knocked and heard Isaiah say, "Come in, Paul," from the other side. He glanced around for something that might hide a camera, but there were too many options to choose just one likely candidate. Or maybe there weren't any, but he wouldn't bet on it. He opened the door to find an empty living room - hardwood floors and nice natural light, marred only by the sight of Isaiah sitting in a folding chair beside a card table in the middle of the room. Paul saw a realtor's business cards and a stack of flyers describing the property on the tabletop.

"You selling houses now?" asked Paul.

“It was convenient and empty,” said Isaiah.

“And secure I hope,” said Paul, looking around for signs of Isaiah’s other Crewmembers. He thought he heard a creak from upstairs, but it might have just been the house settling.

“As secure as it can be,” said Isaiah.

“Is Winston coming?” Paul asked.

“I couldn’t get a hold of him. He’s apparently busy with other matters.”

Paul assumed Win was taking care of Raquel’s body. Or at least he hoped that was the case. “Ok, well, I’ll run him down later. But this can’t wait.”

Isaiah nodded and said nothing, indicating that Paul should proceed.

“We’ve identified Eddie’s ally. The other Crew that he’s lined up to take Raquel’s place.”

“How?”

“We spotted Eddie talking to one of them. A real bastard named Raff.”

“I haven’t heard of him,” said Isaiah said. “Where does he work out of?”

“I don’t know for sure. But he used to be part of Chloe’s Crew in San Jose. And he betrayed us. Totally fucked us, in fact. Set us up to fail, got the police involved and turned the Crew against itself. All the while hiding daggers in his smiles. He’s as dirty a fucking bastard as they come. And let’s not leave out the little fact that his partner shot Winston.”

Isaiah, who’d remained stone-faced through Paul’s tirade, frowned at this last fact, raising an eyebrow as if to say, “Really?”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine Winston’s going to be too happy about that. I’m telling you, he’s got to be the guy that killed Raquel. It fits everything we talked about.”

“Is the man who shot Winston here as well?”

“No,” said Paul, thinking of Bee.

“How can you be sure?”

“He’s dead.”

Isaiah nodded. “Then that debt at least had been repaid.”

“That’s not the point!” shouted Paul. “The point is he’s a murdering, no-good son of a bitch.”

Isaiah held up his hand, “I hear what you’re saying. And I agree, this doesn’t look good.”

“That’s an understatement. We need to do something.”

“What would you suggest?” asked Isaiah.

“We need to drive Raff and whoever he’s with out of town. We need to make sure they never come back again.”

“And you want my help with that?”

“No,” said Paul. “I’m offering you my help with that. This guy is bad news for you and for your whole shadow corporation scheme. If he gets involved - if he even finds out what it is exactly you’re planning to do, the whole thing will come crashing down around your heads, I guarantee it.”

“I hear you,” said Isaiah, although Paul could not tell if the man actually believed him. “Where is this Raff now?”

“I’m not sure. We’re tracking him though. We had an encounter with him down by Mallory Square. We think he might be in the Hyatt complex there by the water - which is where Eddie and his crew are staying by the way.”

“So he knows you are here?” said Isaiah.

“I think he must have known we were here from the beginning.”

“Why? How?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he tracked us here. Or maybe he found us through Winston. I don’t know.”

Isaiah sat still and pondered for a moment, staring out the front window. Paul wondered if he might have an earpiece in, listening to a report from Amelia or one of his other companions.

“I agree with you. We do need to isolate this Raff person and find out what he knows about Raquel’s death. Assuming what you’re telling me about him is true, he is the most likely suspect. Indeed, the only likely suspect, and we should treat him as such. Raquel deserves justice.”

“Great,” said Paul. “How do you...”

“But,” Isaiah interrupted, “We must tread carefully. We don’t yet know what his relationship with Eddie is. Indeed, it’s entirely possible that Eddie had nothing to do with the murder. And if we can avoid alienating him and his crew, we must do so.”

“Why?” asked Paul. “Why is Eddie so important that we have to tiptoe around him like this? What’s his deal?”

Isaiah paused again, this time staring at Paul instead of out the window. Paul met his gaze for as long as he could, but eventually blinked. Isaiah then said, “Eddie has important contacts in the Caribbean - ones we would be hard pressed to duplicate.”

“What? With banks in the Caymans or whatever?”

“Those too of course, but that’s not important. The banks are always eager for new money. No, Eddie has his hands in another big business down here - cruise ships.”

“Cruise ships?” asked Paul.

Isaiah nodded.

“What’s so important about cruise ships? If you need a buffet hook up, I can...”

“They go everywhere,” said Isaiah. “In and out of every major port.”

Paul understood at once. “You’re talking about smuggling.”

Another nod.

“But don’t they go through customs like everything else? And aren’t there all kinds of extra security and all that? There’s got to be easier ways to smuggle things in and out of the country.”

“Security is tight if you’re a passenger,” Isaiah agreed. “But once you’re on the inside, it gets much easier. And there’s no more comfortable way to smuggle people. If you have the right contacts in customs and pay off the right people on board, you can move people and cargo without arousing any suspicion. And the nicer the cruise ship, the more expensive the berth, the less likely you are to attract unwanted law enforcement attention. Eddie and his crew have those connections. They practically live on those cruise ships and they make payments to officials in every major and minor port in the Caribbean.”

“Ok, sure, I guess,” said Paul, who didn’t care at all about smuggling or any of that. He just wanted to get Raff out of his life ASAP. “Fine then, we’ll keep clear of Eddie, at least until we know whether or not he’s involved.”

“Agreed,” said Isaiah.

“But if he is involved...”

“If he’s involved, there will be justice for him,” said Isaiah. “Raquel was a friend.”

Paul nodded and sighed, taking a deep breath. He needed to calm down and focus on the task at hand. “So, what now?” he asked.

“What do you think?”

“Well, for starters, I’ll send you over a pic of Raff and everything else we know about him. That way you and your people can be on the lookout for him. And maybe you can check with your sources or whoever and see if you have any idea who he might be working with.”

“Any information about his former partner might help,” said Isaiah. “The man you said is dead.”

“Yeah, sure.” Paul thought of Bee and her obsession with the dead man. Maybe

if Isaiah could track down some history on him it would give her some closure.

“Of course Winston’s the one to talk to about that,” said Isaiah. “He’s much more knowledgeable about the various Crews out there.”

“I’ll get in touch with him about it, don’t worry,” said Paul. “I guess in the meantime we need to decide what to do about Raff when we find him.”

Isaiah cocked his head to one side, indicating he wasn’t sure what Paul meant.

“I mean, should we take him into custody or something?”

“We’re not the police. We’re not the military,” said Isaiah. “You may of course do as you please. This is your home, and I have not promised Raff or anyone associated with him - besides Eddie apparently - my protection. But I would advise against it.”

This assertion surprised Paul. “Why not?”

“It’s not what you do. Nor is it what we do except in the direst of circumstances. We gather information and use it to our advantage, and I find that you’re not likely to gain the kind of information you want by kidnapping people and forcibly questioning them. Besides, it’s a messy business. A messy, dangerous business that attracts cops.”

Paul didn’t know if he agreed, and Isaiah must have read his doubt on his face. “If things need to become physical, you’ll know it. But don’t be the one to escalate matters. Not until you have to,” said Isaiah.

“It might be too late for that.”

Isaiah shrugged. “The decision is yours.” He stood up and held out a hand to Paul, who shook it. “In the meantime, we’ll proceed as before. I’ll meet with Eddie again, but I won’t let him know that we’ve discovered his connection to Raff. We’ll see how he wants this situation to play out. But until we have more evidence, I won’t help you move directly against Raff.”

“All right,” said Paul. “I’ll send you the info on Raff and keep you up to date. And if you talk to Winston before I do, tell him to call in.”

“Of course,” Isaiah replied, releasing Paul’s hand. “Best of luck.”

Paul turned and headed for the door, but before he could open it Isaiah said, “I have to tell you something.” Paul turned to look back at Isaiah.

“I’ve been impressed with what I’ve seen from you so far,” he told Paul. “If you and Chloe can sort this situation with Raff and Eddie out in a tidy manner, I’d be willing to offer you a larger role in our little project.”

“Tidy?” asked Paul.

“Only two goals are important to me right now, Paul. Finding Raquel’s killer and keeping Eddie’s cruise ship network intact. Eddie’s Crew’s network, I should say. As for Raff or Eddie or any other individual, well...” he shrugged.

“Ok,” said Paul, who didn’t really care about having a bigger role in Isaiah’s shadow corporation but was very interested in fucking over Raff. “Good to know. I’ll let you know if there’s anything you can do to help achieve those two goals.”

“Please do.”

Chapter 21

CHLOE could hear Cassie before she could see her. She'd just parked her scooter at the beach lot on the south side of the island when she became aware of a sort of wailing/singing moving off key up and down the scales. Chloe turned and there she was, Cassie on her rollerblades, shouting her crazy person song as she sped along the sidewalk, waving a faded, torn American flag that was stapled to a stained and rotting length of two by four. A nearby family of fat tourists in the parking lot pointed and laughed as she zoomed toward them.

“AAAAAAAAMMMMMMMMMEEEEEEEE!!!!” she shouted as she zipped by Chloe's parking place.

“Cassie! Wait!” Chloe shouted, but the homeless girl sped right past her, leaning into a hard right turn as she skidded into the parking lot and circled back toward the tourists, holding the flag in front of her like a lance. The pasty family scattered as she bore down on them, the little boy screaming as he clutched his mother's thigh. But Cassie braked hard at the last possible moment, halting just a few feet from their car. She waved the flag back and forth in front of them and, more shouting than singing, said “GOD BLESS A-MER-I-CA!”

Then she lowered the flag and took a deep, theatrical bow, holding out her hand in expectation of a tip. The father said something in what Chloe thought might have been German. With a wary smile, he handed Cassie a couple of crumpled up bills. She saluted him, spun on her skates and started to roll at a leisurely pace back toward the road.

“Cassie!” Chloe called again. “Over here.”

The crazy girl's face lit up when she recognized Chloe, and she dropped the flag and skated over to where Chloe waited. “Chloe, Chloe, Chloe,” she said in a singsong voice. “We going to your place now? Maybe have some enchiladas?”

“Not right now Cass,” said Chloe.

“Really? I like your enchiladas.”

“Some other time,” said Chloe, who had never cooked anyone enchiladas in her

life, much less Cassie. “But I’ve got a job for you if you want.”

“I’m not taking off my clothes,” said Cassie. “Unless it’s for something artistic.”

“No, the clothes stay on if you want. Actually, I’m going to have to insist that they do.”

“You sure?” said Cassie, with a disappointment that confused Chloe.

“Yeah, I’m sure. I need you to find someone for me.”

“Oooh? Do you need a date? Because Lazlo was talking about how hot you are the other day and...”

“No, no. I need you to find a specific guy for me,” said Chloe, pulling a sheaf of papers from her shoulder bag, each with the murderer’s picture on it. “This guy here.”

“Who’s this guy?” asked Cassie as she took one of the papers.

“Just some guy,” said Chloe.

“He’s kinda mean looking,” Cassie observed.

“That’s because he’s more than kind of mean. So you need to be careful. But I have to know where he is as soon as possible.”

“ASAP!” said Cassie. “That stands for...”

“As soon as possible,” interrupted Chloe. “Exactly right.” She pulled out a disposable cell phone from the bag as well. “And I got this for you, so you can call me as soon as you find him.”

Cassie took the phone gently in both hands, holding it like it was a Faberge Egg. “For me?”

“My number’s programmed in. And if you find him, I’ll give you \$100. Cash.” Chloe could’ve afforded much more, of course, but a reward too high would make Cassie suspicious or, just as likely, make her think that she’d dreamed the whole thing up. \$100 was real enough that she could visualize it.

“That sounds real good. Then I could afford to make you enchiladas.”

“Sure thing,” said Chloe. “And tell your other friends, too. Give them pictures and tell them - and if anyone you give a pic to finds the guy, I’ll still pay you the hundred bucks.”

“And pay them a hundred bucks too?” asked Cassie.

“Of course,” said Chloe, guaranteeing that Cassie would bring in a partner, if only to get another \$100 out of Chloe.

“And if two other friends help me?” she asked, testing Chloe’s limits.

“Two is fine,” said Chloe. “But it can’t be more. But show everyone you know the picture and call me, ok? As soon as you find him, call me.”

“As soon as me and up to two friends find him.”

“Yeah. As soon as that happens.” Chloe pulled a \$10 bill from her pocket and handed it to Cassie.

“What’s this for?” she asked as she pocketed the bill.

“It’s for expenses,” said Chloe.

“You mean like gas money?”

“I guess if you had a car, you could use it for gas.”

“Beans give me gas,” Cassie pointed out as if this were one of the more profound observations she could make.

“Um... ok.”

“And boats need gas,” Cassie pointed out.

“True,” Chloe agreed. “Listen, hon. This is important, ok? So if you could...”

“That’s why I don’t like bean enchiladas,” Cassie pronounced with authority. “I’ll find Mr. Man here. And I’ll call you.”

“Thanks, sweetie,” Chloe said, giving Cassie a hug despite the smell.

“And then we’ll spend gas money,” Cassie assured her.

“If you say so.”

CHLOE left the killer’s picture with everyone she knew in town, including most of the bartenders, cabbies and pedi-cab drivers. If the fucker popped his head up in public, she’d hear about it. That was the plan anyway. With his pic all over town, it was possible that he would notice it before someone noticed him. Then, if he had any brains, he’d go into hiding and they might never find him. But Chloe and Paul had decided that their biggest advantage was their network of contacts on the island, and if they wanted to catch him soon, they needed to come out with all their guns blazing.

Back at the house, Chloe found Bee up in her room. Bee was almost always in her room these days unless she had to venture outside to install a new camera or do some maintenance work on one of the existing setups. Chloe and Paul tried to get her to come to the party once in a while, but she preferred to watch from afar. It worried her that Bee was withdrawing into herself so much, but Chloe wasn’t her mother and couldn’t make the woman get out in the sunlight.

The door to Bee’s suite was locked, and Chloe had to knock and wait five minutes while she unsealed the wire mesh tape around the door and undo the locks. When she finally let Chloe in, Chloe said, “I thought you swept the place for bugs?”

“I did,” said Bee, shuffling back to her seat in front of the monitor wall. “But with Raff in town I decided that, you know, you can’t be too careful and stuff.”

“Makes sense,” said Chloe, although she wasn’t sure that it did. She looked at the map display and saw Eddie’s name still next to the Hyatt complex. “What have you got here?”

“Well, I watched Raff ‘s movements after Sandee beat him up. He pretty much followed Eddie’s course and actually went back into the Hyatt. I haven’t seen any sign of any of them since, but that doesn’t mean much. They could’ve gone out the side or taken a cab or even a boat and I wouldn’t know.”

“But Eddie’s still there?” asked Chloe, pointing to the dot with his name.

“Well, maybe,” said Bee. “I got a reading off the RFID there near the entrance, but that was a while ago. He could’ve left by another way where I don’t have any receivers, or he could’ve taken the card out of his pocket and then I wouldn’t know. But he hasn’t shown up on any of the cameras, either.”

“So, let’s assume he’s still in there,” said Chloe. “And we can assume Raff ‘s there with him.”

“Why would Raff go in there if he just met Eddie out on the street a few hours ago?” asked Bee.

“Because he knows we were following him, but he doesn’t know how many of us there are. More to the point, he doesn’t know how fucking few of us there are. He saw me and Paul and Sandee and he heard us mention you...”

“He did?” asked Bee, a note of alarm in her voice.

“Yeah, when we were snatching that little black box thingy.”

“Oh yeah...” Bee pointed over her shoulder at the table behind her where Chloe saw that the box had been pried open and its electronic guts carefully laid out on top of a piece of newspaper. It was normally the kind of thing Bee would do in her workshop, but Chloe guessed she didn’t want to be away from her cameras. “That’s actually pretty cool. I got it opened up...”

“Great,” interrupted Chloe, not wanting to be distracted from her train of thought. “We’ll get to that in a sec...”

“Sorry...” said Bee.

“No worries. Anyway, Raff knows we’re on to him, but he doesn’t know how small our Crew is. Or at least I don’t think he does. So he’s got to assume that we have other people out there and that they’re watching him (which would be nice). So he’s not going to go back to wherever he’s staying because he doesn’t want to lead us to his other Crewmembers...”

“Do you think these are the same people he was working with in secret when we were all in San Jose? That the... detective guy was with?” asked Bee.

“Maybe,” said Chloe. “No way of telling really. But the point is, we’ve got to

assume that he's with people. Eddie as much as said that he was making a deal with another group."

"So Raff is hiding out with Eddie, in order to protect his friends."

"Exactly," Chloe concluded. "Which I can't imagine is going over very well with Eddie. He doesn't seem like the kind of fella who likes uninvited guests. Unless they're women anyway."

"I wonder what he told him?" asked Bee.

"What do you mean?"

"Raff had to have some excuse, right? Some reason for being there. Did he tell them that it was you and Paul and Sandee that attacked him? Or did he come up with some other story?"

"Hmmm, good question," Chloe mused, thinking things over for a minute. "It would depend on what their relationship was like. If they're close and have worked together before, then he probably told Eddie something closer to the truth. He'd want to turn Eddie against us. On the other hand, if it's a less trusting relationship, then he might make up a story of some sort, because Eddie wouldn't want to risk getting Winston and Isaiah angry at him by siding with an enemy of ours."

"This is getting complicated..."

"Yeah, it is, isn't it? But this part here is pretty straightforward. We need to find out where Raff and Eddie stand with each other."

"We could try and get a bug or camera into Eddie's rooms at the Hyatt," suggested Bee.

"Maybe. But we don't even know what room they're in, and I doubt it's under his name, so getting into the reservation system won't work. We'd have to get in with the maid service or something. That could take a while. And we need to act fast."

"We could maybe try and get them apart again," said Bee. "Try and get each of them alone or maybe try and make Raff go back to his other friends."

“That would be ideal,” agreed Chloe. “But I don’t see how.”

“I’d like to talk with Raff,” Bee said, her voice barely a whisper.

“So the fuck would I,” said Chloe. “All I need is a cattle prod, some duct tape and...”

“No, really,” insisted Bee. “I want to talk with him. I think maybe... I think that I...”

“What is it?” asked Chloe.

“I want to ask him about the man I killed. His friend. The detective.”

“Fake detective,” Chloe pointed out.

“The man I killed.”

“The man about to shoot us.”

“That I killed,” Bee insisted.

“What do you think he’s going to tell you?” asked Chloe.

“Who he was...” Bee replied. “I don’t even know his name. I don’t know if he had any...”

“Honey, nothing Raff tells you is going to be the truth. He’s a fucking degenerate liar. He’s either going to tell you what he thinks you want to hear to try and win you over or tell you what he thinks you don’t want to hear in order to fuck with your head.”

“I know that,” said Bee. “But there will be some truth in there.”

“Or not.”

“But that’s not the reason why,” said Bee. “I know he’s going to lie, and I know he can’t be trusted. But listen. Neither can I.”

“What?” asked Chloe. “I don’t understand.”

“He has to be as surprised as you were that I killed that guy. He has to know that it probably fucked with my head and made me crazy.”

“You’re not crazy, Bee.”

“I think that maybe I am. A little. I know I haven’t been normal.”

“If you need to talk about this...” Chloe started. “If you want to, that’s great. I mean, we totally can.” Bee had brushed off every one of Paul and Chloe’s attempts to talk with her about the shooting over the past year. She was excited that her friend was finally opening up, although the timing could have been better. “But with Raff? It’s just a dangerous...”

“That’s why I want to do it,” said Bee. “It’s going to be the last thing he expects. I can go to him. And I can say I’m on my own. That I’m going behind your back because I’m obsessed with this guy I killed. He might believe that.”

“Maybe,” said Chloe, although she doubted Raff would fall for something like that so soon after being beat up.

“Ok, even if he doesn’t believe it, I think the curiosity alone would bring him out. Or maybe the chance that I am a weak link in the Crew that he can exploit. He’ll want the chance to find out more about us.”

Chloe thought about this, staring at the bank of screens. They needed to keep the initiative, keep Raff from getting back on his feet. He’d already had a few hours to recover, and according to Paul’s call, Isaiah was unwilling to put any pressure on Eddie yet. At this point, until they heard something about the killer or Eddie made a move, Bee’s plan seemed like the only course of action that was, well, actually an action.

“Ok, let’s say I sign onto this plan of yours,” said Chloe. “How do we arrange a meeting? We don’t know how to get a hold of Raff.”

“Well, we know how to get in touch with Eddie, don’t we?”

“Yeah...”

“We just call him and ask him to hand the phone to Raff.”

“Then we’re giving away the fact that we know Raff and Eddie are together!” said Chloe, surprised. Giving away information like that went against every instinct.

“I know,” said Bee sheepishly. “But it would be simple...”

“Simple isn’t always good...” Chloe replied, but even as she was saying it, she started to suss out the full implications of Bee’s suggestion. “Although, despite my better judgment, there is a case to be made for it...”

“There is?” asked Bee, sounding surprised.

“Remember our two scenarios. Eddie and Raff are tight and therefore Raff has already told him about us. Or, they’re not so tight, and he doesn’t want them to know about us. If it’s option A, then we’re not telling him anything he doesn’t know. If it’s option B, then our call will make Eddie more suspicious of Raff. He might even get pissed at Raff for not telling him about us.”

“That’s what I was thinking!” said Bee with a smile.

“Liar,” said Chloe, giving her a playful punch in the shoulder.

“I’m just practicing for when I meet Raff,” said Bee.

“Well you need to keep practicing, cuz you suck at it.”

“Where should I ask to meet him?”

“Someplace public so he’ll feel safe, but someplace we can control a little. And someplace that we already have cameras in. Plus, someplace that will throw him off his game. Make him uncomfortable.”

“Oooh!” said Bee. “I have just the place!” She swung around in her chair and seized the mouse, clicking through her cameras. Chloe watched as scenes from a rooftop bar lit up the screens.

“You have cameras in the Garden of Eden?” asked Chloe. “When did you...?”

“They’re not mine. They’re the bar’s. I just figured out how to tap into the wireless signal on them. I think the owner or manager or someone must like to

keep an eye on the place when they're at home or something."

Chloe looked at the screen and smiled wide. "Those pervs. Who knew?" She turned to Bee. "Ok, sounds perfect. Let's make the call."

"I'll tell Raff I got Eddie's number from Paul without him knowing about it."

"He'll like that," said Chloe as she looked back to the screen. "And make sure that you insist he obey the dress code."

"Absolutely," said Bee. "That's the point, right?"

Chapter 22

AN hour later, Paul had heard from Chloe about Bee's plan. He wanted to be with them both right now, on guard against whatever Raff would inevitably try and pull when he met with Bee, but if it worked and they managed to separate Raff and Eddie, they needed to take advantage of the situation. If he could keep him from reuniting with Eddie after the meet with Bee, then Raff would have nowhere to go but back to wherever his own Crew was staying. To do that, they needed to force Eddie to abandon his hotel room and distrust Raff enough not to protect him anymore. That was the tricky part, of course, but together he and Sandee had a plan.

The Hyatt complex where they thought Eddie was staying sat right against the water at the end of Front Street, just a block from Mallory Square. It offered guests the whole package - pool, bar, restaurants, boat and jet ski rentals, sunset cruises and wireless access for their laptops through one of the big cell phone companies. If they had a skilled hacker, they might have been able to find Eddie and his crewmates by tracking their Internet usage or something like that. But they didn't.

Nor did they have any useful contacts who worked at the hotel. Sandee knew one girl who worked as a maid, but wasn't working again for another two days and couldn't help them out. Under other circumstances, they might try to simply bribe someone behind the front desk or show them a pic of Eddie and say they were looking for him. But if Eddie was being as security conscious as he should be, he probably already had one or more of the hotel employees on his temporary payroll. If Paul talked to one of them, he'd not only not find out Eddie's room, he'd be tipping his target off. So it was up to him and Sandee to find another way.

The first obvious step was to get a room for themselves in the hotel. Or that would have been the first step if the Hyatt hadn't been fully booked. Which it was. So they were going to be operating without a safe base of operations inside. The only advantage here was that, with the hotel full, there were plenty of people coming and going. Dressed in typical tourist garb, (Sandee still in what he called his "boy form," as if he had a super power that allowed him to change gender - which was not too far from the truth) they had no trouble slipping past the front desk with a larger group of actual guests.

Once inside, they split up. Paul went and found a public bathroom and ensconced himself in one of the stalls. Sandee took an RFID reader that Bee had given them from her supply. The device was destined to be surreptitiously mounted on a telephone pole or under a mail box or newspaper machines along Key West's streets, and so looked like a plain metal box with stickers that said, "Florida Power and Light" and "City of Key West" on them. Just another anonymous box of wires in an evermore wired world. Normally, Bee's devices needed to be hooked up to a power source when she placed them in her network, but it also had an internal battery that was good for a few hours in case of some sort of power outage. The machines used the city-wide wireless network to transmit information back to Bee's tracking system at the house. But with Bee not at the house, the info was then being transferred from that system to the laptop Paul was currently firing up in his stall. It would record any contact with the RFID tag that Sandee had slipped Eddie last night.

Sandee's job was to start on the first floor and walk every hall, past every room and try not to draw any unwanted attention from hotel security while doing it. It would've been faster if Paul had been helping - he'd grabbed a second RFID reader before they left the house, with just that intention. But on reflection, he realized he couldn't risk running into Eddie or one of his Crewmembers in the hall while they were going to get ice or something. But in boy form, there was no way that Eddie would recognize Sandee from the night before, so he had to do it alone.

The readers had a range from ten to twenty feet, depending on the signal strength and the kinds of materials between the tag and the reader. If Eddie had put the card inside something that blocked the radio waves, they'd have no chance of finding him. If this didn't work, then they'd have to resort to Plan B - activate the fire alarm and hope to spot Eddie's movements in all the confusion. Sandee had pointed out that Plan B was pretty awful, and Paul had to agree.

He sat in the toilet for a lot longer than he normally spent in public toilets. A surprising number of people came and went, and Paul was treated to a range of noises and smells he could've gone without experiencing. One older gentleman, who took the stall next to his, started up a rather unpleasant conversation about his own bowel movements and how they related to his eating habits. Paul pretended to not speak English, answering only in gibberish of his own devising. The man seemed to take this as a go ahead to talk in even more detail, since his audience seemed to be having trouble understanding him.

Thankfully, the man was gone when Paul's laptop screen finally flashed, indicating that Sandee had made contact. The contact then disappeared as fast as it had appeared, but the display recorded the exact time and duration of the signal. Sandee must have just walked by the door to Eddie's room. He dialed Sandee on his disposable cell phone, who picked up immediately.

"That's it," Paul said.

"Right on," replied Sandee in a whisper. "Is it reading right now?"

"No, but it did a second ago."

"Let me back up." A few seconds later the laptop flashed again, registering the contact with Eddie's card.

"There!" said Paul.

"Ok, I'm on the fourth floor. So it's either Room 412 or 413."

"They probably have more than one room booked," said Paul. "But we need to know which one Eddie's in."

"Hold on," Sandee said. "Tell me when you lose it."

Paul watched the display. Unlike the fancy map on Bee's screen at home, this was just a simple text box that said the contact name, the ID number of the reader Sandee was using and a time stamp for when the contact was made. Bee's master display had software that correlated specific readers to specific locations on a map of Key West, but since Sandee was moving the reader with him, such a map would've been useless. Not that they had a map of the inside of the Hyatt hotel anyway. As he watched, the contact ended again.

"There!" Paul said again.

"He's in 412," Sandee said.

"How do you know?"

"A little trick I thought of. I pressed myself against the wall and shielded the reader with my body. I'm right up against the wall to 413, the signal must be

coming from 412, across the hall.”

“Sounds good,” said Paul. “Now get out of there before someone notices you pressing up against walls.”

“I’m on my way.”

Glad to be done in the bathroom, Paul closed his laptop and flushed the toilet before heading out to meet Sandee in the lobby. Time for fireworks.

CHLOE wished, oh how she wished, that they had more people in their Crew. Four was not even close to enough. She’d even tried to call Winston for backup, but she couldn’t get a hold of him or Lily. In an ideal world she’d have been back at the house, monitoring the cameras and directing traffic in support of Bee while other Crewmembers were stationed in the bar and nearby in case Bee ran into trouble. But Paul and Sandee were flushing out Eddie, and Chloe wasn’t about to be across town at the house while Bee met with Raff. She didn’t think he’d try anything violent in so exposed a location, but Chloe couldn’t risk it.

Even now she was farther away than she wanted to be, sitting in the upstairs dining area of the restaurant across the street. The assistant manager there was a regular at The Party (he also dealt a little pot now and then), so he’d set Chloe up in the room, which was not in use right now. This way she was out of sight from the street and the meeting location but less than a minute away if shit started to go wrong. To be extra safe, Chloe had come in through the service entrance and avoided the main dining area and outside bar, just in case Raff had a man watching his back.

Chloe watched on the screen, which was divided into four different views of the meeting locale - all taken off the live Web feeds from the owners’ own cameras. In her ear she heard audio from the microphone hidden in the necklace around Bee’s neck. Bee was sitting in the dressing room of a clothing store two blocks away, waiting for Chloe to signal her that Raff had arrived at the meeting place. Only then would Chloe give her the all-clear to proceed and meet him.

The Garden of Eden was a rooftop bar that occupied the third level of a popular multilevel bar complex. On the ground floor was The Bull, with its live music and dance floor, while on the second floor was The Whistle, with pool tables and a wraparound balcony that overlooked Duval Street. And up top was the Garden of Eden, an open-air, clothing optional bar that allowed nude sunbathing during

the day and naked dancing with a nude DJ at night. Chloe and Paul had been a few times and it was kind of a fun, wacky place if you had enough drinks in you and didn't mind the sight of overweight, middle-aged nudists shaking their prodigious booties and not so prodigious privates in your face.

Looking at the camera feeds on her screen, Chloe saw that the Garden was about half full, with several women and men laid out on deck chairs with frozen drinks in their hands. At the bar itself most of the guests were fully clothed, sipping beer and chatting as they admired the topless bartender or ogled their naked companions. Chloe watched as Raff arrived, stepping through the door beside the bar. She couldn't hear him, but he was laughing, no doubt understanding in that moment what Bee had meant when she'd told him to "obey the dress code."

Raff looked around and, not seeing Bee, ordered himself a drink. Although the resolution on the cameras was pretty poor, Chloe could tell that Raff was trying not to be too obvious as he scanned the bar for cameras. From the slight pauses in his head movements, Chloe guessed that he'd identified at least two of them, but that didn't mean he knew she was watching. If anything it meant that he knew he was being recorded and was therefore all the less likely to pull anything too crazy once Bee got there.

It was only after Raff had stripped his clothes off and lain down on an empty deck chair that Chloe finally gave Bee the go ahead to move from her hiding place to the bar. Five minutes later she watched as Bee walked in. Over Bee's hidden mic, Chloe could hear her humming to herself with nervous energy. On the cameras she saw Raff glance toward the doorway as Bee arrived, but the tall, naked con man played it cool and reclined back in his chair, forcing Bee to come to him.

If Chloe had been in Bee's place, she would have sat down at the bar and waited for Raff to develop a nice sunburn on his bare ass before sending him a drink, but Bee wasn't Chloe. She spotted Raff and headed over to him, wiping her hands on her jeans as she did so. Chloe knew she had to be nervous. The small Asian woman stood over Raff, who lay there with his eyes closed, pretending to not notice her. She coughed once and then again, but Raff's only response was to start snoring. Raff liked his games.

But Bee didn't. She surprised Chloe almost as much as she must have surprised Raff when she "woke" him by spitting down on his face. He sat straight up at

that, wiping the saliva from his nose and cheek and sputtering, “What the fuck?”

“Hi, Raff,” said Bee, her voice coming through loud and clear over the microphone.

“Oh, hi Bee,” he replied. Chloe could hear him pretty well, although she might have problems if he didn’t talk directly toward Bee’s hidden microphone.

“Hi,” Bee repeated.

“Nice place you picked here,” Raff said as he looked around. “Nice scenery. Aren’t you going to strip down and join the party?”

“Um... no, I’m ok.”

“Are you sure?” said Raff, leaning back in his seat with his arms behind his head and spreading his legs to expose his cock and balls to Bee, who glanced down at him and quickly looked away. “It’s very freeing.”

“No...”

“Ok, no pressure. It’s a lifestyle choice. Do you want a drink?”

“No... I’m fine,” Bee said, her voice so low Chloe could barely hear it over the mic. She was starting to wonder if this venue had actually been a good idea after all. Bee appeared strangely embarrassed by Raff’s nudity, even though it had been her idea to meet at The Garden where Raff couldn’t possibly hide any weapons or recording devices. Chloe hoped she was just faking it. If the plan had been to make Raff uncomfortable, it didn’t seem to be working.

“Do you want to sit down then? I can get you a chair?”

“I’m fine. We should just start... start talking.”

“Ok, Bee. What do you want to talk about?”

“You said you were going to leave us alone. In San Jose. You promised,” said Bee.

“I swear, Bee. I had no idea you guys were going to be here. How could I?”

“Paul talked about Key West sometimes. You might have...”

“I never much listened to what Paul was babbling on and on about. I didn’t know, ok?”

“But now you’re going to leave?” asked Bee.

“Is that why Chloe sent you to talk to me? Did she think you could guilt me into leaving?”

“Chloe doesn’t know...”

“Oh, come on,” Raff interrupted. “No way you move without Chloe knowing. You don’t squeak without her permission.”

“That’s not true...”

“Fine,” said Raff. “Let’s say it’s not true. I’ll believe you when you tell me that you’re here on your own.”

“I am,” Bee insisted.

“Ok, you are. So what? So why should I leave?”

“Because you promised you would. Because you promised you’d stay out of our business forever.”

“Is that what I said?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“When was this again?” Raff asked.

“In San Jose. In that motel room...”

“Where you had me tied up? Where you threatened to give me to the cops? The room where you shot my friend in the head with your remote controlled rifle, Bee? That room?”

Bee said nothing, just nodding. Chloe was holding her breath as she watched and listened. The shooting. That was what this conversation would all come down to.

It had been eating at Bee's heart for over a year and if she could hold it together now she might actually get some closure, or whatever the fuck it is that people need in situations like this.

"That's right," Bee said. "That's when you..."

"First of all, I need to reiterate that I did not know you guys were here, so it's not like I knowingly broke my promise. It was Paul and Chloe who attacked me in the street. And second of all, in my world, promises made under threat of arrest or death just don't count for much."

"Promises don't count for much at all with you, do they?" countered Bee.

"Sometimes not, no," he admitted. "But at least I never killed anyone."

"I..." Bee started to say, but then words seem to fail her.

"You what?"

"I'm... I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"That I... I didn't mean to. I thought..."

"You didn't mean to shoot him? Then why was the gun there in the first place? Who did you mean to shoot? Me? Chloe? Paul? I can see shooting Paul actually, but why...?"

"I didn't know!" Bee said, loud enough for nearby sunbathers to hear them over the stereo system. "I just was being safe. Planning for every contingency, like you're supposed to."

"A radio controlled rifle doesn't sound too safe to me," said Raff. "It sounds a little crazy. We never used guns."

"Your friend had a gun," said Bee. "He had a gun and it was pointed right at Paul. And he shot Chloe's friend! You brought the guns into it..."

"But you didn't know that, Bee," said Raff, his voice calm and logical. "You

didn't know he'd have a gun. And yes, he shot Chloe and Paul's friend. But did they tell you the whole story? That their friend was beating me to death with a baseball bat. Owen was just saving my life, that's all."

"Owen?" Bee asked. "His name was..."

"Owen," Raff finished. "Owen Jarvis. That was his name."

Bee didn't say anything but kind of slumped to the floor, not quite fainting but apparently not entirely conscious of her own actions as she sat down in a heap next to the pile of Raff's clothing. "I wondered what his name was," she said.

"His name was Owen Jarvis," Raff intoned in all seriousness, making Chloe wonder if he was consciously mimicking Fight Club. She knew Raff loved that movie.

"Tell me about him," said Bee, looking down at her hands in her lap. Chloe could've sworn that Raff was starting to get a hard-on at the discomfort he was so obviously causing Bee.

"He was like you or me. He was smart and lived by his wits. Had done that for a long time - since before you or I were even born I think. Owen never talked a lot of specifics about his past - just lots of stories dating back to the '70s and his crazy adventures. You know how it goes."

Bee nodded that she did. Chloe noticed that Raff hadn't actually come out and said that Owen was a thief and a con artist - no doubt he was trying to make him as sympathetic sounding as possible in order to inflame Bee's guilty conscience.

"Did he have a family?"

"A teenage daughter from his first marriage. A wife who's in the life. A cousin..."

"Daughter?" asked Bee, and her voice was cracking.

"Yeah," said Raff. "They weren't close I don't think. He sent her money for college I know, but maybe not much more than that. Or maybe a lot more. You never know with people in our world, do you?"

“No, you don’t,” agreed Bee.

“It’s too bad about his wife too. Jeanie. She was pretty upset. They were kinda perfect for each other, you know? Both in this together.”

“Like Chloe and Paul,” said Bee.

“Maybe, yeah,” said Raff. “You’d know better than me about the two of them. But she was so... so shocked. That he’d been shot, you know? It’s just not what anyone expected.”

“He had a gun!” protested Bee. “He had a gun pointed at Paul and Chloe and he’d shot their friend.”

Raff laughed, although there wasn’t any humor in his voice.

“It’s not funny!” Bee shouted, and now everyone was looking at them.

Even Raff had to acknowledge they were drawing too much attention. He said something to Bee in a soft voice that Chloe couldn’t make out over the microphone, calming her down. Then, in more normal tones, he said, “I was just laughing - and I shouldn’t have been because no, it’s not funny - but when Owen found out who he’d shot. That he’d shot Winston, he was devastated. Turns out they were old friends.”

Chloe’s heart raced at Raff’s mention of Winston. Old friends? Could that be true? That her mentor and Raff’s had known each other at some point? Maybe even worked together? It didn’t seem likely. As a matter of fact, she knew that Raff was bullshitting at least a little bit. Winston had been wearing a mask when Owen shot him. And he was dead less than six hours later. There was no way he could’ve known it was Winston. She just hoped that Bee’s bullshit detector was working as well as her own.

“Really?” asked Bee.

“It’s true. Or that’s what Jeanie told me anyway. Jeanie and Owen and Winston go way back she said.”

“That’s... that’s horrible.”

“Yeah,” said Raff. “It kind of is, isn’t it?”

The two sat in awkward silence for a while. Chloe knew that Raff was letting Bee stew in her shame, hoping that she’d make some big mistake. Chloe hoped that she wouldn’t, but this particular situation was beyond her experience, and she just couldn’t predict what Bee would do next.

“Is she very sad still?” Bee finally asked.

Raff put his hand on Bee’s shoulder as he said, “I think so, yeah. But she hides it well.”

Bee looked up into Raff’s eyes. “Can you tell her I’m sorry?” she asked.

“I can...” said Raff before a dramatic pause. “Or better yet, you could tell her yourself.”

Oh shit, thought Chloe. This is it.

“We could call her? If we called her I could...”

“No, Bee. She’s here. In Key West. You could tell her in person. You could tell her to her face. Don’t you think you owe her that much?”

“No!” said Chloe, across the street in her private room. “Jesus, no, it’s a trap.” This Jeanie person may or may not exist, but there was no way Raff was going to lead Bee to her - not when he had to assume that Chloe was still watching him.

But Bee said, “Maybe... Maybe that would be good. To see her.”

“To give her some closure,” Raff interjected. “And maybe give yourself some too.”

“I’d have to think about it,” Bee said. “Chloe’s going to be expecting me to be back at the house soon.”

“Chloe can wait,” Raff said. “I can’t. I can’t risk being followed back. Not with Paul being so mad at me. Did he tell you they attacked me?”

Bee ignored this last question. “How would it work? Is she close?”

“Well,” said Raff. “I need to be careful, you know. I need to make sure you don’t have any tracking devices on you. So I’d take you to a neutral place and sweep you for bugs and then take you to Jeanie. Blindfolded of course. Then, after you two have a chance to talk, I’ll take you back here or wherever you want to be dropped off.”

“I don’t know,” said Bee. “That could take a long time. What if Paul or Chloe...”

Raff reached down into his pile of clothes and pulled out a cell phone from his shorts’ pocket. “I can call right now and set it up. It won’t take an hour for the whole thing.”

Bee thought this over, before finally saying, “Ok.”

Raff smiled. “Great, Bee. This is the right decision.” He stood up and turned his back to Bee as he dialed the phone. Chloe watched as Bee idly fingered Raff’s shorts, which were in a pile in front of her. It was hard to tell for sure with the camera’s crappy resolution, but Chloe thought it looked like Bee was crying.

With his back to Bee, Chloe couldn’t hear what Raff was saying into the phone, but when he turned around he said, “All right, you ready?”

“Sure,” said Bee. “I guess so.”

“Lemme just get dressed.” Raff quickly slid his shorts, shirt and shoes back on and then offered Bee a hand up. “Come on, we’ll get a cab downstairs.”

Chloe slammed her laptop shut, and shoved it into her shoulder bag as she raced down the stairs into the restaurant below. She came out onto the street just as Bee and Raff emerged from the front door of the Bull and Whistle. Raff saw her immediately, and a moment later so did Bee. Chloe dodged through the slow Duval Street traffic and came to a halt in front of them.

“What the fuck kind of stupid shit are you doing?” Chloe said to Bee.

“I was...” Bee stammered, as Chloe grabbed her arm.

“What’s wrong Chloe?” asked Raff. “We were just catching some sun.”

“Shut up, shitbag,” Chloe spat at him. “Stay the fuck away from her.”

Raff didn't try to stop Chloe as she dragged Bee back across the street except to say, “She's not your mother, Bee. You can still do the right thing here.”

“Fuck off, Raff. Next time I see you, you're dead,” Chloe shouted without looking over her shoulder. She heard him laughing as she flagged down a cab and stuffed Bee into it.

“Are you ok, Bee?” Chloe asked.

Bee nodded, wiping a tear from her eye. Chloe hugged her close. “It's ok, sweetie. It's ok. Don't worry about it. Everything's going to be ok.” And maybe, thought Chloe, just maybe, it actually would be.

Chapter 23

PAUL didn't even own a tie until he became a con man. As an artist and then videogame designer, there'd never been a need for much in the way of formal wear. And when occasion called for dressing up, a button-down shirt and maybe a sports coat were usually all he'd ever needed. But once he and Chloe had arrived in Key West, he'd soon found that a tie could be a necessary evil. In the ultra-casual Key West culture, wearing a tie was a sure sign that you were either a stuffy-ass businessman or some kind of government official, and any simple article of clothing that could make people jump to such immediate conclusions about you was a valuable tool.

Wearing a crisp, white shirt, dark blue tie with deep red stripes, and navy slacks with loafers, Paul marched with officious determination into the lobby of the Hyatt and straight to the front desk, cutting in front of three people who were standing in line. He heaved his briefcase up onto the counter and popped it open saying, "I need to speak with a manager right away."

"Excuse me?" said the handsome, tan young man behind the counter in a light Spanish accent.

Paul flipped out a business card from inside the case, presenting it to the receptionist as if it were a badge. "Mike O'Conner, Verizon Wireless Security Services Department," Paul said, which was exactly what it read on the business card. He also had an ID to match it in his wallet, both made by Bee several months earlier as a cover for him to help set up the camera and RFID network. "I need to speak to your manager about a computer security issue," he said.

"All right," the man said. "Please hold on a moment." He picked up his phone and dialed a number, turning his back to Paul as he spoke into the phone in a low whisper. Then, to Paul he said, "She'll be right out. If you could wait over there?" he asked, pointing to a nearby potted plant.

"Thank you," he said, and moved over to his assigned location, which was too near the elevators for Paul's comfort. The worst thing that could happen right now would be for Eddie to come down that elevator, followed in close second by Raff walking in the front door. Two tense minutes passed before he saw an attractive, middle-aged woman with dyed blonde hair come out from the back

room. The receptionist pointed her toward Paul, and she came over, a wary smile on her face.

“Can I help you, sir?” the woman asked.

Paul held out his hand and read her name off the tag on her blouse. “Mike O’Conner, Verizon Wireless Security Services Department. You’re Ms. Jawolski?”

“I am,” she said as she shook his hand. “The assistant manager.” She seemed surprised that Paul knew her name. People tended to forget they were wearing name tags, especially since few people actually paid much attention to them.

“Great,” said Paul, “Just the person I need to see.”

“What’s this about?”

“We’ve been tracking a series of network security breaches over the last twenty-four hours. There’s been a rash of virus and hacker attacks on area networks and local ISP’s and we’ve been doing our darnedest to sort it all out.” Paul looked around the lobby. “Is there somewhere we can sit for just a moment? How about over there?” He pointed to some chairs and a coffee table that were out of line of sight from the elevator.

“Of course,” the manager said, playing the perfect hostess and ushering him to a seat. As soon as he sat down, Paul opened the briefcase again, producing a stack of papers covered in complicated graphs and spreadsheets with columns like “Transfer Rates” and “Unknown Server Contacts” and even more technical terms like “TCP/IP.” They were meaningless of course, but he was betting she didn’t know that. Hell, if Paul didn’t know they were fake, he wouldn’t have been able to tell himself.

“As you see here,” said Paul, “There’s been a great deal of unusual activity in the area. And we’ve had several reports of unauthorized access to some very secure networks near here. You haven’t had any problems with your wireless network here at the Hyatt have you?”

“No,” said the woman, scanning the papers as Paul handed them to her, trying to make some sense of them. “As far as I know, we’ve had no complaints.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Paul said. “We have reason to believe that the attacks are originating from your network here.”

“One of our guests?” she asked, real concern in her voice.

“That’s a possibility, of course,” said Paul. “But we think it’s an outside hacker who’s hijacked your network for his own purposes. An all too common occurrence I’m afraid.”

“Do we need to shut it down? Are our computers ok?” she asked. “I should get our IT guy down here.”

“Your own internal network should be still secure. But we do have a list of room numbers where the hacker has used open access points for his own purposes, and any computer users in those rooms might have had their personal systems compromised, so you should probably warn them.” Paul handed her a sheet of paper with twenty room numbers on it, including the one they’d identified as Eddie’s.

“Ok,” she said, looking up and down the list. “You know security is Verizon’s responsibility. We’re only...”

“Don’t worry about liability,” Paul interrupted. “You’re absolutely right. This is Verizon’s problem and our liability issue, but we’d like your help nipping this little bit of trouble in the bud.”

“Of course. What can I do to help?”

“Using some pretty advanced tracing techniques, we’ve managed to develop a suspect.” He reached into his briefcase one final time, and drew forth a stack of thirty pages, each with Raff’s picture on it. “He’s a lone hacker and con man who’s been spotted in the area by law enforcement. We believe he’s responsible. If you could show these one-sheets to your employees and the guests in those rooms on the list, we might have a good shot at catching him.”

The manager took the sheaf of what could only be described as wanted posters. They had “SECURITY WARNING” printed in large bold letters across the top, right above the picture of Raff they’d captured from Bee’s video. Below it said, “Wanted for questioning involving computer security fraud, bank fraud and trespassing.” There was also a number (one of the Crew’s burner phones) to call

if he was spotted.

“All right,” the woman said, “I’ll pass these around and post them in our security area.”

“Please make sure the guests I’ve indicated see them as well,” said Paul. “This suspect is a known confidence man, and he’s approached targets in person in the past.”

“Of course,” the manager agreed.

Paul stuffed his fake evidence spreadsheets back in the briefcase and stood up. “On behalf of Verizon, thank you very much for your kind assistance,” he said, shaking her hand again. “And remember, never give out your password or security codes to anyone over the phone or via e-mail.”

“I never do,” said the woman.

“Excellent,” said Paul. “Well, I’ve got to head across the street. Lots of fires to put out today.”

“Good luck,” said the woman as she walked Paul to the front door.

“Thank you,” he replied. “And we’ll be sure to let you know when we’ve caught him.” With that he was out the door, headed back to his rendezvous with Sandee at the observation post. A little luck and Eddie would now feel that Raff had too much heat on him to let him hide out in his hotel room any longer. Then Raff would have no choice but to rejoin his Crew.

The observation post was two blocks away on Caroline Street in an empty timeshare they helped manage through Keys Condos and Estates. While Paul had been inside the hotel, Sandee had planted cameras covering all the entrances into the Hyatt, except the water side. But odds were Raff wouldn’t be coming in by boat. They’d set up two laptops in the apartment’s dining room, where Sandee sat with his feet propped up on the table, watching the screens. They could’ve monitored all of this from the house, of course, but if they needed to try and follow Raff, assuming Eddie did kick him out, then they’d need to be close at hand to track him. Paul had a wig, hat and sunglasses in a bag by the door for a disguise when he had to follow Raff. He knew he should put the costume on now to be ready, but he didn’t relish the idea of wearing the scratchy wig longer

than he had to.

Sandee, always prepared, had brought a cooler with fruit and Tupperware containers full of his famous brown rice salad. He didn't keep that figure of his without constant attention to diet and exercise. Paul, no lover of brown rice, had learned to actually kind of like the stuff, at least when there wasn't anything else around.

"How'd it go?" Sandee asked.

"Great," said Paul. "With every employee in the hotel looking for Raff, there's no way that Eddie can let him stay there. And if they aren't on real strong terms, he might well be pissed off enough to distrust Raff completely."

"And now we wait?" said Sandee.

"Now we wait," agreed Paul, opening a bowl of rice and digging in as he watched tourists stream by on the two laptop screens set up in front of them.

"I wanted to apologize," said Sandee, his voice even and pleasant as always. "I must not be very good at the spy thing."

"What do you mean?" asked Paul.

"I assume this Raff boy must have spotted me following him. I think I'm more cut out for the role of femme fatale than gumshoe."

"Don't worry about it," said Paul. "Raff 's been doing this a long time."

"Oh, I'm not too terribly worried," said Sandee. "I've nary a doubt that you and Chloe can handle him."

"What on earth makes you think that?" Paul asked with a smile. "We haven't been paragons of competence lately."

"You're kidding, right?" asked Sandee.

"No. I mean, yes. Yes I think we can handle Raff, but I also thing we've been running around like chickens with our heads cut off."

“And here I was wondering how the pair of you got so good at this,” mused Sandee. “You’re saying I shouldn’t be impressed?”

“You’re saying you are?” asked Paul, although now he was smiling with a bit of pride at Sandee’s kind words.

“This might be old hat to you and Chloe and Bee, but I’ll tell you cowboy, this is way beyond my life experience - and I’ve experienced me some life.”

“You’ve been with us for nine months now,” Paul said. “You’ve done all kinds of cons with us. The party of course. The real estate stuff. That s♦ance thing. The scavenger hunt.”

“Oh, those little things?” Sandee said with a wise smile. “That was just theater. Putting on a show. Everything was planned down to a tee, and all I had to do was get into girl form and play my part. I never thought of those as anything other than a game.”

“That’s supposed to be the point. We do this because it’s supposed to be fun. This crap,” Paul said as he waved a hand toward the laptops, “this is the scary bullshit part. The part where people get hurt or end up in jail or worse. And where you can’t plan every step down to a tee because you’ve only got five minutes to come up with what you’re going to do next. I hate it.”

“It’s amazing then that you’re so good at it,” said Sandee, giving him a reassuring pat on the knee. “You managed to find Eddie and put together the hacker alert story in just a couple hours. And then all the stuff with that dead body... I don’t know how you keep your cool.”

“I had a good teacher,” said Paul.

“Chloe? She is pretty amazing, isn’t she? And I’ve never seen her as driven and focused as she has been since we got the word Winston was coming to town. She’s been a bit of a madwoman in an endearing, obsessive compulsive kind of way.”

“You noticed that too?”

“It was hard to miss; we do all live in the same house.”

“Yeah, she’s definitely got her game face on for this whole clusterfuck. I think she secretly thrives on this seat-of-your-pants shit. And I’ll admit, the adrenaline rush of pulling off an improvised con like in the hotel back there gave me a pretty great high. Almost as good as sex.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” said Sandee with a wink.

“I said almost,” Paul pointed out.

“Speaking of which, how is the sex with you two?” Sandee asked. From anyone else it would’ve been an odd or presumptuous question. But Sandee was not only a dear friend and Crewmember, he’d also been teaching them some tantric sex basic positions and exercises.

“When we have time, it’s amazing,” said Paul. “But the sex has never been the problem. It’s everything else.”

“I have heard some shouting,”

“We’re having a hard time...” Paul started, then stopped as he searched for the right words. “It’s hard, you know. Living together. It’s hard work. And it’s not like our chosen lifestyle lends itself to a low stress environment, despite all the parties. This living a life of crime thing can be hard work too.”

“Maybe you should talk more,” Sandee said. “Air out your differences.”

“Talking more isn’t the solution,” said Paul. “We talk plenty and air out pretty much everything. The problem’s a little more unsolvable than that. Fact is, we want different things out of life and, well, those things are kind of incompatible.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I love it here,” said Paul. “Current events aside, for me this is all just about perfect. Warm weather and parties and fun-filled scams, good drugs and great friends and free Internet access. Total freedom to do as we please.”

“Amen, brother,” Sandee said. “Sounds like paradise to me. So what’s the problem?”

“Well, for you and me it’s paradise - or it would be if there was a decent comic

book store - but for Chloe, not so much. She's starting to feel penned-in here. It's too small for her."

"See, I love that it's so small but so alive and fun at the same time," said Sandee. "I mean, I've visited Miami and New York, but I keep coming back here."

"And I keep hoping Chloe will come to see it that way too," said Paul. "But I don't know if that's ever going to happen."

"It'll happen," said Sandee. "Key West gets to you. You just need to give it some time. And just because I love you kids, we could skip ahead in our lessons straight to the hour long orgasms. If that doesn't make her want to stay, nothing will."

Paul laughed. "Finally! That's why we signed up with you in the first place, you know."

"We've all got to crawl before we walk," Sandee chided with a smile.

They settled into a comfortable silence then, eating brown rice salad and watching the tourists waddle around on the laptop screens. Paul closed his eyes for a moment just to rest them. Just for a few seconds...

Chapter 24

CHLOE worked the door's lock as quietly as possible, turning the knob with a slow, steady hand. She crept inside, the carpeting muffling her footsteps as she slid along the wall toward the living room. As she popped around the corner, she discovered all her stealth was for naught. There sat Sandee, smiling and waving at her while Paul was snoring in his seat in front of two laptops. She smiled and put a finger to her lips. Sandee nodded in response. Chloe moved up behind Paul, positioned her fingers just so on either side of his ribs and then started to tickle her boyfriend mercilessly.

"Ahhh!" shouted Paul as he jumped up from his seat while Sandee and Chloe descended into giggle fits. "What the fuck...?" he said, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

Still laughing, Chloe gave Paul a hug and kissed him, which calmed them both down a bit. She kissed him again and then one more time just because she could. It was good to see him.

"Hey, babe," she said.

"Hey yourself," he replied, his hands around her waist. "How'd it go with Bee?"

"She's pretty shaken up," said Chloe. "Raff was... well, Raff was Raff. He knew all the right things to say to push her buttons. It was hard for me to watch. I can't imagine how tough it was for her."

"He gave her shit for killing that PI fuck?" asked Paul.

"It's practically all they talked about. And then he tried to get her to come with him to some secret meeting with the guy's wife or some bullshit. That's when I pulled her out."

"She wasn't going to go, was she?" asked Sandee from his seat.

"I don't think so," Chloe replied. "She said she was just playing along, and maybe she was. She did manage to slip an RFID tag into the inseam of his shorts though, so mission accomplished there."

“Where’s Raff now?” asked Paul.

“Bee’s been tracking him by the tag and the cameras for the last half hour. He’s just been wandering around Duval and slowly working his way back toward the Hyatt. Probably trying to shake the tail he assumes we put on him.” Chloe glanced at the two laptops. “How’re things here?”

“Great!” said Sandee, with an enthusiasm Chloe found kind of cute. “Paul was awesome in the hotel.”

“We’ll see,” said Paul. “We have no way of knowing if Eddie bought our little ruse.”

Chloe sat down in Paul’s seat and leaned close to the laptop on the left. She recognized one of the people on the screen. It was Marco, Eddie’s right-hand man whom she’d met at the bar when she tempted Eddie to the party. “How long has this guy been standing here?” she asked, pointing to a man leaning against the wall outside the hotel, reading a paper and smoking a cigarette

“Oh shit...” said Paul. “That’s Marco.”

“He’s been there about ten, fifteen minutes,” Sandee said. “Just sitting there smoking and reading and catching some rays I guess.”

“From there he can cover the main entrances to the hotel,” said Paul. “He might be standing watch for Raff.”

“I guess we’ll see,” said Chloe. She saw the empty containers of food and the cooler next to Sandee’s chair. “Is there any food left?”

“Of course,” said Sandee, reaching into the cooler. “Would you like some mango?”

The three of them only had to wait another twenty minutes before Bee called to let them know that Raff was approaching the hotel. And sure enough, a cab pulled up in front of the entrance and out stepped Raff, scanning the street around him. Marco had seen him too, and they locked eyes. Some unseen signal passed between them and, instead of going into the Hyatt, Raff came over to Marco and bummed a cigarette off him.

The two men talked for a few moments, and Chloe watched their body language closely. She'd worked with Raff for two years and knew a lot about his quirks and tells. Unfortunately the camera she was watching didn't have the resolution to give her a good look at his eyes, but even from his body language she could tell he was frustrated and maybe indignant. Marco remained calm and relaxed throughout the brief conversation, and in the end Raff seemed resigned to his fate. He shook Marco's hand and then walked away from the Hyatt, headed up Simonton.

"That's right, fucker," said Paul. "You got no home now."

"Ok," said Chloe, dialing Bee's number even as she talked to the other two. "Let's get going. Sandee, you take Whitehead Street. Paul, get on your wig and stuff and take Duval. I'll go along Elizabeth. That way, whichever way he goes we can..." She heard Bee answer the phone on her end. "Bee, he just got rebuffed at the... yeah, of course you were watching, sorry. Anyway, you play director and tell us where to go. We're going to track him down."

Two minutes later they were out the door, earpieces in and phones conferenced together, with Bee giving them directions. Between the RFID readers and cameras, it was easy for the three of them to stay at least three blocks away from Raff at all times and still keep him boxed in between them. He took a circuitous route through the city, working his way deeper into Old Town as he did so. The cameras and readers were fewer and farther between here, but so were his options - no stores or restaurants to duck into, just houses and guesthouses.

It took them an hour, but even Raff had his limits, and in the end he led them right to his secret location - a house at the corner of Leon and Duncan just a half-block down from Bayview Park. It was a newer place, built in the past couple years, probably on top of the ruins of some place that hadn't survived hurricane season. From down the street, Sandee reported by phone as he watched Raff enter the house. Chloe and Paul moved in closer, and together the three of them watched the place for another hour. As it got dark and the street lights came on inside, they all agreed - this had to be where Raff and his Crew were staying. The question now was, what were they going to do with that information?

"WE need to see if Raquel's murderer is in there with them," said Chloe. "He's got to be hiding somewhere, and if he's in there then we know Raff is behind this whole thing. Isaiah and the others will have to act."

They were stationed in a car parked three blocks away from Raff 's house. They'd moved their wireless cameras so they covered the front and rear of the house (or rather, the front of the house that sat to the rear of Raff 's house) as well as two more cameras at each end of the street. All were on batteries since they didn't have time to tap into a power source. That meant they only had a few more hours until they had to replace them, but every time they went near Raff 's place, the odds improved that Raff or someone else would spot them. So far they'd seen signs of movement in the house, but the blinds were shut, and they had no idea who or how many people are inside.

"We could just knock on the door," said Sandee from the backseat of the old Honda Civic. "Ask to look around - tell them who we're looking for."

"They'd never let us in," said Chloe. "Why would they? And then we'd have tipped our hand."

"It's not totally crazy," Sandee countered. "We just lay it all out - that we know who killed Raquel and that they're working with Eddie and that if they're harboring the killer, then they're in a whole lot of trouble. And if they don't let us search that house, we assume they're hiding him. Plus I'd like to see them try and stop me."

Chloe shook her head. "No, too dangerous," she said. No one respected Sandee's ability to kick some ass more than she did, but his kung fu didn't make him bulletproof and they had no idea how many of them there were inside.

"Then we need to get some way in there," said Paul, speaking up for the first time in quite a while. He'd been deep in one of his private brainstorm modes, and Chloe knew better than to try and drag him out of it before he was ready. "Someone not tied to us and someone they won't hurt."

"You mean like the cops?" Chloe said, joking. The last thing they wanted was cops involved.

"I was thinking more like the pirates," Paul said, staring out the window at nothing in particular.

"I thought we were the pirates," said Chloe, not understanding what the hell Paul was talking about. "Or did you mean Isaiah? I thought he told you..."

“No, no,” said Paul, coming out of his reverie. He turned to face Chloe and Sandee. “The other pirates. The Booty Hunt.”

Sandee laughed, but Chloe was not amused. “The bar crawl people?” she asked. “What good would they do us?”

“It’s what, 7:00?” said Paul, looking at the clock in the bottom right corner of the computer in his lap. “They start at 8:00, I think.”

“Yeah, that sounds right,” Sandee said.

“So we’ve got an hour. Plenty of time to call Bernie and get hooked up with the organizer. What’s his name? Hugh something?”

“Hubert Vandenburg,” Sandee said.

“Right. Hubert. He buys from Bernie and he’s been to the party at least once.”

“Twice,” said Sandee.

“Twice. So we got some pull. We can ask him to change the map.”

“And what does that get us?” Chloe asked, still not quite sure how a barhopping bunch of tourists could help them.

“We make this house,” said Paul, jamming his finger at the screen. “The fucking X that marks the spot on the map. The end of the line.”

“Right on!” shouted Sandee from the back. “And so they storm the place! Swords in hand!”

“You’re kidding,” said Chloe. “Is that what...?”

“At the end of the Booty Hunt, that’s what they do,” said Paul, excited now.

“They go from bar to bar, drinking and work their way around town with their paper swords and hats. And they get a stamp at each place to put on their maps, and then, when they’ve got all the stamps they meet together at the final place. The treasure trove or whatever they call it, and they make a big show of shouting ‘arrgh!’ and shit like that and then charge in. Usually it’s a bar or sometimes a strip club. Places pay Hubert extra to be the last on the list, because everyone’s

usually drunk and spending money like crazy. But sometimes it ends up at a private party or something like that.”

“We were thinking of driving them all to the party one night,” Sandee interjected. “You know, bring in some one-timers and see what kind of fun we could have with them.”

“Well,” said Chloe, thinking. “It is a crazy idea...”

“But...” Paul replied, urging her on.

“But it might work. A bunch of drunken tourists showing up in their yard. Raff ‘s not going to shoot them, but he won’t want the attention either. And it’s not like he’s going to call the cops. Not if he’s hiding a killer in there. We might flush them out or at least get a view of who’s in there.”

“Great,” said Paul. “I’ll call Bernie...”

“Another but,” Chloe interrupted. “And this is a big one. We can’t wait four or five hours for them to get their drunk on and make their way to the end of the map. It’s too long. Who knows what will happen between now and then.”

“Yeah...” said Paul. “That is a problem. But we could... maybe we could...” his voice drifted off.

“Could what?” Chloe prompted.

“I’m thinking that maybe... I mean why not. If we pay off this Hubert guy enough, then why not? We could reverse the map. Have them start at the end, with the ‘attack.’ We just need to make it worth his while. I mean, what does he care?”

“That could do it,” agreed Chloe. “How much are we talking here?”

“I’m not sure...”

“I know I could convince Hubert to go for five grand,” Sandee said. “Especially if Bernie’s there to help me out.”

“Ok, I love it, and it’s damn certain that Raff won’t be expecting it,” Chloe said.

“I’ll call Bee and have her make up a map. Sandee, you call Bernie and then track down Hubert. Then swing by the house, pick up the money and the maps and maybe change into girl form for the occasion. You should stick with the Booty Hunt crowd and make sure they’re riled up for the occasion.”

“Will do,” said Sandee, opening the car door. “And you two are going to stay and watch the house?”

“That’s the plan,” said Chloe.

“Ok,” said Sandee with a devilish grin, “But try and keep your eyes on the screens, ok? I haven’t taught you two my patented Shiva and Shakti in the Backseat of a Civic, Reversed position yet.”

“We’ll be good,” Chloe assured him.

“I don’t want you to be good!” Sandee insisted. “I just want you to keep your eyes on the screens while you fuck.” He exited the car, closing the door behind him before Chloe or Paul could respond.

She looked over at Paul, who was laughing to himself. They both smiled at one another, but then all of a sudden Chloe felt embarrassed and looked away. She certainly wanted to fuck Paul - but not right now. Not with all this other crap going on. They’d find the time later. Out of the corner of her eye she saw that Paul had turned his attention back to his laptop. He must feel the same way, she thought, focusing on the job at hand. Time enough for love later.

CHLOE had needed a breath of fresh air. Two hours of sitting in the Civic not talking to Paul had finally become too oppressive. There was this tension between them, and she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was. It was like he blamed her somehow for Raff being here, as if it were all her fault. Not that he said that, of course. Or anything like that, really. But somehow every time he mentioned Winston or Isaiah or Raff, it was with this deep-seated venom, and she couldn’t help but think that he might be feeling the same way about her. The sad part was that he probably didn’t even know he was doing it. He was just scared. And so was she, so at least they had that in common.

On the plus side, she’d finally gotten a hold of Winston. He’d told her that he’d taken care of the body (although not in so many words over a cell phone), and that he was heading back into Key West. Chloe guessed that he’d taken the body

up the road to dispose of it, maybe as far as the Everglades, over three hours away. He'd certainly been gone long enough to make it there and back. He'd promised to call again as soon as he and Lily got settled back in town.

It was 10:00 now. Bee and Sandee had both checked in and everything was going according to plan. Hubert had cost \$6,500, not \$5k, but he'd agreed to use their revised map. Sandee had called from Busted Bill's, the bar where the Booty Hunt always began, to say that the "pirates" were heading out. Thanks to Key West's liberal open container laws, she expected to see the crowd of pirate-hat wearing bar hoppers meandering down the street with plastic cups of rum punch and paper cutlasses in their hands any minute now.

She heard them before she saw them, an out of synch, boisterous chorus singing, "Fifteen men on a dead man's chest! Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum!" over and over again. Their vanguard rounded the corner, led by what looked like a woman with long, curly black hair tucked under a flamboyant pirate hat. The leader's trim figure was packed into skintight black pants, knee high, spike-heeled boots and a tight fitting red corset modeled after an old-fashioned captain's coat, with gold buttons and fringe. It was Sandee of course, who had apparently decided to personally take charge of the assault in his Captain Morgana costume. Chloe wished he hadn't done that; it was too conspicuous by far, but Sandee was never good at being demure.

Chloe backed into the shadows of a nearby tree, out of sight from the advancing mob of booty seekers. She counted them as they walked by her position, headed for Raff 's house. There had to be fifty of them! Fuck, this could either go really right or really fucking wrong. The crowd was mostly middle aged and probably all tourists, an even mix of men and women. Several passing cars honked their appreciation, and the gang cheered "ARRRR!" in return, as they'd been taught.

Once they'd passed, she jogged back to the car to watch on the video and let Paul knew what was up.

"They're coming," she told him as she got inside.

"I heard," said Paul, not looking up from his screen.

"There's like, fifty of them," Chloe said.

"Christ, really?"

“Yeah. It’s gonna be something.”

“We’re recording on all these and Bee’s using her facial recognition software back in her room. We’ve got the house covered, so if the killer so much as sticks his head out a window to see what all the fuss is about, we’ll get a match. Then we can go to Isaiah and bring the hammer down on Raff.”

Chloe just nodded. She knew all that already, but she knew Paul liked to go over things up until the last second, just to make sure everyone knew exactly what the play was - a habit she’d taught him.

“Here we go,” he said to the screen in front of him.

And there they were - four dozen would-be pirates, looking for the treasure of booze and gift certificates from local merchants that usually waited for them at the end of these Booty Hunts. Under Sandee’s direction they lined up in the street before Raff ‘s house and on the count of three shouted “ARRRRRRR!” with such volume that Chloe could hear it through the open car window three blocks away.

“That’ll wake ‘em up,” said Paul.

“Yeah,” agreed Chloe. Had this really been such a good idea? Too late to wonder now.

She watched on the screen as Sandee raised her paper sword in the air, shouted something to the assembled “pirates” and then brought the weapon down in an arcing chop. Everyone in the crowd tipped their cups back, finishing off whatever liquor they had left with them. Then Sandee raised the sword again, pointed it toward the house, swung the blade and set them loose. The gang charged the front door with another cry of “ARRRRRR!”

A middle-aged woman Chloe didn’t recognize opened the door just as the first of the pirates reached the front porch. She might have intended to yell at them about all the noise or maybe just see what the fuck was going on. But her timing couldn’t have been worse. Not expecting the strangers who were obviously tourists to come in without asking, she opened the door wide and thus had just enough time to step back out of sight as the crowd came swarming in past her.

“Fuck,” said Paul, under his breath.

Chloe nodded as she leaned close to his screen (hers showed the back view, which was still quiet). She saw Sandee pulling something out from inside his jacket, but couldn't make out what it was. The crowd of pirates had now bunched up at the door, pushing against those who'd made it through the bottleneck. Sandee, mystery item in hand, wormed his way up through the crowd, out of sight and into the house.

They watched for a couple of long minutes as the crowd outside just sort of milled around. Apparently the house was as full as it was going to get. It wasn't a big place to begin with, and having seen the inside of more old Key West houses than she wanted to admit, Chloe knew the downstairs living space couldn't be more than six or seven hundred square feet. They had to be shoulder to shoulder in there. She couldn't even imagine what Raff and his Crew were thinking.

"I wonder if they'll break down and call the cops," Paul said.

"Maybe," said Chloe. "At least they've got to be threatening to at this point. What else can they do?"

"Violence," Paul suggested. "Although with that many drunks in their house, that's more likely to backfire than not. Maybe they'll... oh shit. What's that?" Paul said, pointing to the screen.

Between the low-light vision and the crappy resolution, it was hard to tell what Paul was pointing at. Something near the front window. And then there was more of it. Smoke. "Oh shit," said Chloe. "There's a fire."

"Or someone set off a smoke bomb," Paul suggested. "Or maybe teargas? That would clear everyone out."

Chloe thought about Sandee and hoped that her friend hadn't been that crazy. The flow of pirates into the house, having stalled, now reversed itself in a flash, and they came pouring out the front door again. Chloe saw movement on her screen as well and looked down to see Sandee come sprinting through the side yard of the house behind Raff 's, a maniacal grin on his face. Sandee being Sandee, he leaped up into the branches of a tree, clambering up onto the roof of the house whose yard he'd just run through. A moment later, Chloe saw why. Raff burst from the shadows and ran into the street before skidding to a halt and looking both ways for some sign of the female pirate he'd been pursuing a

second earlier. Chloe had to laugh as she saw Sandee peeking over the edge of the roof, looking down at the flustered Raff, who finally chose a direction and ran out of the camera's field of vision.

On Paul's screen, the chaos continued. The pirates had seemed to clear out, although they were laughing rather than screaming in panic. Chloe suspected that Sandee might well have warned them in advance about his plan to light off the smoke bomb, so they wouldn't freak out. At least she hoped he'd been smart enough to do that. Smoke was coming out the door, both front windows and even from one of the upstairs ones. Everyone inside had no choice but to bug out. And while Raff had spotted Sandee and chased her out the back, at least two of the mystery Crew's members had used the front door.

The woman who'd let the pirates in came out first, her face covered with a dishtowel as she emerged from the door, but as soon as she was clear, she revealed her face directly to the hidden camera. She looked to be in her mid-40s, with shoulder length dark hair. She was lean with harsh features, but still very striking. There wasn't a hint of panic in her movements as she swept her gaze back and forth over the crowd of laughing pirates. When another, younger woman came out of the house, coughing and stumbling down the stairs, the older woman caught her hand and steadied the young one's nerves. This second girl was in her 20s with Latin features and curly dark hair. Both women were dressed in casual shorts and Tshirts. No doubt they'd been lounging around the house, expecting a quiet night in when the attack began.

"That's got to be them," said Paul. "I wonder if that older woman is the Jeanie person that Raff was talking about. Owen's wife or whatever."

"I still think Raff made all that shit up just to fuck with Bee's head," said Chloe. "But I don't doubt she's the one who Raff was going to have play 'Jeanie' in whatever mindfuck he had planned for her."

"The young one looks familiar," said Paul. "Where have I seen her before?"

"Yeah?" asked Chloe, looking close. "I don't recognize her. Where do you think...?"

"Not from Key West," said Paul. "From California, I think. I think she was in the car when Raff and his crew were chasing us. Outside the storage place where my money was."

“Really?” said Chloe, who hadn’t gotten a look at the woman back then. “Then this really must be Raff ‘s Crew from back then. Motherfucker.”

They watched as the two women whispered just a few words to one another, coming to a joint decision. The crowd around them was starting to grow restless, looking for some direction about where to find those drinks they’d been promised. With Sandee nowhere in sight, they had no one to lead them, and some of them were getting angry. Raff ‘s comrades might have sensed this, or maybe the attention itself was too much. Either way, they decided to bug out. They split up and both calmly walked away from the crowd in front of their house. The younger woman left first, with Jeanie following behind about a minute later, going the same direction.

“They’re going in tandem,” said Chloe. “They’ll probably keep a good separation between them as they walk, occasionally switching leads. It’ll make it damn hard to follow them without being spotted.” These were not amateurs they were dealing with.

“We have their faces now,” said Paul. “Bee can watch for them on the cameras. They’re not the important ones anyway. There’s still one more in there.”

Chloe knew Paul meant the killer. “He might have slipped out the back with Raff,” she suggested. “Could be hiding in the back yard or something.”

“We’ll see,” said Paul.

They kept watching as, inevitably, the police showed up. By this point the smoke bombs had fizzled out, and while the air was a bit hazy around the house, it was clear that the place wasn’t actually on fire. The cops waded into the crowd, ordering them to disperse and made their way inside. They were inside long enough to search through the whole place. The cops spent another half hour there, mostly inside. It must have been a confusing scene, like the Marie Celeste, a house whose tenants had disappeared. The crowd gave up after only about ten minutes and made their way back toward Duval Street, where they knew for sure they could find more drinks. Eventually even the cops gave up, probably because they had more important things to do. They closed up the house, leaving a ticket or citation of some sort stuck to the front door.

Once they’d gone, Sandee finally made his way down from the roof and back to the car. He’d stripped off his Captain Morgana costume and wore just spandex

biker shorts and a tank top. He slipped into the back of the car, saying, “Right on! How cool was that, huh?”

“Pretty fucking cool,” said Paul, twisting around in his seat.

“You might’ve mentioned the smoke bomb thing,” Chloe chided.

“That was just a bit of last minute improvisation,” Sandee said with a smile.

“One of the pirates had them with him for some reason. Some frat boy. I pinched his butt a couple times and he handed them right over.”

“Did you see the killer come out the back?” asked Paul. “Did you get a...”

“No one but Raff came out the back,” said Sandee. “I had a perfect perch up there on the roof. There were only the three of them in there. The cops searched the whole place. No killer on the premises.”

“Fuck,” said Chloe. “They must’ve moved him.”

“They probably moved him as soon as Raff spotted us,” said Paul. “Or as soon as we got him booted out of Eddie’s hotel. We were stupid to think they’d keep him here.”

“I know,” said Chloe, frustrated. “But where the hell else are they going to stash him? We should have picked him up on one of the cameras by now if they were moving him around town.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Paul. “But now that we have two more faces to search with, Bee should be able to track their movements as well. If we find any shot of either Raff or these two others with the killer at any point in the last few days, we’ll have the proof we need to get Isaiah off his ass and involved.”

“Ok,” said Chloe, still not entirely pleased with how things had gone. She’d wanted firm proof of Raff’s involvement with the killer. “Well, let’s get rolling.” She started the car. “Head back to the ranch and see if Bee needs any help.”

“And we should call Winston,” Paul said. “Show him the pic of the person we think is Jeanie. If he really does know her...”

“He doesn’t,” said Chloe. “That’s just Raff fucking with us.”

“Then Winston denying it will help calm Bee’s nerves,” said Paul.

“You’re right. Besides, at this point, we could use the backup. And maybe the old man will actually have some idea of what we should do next.”

Chapter 25

IT was getting close to midnight, and down on Duval Street, Key West was jumping. Paul watched the night life unfold on Bee's wall of computer monitors and for a moment got lost in the flow of tourists across the screens, wishing he could join them and just forget about murders and conspiracies and everything else.

"I think this is her, right?" asked Bee, clicking her control screen and putting up a single image on the main flat panel display that she usually used for the city map. It showed the older woman, "Jeanie," walking down Catherine Street, looking as calm and nonchalant as one could imagine. The time code at the bottom of the screen said the image was only ten minutes old.

"That's her," agreed Paul.

"Ok," Bee said. "I'll track her by hand now."

The facial recognition software had found the woman within the records of all the footage the cameras had taken in over the last hour, but the search itself had taken over twenty minutes to process. If they had more advanced software, they could probably figure out a way to track her automatically, but they didn't. All they could do is run the search again, which would take another twenty minutes. Instead, Bee would have to go through the various camera feeds herself, guessing which ones might have picked up Jeanie on her route through the city. Just another reason they needed a hacker in the Crew. At least Chloe was downstairs and couldn't point it out to him for the hundredth time.

"Can you print me out that screen grab?" asked Paul.

"It'd be faster to e-mail it to your PDA or laptop," Bee replied. She hated paper.

"That's fine," said Paul. "Go ahead and send it to Chloe's machine too."

Bee swiveled in her chair to face a different keyboard and mouse, clicked and tapped for a few seconds and then swung back around to her camera controls. "Done," she said.

“Thanks, Bee,” said Paul. He started to head downstairs but stopped and turned back to her. She seemed intense, which was normal for Bee, but also terse, which really wasn’t. “You doing ok?” he asked.

“Mmm hmm,” she said, nodding without looking away from the screens in front of her.

“Chloe said that things with Raff got pretty intense.”

“He’s a liar,” Bee said. “I know that. That’s why we’re going to nail him for helping to kill that woman.” Paul wasn’t convinced that she believed her own words, but he couldn’t argue with her sentiment.

“Damn straight,” said Paul. “We’ll get ‘em all.” Bee didn’t respond, and Paul gave up trying to cheer her up and headed downstairs.

There, to his surprise, he found Chloe and Winston, sitting on the couch, laughing. Paul found it hard to imagine what could be so funny, but was glad at least someone could keep a light heart at a time like this.

“Hey, kids,” said Paul, who was actually younger than either of them - Chloe by one year and Winston by at least twenty-five. “Got something for you.” They both looked up at him, still smiling at whatever had set them chuckling in the first place.

“Hello again, Paul,” Winston said, standing up and shaking his hand. “I hear you’ve had a busy day.”

“And night,” Paul replied. “I’ll bet yours hasn’t been any less eventful.”

“No, no,” Winston agreed. “It is a time for courage and resolve to be sure.”

Paul turned to Chloe, gesturing to her laptop, which was on the coffee table. “Bee just sent you something. We found Jeanie.”

“Oh, great,” said Chloe, leaning forward and tapping the shift key to wake the computer from its sleep mode. “Ok, here it is.” She clicked a few times then picked up the laptop and turned it around, showing the display to Paul and Winston. It had a full screen video-cap of the image of Jeanie Paul had just seen up in Bee’s room. “Win, do you recognize this lady?”

Winston took a pair of reading glasses out of his front shirt pocket, put them on and then peered close at the image. “No, I don’t recognize her. You say her name’s Jeanie?” he said.

“Raff ‘s the one who said her name was Jeanie,” Chloe said. “I think he was spinning bullshit for Bee and me, knowing I was listening in. But whoever she is, she’s working with Raff.”

“Raff also said she was partnered with a man named Owen,” said Paul, who’d listened to the recording of the conversation. “He claimed that you and Owen were old friends.”

“Do we have a picture of him too?” asked Winston. “The name doesn’t ring any particular bells.”

“We don’t anymore,” said Chloe. “Raff says Owen is the man who shot you back in San Jose.”

“Really?” said Winston, “That’s rather intriguing. I never did see that man’s face. And you think he’s here now?”

Paul and Chloe looked at each other. They’d never told anyone about Bee shooting the man in the motel room in San Jose. They’d all agreed that the fewer people who knew they’d killed a man, the better. The only reason Sandee knew was because Bee had told him herself - he was very easy to talk to. But since Paul had told Isaiah, it only made sense to tell Winston too. Paul gave the slightest shrug, which Chloe responded to with something that was almost a nod. Through their own unspoken sign language, they’d just agree to let Winston in on the big secret.

“No,” said Chloe. “He’s dead.”

“Recently departed?” asked Winston.

“No, he died about a year ago,” Chloe responded.

Winston just nodded. He could probably put together the rest of the story for himself without having to ask any awkward questions. “Well then, if what Raff has said is true and Jeanie really was this Owen person’s partner, then she’s probably quite upset with you. But Raff has already lied about Owen and I

knowing each other, so of course there's no reason to believe that he's telling the truth about her either."

"Agreed," said Chloe.

"Maybe," countered Paul. "There was another, younger woman with Jeanie tonight. Someone I recognized from San Jose as being with Raff."

"Someone you think you might have recognized," Chloe pointed out.

"Ok, fine," Paul said, annoyed but also knowing that she was right. "I'm not by any means one hundred percent sure. My point is that we know Raff 's lying, but we also know he's probably telling some truth with his lies. We can't make any assumptions about what's true and what's not."

"Of course," said Winston. "The question is what to do now?"

"Bee's trying to track her back through our records," said Paul. "Then she's going to search for any time where she and our killer, or Raff and our killer might have met. If we find that, we can bring it to Isaiah and then get his help."

"That does seem the best course," Winston said. "Although you must be careful dealing with Isaiah."

"We're trying to be careful dealing with everyone," Paul said.

"Naturally, but with Isaiah you must take special care. He certainly has more than enough resources to resolve this situation one way or another, once he decides how to act. More than enough resources. You just need to be very certain he applies his power on your behalf."

Paul already had his own fears about dealing with Isaiah. Now, hearing Winston talk about him in hushed, worrisome tones, his blood ran cold.

"I don't see that we have much of a choice," said Chloe. "We don't have the strength to take on Raff and company straight on. Especially not if he's got Eddie supporting him. But everyone seems to respect and fear Isaiah, so we have to get him on our side."

"And I'm sure we will," Winston said, his voice warming with hope. "There is

another summit tomorrow. Isaiah, Eddie, myself and of course you are all invited. I wouldn't be surprised if Eddie brought along Raff or this Jeanie person as well. Or at least had them waiting in the wings. Ideally, we should try and find some resolution by then. Then being noon tomorrow at the AME church."

"We're meeting in a church?" asked Paul, surprised.

"Isaiah's choice. He assures me it will be totally secure."

"Seems weird to me," Chloe said.

"It's just another display of power," Winston explained. "Churches of all kinds are meant to inspire awe and devotion in the congregants. Isaiah wants to inspire those very same feelings in us."

"Not very subtle," Paul pointed out.

"He's not trying to be. When he's being subtle, you won't even know he's there."

"Yeah," said Paul, remembering how Isaiah had contacted him online through the game. "I know what you mean."

"We should concentrate on Raff for right now," said Chloe, bringing up a map of Key West on her laptop and motioning for Paul and Winston to sit down on either side of her on the couch. "We'll divide up the city based on what Bee has found and try and be within striking distance if Raff or Jeanie meets with the killer."

For the next fifteen minutes they went over the map, taking into account updates about Jeanie's position that Bee was emailing them from upstairs. They'd replaced the batteries on the two cameras covering Raff's house and had placed another one on Sandee's rooftop perch. If Raff or Jeanie or anyone else came back to the house in the next four hours, they'd see them. After that, they'd have to change the batteries again. Sandee was out looking after The Party, which always required attention from either him or Paul each night. Winston said that Lily was back at the house they'd gotten him, but that she was ready and willing to help as needed.

Then Chloe's phone rang, and she looked surprised when she saw the caller ID. "Hello, Cassie?" she said as she answered the call. A second later she looked

really surprised. “You’re sure... huh-huh... yeah, I’ve got your... right now? Can you...? Right, where are you? Sure, but why don’t I just pay you all the money and you can pay the others, ok? Great. Now where...? Yeah, I know it. I’ll be right there... no... yes... I’ll be right there.”

“That was Cassie?” said Paul.

“She’s found the killer,” said Chloe, jumping up from her seat.

“Where? What?” asked Paul. He couldn’t believe it. All their high-tech gadgetry and it was the crazy homeless girl who’d found him. “Are you sure?”

“No, I’m not sure,” said Chloe. “It’s Cassie we’re talking about, and she is crazy after all. But she says she found him. I’m going to run over and meet her now, and she’s going to show me.”

“Do you want us to come along?” asked Paul, standing up as well.

“No, no. I’ll call you if it pans out. I’d like you and Winston to stay here if you could, keep working on the Raff end of things. See if you can track his ass down.”

“I should go get Lily...” Winston started to say.

“Call her and have her come here,” Chloe said. “We should all be together and ready to go if Cassie turns out to be right or if Bee finds something.”

“Are you sure...?” Winston tried again, but Chloe was on a roll and talked right over him.

“And gear up with some weapons. Check the batteries in the tasers and get some cuffs and maybe, I don’t know, see if Bee still has any chloroform. If we really have found the bastard, I want to be able to take him down without anyone getting hurt.” She’d scooped up her keys and her stun gun from the table by the door.

“We’ll have one hell of an offering to give pastor Isaiah at the church tomorrow,” Chloe said, and then she was out the door.

Chapter 26

“HEY, Cassie,” Chloe said in a loud voice, struggling to be heard over the band that was blaring Credence Clearwater Revival covers from the stage at Schooner’s Wharf Bar and Grille behind her. Cassie, wearing nothing but a pair of stained khaki shorts and a faded blue sports bra, was grooving to the band from her place on the docks (out of the glaring bouncer’s jurisdiction). She wheeled around with a dramatic flourish and took Chloe’s hand in hers, trying to draw Chloe into her dance.

“Hi!” she said, “Isn’t this band great?”

“No, not really,” Chloe said with a smile, swaying a bit in the hips in spite of herself. “Are you ready to take me to my guy?”

“Am I!” Cassie shouted, spinning away from Chloe and waving her arms in the air. “Ready when you are!”

“I’m actually ready right now,” said Chloe.

“Really?” said Cassie, pausing midspin. “Are you sure?” Then she was spinning again.

Then Chloe understood. Cassie may be crazy. But then again, maybe she wasn’t. Maybe it was just her shtick. But even if she was nuts, she was also homeless and wise in the ways of scrounging. Chloe pulled out the wad of bills she’d brought and held it out to Cassie, who plucked it from her hand as she spun. The money disappeared into Cassie’s sports bra.

“Let’s go!” she said, taking Chloe’s hand once more and pulling her at a run along the dock.

“You said he’s out on Christmas Tree Island?” asked Chloe as they ran.

“Yep!”

“So we need a boat. I’ve got a friend who could...”

“Here!” said Cassie, stopping all of a sudden and bracing herself against Chloe,

who collided into her. They were standing in front of a beat-up and patched gray Zodiac with an equally junky looking outboard engine attached to it.

“Whose boat is that?” Chloe asked. They were in a section of the docks where people could rent small boat slips for \$30 a month. Most were used by folks who lived out on their sailboats full time and wanted a reliable parking space when they came ashore. But Chloe knew that at least some of them belonged to homeless people who lived out on one of the nearby islands and maybe made a few extra bucks fishing.

“It belongs to a friend of mine,” said Cassie as she clambered down onto the boat. Chloe noticed about an inch of stagnant water sitting in the bottom of the craft and wondered if it was rain water or from a leak. She couldn’t quite remember when it had last rained. Four days ago? Six? “Come on, we’ve got to go!”

“Ok, ok,” Chloe said. Cassie gave her a hand down into the boat, and her shoes were instantly soaked. So too was the rest of her as Cassie untied the boat from the dock, started up the engine and hit full reverse, jolting Chloe off her seat and down into the briny puddle. It was definitely salt water. She clung to the side as Cassie ignored the posted “No Wake” signs and roared out of the marina and into the channel, headed for Christmas Tree Island.

Key West is surrounded by several smaller keys, two of which form a kind of natural harbor for the island city. Low lying, and covered with windswept pine trees, the festively named Christmas Tree Island is one of these. The other nearby island was once known as Tank Island because the Navy used to have a fuel depot there. It had since been bought by developers and converted from diesel depot to ultra-expensive condos and renamed Sunset Key. The contrast between the two couldn’t have been greater. With its multimillion-dollar residence, state-of-the-art amenities and private ferry service, Sunset Key was the most exclusive address around. With its lack of fresh water, let alone real shelter, the homeless enclave that was Christmas Tree Island was at the exact opposite end of the spectrum. But in a small town already overflowing with the indigent, the local authorities were perfectly content to let the homeless have the place, knowing that at least it kept them out of sight.

Since the island was only about a quarter-mile away, the trip took only a few minutes, especially at the speed Cassie was going. Chloe was afraid that she was

going to run them straight up onto the shore, but at the last second Cassie swerved the boat hard to port, sending a wave of spray into the pine trees and stalling out the engine. This may or may not have been her plan, but the crazy girl went with it, jumping over the side into waist deep water and starting to pull the craft up onto the small spit of beach. Already soaked, Chloe decided to get out and help her. They got the boat halfway onto the island before Cassie gave up and then tied the rope from the bow around the trunk of a nearby tree.

Chloe took a moment to look at the island around her, but there wasn't much to see. It was dark and quiet. Over the surf and wind she heard what might have been voices but what could have just been crowd noise carrying over from some loud bar across the water. She turned to Cassie and whispered, "Which way?"

Cassie put a finger to her lips and, louder than Chloe had just whispered, said "SHHHHHH!" Then she started forward into the trees, and Chloe followed close behind. They crept through the dark, their footfalls muffled by the carpet of pine needles that covered the sandy ground. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Chloe realized that they were far from alone on the island. She picked out huddled forms sleeping under moldy blankets and pine needles. At least she hoped they were sleeping. To her right she saw two figures leaning against a tree, one bent over, the other behind, his hips moving back and forth in an unmistakable motion.

A sudden splash and hiss from off to her left forced Chloe to bite back a startled cry. They'd just come upon a fat, stinking man who was pissing like a racehorse against a tree. He hadn't noticed them, or if he had he didn't seem to care. Cassie held her nose between two fingers and led them away from the urinating man. The man belched as they moved by.

Up ahead, Chloe saw a faint glow through the trees and heard soft voices over the wind. Cassie stopped behind a tree and motioned for Chloe to come up along side her. She pointed through the trees to what might charitably be called a clearing, although really it was more of an area where the trees were a little thinner, mostly because two of them had been cut down at some point in the past. She saw about a dozen figures huddled around a fire pit that was dug deep into the sand. A length of chain link fence supported on rusted iron rebars covered the pit, providing a surface for those around to fire to cook cans of soup and hotdogs on.

From her hidden spot in the shadows, Chloe scanned the homeless men and women, looking for the killer's face among them. At first she just saw a crowd of dirty, disheveled bums, but then she looked past the surface and started taking in details. See with your eyes, not your prejudices, Chloe told herself. Most of the men had beards, but none of them looked like her killer. But of course if this guy was as good as she feared he was, shaving the beard would've been the first thing he did once Eddie or Raff or whoever warned him that there was a hunt on for him. Assuming, of course, that it had been a real beard in the first place.

There were only three beardless men by the fire, one of whom had his back to Chloe. She decided to circle around the perimeter to get a better view. Cassie tried to stop her, but she shrugged the crazy woman's hand off her shoulder and moved into the shadows. As she moved, she noticed that the fireside conversation had stopped, and all she could hear was the crackling flames and the occasional scrape of metal on metal as someone spooned soup out of a can.

She froze in her tracks as some unspoken signal passed between the group and they all stood up. One of them took a stick out of the fire, its end a red hot coal. They were all looking in her general direction, although she didn't think they'd spotted her precise location yet. She pulled her stun gun from its holster at the base of her spine and wondered if it would still work after being soaked in seawater. She wondered what they would do to her if they caught her here. She still had some money in her pocket - about fifty bucks. Maybe she could buy them off.

Assessing the threat in front of her, it took her a second to move her focus beyond the fire-tipped club and the empty wine bottles that others had gripped in their hands like clubs. But when she did, she realized that the one person still sitting by the fire was the killer. He was eating a can of corn, his face covered in uneven stubble and his hair a dirty, greasy mess. But he still wore that same blue shirt, and his hands were cleaner than they should have been if he actually spent much time on this island. He wasn't homeless - he was just dressing the part.

She needed to get the others out here. Indeed, she should've had Winston get his boat ready for the occasion, assuming it was still nearby. But she hadn't really believed that Cassie had found the guy and, well, now it might be too late. She started to retreat away from the fire, hoping that she could find her way back to the boat.

“Hey guys!” shouted Cassie, bursting out of the dark and into the circle of firelight. “What’s shakin’ bacon?”

Chloe saw a visible wave of relief sweep through the crowd. “Jesus, Cass,” said the man with the firebrand. “What’re you doing sneakin’ around like that?”

Cassie dropped into a low crouch, holding her hands out like they were pistols. “I’m a two-gun commando!” she said. “Blam! Blam!” The men and women laughed and moved back to their seats.

“We thought ya might be that sick creeper guy come back,” said a woman.

“Me? Sick? Creeper? Guy?” replied Cassie. “No way! I’m hot creeper chick!”

“You wanna drink?” someone else asked.

“Do fish fuck in water?” Cassie said, plopping down in the dirt next to the man and taking a swig off his wine bottle.

Chloe ignored the conversation for a moment as she pulled out her phone and got set to send Paul a text message. Problem. While the stun gun may or may not have survived the salt water, her cell phone certainly had not. It was dead, the battery probably fried. She should’ve thought to bring along a plastic baggie for the damn thing. Stupid. She wondered if the phone she’d given Cassie still worked.

Then a new voice cut through the night, low and commanding and not slurred by drink or mental defect. Chloe looked up and wasn’t surprised at all to see it was the killer talking. “You got a boat?” he asked Cassie.

“I walk on water,” she replied. “Skate over the waves like a mongoose.”

The man ignored her ravings. “Think you can give me a ride back to the island?”

“Do I look like a taxi to you?” Cassie said. “Besides, I just got here. My feet are tired.”

“I’ve got money,” he said, pulling out a bill from his pocket.

“Oooh!” said Cassie, pulling out a bill of her own. “Me too!”

“I got a boat, fella,” said one of the others. “Gotta good engine too. I’ll take your money.”

“Lemme finish my corn and we’ll go,” the killer said, digging into the can with his spoon.

Chloe wondered just who the hell this guy was. How had he gotten to the island if he didn’t have a boat? Why was he leaving now? She needed to follow him once he got back to the island, but there was no way she and Cassie could tail him on the open water without being noticed.

Cassie, who had to be less crazy than she seemed, must have been thinking the same thing. “Oooh!” she shouted. “We can race!”

“Don’t want no race,” said the killer. “Just need a lift.”

“A race! A race!” Cassie said, leaping to her feet, bottle in hand. “I finish my drink. You finish your corn! Gimme five minutes and we race!”

“Don’t want no race,” the killer insisted.

“I win, I pay you twenty bucks. You win I pay you fifty!” Cassie said to the other boat owner. Chloe reflected that the nice thing about being crazy is that no one thought twice when you said something insane. She just hoped she could find her way back to the boat in five minutes.

“You gotta deal,” the boat owner said.

“No race,” the killer repeated through a mouth full of canned corn.

“She’s gonna pay me twenty just for losing,” the man explained to the killer. “I been losin’ the last three years and ne’er got paid for it. It’ll be a slow race, don’t you worry.”

The killer must’ve known that any attempt to convince his ride not to take easy money would raise suspicion he didn’t need, so he just grunted and let the matter drop.

“A race! A race! A race!” Cassie sang, delighted. “In five minutes we RACE!”

She wasn't subtle, thought Chloe, but she gets the job done. She turned away from the fire and tried to find her way back to the boat. She caught a whiff of urine on the wind and thought that might be the right direction. Stun gun ready, she picked her way through the trees. She passed the couple who'd been fucking, now lying in each others arms in the sand at the base of the tree. It was a surprisingly sweet sight. She tiptoed past them and found the water. She waded through ankle-deep surf the last hundred feet to the boat.

She didn't know where the other guy kept his boat. It could be hidden in the trees twenty feet away for all she knew. So, just to be safe, she climbed into the boat and lay down in the water inside, out of sight from anyone who might pass by. It stank of mildew and rot and was ice cold. On a normal night she would be out on Duval somewhere right now, looking for marks or maybe at the party with Paul and Sandee. Someplace comfortable with good drinks and great pot. She tried to comfort herself with thoughts of getting back to those pleasures soon, but was surprised to realize that she felt more alive now than she had in months. "Fuck," she thought as cold saltwater seeped through her shorts, "this is not the glamorous life, but I do love it."

The truth was that nothing about life in Key West had been very glamorous or exciting. Ok, sometimes the party could be more than a little awesome, especially when Sandee was on his A-Game. But it was hard work scratching out a geek grifter's life here. She and Paul had both agreed that flat-out robbery and theft and even extortion were not the business they wanted to be in. Nor did they want to steal from anyone who couldn't afford it. They were supposed to be Robin Hood (or at least that's what they told themselves so they could sleep at night). All fine and good. But that didn't leave a whole lot of opportunity. And with even Miami a good three-hour drive away (if there was no traffic), it wasn't like they could branch out to other cities very easily.

There'd been talk of getting a condo up in South Beach and splitting their time between the two cities, but the truth was, they didn't have the capital or manpower to expand. The four of them were running themselves ragged just to keep up with expenses here. Those fucking cameras of Bee's cost a fortune, even when they were stolen. Maybe this plan of Isaiah's would open things up for them. She sure hoped so. She needed something. 206 Geek Mafia: Mile Zero

It was more like fifteen minutes before Cassie showed up. Chloe didn't hear her untie the boat. All of a sudden it was moving and Cassie was laughing and they

were out in the water. The engine roared to life and the race was on.

“Hey!” shouted Cassie over the engine. “Did I wake you?”

“No,” Chloe said, laughing. “Good call on the race. Thanks for covering for me like that.”

“I can tell a hawk from a handsaw,” Cassie replied.

“Really? I’m not sure I can,” Chloe responded from her prone position. “So where are they?”

“Coming around the island now. Keep your head down. Your friend is looking right at us.” Cassie gave the other boat a big wave with her whole arm.

“READY? SET! GO!!!!” she shouted.

But instead of pouring on the acceleration, Cassie just eased the engine a bit, and they puttered along. “The other guys aren’t really racing,” she reported. “Or maybe they are. Porky’s boat has a really small motor.”

The other boat must’ve been slow, because it took them five times as long to get back to shore as the outbound trip. “They’re not going into the marina,” Cassie said in a low voice between shouts at the other boat in which she urged them to go even slower. “They’re headed for Simonton Beach.”

“Crap,” said Sandee. “Are you sure?”

“I think so. We’re almost there.”

Simonton Beach was a tiny public piece of beachfront property sandwiched between two hotels, one of which was unfortunately Eddie’s place, the Hyatt. It made sense as a landing place if the killer was going to check in with his bosses. But there was just a single cement pier there, and it would be impossible for Chloe to disembark without being noticed.

“Hey, does your phone work?” Chloe asked.

“I don’t have a phone,” Cassie replied, her tone implying that Chloe had just said the most ridiculous thing imaginable.

“I gave you a phone. You called me on it.”

“That’s your phone,” Cassie pointed out.

“Ok, but does it work?”

“Sure!”

“Can I have it?” Chloe asked.

“Sure!” said Cassie, but she wasn’t making any move to hand it over.

“Can I have it now?”

“I hid it on the land. I didn’t want it to get wet.”

“Good thinking,” Chloe said with a sigh. “Ok, well, give up this slow boat race crap and speed me around to Mallory Square. I’ll jump off and then run over before they make land. I’ll pick up his trail there.”

“Ok!” The engine roared to life and Cassie cackled as they made a sudden swerve to starboard and sped through the channel. Less than two minutes later, Cassie repeated her fast break maneuver, again stalling out the engine and slamming into the seawall by Mallory Square to boot. Ground level was a good five feet above the water-logged floor of the boat, but Cassie gave her ass a push and Chloe managed to clamber onto shore with only a few scrapes on her knees. She blew her crazy friend a kiss and then sprinted across the wide plaza, dodging tourists on her way to Front Street. She had a killer to catch.

Chapter 27

PAUL met up with Sandee outside the Crawford place, where the party continued from the night before. Still in girl form, Sandee had changed out of his Morgana costume and into a miniskirt and tube-top combo with knee-high stiletto boots and fishnets. Both Chloe and Paul had argued that it wasn't exactly the most efficient killer-hunting outfit when he'd left the house, but there was no changing Sandee's mind when it came to fashion. Besides, Paul had seen him fight in stilettos before, and it was a mighty impressive sight.

"How's the party going?" Paul asked, as he put the scooter in gear and turned back the way he'd come, Sandee clinging to his back.

"I hardly got a chance to tell," he pouted. "But Quinn seems to have things under control. Bernie and Erica say hi."

"That's great," said Paul, "But Bee's been tracking Jeanie for like half an hour now and she's gone into a dead zone."

"You mean that new restaurant on Fleming?"

"No, I mean a place with no cameras," Paul said. "Over near the library. But we've got all the streets coming and going from there, so we think she might have gone to ground on that block. Or, just as likely, she's meeting someone, maybe even in that park by the library there."

"And we're going to check it out?" said Sandee.

"That's the plan," said Paul.

"I'm not really dressed for it," he pointed out.

"You'll have to make due. We did warn you..."

"Fine, fine. Hey? Where's Winston? Did he go ahead?"

"He actually left to do whatever it is he does when we're not around. Got a call from Lily and had some sort of emergency. I suspect maybe Isaiah wanted to talk to him about something, but who knows."

Paul pulled the scooter up onto the sidewalk near Mangia, Mangia, his favorite Italian place on the island, which was only a few blocks from the library. “We walk from here,” he said, dismounting after Sandee. He undid the bungee cords holding his backpack to the scooter’s rear and slung it over his shoulder.

“What’s the plan?”

“We play tourists out for a late evening walk and see if we can find any sign of her,” he said, pulling a New York Yankees cap from the bag and putting it on. Sandee looked at him, adjusted the hat to sit lower over his eyes and nodded.

“And hope she doesn’t recognize us?” Sandee said.

“That’s the idea,” Paul said. “I’ve got two more cameras in the bag if we need them.”

“You know, I never watched reality TV before I met you three, and let me tell you, it’s even more boring than I thought it would be.”

“Glad to help,” said Paul, offering his arm to Sandee. “Care for a stroll?”

They walked down the street, arms linked, keeping up a happy, fake patter about imaginary friends doing scandalous things back in New York. They had fun one-upping each other, which made the laughs they shared genuine and thus provided a stronger false impression for anyone watching them. Paul chose the side of the street opposite the library, not wanting to pass too close if Jeanie or anyone else was indeed lurking in the garden area beside the old building.

“And then Misty St. Clair showed up wearing a Dolce Gabbana from two years ago, and I just had to laugh because I’d seen the same dress on a streetwalker...” Sandee was saying, when they came up across from the garden. There was someone in there. Someone moving on the other side of the low hedge wall that separated it from the street.

Paul stopped, swung Sandee into his arms and kissed him, then whispered, “Nuzzle my neck...”

Sandee did as he was told, rubbing his cheek against the side of Paul’s neck as they held each other close. “Is she in there?” Sandee asked.

Paul peered into the darkness. The figure was a woman, about the right height. It had to be her. "I think so," he said. "Looks like she's alone."

"So now what?" Sandee purred, giving Paul's butt a playful squeeze. In spite of himself, Paul was getting kind of turned on.

"Good question," he said, returning the squeeze. He leaned back to expose his neck even more, giving him a chance to look around at the surroundings. Houses. Guesthouses. An antique store. No good place to set up a camera without being noticed. They'd have to play it dangerous.

Paul started walking again, his arm around Sandee's waist as he leaned close, kissed him on the cheek and whispered, "We'll go around the block and circle back. You find a hiding place at the far end of the street, and I'll go find some place back from where we came. We'll have an open cell line, and if anyone comes to meet her, we'll see him."

Sandee nodded, "So, no more kissing?" he joked.

"Not unless I get my girlfriend's permission," he replied with a smile.

Once they reached the end of the block and turned the corner, they split up. Sandee eyed a tree and, to Paul's amazement, managed to shimmy up into its branches, stiletto heels, miniskirt and all. Paul envied his mad monkey skills, but didn't see himself taking the two or three hours a day to do yoga and gung fu that Sandee always made time for. Still, he was in better shape than he'd been in a long time, and the jog around the block didn't even wind him. There were no handy trees to hide in however, nor was there even a shadowed doorway. The street was well lit, the local shops closed.

With no other choice, Paul moved back up the street toward the library, this time staying on the same side of the street as his target. He'd noticed a row of bushes along the library's facade, near the doorway. If he could sneak in there without being detected, it'd be a great hiding place. Sticking close to the building's wall, he made his way toward the spot, and in the darkness he nearly tripped over the man sleeping there. "Shit," he thought. The man stirred and turned over, but didn't wake up. He stank of course, like sweat and alcohol. Paul weighed his options and decided he was better off staying put. As long as he was quiet, the man would probably sleep right through his surveillance. And there really wasn't anywhere else to hide.

He squatted down in the damp earth, his back against the library's exterior wall. He couldn't quite see the street from there, and so began picking away at the bush's branches, clearing a line of sight through the foliage. When, ten minutes later, someone did walk by, he could only see enough to confirm that, yes indeed, someone had walked by. After they'd passed, he risked poking his head out to take a look. An older man in jeans and a T-shirt with dark hair. He walked right past the library garden without so much as a glance inside. Not their guy. Nor were the next three men and two women who walked by, one of whom happened to glance over her shoulder and catch Paul sticking his head out. She just gave him a quizzical look and smiled. This really was not the best hiding place.

Five more minutes passed in discomfort. Paul's back was killing him. He wanted to talk to Sandee, see how he was doing, but there was no sense making unnecessary noise just because he was bored. As it turned out, it was Sandee who eventually broke the silence.

"There's someone coming," Sandee reported over the cell phone. "I think it's that guy."

"Which guy?" Paul asked in a whisper. "Raff?"

"No," Sandee hissed. "The guy. The killer guy."

"Shit," Paul said. "Ok, let's see what happens."

Paul waited, holding his breath and trying not to move a muscle. After a minute, the man still hadn't passed by his location, even though he'd had more than enough time. "He hasn't come by here, yet." Paul told Sandee.

"I can't see him either," Sandee replied.

"Ok, I'm going to get a closer look." Paul pulled out his digital camera from his backpack and set it to night vision. Then stepping back over the sleeping man, he inched out from behind the bushes as fast as he could without making too much noise.

Paul heard voices coming from the garden, a male and a female. It had to be the killer and Jeanie talking. Paul climbed over the library steps and, crouching low, moved to the side of the garden, a plant-covered fence blocking their view of

him from inside. The voices grew just a bit louder, but he still couldn't make out what they were saying.

He stuck his camera through the bars of the fence and looked through the viewfinder. It revealed the two of them, in shades of green, standing about ten feet away from Paul. They stood with a yard or so of space between them as they talked in low, serious tones. As Paul watched, the woman threw up her arms in annoyance and said, "Fine, let's go." In a voice loud enough to hear. The man motioned toward the gate.

It was indeed Jeanie who walked toward the garden's exit, her face serious, even angry. And the man behind her, although he'd shaved his beard, was the killer. Paul snapped pictures of them together in rapid succession. He had them! He had her with the killer, Raff with her, and Eddie with Raff. The transitive property of being murderous bastards. Isaiah would have to move now.

Paul was about to consider just where he was going to hide when they exited the garden when he noticed the killer pulling something from behind his back. The object was dark on the green low-light display, a dark six-inch long screwdriver or maybe an awl. And ice pick possibly. Whatever it was, the killer's intentions were obvious to Paul. He was about to stab Jeanie in the back with it.

"Look out!" Paul screamed, without thinking. Jeanie looked his way and recoiled in surprise, but the killer never lost his focus, and drove the shiv up into Jeanie. He might have originally been going for a kidney, but Paul's warning had caused her to shift her stance just enough that it instead seemed to glance off her ribs. She spun away from him, her face wincing in pain.

Paul stopped looking at the camera and turn and ran, sprinting around the fence to the garden entrance just in time to see Jeanie come tumbling out backward onto the pavement in front him. The killer was right on top of her, coming through the entrance. It was a screwdriver he held, black with a black handle, only its tip shining silver in the streetlight. He fell upon Jeanie, his knees pinning her to the ground. She punched up at him, the blows glancing off his chest as he brought the screwdriver up and down toward her face. She manage to twist her head away just in time and the weapon slammed into the sidewalk.

As the killer brought it up again, Paul launched himself at the man in a head-first tackle, knocking him off Jeanie and sending them both to the ground in a heap of

arms and legs. Paul was thankful to hear the screwdriver skitter off into the road. But the man was big and strong and skilled. With one arm he pushed Paul's chest, forcing enough room between them so that he could bring his other elbow smashing into the side of Paul's head. He blacked out for an instant, his eyes rolling up and then snapped back to reality as a second blow smashed into his forehead, knocking him to the ground.

The man tossed Paul aside and got his feet under him long enough to shoot across the distance between himself and Jeanie, who was trying to stand up. The killer hit her with a strong uppercut to the body, probably powerful enough to shock her liver. Jeanie collapsed from the knockout body blow. Paul, gasping for breath, wondered which of them he'd kill first.

A loud, two-note whistle screeched through the air, low then high, as if someone were calling their dog. Paul and the killer both turned to see Sandee there, a vision of loveliness in high-heeled boots. He stood in a defensive, classic wing-chun pose, left leg and right arm forward.

Sandee had his boy form and his girl form, and aside from the clothes and the voice, there wasn't much difference between them, personality-wise. But then there was the other Sandee. The black belt martial artist and yoga instructor Sandee who meditated daily and could punch a hole in a brick wall if he wanted to. Kung Fu Sandee didn't have time for double entendres or snappy comebacks. Kung Fu Sandee was here to kick your ass.

The killer stood up and turned to face the newcomer, his face still as stone. The two of them stood there for a moment, almost the same height, thanks to Sandee's boots. Paul crawled over toward Jeanie, although he wasn't sure what good he could do in his current state. Maybe he'd drag her out of the way or something. The killer heard him and turned and shot a quick glare Paul's way, which froze him in his tracks. Sandee chose that moment to strike.

Three quick steps forward and then his rear leg swung forward at the hip in a roundhouse arc, shin smacking into the inside of the killer's right knee. His right elbow followed through a split second later, smashing into the killer's jaw as it moved right to left and then catching him on the other side of the face as it swept back from left to right. Sandee's kicking leg recoiled back and his hip followed, twisting his body. As he settled back onto his right leg, he launched a straight thrust kick with his left, catching the killer in the stomach and pushing him away

from him. He fell back on his ass with an “Ooof.”

Whatever the man had expected from the “woman” in heels, it couldn’t have been that. Paul heard a cry from behind him and looked back to see two people, an older man and woman, who’d just rounded the corner. They must’ve seen Sandee attack the man. They retreated back the way they came, but Paul could see the woman reaching into her purse - the cops would be here soon.

The killer started to get to his feet, hand on the ground for support when Sandee slashed forward again, his knee connecting with the man’s forehead. Just for good measure, he brought the stiletto tip of his boot heel down on the man’s left hand in a vicious stomp. Even Paul winced in pain at the sight of it, and when he heard the loud snap, he closed his eyes and looked away.

“Shit,” he heard Sandee say, and he opened them. He was limping now, pulling back away from the man. The snapping sound hadn’t been the man’s hand breaking (although surely it had). It was Sandee’s stiletto heel breaking off at the base.

The killer managed to regain his feet as Sandee was trying to maintain balance on one foot. He was woozy, no doubt dazed by the knee to the head which had opened a nasty looking cut above his left eye. But the killer had the wherewithal to lunge forward at Sandee, shoving him with both hands. Although Sandee managed to deflect the attack, he couldn’t do so and keep his balance. He went down, although in typical Sandee fashion he managed to turn it into a relatively graceful backwards roll and ended up crouched low on his toes.

But the killer was on the run now, racing down the middle of the road toward White Street with a loping, limping gait. Paul was still gasping for air and on the ground, in no position to give chase. Sandee started after him but immediately stumbled. It was impossible to run in just one heel. He sat down where he was and started to undo the boots, but Paul called to him. “Sandee, stop!”

“What?” Sandee snapped. “I can catch...”

“We need to help her!” Paul gestured to Jeanie, who was still lying with her eyes closed, although now she was moaning some words he couldn’t make out. Together Sandee and Paul managed to revive her, Sandee checking the wound and applying pressure to staunch the bleeding in her back.

“I need to just take a nap...” Jeanie said in a weak voice.

“Come on, sweetie,” Sandee said. “You’ve got to stay with us here. We’ve got to get going.”

The idea of moving seemed to snap the woman back to full awareness. “Are you crazy?” she asked, “I need a doctor. And ambulances...”

“We have to go,” Paul said, his voice ringing in his head. “The cops are coming...”

“Good!” Jeanie said, her voice much stronger now. “I want the cops. And an ambulance.”

“What?” asked Paul, confused. If he’d learned anything in this biz, it was that you never wanted the cops.

“I want cops. I want a doctor to sew me up.”

“We can...” Paul started to say, but realized that he didn’t have a better option.

“There’s a hole in me. I’m bleeding. What can you do?” Jeanie asked.

“I don’t...”

“The cops are fine. I did nothing wrong. I’m a tourist. I’ve got a room at the Days Inn. I was out for a walk and some homeless man attacked me and took my purse. And you two ran him off.”

Paul nodded, and then said, “Are you sure he didn’t just run off on his own?”

“If you prefer,” she said, looking up at the cut on his forehead. “But you might want to see that doctor yourself.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Paul said.

“Then go,” Jeanie said. “Like you said, the cops will be here any second.”

Sandee took Paul’s hand and started to drag him toward the end of the street. “Come on, sweetie, let’s go get you fixed up,” he said.

Paul looked at Jeanie, confused about what was happening now and about who was on whose side. Or even what the sides were now. "But what about her?" he asked no one in particular.

"I've got the cops coming," Jeanie said, still pressing against the wound on her side. "You two and the old man can resume following me around again tomorrow, ok? Right now I just want a doctor."

Paul had no response to that, and so he just gave her a kind of awkward wave as Sandee led him by the hand into the shadows and, hopefully, back home.

Chapter 28

CHLOE had lost the killer almost as soon as they hit the streets of Old Town. Either he knew he was being followed or he was just super cautious. Either way, she'd spotted him on Front Street and managed to stay a block behind him for about fifteen minutes as he moved into the residential streets of old town. But when she rounded a corner onto Petronia, he was gone. She assumed he'd dodged between some houses, but she had no way of knowing which ones. Alternately, he could be waiting in ambush for her, and there was no way she was going to fall for that.

Instead she reversed course and headed back the way she'd come, until she was out of sight. Then she sprinted the length of the block, guessing that the killer might be headed back in the general direction of Raff 's house. But she didn't see him on the next street over or the one after that. After ten more minutes of searching, she had to admit she'd lost him. Time to call in.

She was in a residential neighborhood. No payphones in sight. It would be almost as fast to run home at this point as it would be to go back to Duval and find a phone. She ended up ducking into the lobby of a guest house across the street and paying the night clerk \$20 to use the phone. Given that she was soaked with salt water and sweat, she was lucky the guy let her off that cheap.

"Bee," she said as soon as her friend picked up. "What's up?"

"Chloe! What number is this you're calling from?"

"Never mind. I found our guy but I lost him. I need you to..."

"Sandee just called," Bee interrupted. "He and Paul just spotted that Jeanie person talking to the killer. I mean the guy. And then I think something happened, because their phones cut..."

"Where?" asked Chloe, fear and excitement flooding into her. Catching the killer and Jeanie together was great news. Losing contact with Paul and Sandee was not.

"At the library. By the library," said Bee. "The garden by the library."

“Got it,” she said. “I’m pretty close to there now.” She was in fact only four blocks from there. Less if she cut through a few backyards. “If you get a hold of Paul, tell him I’m coming.”

“Will do,” said Bee. “Where’s your...”

“Gotta go,” Chloe said and hung up, handing the clerk his phone before running out the door.

She sprinted across the street, ducked between two houses, slipped through an open gate and vaulted a low fence in the front yard of another house, shaving a block off her route. Chloe was headed across the street, about to take another shortcut when she heard rapid footsteps from off to her right. She looked down the block and saw a dark figure running with a weird, awkward gait across the street, like he was hurt. Not a big believer in coincidences, she figured he just might be her man, so she headed off after him.

Chloe jogged behind him, trying to keep her footsteps as silent as possible as she closed the distance. When she got within half a block of him he passed under a streetlight and she was sure it was him. Same clothes, same hair. Same guy. He paused for a moment at the intersection of White and Angela, looking in both directions as if trying to figure out which way to go. Then he turned right on White Street and started off again with that injured half-run, half-walk.

She followed and had a moment’s excited panic when she realized that his course would take them within just a couple blocks of her own house. Chloe wondered if he’d tracked them down somehow. But no, he turned left instead of right at Olivia Street, crossing the road and heading northeast. She was relieved but also slightly disappointed. If he had tried to attack them at home, Bee’s defenses would have put him down before he knew what hit him, plus Chloe would have had backup. As it was, she was still on her own. She crossed after him, keeping to the shadows as best she could.

The killer was either lost or making a halfhearted effort to shake any tails he might have picked up. He zigzagged up through the next three blocks but always headed northeast, until they reached Eisenhower. There he stopped in front of a large marina on the edge of Garrison Bight. The place was fenced off from the street and locked up tight. A huge, hangar-like building dominated the lot, and Chloe knew that it contained four levels of speedboats in dry dock. More boats

sat on trailers in the parking lot, waiting to be rented or sold. What the hell was he doing here?

She squatted behind a parked car and watched as the killer crossed the street and went right up to the gate. His limp had only gotten worse as she'd followed him, and she doubted he could make it over the high fence. But no, that wasn't his plan. He pulled something from his pocket. A lock pick maybe? If so, he had to be the fastest pick in the world, because the gate popped right open. He had a key. He slid inside and locked it behind him. Shit! She thought. There was no way she could climb up and over the chain link fence without alerting him. Still, she wasn't about to lose him now.

Chloe was about to sprint clear of her hiding place behind the car as soon as he disappeared out of sight. Except he didn't disappear. He wasn't going into the main building but was instead walking along the perimeter, past the boats on trailers. Chloe moved along her side of the street, crouched low and paralleling his course. He made his way past the last of the boats to the row of two dozen wet slips where they kept the large boats. If he got on a fucking boat, he was gone and she couldn't stop him.

Unlike the boats in the main marina she'd just come from, no one stayed overnight here. They were all locked up and dark. But he probably had a key for one of those as well. Chloe watched from across the street and contemplated her options. He was obviously hurt. His right hand hung useless at his side and he walked with a painful looking limp. She could probably take him. The fence had a little barbed wire at the top, but nothing she couldn't handle. She was about to tear her shirt into two pieces she could wrap around her hands for protection when she heard a voice from across the way.

"Hello?" the killer said, his voice cracking a bit on the second syllable. She looked over and saw him standing beside a big old stained and cracked fishing boat, the least impressive of the vessels in the wet slips, although one of the largest. "I need a hand here," the man said.

Chloe saw that there was a gap of about two feet between the deck of the boat and the dock, and the man didn't think he could make it across in his wounded condition. She heard a muffled voice reply from inside the boat and gave up any thoughts she might have had of vaulting the fence. Not without knowing who she was facing. "I'm all messed up," the killer shouted to the boat. "Come give

me a goddamned hand, will you?”

A man appeared from below, and light streamed out onto the deck of the boat from inside. Chloe realized that the portholes were blacked out from inside so perfectly, that no light escaped through any cracks within. Perfect for smuggling she thought. The man from inside the boat came over to the gunwale across from the killer and held out his hand. He said something, but it was too quiet for Chloe to make out from her vantage fifty feet away. The killer took the hand and, with a grunt, made the step across the gap and onto the boat.

But as he stepped down onto the deck he stumbled. The other man was there to catch him however, preventing him from falling. In the process, the boat’s owner turned his body so that Chloe could get a good look at his face.

“Oh, fuck...” she whispered. It was Winston. The man on the boat was Winston.

She was about to shout a warning, fearing that the killer was there to assassinate her mentor. But no, now she saw how they interacted. Her friend was looking at the killer’s injured hand, examining it like a doctor might. And then the two men smiled and laughed like old friends. Offering his shoulder for support, Winston propped the wounded man up and led him back below decks into the warmth of the cabin light. Like friends. Like old, fucking friends.

“Fucking, fuck, fuck,” Chloe said, as she thought through all the implications of what she’d just seen.

“Fuck.”

Chapter 29

PAUL collapsed onto the couch in the living room, while Sandee went into the kitchen to get some ice. Bee came running down the stairs almost at once, a cell phone in each hand. She took one look at Paul and froze in her tracks.

“Oh my God, Paul!” she said, and ran over to him. “What happened?”

He had a huge knot forming in the middle of his forehead and a cut that was bleeding over his left eye. And although Bee couldn’t see it, he also had the worst headache of his life. “I got beat up a little,” he said. “Just a little though. You should see the other guy.”

“The killer?” Bee asked.

“He’s a mean one,” said Sandee, coming out of the kitchen with a towel and a tray of ice cubes. “Mean and vicious and now, I think, a little crippled.”

“That’s good,” said Bee. “Then he probably can’t hurt Chloe, right?”

“Hurt Chloe what?” Paul asked, trying to focus. “Where’s Chloe?”

“She went after you. You and him. She went to find you guys. I told her where you were...”

“Can I have a phone?” Paul said as he reached out to take the one in her left hand.

“Sure,” said Bee. She put the other phone in her pocket and helped Sandee wrap up some ice cubes in the towel.

Paul dialed Chloe’s number then stopped, remembering that they’d stopped using their normal phones. “What’s the number for Chloe’s phone?” he asked Bee.

“Her phone’s dead,” Bee explained. “I think maybe something happened with that crazy girl she went to see.”

Paul sat up and, trying to ignore the rush of dizziness, he started to stand up. But

Sandee eased him back down onto the couch and placed the ice pack against his forehead. He winced. "We need to go find her," he insisted.

"Where is she?" asked Sandee.

Paul took the ice pack from his hand but continued to press it against his head. The cold was starting to seep through, and soon the numbness would come, which would be a nice change from the throbbing pain. He turned to Bee. "I don't know. Bee, where is she?"

"I sent her over to the library, because that's where you were."

"Well, there's no one there but cops now, probably," said Paul, relieved.

"And an ambulance," Sandee added. "Neither of which are likely to entice her to stick around very long. I'm sure she'll be back any minute."

"Yeah, you're right," he said. "Can one of you get me something for this headache?"

"Sure," said Bee. "How strong do you want?"

Paul considered his options. Their household pharmacy was stocked with everything from Tylenol to Darvocet. "Nothing that'll knock me out. We're not done tonight."

"Tylenol 3?" asked Bee. "It's only got a little codeine in it."

"A little codeine sounds about right," Paul agreed.

Bee went upstairs to get the drugs, while Sandee took the rest of the ice back into the kitchen and returned with two glasses of water. He gave one to Paul and then sat back in the easy chair, closing his eyes.

"You really kicked that guy's ass," Paul said.

"I really did, didn't I?" said Sandee, a slight smile on his face as he reclined. "I haven't been in a fight in, God, almost three months."

"Does it count as a fight if he doesn't hit you back?" asked Paul.

“Oh, he wanted to hit back, I just wouldn’t let him. That makes it a fight. Plus, he did hit you.”

“And stabbed that woman,” Paul pointed out. “Whom I saved by the way.”

“Did you? That was sweet. Why do you think he was trying to kill her in the first place?”

“That’s the big question,” said Paul. “And I have no freaking clue. Although it does make it seem unlikely that they were working together, doesn’t it?”

“Pretty unlikely,” Sandee agreed.

Bee came back with the pills, giving two to Paul and then, when he asked for it, one for Sandee. He wanted to calm down a bit, he said. Bee reported that there was no movement on the big board. No sign of Chloe or Raff or anyone. Then a small black box clipped to the waist of Bee’s jeans emitted a low beep. She looked down at the PDA-style display and touched a button. Then she said, “Chloe’s here.”

Paul had enough time to sit up before the front door opened and Chloe walked in. She looked like hell - damp clothes, scratched knees, dirt everywhere like she’d been crawling on her hands and knees through a jungle. Her face looked like she was carrying the worries of the world in her brain. “Hey, babe,” he said, “Looks like your night’s been as good as mine.”

She looked at him and her eyes widened. “Jesus Christ, Paul. What happened?” she said, rushing to his side. He had to admit that, now that the drugs had deadened the pain a bit, he was kind of enjoying all the sympathy and attention.

“Sandee and I got into a little scuffle with our killer,” he said.

Chloe poked and prodded gently at his wounds. “Fuck, what did he hit you with, a crowbar?”

“It felt like it,” he said.

“He’s a vicious bastard,” Sandee chimed in. “Good with his hands.”

“Not as good as Sandee though,” Paul pointed out.

Chloe nodded as if this statement explained a lot. “Few people are,” she said. “That explains why he was limping and couldn’t use his right hand when I followed him.”

“You did follow him?” Paul asked. “Are you ok?”

“Yes,” she said with a gentle smile that sank into a frown. “Actually no, I’m not. He didn’t hurt me but I followed him. I...” she trailed off.

“What is it, hon?” Paul asked after a few seconds of silence. “Where is he?”

“He’s on a boat over at the bight,” Chloe said. “He got onto a boat.”

“So he’s gone to sea?” asked Sandee. “If only my heel hadn’t broken...”

“No, I don’t think so. The boat didn’t go anywhere that I saw. But I did get a good look at whose boat it was,” she paused, like she was looking for the words. “It was Winston.”

Paul was stunned. His first thought was that the killer had gotten Winston too. But as soon as the thought flashed through his head, he knew that was wrong. All of a sudden the pieces started falling into place in his mind. Jeanie hadn’t been in the garden to meet the killer. She’d been there to meet someone she knew, maybe someone Raff had described as an old friend. Winston. He’d set her up and then told the killer where to find her. And he’d known she would be off balance and under-protected, because they’d briefed him on the entire situation right here in this house. And if Winston was working with the killer, then he must have been involved in Raquel’s murder as well. That left a bunch of questions, the biggest one of which was:

“Why?” he asked. He looked around the room and saw that Bee and Sandee were both as shocked as he was. Chloe took a seat on the couch next to him and he put his arm around her, drawing her close.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “It doesn’t make any sense does it?”

“No,” agreed Paul. “It really doesn’t.”

“So what’re you guys saying?” asked Sandee. “That the killer works for Winston? That old guy who was just in our house a couple hours ago?”

Bee jumped at those words, shouting, "Oh shit! I've got to check everything!" She ran upstairs, taking the steps two at a time.

Sandee started to say something else, but Paul and Chloe both put their fingers to their lips at the same moment, silencing him. They sat in silent, unmoving contemplation on the couch while Bee came down and swept the living room with her bug detection equipment. If Winston had planted something, it couldn't have been too well hidden - he hadn't been alone in the house long enough.

On the second sweep, Bee found it. A small bug attached to the underside of a table lamp. She carefully pried it loose and then dropped it inside a ten year old lead-lined bag used to protect film from x-rays. She swept the rest of the rooms downstairs and then said, "It's ok to talk in here now. I'm going to take this little monster upstairs and seal the room and check it out. And the rest of the network."

"Sounds good, Bee," said Chloe. "Smart thinking."

"See, my paranoia isn't just a cute personality trait," Bee said. "It's also pretty handy."

"No one ever said it wasn't," Paul told her. "Let us know what you find out."

"Always," said Bee before she disappeared back upstairs.

"So, we assume he heard all that?" asked Sandee.

"Maybe," said Chloe. "Maybe not. If he's already got his man back safe on his boat, then he might not be listening in. And the bug has to be set to bursts of info. If it was constantly transmitting, Bee's defenses in the house here would've found it. If we're lucky, our privacy is still private." Sandee's face said he didn't believe they were that lucky, but he held his tongue.

"Chloe," said Paul. "This boat. You said it was at the bight marina, right?"

"Yep."

"Then it's not the same boat they came in on. At the other marina down by artist's alley."

“Well, we didn’t see that boat for sure,” said Chloe. “He and Lily could’ve just been dropped off there by this boat.”

“Or they could have two boats. Or three. We know that Winston’s crew is water-based, at least back on the West coast. They live in the things. At this point I don’t think that he’d give up what he’s used to. There could be a half dozen boats and three dozen members of his Crew in the waters around Key West and we’d have no idea. Between the boats out by the outer islands and the marinas and wherever else, this place provides all the cover a Crew like Win’s could ask for.”

“Which is probably why he suggested Isaiah hold his meeting here in the first place” said Chloe. “He had us here as a front line, but he could have plenty of backup ready if he needed it.”

“So, what?” asked Sandee. “You’re saying he’s got some kind of army out there?”

“They could’ve been coming to the island for weeks now, getting in place,” Paul said. “We know Isaiah had to come in early too in order to set up all his stuff. He’s probably got his own army here as well, ready to throw down if necessary. And we didn’t see any of it. For all our cameras and tracking tags and contacts, we had no idea.”

“We didn’t know what we were looking for,” Chloe pointed out. “Now we do. We still have the home turf advantage. We found the killer, didn’t we?”

“We did,” agreed Paul. “But now that we not only found him but found his boss, what are we going to do about it?”

“We’re not going to tell Isaiah, that’s for sure,” said Chloe.

“I agree with you there,” said Paul.

“Why not?” asked Sandee. “Won’t we need his help to take down Winston? I mean, if he’s really got an army...”

“Who said we’re taking down Winston?” asked Chloe, throwing Sandee a sharp look.

“Didn’t Paul just say he’s the one who killed Raquel? I thought we were looking to bring the killer down. You know, the guy who just pulped your boyfriend’s face and stabbed a woman in the back with a screwdriver.”

Paul could tell that Chloe was about to blow up at Sandee, so he put a hand on her thigh to calm her down and spoke to Sandee in quiet, even terms. “I know that’s how it looks, Sandee,” Paul said. “But right now we just don’t know enough about what’s going on. First of all, we don’t one hundred percent know that Winston told that guy to kill Raquel and Jeanie, although I think he probably did. Even taking that as a given, we don’t know why he gave that order. Maybe Raquel was up to no good. Maybe she was an undercover cop. Maybe the whole thing was an accident. And remember, according to Raff, Jeanie’s ‘partner’ did shoot Winston. There might be bad blood going back a long time with those two. We just don’t know.”

Sandee nodded, but clearly didn’t like it. Paul couldn’t blame him. He’d signed up with the Crew to run 24-hour parties and scam tourists out of their money and clothes. In their little recruitment speeches they’d never mentioned hunting down murderers or getting caught between to “armies” of gangsters fighting over old vendettas.

“There’s a chilling thought,” said Paul, realizing something unpleasant.

“What?” asked Chloe and Sandee at the same time.

“Talking with Jeanie, however briefly, I got the impression that she knew about Winston. Or someone that she referred to as ‘the old man,’ who pretty much has to be Win. And now that we know Winston has been lying to us about more than a few important facts and has placed a bug here in the house, well, as much as it pains me to say it, I think we have to look again at some of the things Raff told Bee.”

Chloe chewed on her lower lip and just nodded for Paul to continue. “I think it strains all credulity to believe that Winston and Raff were both working with the killer. Whatever his reasons, Win was behind the attacks on Raquel and Jeanie. I mean, Raff ‘s not going to set up his own Crewmember for... Ok, scratch that. Raff might set up a Crewmember for a fall, but it’s not really likely in this situation.”

Chloe jumped in at this point, “Which means that Raff really is just here as

backup to Eddie and probably didn't know we'd be here. Then he didn't kill Raquel just so he could take over her place in Isaiah's organization. And while we were concentrating on him, the real killers were free to do whatever they wanted behind our backs."

"Like dispose of the body," Paul pointed out. "And shift blame to other suspects. And undermine the whole foundation of Isaiah's plan by sowing dissension and doubt amongst the founders."

"I thought Winston was in favor of Isaiah's plan?" asked Chloe. "Why come to the meeting at all if he was against it?"

"Well, his support has been super cautious," Paul explained. "Like he thinks it's a great idea but is worried because so much could go wrong. Which makes sense. If he just comes out against it, Isaiah would cut him out of the loop, simple as that. Isaiah wants Win's contacts - he probably has to have them to make this thing as big as he wants it to be. And Winston knows that, so he's stringing us all along so that he can destroy the plan from the inside out. Convince Isaiah that it's impossible and doomed to failure."

"Why would he be so against it?" asked Sandee. "So against it that he'd kill people?"

"Winston doesn't like change," said Chloe, who knew Winston far better than any of them. "I know that sounds crazy. He's a revolutionary right? But he's old school in his ways. He thinks we should all be living in squats and on boats and on collectives somewhere in the boonies, pulling shit over on The Man. He's very much an ideologue, and I can just imagine how much he hates this idea of buying into the corporate culture as a model for revolutionary action. I was surprised that he was willing to even talk about giving over his list of contacts to Isaiah, so I can't say I'm really shocked at the idea that he might've been playing us all from the beginning."

"What I can't figure out," said Paul. "is why he felt he needed to kill Raquel."

"That doesn't make any sense to me either," Chloe said, shaking her head. "Winston doesn't like violence and, as far as I know, he's never killed anyone before."

"As far as you know," said Sandee with scorn in his voice. "His friend certainly

didn't seem to have much of a problem with it. He sure as..."

"Like I said," Paul interrupted, "We just don't know enough about what's going on. We need more information before we do anything else."

"So what do we do now then?" Sandee asked.

"We pretend we don't know anything," said Paul. Chloe nodded her agreement. "They have no way of knowing we saw the killer and Winston together. Well, unless they heard it over the bug. But even then, they don't know we know they know, if you follow me."

"I think so," Sandee said.

"So we play dumb," Chloe said. "Paul goes to the meeting tomorrow morning with Isaiah and Winston and Eddie, and reports what he can. The killer attacked Jeanie last night, and no one knows why. You gotta assume she'll tell Raff who will tell Eddie, so there's no sense in hiding it."

"Then we just see how everyone reacts," said Paul. "Maybe Winston will use it as an excuse to shut down the meetings and maybe Isaiah will agree and everyone will just go home. Then we don't have to worry about it."

Chloe stood up from her seat, "And while Paul's doing that, the rest of us try and track down any other members of Winston's crew. I want to have a few words with Lily. Maybe she can shed some light on this."

"Sounds fun," said Sandee, who clearly thought it was nothing of the sort.

Chloe held out a hand to Paul, offering him a lift up. "I'm going to take a shower and get some sleep," she said. "Care to join me?"

Although the shower sounded pretty pleasant, it was the sleep part that really caught Paul's imagination. "Absolutely." He looked at his watch. 4 a.m.. He could get six hours of sleep, which seemed an impossible luxury. "We'll save the world tomorrow."

"Not the world," said Chloe. "Just our own asses."

"Same difference," said Paul. "Just as long as I get to sleep first."

Chapter 30

AS it turned out, Paul didn't get to sleep anywhere near right away. Nor did Chloe. No sooner had they stepped out of the shower than Bee barged into their room, aflutter with worries about their compromised security. Paul had wanted to lie down and let her paranoia stew until daylight, but the breaches she started describing to them were so grim that he couldn't ignore it.

They had no way of knowing what Winston did and didn't know about their little set-up in Key West, but at the very least he knew about the cameras hidden all over town. In planning their hunt for Jeanie and the killer, they'd even shown him a map of where every camera and RFID reader in town was located. Bee had discovered that just in the last few hours over a dozen of her cameras had gone down. And while it was pretty common for at least one or two of the devices to go black almost every day, twelve at once was unheard of. Even more telling, three of them were in the general location of Winston's boat at the bight marina, while two more were near the AME church where today's meeting with Isaiah was to be held.

But wait, it got worse. Most of the cameras worked on a wireless network, transmitting their signals to routers that Bee had hidden around town, routers that bounced the signal back to the house or used the city's own wireless network. And while the signal network was behind a security wall and encoded, it was all off-the-shelf software. If Winston had a competent hacker on his Crew, he could probably break it. Especially if he'd managed to pull some data off one of their laptops. None of them could remember for sure if they'd left Winston alone with any of their computers, but everyone agreed it was more than probable that they had. Thus, Winston could very well be accessing their own camera network for his own purposes.

Finally they'd given him their private cell phone numbers, although that was easy enough to fix. They switched out for new disposable phones and tossed the ones Winston knew about, giving them some small measure of security. Bee's analysis of the bug Winston had planted showed that it did operate in signal bursts, but that it sent them fairly frequently - every ten minutes or so, which was the maximum amount of audio it could store. Bee had done a little digging around outside and found a signal receiver for the bug plugged into an outlet on the outside of their neighbor's house that would transmit the bug's recording

anywhere on the island. There was a chance Winston or his Crew had heard everything they said.

They'd all agreed that the only real option was to move forward as planned and play dumb, at least during the next meeting. They needed time to figure out just what Winston's game was and whether or not he meant them harm. So Paul would go to the meeting, while the rest tried their best to dig into Winston's activities over the past few days and sort out just what the hell was going on.

All of which was why Paul had only about two and a half hours of sleep before he had to set out to meet with his potential co-conspirators at the church. After his experience with Isaiah and the gang up atop the La Concha, he knew better than to try and sneak in any hidden recording devices. Armed with just his cell phone (and, he liked to think, his wits), Paul walked the twelve blocks to the church. He traveled through the prosperous tourist and residential blocks where he spent most of his time and then right past the restaurant and bar-clogged region around Duval Street and onto Whitehead Street, where one couldn't help but be reminded that Key West really was a southern town.

He'd talked to several old-time conchs who'd grown up on the island and lived here all their lives (rarer and rarer as snowbirds bought up all the real estate for vacation homes and drove the housing prices sky high). They told him how up until all too recently it had been unheard of for a black person to cross Whitehead Street and come into the "white" parts of town unless they had a very good reason. Likewise, it was equally unusual for any white to travel in the opposite direction. In more recent years, the part of the black community known as Bahama Village had been refurbished and claimed as part of the larger tourist attraction, but much of the historically black neighborhood remained as historically poor as it had always been. Paul and his Crew had few contacts here and no cameras because, quite frankly, they were intimidated by the drug dealers. And although there was nothing much in the way of organized gang activity (it was still a pretty small part of the island), there was too little gain for too much risk.

Isaiah obviously had fewer worries about setting up shop in the area, and he obviously had some good contacts if he could get the usually busy and popular AME church to let them meet there. Although to be honest, the church was just at the edge of what locals considered the "dangerous" part of town and Paul wondered if maybe Isaiah wasn't trying to have it both ways - meet in a black

community, but not so far in that he'd be likely to encounter any real trouble.

Paul had expected to gather in a parish hall or church office of some sort, but as he approached, he recognized the man who'd been guarding the door at the La Concha two nights ago. He was sitting on the steps of the church, reading a newspaper. He gave Paul a casual nod of greeting and then motioned for him to go on inside.

Up five steps and through the front door which stood wide open. Paul could count on two fingers the number of hours he'd spent in church since graduating from high school, including weddings. This particular church was pretty much everything he expected from a house of worship - wooden pews coated with decades of furniture polish, a high vaulted wooden ceiling shrouded in shadows and high, thin windows. At the far end, standing in front of rather than behind the pulpit, was Isaiah, his wife Amelia at his side. She had a phone nub in her ear and was paying studious attention to the PDA in her hand. Isaiah was talking on a phone of his own, but he hung up as he saw Paul advancing down the aisle toward him.

As he walked forward, Paul took a moment to look around the sanctuary, searching for signs of hidden cameras or other electronics Isaiah might have hidden there, but of course he didn't see anything. Once again, he decided to just assume they were there. He reached the front and held out his hand to Isaiah, who shook it. Amelia, talking quietly to whoever was on the other end of her cell phone, flashed him a smile and a little wave before strolling a few paces away, out of Paul's earshot.

"Good morning, Paul," said Isaiah.

"Pretty fancy digs you got here." Paul said. "Is this a religion or a corporation you're planning to start here?"

"Most religions are corporations of one sort or another," Isaiah replied. "Or at least they take advantage of some of the same powers and advantages that governments have granted big business. Incorporating some religious institutions is part of the overall strategy - we've got to take advantage of any opportunity the powers that be give us."

"Sure, why not?" said Paul. "Are you a religious man yourself?"

“No, not at all. But don’t tell my grandparents or my mother. I thought this place would add a certain solemnity to the occasion, maybe inspire our future partners to behave themselves and think seriously about the opportunity we all have here.”

“Plus if we need to have a funeral...” Paul said, but let the joke trail off.

“There is a certain funereal aspect too, but no one had been killed when I arranged for this place.”

“The best laid plans...” said Paul, again letting his sentence trail off, although this time it was because he couldn’t remember the whole quote. Something about mice and men. More important, Isaiah had just dropped an interesting little fact into the conversation: He’d arranged to use the church days ago, at least before Raquel’s murder. And probably weeks or even months ago. Once again he felt he was playing catch-up with everyone else.

Isaiah’s phone buzzed in his hand, and he excused himself to take the call. Looking around, Paul decided to take a seat in one of the pews and wait for the others. Eddie and his sidekick Marco arrived about five minutes later, and Eddie ignored Paul as he went over to Isaiah and pulled him aside for a private word. Marco just sort of stood there, looking around. He gave Paul a friendly nod, but that was the limit of their communication.

Winston arrived last, coming up the aisle with a spring in his step and a smile on his face as he whistled something that sounded to Paul’s ears like a hymn or maybe an old spiritual. “Good morning, all,” he said. “Sorry I’m late. Overslept a bit.” Paul wondered where he’d slept - certainly not back in the house he and Chloe had provided, which had remained empty all night according to their cameras.

Isaiah broke away from Eddie, (who didn’t seem like he was finished saying whatever it was he wanted to say) and resumed his place at the front of the church below the pulpit. Eddie followed him over and took a seat in the pew across the aisle from Paul, motioning for Marco to join him. Winston sat down next to Paul, giving him a fatherly pat on the shoulder as he did so.

“We’ve got a lot to cover,” Isaiah said, “And not a lot of time, as always. Why don’t we start with what’s on everyone’s minds: the investigation into Raquel’s murder. Paul, can you tell us all what you’ve found?”

“Sure,” said Paul, standing up. “Well, we know she was murdered out near the beach at Ft. Taylor Park, after hours when the park was closed. We then think the killers took her by boat off the beach area and then dumped her body back in her hotel room.”

“What the hell is that about?” asked Eddie. “Why the fuck would they do that?”

“To send us all a message. We think they’re trying to scuttle this whole endeavor of Isaiah’s and they placed the body where only we were likely to find it.”

“That means the killer is one of us,” said Marco, his voice calm and quiet. “Assuming we’re the only ones who knew about the plan.”

“That’s right!” Eddie shouted. “If what you’re saying is right, then you’re also accusing one of us of the murder.”

“Or someone that one of us told about the plan,” Paul pointed out, staring right at Eddie as he said it. Even though he didn’t believe Eddie’s Crew had killed anyone, his distaste for the man brought out Paul’s confrontational side. “Have any of you spoken of the plan to anyone outside our little inner circle?”

“That is a very good question,” Winston added from his seat. “Have any of us told anyone outside about the plan.” He looked right at Eddie as he said this last bit.

“Oh fuck you, old man,” Eddie said. “You both know I’ve told someone else. But that was after the fucking murder, ok?”

“Indeed?” Winston asked. “And this other Crew just happened to be in Key West at this particular moment in time?”

“We asked them to meet us here, ok? It’s not like we don’t have other shit going down besides this whacked scheme of Isaiah’s.”

“When did you ask them?” Winston asked.

“A couple weeks ago,” Eddie admitted. “But before you get any ideas, we didn’t tell them a fucking thing about you guys. They had no idea. As far as they’re concerned, this was all about an unrelated piece of fucking business that’s not any of your business.”

“Of course,” said Winston, raising an eyebrow and making it clear to one and all that he didn’t believe one word of it.

Eddie started to say something, but Isaiah cut him off. “I believe there’s more to Paul’s report. Let’s save the discussion until the end.”

Paul nodded and continued. “We do have a suspect. I’ve sent pics to Isaiah of a man we’ve identified as being involved in the killing in some way. We think that he definitely had a role in dumping the body back in the guest house and may have been the one to actually kill her as well.”

“I’m sending it to you now,” said Amelia, speaking for the first time. Marcos, Eddie, Winston and Paul all watched their phones, and a minute later they had the pictures he’d sent.

“This was taken off a security camera near the guesthouse,” said Paul. “We have others showing him following Raquel shortly before the murder. He might have shaved his beard since then, especially if he knows we’re looking for him. Does anyone recognize him?” Paul had to fight hard not to look extra hard at Winston as he said this.

“Never seen him,” Eddie said. “And before you two go accusing me of anything else, that’s the goddamned truth. Never. Seen. This. Fuck.”

Paul didn’t remember accusing Eddie of anything to his face, but apparently he’d been found guilty by association because Eddie perceived him to be Winston’s ally. “Well, keep an eye out for him. He definitely wasn’t acting alone in all this.”

“What about the cops?” Eddie asked. “What do they think?”

“Not involved,” said Paul. “They don’t know about the murder, because we disposed of the body before anyone outside our circle could find out about it. Local law enforcement shouldn’t be an issue moving forward.”

“Well at least you did that right,” Eddie snipped.

“What do you mean ‘that right’?” Paul asked, his ire rising.

“I mean you’ve done a pretty crappy job finding this killer.”

“Oh, come on, that’s bullshit! I just fucking showed you a goddamned picture of the guy!”

“But where is he now, huh, tough guy?”

Paul dearly wanted to answer him, but he managed to hold his tongue, and Eddie jumped into the silence with more vitriol. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. You got no answer for that, do you? You and your buddy there just finished telling us that the killer’s got to be working for someone in our little circle of friends here, so it’s not like there’s this endless list of suspects. So what’s taking you so long?”

“Methinks he doth protest too much,” said Winston with a wry smile.

“Methinks that’s bullshit,” Eddie retorted as he stood up. He took out a folded sheaf of papers from his back pocket and angrily shook them loose as he tossed them across the aisle at Paul and Winston. “If you’re done trying to stick your hand down my pants, maybe you can look somewhere else!”

Paul picked up the papers from the floor near his feet. Each one was a printout of six grainy color pictures taken from the high angle characteristic of a security camera. They showed the lobby of the Hyatt, and there were images of Paul dressed as the Verizon rep, talking with the assistant manager. There were other pics of Sandee walking up and down a hall in the hotel which Paul assumed was where Eddie was staying.

“Looks to me like Paul was being quite thorough and examining a valid suspect,” said Winston as he looked at the pics. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“I do have a problem with it, because I didn’t kill the damn chick, ok?” shouted Eddie at Winston. Then he turned his wrath on Paul again. “And what did you find, tough guy? Any connection between me and this killer?”

“Nothing I could find,” Paul admitted.

“But you still thought it was just peachy to start fucking with me and my friends and our business.”

Paul almost told Eddie that he and his “friend” Raff had some unfinished business of their own, but he literally bit his tongue. No need to tell Eddie

something that Raff might've kept from him. Instead Paul said nothing.

But Eddie wasn't done. "And what about my friends?" Eddie asked. "Did you find anything connecting them to the killer? Did you?"

"Not yet, no," said Paul.

"Well then! Now that you've cleared us, maybe we can bring in some competent, experienced help into this mess. I'm sure they can clear this all up."

"Paul said he hadn't found anything yet," Winston pointed out. "That doesn't mean he's cleared you."

"And who's cleared him?" Eddie asked. "It's his town, right? Who better than him to go around and commit murders and get away with it? Who cleared him and his Crew, that's what I want to know!"

"I did," said Winston. "Paul's a known quantity and had no knowledge of either the meeting or Raquel before the murder. He couldn't have done it and wouldn't have if he could."

"And we're supposed to just take your word for that, old man?" asked Eddie. "I don't think so. And how do you know what he did and didn't know? This is his town, right? His fucking town. If he's really worth being in our inner circle here, then surely nothing this big happens in his town without him knowing about it, right? I mean, if this were my fucking town, there's no way all these heavy hitters could come in here and set up without me knowing about it."

The words struck Paul right in his stomach like a fist, confirming the doubts and worries he'd had ever since Isaiah told him about the shadow corporation plan. Eddie was right. If he and Chloe actually had a big-time Crew, they should have seen signs of Isaiah and Winston and Raquel and even Eddie in town long before two nights ago. But they didn't. And they weren't a big-time Crew. Which cast some serious doubt on their ability to play with the big boys here.

"Enough," said Isaiah. "Let's just all stop cutting each other's throats for a few minutes here, and talk like intelligent men." Everyone was watching Isaiah now, and Eddie chose that moment to sit back down in his seat. Paul did the same.

"Obviously we still can't proceed further until we know who the killer is

working for,” said Isaiah. “So we must renew our efforts to find him and bring him in.”

“And if we can’t find him?” asked Winston. “If we never know for certain which of us he was working for? What then?”

“I don’t want to engage in hypotheticals,” Isaiah said. “Let’s not get distracted by...”

“It’s an important question,” Winston interrupted. “If we can’t find the killer among us, then how can we move forward? There will be no foundation of trust. No real security.”

“I one hundred percent agree with that,” Eddie said. “One of you three fuckers killed that lady, and I’m not putting my neck on the line until I know who it is. Which is why I want to bring my other friends into the loop now, so they can help us find out who the rats are.”

“I’m not exposing my interests to unknown quantities,” Winston countered. “Not under these circumstances.”

“Unknown quantities?” Eddie mocked. “Ask your little buddy there how unknown they are to him.”

“We’ll compromise,” Isaiah commanded. “I’ll meet with you and your friend in private, Eddie. That will allow me to make my own judgment about them and what they might or might not have to offer. Then we’ll revisit your motion that they be admitted to the board.”

Eddie stopped and listened to Marco whisper something in his ear. Eddie replied in kind, and they went back and forth a couple times before he finally said, “Ok, that’ll work. Can we talk now?” he glanced over at Paul and Winston. “Just you and me?”

“Of course,” said Isaiah. “Now, if no one has anything else, I adjourn the meeting.” No one said anything, and Isaiah nodded, gesturing toward the church door with his left hand. Eddie leaped up from his seat and cornered Isaiah in private conversation. Paul got up and headed straight for the door as well, wanting out of there before anything else disastrous happened.

Outside, Winston caught up with him at the bottom of the church steps. “Paul,” he said. “How are you?”

Paul turned to face him steeling himself for the conversation he’d been dreading most. “I’m good,” he said. “Just tired is all.”

“What did you think of our friend Eddie’s performance in there?” Winston asked.

“He’s pretty mad.”

“A sure sign of guilt in my experience.”

“You think so?” Paul asked. “I guess...”

“You do think he’s behind the murder, don’t you? Him or this Raff person?”

“It makes the most sense,” said Paul. “But I don’t see how we’ll ever prove it unless we find the killer.”

“And how’s that coming? Any sign of him?” Winston asked.

“No, nothing,” Paul lied. What was Winston playing at? Had he heard them on the bug or not? Or was he just trying to fuck with Paul’s head?

“Well, I’m not sure what will become of Isaiah’s scheme if we can’t find out the truth. You wouldn’t trust your secrets with Eddie and Isaiah under these circumstances, would you?”

“No, of course not,” agreed Paul. Looking past Winston’s shoulder, he saw Marco coming out the front doors of the church, a cigarette in hand. “Do you have a smoke?” he asked Winston, knowing the old man only smoked dope.

“I’m afraid not,” Winston said, giving Paul a quizzical look. “I didn’t know...”

“I’m going to bum one off Marco,” Paul said. “Listen, let’s get together later, ok? You, me and Chloe. We’ll compare notes and hash out all this shit.”

“How is Chloe?” he asked as Paul tried to walk past him.

“Getting some sleep,” Paul said. “We’ve been running ourselves ragged on this

thing. We'll give you a call in a few hours, ok?"

Winston eyed him for a moment and then smiled. "An excellent plan," he said, patting Paul's shoulder and spinning on his heel to walk off into the sunshine.

Marco looked a little surprised as Paul walked up the steps to where he was smoking. He just nodded to Paul in acknowledgement.

"What's up, man?" Paul asked. "Can I bum a smoke?"

"Sure," said Marco, taking the pack from his shirt pocket and offering one to Paul. He took it and put it in his mouth, the first one he'd had since college when he'd occasionally have a smoke while at a bar. Marco produced a Zippo and lit it for him and Paul took a shallow drag and tried not to cough.

"Thanks," said Paul, turning to his side so that he and Marco were now both looking down the church steps to the street. There was a long silence between them, but Paul wanted Marco to talk first, figuring that might be the only way he would say anything interesting. He was counting on Eddie taking full advantage of his private time with Isaiah to vent every single one of his frustrations.

After maybe a couple of minutes, Marco broke the silence. "Got pretty intense in there, huh?" he said to Paul.

"Sure did," Paul agreed.

"He can get that way, you know. When he's passionate about something? He starts seeing enemies everywhere."

"Sometimes there are enemies everywhere," Paul pointed out.

"But not always," Marco replied. "I know you're just doing what you've got to do, right? I'd be looking at us too. We're from out of town, and I guess you've got some history with Raff or whatever, so that's understandable." Paul wondered if Raff had told Marco and Eddie about their history or if he had figured it out for himself. Or maybe he was just fishing. Not wanting to give anything away, Paul stayed silent and let Marco keep talking. "But we're not the only ones you should be looking at. We didn't do it, so you're wasting your time. But you know, whatever you gotta do. It's your town."

“Well, your boss in there isn’t acting very innocent if you ask me,” Paul said, nodding his head toward the church door. “He seems pretty hot-headed. Pretty violent.”

“First of all, he’s not my boss, he’s my partner. But I get what you’re saying. And yeah, just so you know, he is pretty violent. That’s something else you should probably take into consideration. That can be a liability sometimes, but it’s how things are for now.”

Paul considered very carefully what kinds of messages Marco might be sending his way. Was he threatening him with Eddie’s violent side if he and Chloe didn’t lay off the investigation? Or was he perhaps hinting that, although that’s how things are now, maybe someday they’ll change? Like when there was a change of leadership. Paul didn’t know, so he just nodded.

“So here’s my advice,” said Marco. “I’ll keep Eddie focused on actual business instead of being pissed at you guys, and you guys maybe expand the focus of your inquiries. How does that sound?”

“That first part sounds just fine,” Paul said. “As for the inquiries, well, you’ll have to trust me to do the right thing on that. If you guys didn’t do it, then you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Now you sound like a cop.”

“Me? That’s the last thing I am.”

“Uh huh,” said Marco, flicking his cigarette into the street. “Just think about what I said, ok?”

“Will do,” said Paul, dropping his own smoke and stamping it out. The two of them parted without another word, Paul down the stairs and Marco with Eddie back inside the church.

Chapter 31

CHLOE'S morning had been beyond frustrating. It had been downright

depressing. After Bee's news about their compromised camera network, she'd spent a couple hours helping her engineer friend reconfigure the software on some of the cameras and install new security so that Winston couldn't tap into their feeds (or so they hoped). She'd then taken the new cameras out into the field to set them up around the bight marina, but when she got there, she discovered that Winston's boat was gone, presumably with the killer on board. They could be well on their way to Miami by now. Or Cuba. "Fuck" she said under her breath.

She'd set up the cameras anyway, just in case they came back, and then went home to help Bee go through the video records and see if they could find any sign of where Winston or the killer or really anyone else had gone. Like Raff. Where the fuck had he gone? There'd been no sign of him since he'd left his house in search of Sandee. The RFID tag hadn't popped up on any of the readers, and they couldn't find him on any of the cameras.

And then the cameras had started dying. One by one, across the city, they'd started winking out. They were being blinded.

"What the...?" Bee said when the first one went out. "I just lost the Petronia 4 Camera."

"That's not good," Chloe replied. "Let's roll back the video on that camera and see if there's anything weird going on there."

They watched the video, but there wasn't anything unusual in the half hour leading up to the camera going dead. No sign of Winston or Lily or anyone they recognized and no sign of anyone even noticing the camera.

"Crap!" Bee shouted, "Look at that."

The big screen showing the map of the city was now displaying a constellation of blinking red dots with camera names next to them, all around the west end of Duval Street. "Someone took down a wireless router there," Bee said.

“Any chance it’s just a coincidence?” Chloe asked.

“Of course,” said Bee. “They go down all the time. But I don’t think so...” She typed and clicked on one of her computers. “As far as I can tell it just shut down. Probably someone pulled the power. I’ll have to go out there to see what’s wrong.”

“And while you’re doing that, more of them will go down,” Chloe said.

“I don’t see what else we can do,” said Bee. “Whoever’s doing this is blinding us all over the city.”

As they watched, three more cameras went down within a couple minutes of each other. “How’re they doing that so fast?” asked Bee. “It’s not a software thing. They’re just out there yanking the plugs or something.”

“Winston must have his whole Crew on it. Probably took a pic of the whole camera map while he was here and then sent it out to his gang.”

“Doesn’t he know that we’ll be suspicious?” asked Bee. “I mean, who else could be doing it?”

“Well, Isaiah or Eddie or Raff could be doing it. All of them probably would do it if they knew about the cameras. And that’s probably going to be what Win tells me when we talk - that Eddie or Isaiah is after us and that the only way we can survive the night is to do exactly what he says. He’s trying to panic us.”

“He’s doing a good job,” said Bee.

“Yeah, he really is,” agreed Chloe. The two of them stared at the board, helpless as more cameras went dark. She couldn’t stop him, so she had to change the nature of the game. The cameras didn’t matter anymore. Time to forget them and move on. “I’m going to call Paul and we’re going to go see Winston.”

“You are?” asked Bee. “What’re you going to say?”

“I’m not sure yet. But I can’t let this go unanswered. I need to do something to throw him off his game.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not sure,” said Chloe. “That’s why I’m going to get Paul. I can always count on him to think of something crazy.”

CHLOE and Paul met at Anna’s, a small sandwich place on Simonton that wasn’t quite in the middle of tourist central but still had big enough crowds that they could sit in the corner and go unnoticed. Paul had his usual roast beef and she decided to switch things up and had a BLT instead of the tuna.

“I swear he was trying to bait Eddie,” Paul said to her in hushed tones. “He was provoking those guys, just begging them to do something stupid.”

“And Eddie’s probably the kind of guy that would do something stupid if he got angry enough,” Chloe said.

“I don’t doubt it. Marco as much as told me so. We need to see Winston and try somehow to get him to ratchet down the aggro.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“I mean, he’s gotten what he wants already. Unless we rat him out, I don’t think Isaiah and Eddie are ever going to be able to be certain about who exactly it is that’s behind Raquel’s murder. And until they’re both satisfied, this whole shadow corporation deal is dead in the water.”

“And you’re ok with that?” asked Chloe.

“If it ends this whole rain of bullshit we’ve been subjected to, then yeah, I’m ok with that.”

“I’m not sure I am,” she said. Part of her agreed with Paul - anything that ended the current clusterfuck was good, but she didn’t want to lose the opportunity that Isaiah was presenting them.

“You’re not?” Paul asked, a confused look on his face.

“If they all leave, what happens then do you think? Isaiah’s not the kind of guy to give up. He’ll go forward with his plan in some form, right?”

“I’d assume so, yeah. He doesn’t seem like the kinda guy who’d give up on his dream.”

“Neither am I. Neither are you,” said Chloe. “But when he goes to version 2.0, do you think he’s going to ask us to join again?”

“Maybe?” said Paul. “I don’t know...”

“It’s pretty unlikely. I mean, the only reason we got invited in at all is because Winston vouched for us. But there’s no way that’s going to count for much with Isaiah after he leaves Key West. He’s going to go back to New York, and he’s gonna think things over, and maybe he’s going to figure out that Winston’s just as good a suspect as Eddie. Or that maybe we are. Either way, there’s no way he’s trusting either of us again.”

“No, you’re right. He’ll cut us out,” agreed Paul. “But then again, four days ago we didn’t even know there was something to be cut into.”

“But now we do know. And knowing it’s out there, I want it. I really want it.” Chloe hadn’t even fully realized this was true until she spoke the words out loud. “It’s a path out of this dead end we’ve driven ourselves into. It’s a way to expand our Crew and our influence and get off of this damn island.”

“And that’s worth risking everything for?” Paul asked. “It’s worth it to you to stir things up and bring on some confrontation with your old friend - your mentor really - who is obviously willing to kill to sink this deal? You want to go up against Winston and blow this whole thing open?”

Chloe thought about that. She was mad at Winston. Really super fucking pissed off. Hell, maybe the only reason she wanted to hook up with Isaiah’s plan was because Winston didn’t want her too. Wouldn’t be the first time she’d done something just to piss off a father figure. “Yeah,” she said. “I really do. He’s fucked with us, Paul. And part of me still loves the old bastard and if he has the world’s best excuse I might even forgive him. But yeah, I’m willing to go against him if he’s standing between us and what we need to do.”

“What we need to do,” Paul said, mulling the words over. He was silent for a long moment, staring off into space.

“Yeah, it’s what we need to do,” she repeated. And it was true. Although she didn’t want to face the reality of it, she knew deep down in her heart that unless something changed in their Crew’s life, then her relationship with Paul was doomed as well. But she couldn’t come out and say it couldn’t find the words

that would express her certainty without sounding like an ultimatum to Paul. And they'd been together long enough for her to know that he didn't take ultimatums well at all - no better than she did.

Paul nodded to her and smiled. It was a wan, tired smile. A smile of recognition, and maybe resignation. "It's what we need to do," he said. A statement, not a question. She breathed a silent sigh of relief. He did get her message.

"The question is," said Chloe. "How do we do it?"

"We talk with Winston," said Paul. "He's expecting us to come to him. Now that he's knocking down our camera network, he's got to think we're in a total state of fear. So we have to do what he expects if we're going to catch him off guard."

"I agree," said Chloe. "I figure we go, meet with him, and try and feel him out. See what he wants. Then we'll know how to react."

"I think that's backwards," said Paul. "He's too good at this shit. He won't give away anything he doesn't want to. We can't worry about what he wants, we've got to make him want what we want him to want. Does that make sense?"

"It does," said Chloe, seeing a path forward now. "He is better at this than we are, and he knows it. We should play into that. Make him think he's getting the better of us."

Paul nodded and got that look he got when the ideas were flowing through his brain faster than he could talk. He kept nodding and said, "Ok, ok. I've got an idea. But we need to go home. We also need a blond wig, two old phones and an extra car."

"We do?" asked Chloe. "Ok, that's all doable. What's the play?"

Paul stood up, leaving his sandwich half eaten. "I'll tell you on the way home. This is going to take a bit of setup, so we need to get on it."

She smiled and stood up with him. This is when she loved him the most. Not lost in some online world in front of his computer or drunk off his ass at the party. Now, when he was alive and excited by some new idea, some new plan he'd concocted in that fevered, brilliant brain of his. She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him to her, kissing him hard and long.

“Ok,” she said, releasing him. “Let’s go.”

BY the time they arrived home, he’d outlined his plan. It was good. Nice and simple and not too insanely dangerous. Just a little dangerous. She parked the Vespa beside the front porch and got off after Paul. He was already up the steps and unlocking the front door when she heard the car slowing to a stop on the road behind her. She turned to see a tan Ford Taurus on the road by the cemetery, its window rolling down.

It was Eddie. They hadn’t covered their tracks as well as they might have, heading pretty much straight home from the restaurant. With all their attention focused on Winston - who already knew exactly where they lived - there seemed little point. She’d forgotten about Eddie, and now he or his Crew had followed them home.

He was looking right past her as he called out the window. “Hey, Paul!” he shouted. Paul turned from the door and looked back at Eddie. To his credit, his face didn’t show any surprise that he might have felt.

“Hey, Eddie,” Paul shouted back. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted you to know that you’re not the only one who...” his voice trailed off and he made no effort to hide his surprise as he recognized Chloe. Shit, she thought. “You!” he shouted, pointing at her.

“Moi?” said Chloe, looking at him like he was a complete stranger.

“From that fucked up party!” he shouted. The car door opened and he stepped out, angry. She could see that Marco was in the passenger seat and that he didn’t look happy. “You’re with him?”

Paul was at her side now, hands balled into fists. She slipped her own hand behind her back to where her spare stun gun (not the one that’d gotten wet) was tucked into the small of her back. “Get on out of here, Eddie,” Paul said.

“You were with him from the beginning?” Eddie said, now just a couple yards away, his finger pointing at her. “You two have been fucking with me from moment one!”

“Get out of here, Eddie!” Paul shouted. “I’m warning you...”

“Fuck you and your warnings,” said Eddie. “You and your little bitch here can fucking blow me. You set me up at that bar, coming onto me like a whore when you knew full well we were doing business together. And then snooping around my hotel, passing out wanted pictures of my friends and generally sticking your cock in my goddamned business. What right do you think you have to fuck with me like that?”

Chloe wanted to punch him then and there, but for all she knew, Marco had a gun in that car with him.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Paul, his voice mocking and dismissive. “We’ve been fucking with you since the beginning. And why not? It’s our town. You’re on our island, and if we want to check you out or spy on you or just fuck with you, well then, that’s our goddamned business isn’t it?”

“Is that what you think?” Eddie said, taking another step forward. Behind him Marco was getting out of the car and rushing forward, although Chloe couldn’t tell if he was coming to back his friend up or calm him down. At the same moment she heard the front door of the house open up behind her. Both Eddie and Marco stopped in their tracks at whatever they were seeing.

Chloe looked back over her shoulder to see Bee and Sandee standing on the front porch with really big fucking guns in their hands. Bee held what looked like a freaking bazooka that was as long as she was tall. She had on some sort of high-tech looking helmet that covered her left eye with some sort of digital heads up display. Beside her stood Sandee in boy form, an AK-47 slung at his hip, legs wide apart. He wore a skintight camo T-shirt and thong underwear.

Chloe had to stop herself from laughing as Sandee shouted, “Get off my property!” in a thick redneck accent.

Eddie started to say something, but Marco grabbed his arm and pulled him back toward the car. Eddie cursed under his breath as he climbed back into the driver’s seat. Just before Marco got back into the car, his eyes met Paul’s and he gave the slightest nod. Respect? Fear? Some sign that he approved? Chloe couldn’t tell.

After they’d driven out of sight, Sandee was the first one to start laughing, although Bee’s giggles came right behind.

“Jesus,” said Chloe. “You two look ridiculous.”

“It worked didn’t it?” Bee said.

“Good thing Eddie’s scared of water balloons,” Paul said, taking the “bazooka” from Bee and admiring it.

“What’s the point of having fake guns if you can’t fake people out once in a while?” Bee asked.

“And you!” said Chloe to Sandee. “You’re the sexiest damn guerilla I’ve ever seen.”

“You better believe it,” Sandee said, tossing Chloe the plastic gun. “Now come inside and tell us what that was all about.”

“I don’t exactly know what it was all about for sure,” said Paul as he led them inside. “But we don’t have time to worry about that just this moment. We’ve got a plan to execute.”

“A new plan?” asked Bee excited, still riding the adrenaline high from her showdown with Eddie. “Is it brilliant? Those are my favorite kind.”

“It’s not brilliant,” said Paul. “It’s abso-fucking-lutely brilliant.”

Chloe smiled as the Crew piled back into the house. This was it. This was how life was supposed to be.

Chapter 32

PAUL seethed on the inside, but he did his best to hide it from Chloe as they drove on her scooter over to the house they'd gotten for Winston. He was still angry from his lunch with Chloe, of course. Angry that he had to commit himself to this insane plan of confronting Winston and blowing the whole thing open just to get on Isaiah's good side. He'd been relieved when he realized that the end was in sight. Yes, it had been a kind of defeated, broken, and abused sense of relief, but it had been relief all the same. Winston had used them and killed someone and that hurt like swallowing barbed wire, but at least it was over. They could get back to life as normal.

But then Chloe had made it clear that life as normal was not an option for her and that therefore it was not an option for him either. He'd known she wasn't happy. It was impossible not to know that. He should be happy actually - for months he'd been trying to find some way to improve her mood and had failed at every turn. No party was quite wild enough, no scam entirely satisfying. Now at least he knew what he had to do, even if it was going to be a royal pain in the fucking ass. He'd do what had to be done to keep them together, but that didn't mean he had to be happy about it.

They arrived at ten minutes after 3:00 p.m. Winston greeted them at the door with a smile, ushered them into the living room and offered them drinks from the pitcher of margaritas that he had ready and waiting. Paul and Chloe both accepted and they listened for a while as Winston chattered about what a wonderful, fun place Key West was and how much he liked the people here. There was not a hint of urgency in his voice, not even when the conversation finally did roll back around to more serious matters.

"So," he said, "Any luck on the search for the killer?"

"No," Chloe replied, "There's no sign of him anywhere. Not after last night."

"What happened last night?" Winston asked.

"Paul and Sandee had a little run-in with him over by the library," Chloe explained. "I thought he told you this morning."

“I forgot,” Paul said. “With everything that happened at the meeting, I just somehow assumed you already knew.”

“That’s all right, Paul,” said Winston. “It’s a trying time for us all. Can you tell me what happened?”

“After you left last night, we found the woman Jeanie again. The one Raff says you know from way back.”

“But of course I don’t know her,” Winston reminded him.

“Of course,” said Paul. “Anyway, we found her on the cameras again and tracked her to this little garden by the library. Sandee and I went to catch up with her, and while we were watching her, the killer showed up.” Paul paused to see if Winston was going to react, but the old man just sat there, waiting for him to continue. “Well of course we thought we had our proof right then and there, but no, as it turned out they weren’t in it together.” He paused again, hoping Winston would jump in and say something stupid, but he didn’t. “Turned out, we were wrong. Instead the guy tried to kill her. Stabbed her with a screwdriver. Sandee and I stepped in and sort of saved the day. But the bad guy got away.”

“Which is how you got the nasty cut on your head?” Winston asked.

“Yeah.”

“Looks like it must have hurt quite a bit.”

“Oh yeah,” Paul said, gently touching the tender spot. Winston sat there, waiting for Paul to continue. “And that’s pretty much it. He got away and we’ve been looking for him, but haven’t had any luck.”

“He’s not showed up on any of your cameras?” asked Winston. “And what about your contact, Chloe? What did she have to say?”

“Oh, she led me right to the guy. He was out on an island chilling with some homeless people. But he gave me the slip and I wasn’t able to ever catch up with him after that.”

Winston sat and nodded, sipping his drink. “So what do we do now?” he asked them. “Do you have a plan?”

“We’re still trying to make some sense of the situation,” Paul answered. “In light of all we now know, things are kind of complicated.”

“How so?”

“For starters, there’s the fact that the killer attacked Jeanie. I take that as pretty strong evidence that they’re not working together and that Raff and his Crew aren’t behind Raquel’s murder.”

“Perhaps they had some sort of falling out,” Winston suggested. “Certainly you two know better than most what kind of betrayal Raff is capable of.”

“Possible, I guess,” said Paul, “But it seems unlikely.”

“Unlikely to be sure, but not out of the question. And that is the problem that faces us here, is it not? We just don’t have enough information about what is really going on. In particular, we don’t know anything about the various players and their motivations for doing what they do. Raff may have had a very good reason for betraying his partner. Or maybe she had a very good reason for betraying him. It’s impossible for us to say.

“With others - that is to say, with average people - it’s often a straightforward piece of analysis to determine their motives because their lives are so simple. They work for some monstrous, faceless corporation. They do their time in office or retail purgatory each day and collect their check at the end of the week and go home and watch TV. They have their families and their friends and their hobbies and their problems, all of which box their lives in. It’s easy to figure out why they do the things they do.

“But for us - those of us who truly live free in the world - it becomes infinitely more complicated. We need money and food, certainly. We have friends and families and hobbies, no doubt. But our priorities are our own, as are our methods for achieving them. Working in the lacunae of society, taking what we need when we need it. It is a life as rewarding and fulfilling as it is complex and dangerous. And the more rewarding it becomes, the more difficult it is for outsiders to read your motivation with anything approaching accuracy.

“And that is the problem we face now, trying to solve this murder of poor Raquel. There are too many factors to consider. Too many suspects. We still don’t even know for absolute certain that the killer has anything to do with us. It

seems likely, I agree. Very likely. But we do not know. Nor does it seem likely that we can know. That is our problem and, moreover, it is a problem that doesn't seem to have any easy resolution. Nor even a difficult resolution. It seems destined to remain ambiguous to us, as do so many things in this life."

"Uh huh," said Paul, trying to sort out all the double meanings, hidden warnings and obfuscations in Winston's speech. Was he telling them that they would never understand his motivation and should just let it go? Or was he just throwing up smoke to discourage them about the whole affair in hopes they would give up? Or was he just talking philosophy because he's Winston and that's what he likes to do? Paul suspected some combination of all three.

"So, let's agree that we don't know what we don't know or whatever it is you're saying," said Chloe. "We still have to do something don't we?"

"Of course," said Winston, although something in his tone seemed to suggest that he didn't actually agree.

"Don't we?" Chloe asked again, doubt creeping into her own voice.

"If there is something we can do, then we should do it," he said. "But what to do? I for one am at a bit of a loss."

"What about Isaiah and the rest of them?" asked Paul. "What about his whole plan?"

"As we discussed at the meeting this morning, Paul, it seems all but doomed, doesn't it? Which is a shame. Isaiah's a brilliant, visionary man. But I don't see how it could work."

Chloe started to say something, but Winston kept on before she could get a word out. "But I don't see any reason why the three of us couldn't continue on and do something of our own in the same vein. There are a lot of merits to Isaiah's scheme, although I still think forming an actual legally recognized corporation produces too much exposure and creates power relationships and thought processes that are inherently unfair and unfree. But we three and our two Crews should be able to put our heads together and come up with a more democratic system that could achieve much of what Isaiah is aiming for."

"You mean, have our Crews cooperate?" asked Chloe. "Yours and mine?"

“And others that I know of,” Winston said. “As has been pointed out, I’ve contacts with other groups all across the country and beyond. Organizing that power to some greater goal is a worthy endeavor and one I’ve avoided for far too long. I’m getting old now, and in the years I have left I want to do all I can to make a real difference. And with your youthful energy and creativity and ability leading the way, I think we can.”

Paul sat in awe at the genius of Winston’s surprise gambit. Whatever he’d been expecting the old man to say during this meeting, it wasn’t that. Winston had just offered Chloe and Paul exactly the right thing, almost as if he’d been reading their minds. Chloe idolized Winston and had for years (and Paul admired him a great deal as well), but the old mentor had long kept her at arm’s length, never letting her into his inner circle. Now he was proposing to do exactly that, which would let Chloe spread her wings and expand her activities beyond the shores of Key West, just as she dreamed. And for Paul he was offering a safer alternative. He was saying, get rid of all these murder investigations and Raff and Isaiah and Eddie, and get back to a world you know and love. Only work with someone you trust.

All they had to do was ignore the fact that he’d committed one little murder - a murder he hinted he might have had very good reasons to commit - and they could both have everything that they wanted. Paul didn’t know what to do. Part of him wanted to just say, “Ok!” and be done with it. So did a second part. Even the third part, the doubting part, was doubting its own doubt. He looked over at Chloe and guessed that she was running through a similar set of mental gymnastics, but he couldn’t tell for sure what she was going to do about it.

“That’s...” Chloe started, then stopped. “That’s... It’s a very interesting point you bring up. Lots of interesting points. Lots to think about.”

“No decisions need to be made right away,” Winston assured them. “Think it over. In the meantime, you were absolutely correct when you said we needed to discuss our current plan of action. If we can find this killer, we should, just to be on the safe side.”

“We’re kind of with you about not being sure what to do next,” said Paul. “We’ve been having some hiccups with our camera network that’ve made it pretty difficult to track anyone.”

“But we do have the guy’s pic out to our contacts around town,” Chloe added. “One of them might spot him again, like Cassie did the other night.”

“If he is even still on the island,” Paul said. “After the beating Sandee gave him, he might’ve just made a run for it. We checked the hospital, and he didn’t show up there.” In fact they hadn’t checked the hospital because they knew where he was, but they had to keep up the illusion that they were looking for him for their plan to work.

“It does seem probable that he has gone to ground,” Winston said. “If he’s merely a lackey for one of the other players like Eddie or Raff, then in all likelihood we’ll never see him again.”

“Well,” said Chloe. “There’s only one road out of town, and we’re still tapped into the red-light camera there. If he’s driving out of town, then Bee’s facial recognition software should pick him up.” Paul knew this assertion was a total lie, although it would be nice if they could do something like that. “Of course,” Chloe continued, “If he took a boat outta here, then we’d have no way of knowing.”

“And you already know he’s had access to the water,” Winston pointed out.

“True, true. But the real issue is the damn camera situation,” Chloe said. “Something seriously screwed up is happening to our network, and we’re losing feeds from all over the city. Bee’s doing her best, but it’s not going well.”

“Sounds like the work of an outside force,” said Winston. “Someone trying to put you at a disadvantage.”

“That’s right,” said Chloe. “And certainly Isaiah, Eddie and Raff are all capable of fucking with us like that. So we were going to ask if you could help us out.”

“What can I do?”

“I know it can’t be just you and Lily here in town, right?” said Chloe. Winston smiled and nodded, acknowledging the point. “What would really help us out would be if you could put some of your people on watching our principals - the three other crews. Well, we don’t know where Raff is. So Eddie and Isaiah, anyway.”

“Of course,” said Winston. “It will take me some time to get them in place. But not too much time I think.”

“Perfect,” said Chloe. “And if you could have them all coordinate with Bee? She’s still got the best seat in the house, even with a bunch of our cameras on the fritz. She can coordinate reports from the field and then pass the information on to the rest of us.”

Winston paused for just a moment and Paul suspected that he didn’t like the idea of revealing so many of his assets to them. But he relented with a smile. “That sounds like a good idea. Just give me the number and I’ll start making the calls.”

Chloe pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to Winston. “That’s her cell number and an e-mail address too. If they could report in one way or the other every fifteen minutes or so, that’d be perfect.”

“All right,” said Winston. “How long do you think we should run this level of surveillance? If Eddie or Isaiah spot us watching them, it will only make them more angry. And I’m sure Paul told you how volatile Eddie became this morning.”

“Yeah,” said Chloe. “I don’t want to start a gang war or whatever. But I think just for the next twenty-four hours or so should be fine.”

“I think everything will be sorted out by then,” Paul added. “At that point if we haven’t found the damn guy, we probably never will and Isaiah will have to cancel the whole plan. Then we can talk about other options.”

“It sounds like you’ve thought of everything,” Winston said, standing up. “I’ll go call my people.”

“Great,” said Chloe. “I’m glad you could step up and help out on this.”

“Always, Chloe. For you, anything.”

“I’m going to call Bee and tell her to get everything ready,” Paul said, pulling out one of the two phones he was carrying. “Although knowing her, she’s already finished.”

Paul stepped into the kitchen for a bit of privacy, leaving Chloe and Winston

chatting in the other room about how to organize the surveillance teams. He dialed Bee's number, and she picked up on the first ring.

"Hey, Bee," he said. "Listen. Winston's people are going to help us..."

"Hold on," Bee said. "Listen, we just got a call in from one of our contacts. She's staying in one of our condos, right? Jill's her name."

"Sure, I know her," said Paul. "The park ranger."

"Well, she recognized the guy. The killer guy? And she says she knows where he's staying. Saw him this morning she says, with some other people."

"Shit, really?"

"Yeah. She's working out in the salt marshes by the airport. You know, that nature path back there? If you want to go talk to her, that's where she'll be."

"Absolutely," said Paul. "We'll just finish up here and then go back by the house and get the car and then head out there. Should take us half an hour. An hour maybe."

"She said she'd be there all day," Bee said. "Only park ranger out there so it shouldn't be hard to find her."

"Great. Oh, and hey, Bee, some people of Winston's will be calling you soon. They're going to set up surveillance on Eddie and the others. You're going to coordinate, ok?"

"No problem," said Bee. "I've got everything set up already."

"I knew it," laughed Paul. "Ok, we'll see you in a few." He hung up the phone and headed back into the living room. He didn't want to tell Chloe about the tip in front of Winston. Despite his generous new offer, he still didn't trust him.

"Bee's all set up," he said to them both. "We should get going."

"Right," said Chloe. She turned and gave Winston a hug. "We'll be in touch throughout the day and meet again tonight at 8:00?"

“Sounds good,” he replied.

“Thanks again, Winston,” Paul said as he opened the door for Chloe. “Talk to you soon.”

The two of them were out the door, Paul wondering what exactly Chloe was thinking about Winston’s offer. She gave nothing away as they mounted the scooter and zipped back toward their house. They had to assume they were being watched.

Chapter 33

THEY talked to Winston a lot sooner than Chloe had anticipated. They got home in just over five minutes, and Chloe's phone chimed as soon as she walked through the door. She answered and heard Winston's voice say, "Hello, Chloe. I spoke with some of my people, and they're having some trouble finding Eddie right now. Do you have any idea where he is from your cameras?"

"No, we've got no idea," Chloe said, annoyed with her mentor's gall. He was the one taking down their camera network and here he is asking her to use it to help him! She knew that it was just a delaying tactic, trying to keep her and Paul occupied with some meaningless task while he made his next move - whatever that was. But Chloe had other things she had to do. "Right now our cameras are all fucked up. We'll be here at the house for another hour at least trying to get it sorted out. If you could just give me a call when you find him, that'd be great." She hung up before he could say anything else. The more she let him talk, the more likely she was to give something away.

Bee came down the stairs with a laptop in her hand, which she handed to Paul, who was waiting for it. "This is set up to read right off our feed in the park department security cameras," Bee explained. "You need to get over within a couple hundred yards of the hub, which is at the back of that apartment complex over there, Sandy Gables. Just park by the rear dumpsters and you should be fine."

"Sounds lovely," said Paul. "And we can watch our ranger friend with this?"

"The cameras there have pretty good coverage, so yeah, it shouldn't be a problem."

Paul tucked the laptop under his arm and turned to flash Chloe a smile. "You ready to sit in the car and stare at a laptop screen for a while?" he asked.

"Oh God yes!" Chloe said in mock excitement. "That sounds awesome! And maybe later we can come back here and look at screens on a desktop while eating nails."

"I don't eat nails!" Bee protested.

“You’re missing out,” Paul said. “Yummy, yummy nails. Full of metally goodness.” Bee seemed to realize they weren’t making fun of her and laughed along with their joke.

“Ok,” said Chloe, “Let’s get going.”

They used the car instead of the scooter because it provided more cover and the laptop could plug right into the cigarette lighter (Bee always kept a spare car battery in the trunk just in case they killed the one under the hood). It was also kind of a long drive to the salt marshes, or at least what passed for a long drive on Key West. Out by the airport, the whole area was supposed to be protected wetlands, shielded from development. But real estate ruled in Florida, particularly on small islands like Key West, and several large apartment complexes had managed to somehow circumvent or just ignore regulations and built out into the swamp.

Not that the real estate tycoons were the first to use the marshes for something other than their intended legal purposes, although Chloe had a lot more sympathy for the region’s first cadre of lawbreakers. Ever since the park service cut some paths and laid some bridges through the thick mangroves, the spot had been a favorite spot for cruisers. Men looking for an anonymous midnight rendezvous with other like-minded gents frequented the paths, which also became haunts for prostitutes, drug users and the homeless. Although “out of sight, out of mind” was a truism in Key West as it was elsewhere, at some point the sexual shenanigans became too popular for the local authorities to ignore. And when periodic police raids and undercover stings weren’t enough, they fell back upon the last refuge of the frustrated police state: cameras.

The city had set up cameras all along the nature paths, clamped right onto the sides of trees and the occasional lamp post. Bee had spliced her way into the feed several months ago, but the park was too far away from the rest of their wireless camera grid in old town, so it wasn’t part of the main network. She had plans to some day put some boosters out there to piggyback the signal so it was in range, but the truth was, they’d never seen much need in having access to these camera feeds. The party gave them more than enough voyeuristic opportunities if that’s what they wanted, and not much else went on out here worth looking at.

Chloe parked the car in the back of the Sandy Gables parking lot, right next to

the dumpster as instructed. It did indeed smell as bad as she had feared. The Sandy Gables developers had been one of those companies which had stuck its concrete in the swamp and piled up crappy, cookie-cutter condos. One result was that this position was within range of the wireless transmitter Bee had attached to the city's camera network, so they could pick up the feeds from the comfort of their car.

She watched as Paul browsed through the twenty different camera views, each displayed in groups of four. The park was empty, despite the fact that tourist season was raging around them. Hardly anyone knew about the paths, and the habitual users waited until night (when the cameras were largely ineffective because they had no night-vision capability). It took Paul less than a minute to find the young ranger, standing in a clearing, smoking a cigarette, back to the camera but in plain view.

"Shouldn't be too hard to find," said Paul.

"Nope," agreed Chloe. "Especially with that cigarette stinking up the place."

They sat and watched for twenty minutes as the ranger wandered idly around the clearing, occasionally pushing some dirt and leaves around with a rake. Paul cycled through the camera feeds every minute or so, watching for anyone else entering the park. And soon enough, their patience was rewarded. A beat-up old pickup truck pulled into one of the small parking areas, and a man slowly levered himself out of the cab. His right hand was bandaged and he walked with a limp. In his left hand he held a flashlight. It was the killer. Winston's friend.

"There!" said Paul. "He's coming in from the West entrance."

Chloe thumbed a speed dial button on her phone and said, "We see him, coming in from the west."

"Well, that pretty much proves that, doesn't it?" Paul said, his voice grim.

"Yeah," said Chloe through clenched teeth. There was no doubting it now. Winston was not only in league with the killer, he was still providing the man with targets. In this case, an innocent park ranger.

She had backed into the parking space, making a quick getaway all the easier. She screeched out of the lot and zigzagged through the complex's labyrinthine

parking lot on her way to Flagler Road. Although the killer was entering from a location less than a quarter of a mile from where they were parked, it was all swamp and water between the two points. Chloe had to circle all the way back around on South Roosevelt to get to where the killer had parked, which was almost a mile. It should take the killer a little while to find his prey on the winding, wooded trails, whereas they knew exactly where they were going. With a little luck they should beat him there.

They didn't have a little luck though. As she turned onto Roosevelt she found herself right behind a police car. No speeding, no passing. It ended up taking them ten minutes to get into position. At least the cop hadn't decided to check out the salt marshes on top of everything else. They parked right next to the killer's pickup and raced through the woods toward where the killer had gone. Chloe had her stun gun in hand, charged and ready for whatever lay up ahead. She skidded to a halt as she entered the clearing, and Paul plowed right into her back, sending them both sprawling to the ground. Sandee found this very amusing indeed.

"Some cavalry you guys are," he said once he'd stopped laughing. Dressed in a park ranger's khakis with a broad-brimmed hat and shades, Sandee was standing in the middle of the clearing, his left foot resting comfortably on top of the killer's body. He was bound and gagged, pink-furry handcuffs clasping his hands behind his back and a bright red ball-gag strapped to his mouth.

"I see you got him," said Chloe as she stood up and brushed herself off.

"I always get my man," Sandee said. "You should know that by now."

"See what wearing the right footwear for the occasion can do?" Paul said as he regained his feet, pointing to Sandee's work boots.

"I know, right? These are steel-toed by the way," said Sandee and gave the prone killer a nudge with the tip of his foot. "Just ask his shins. I jumped him as soon as he came into the clearing, so he never had a chance. I almost feel sorry for him."

"He was here to try and kill you," Paul pointed out.

"I'm not sure about that," Sandee said.

“Why?” asked Chloe.

“Well, he’s lame and has a broken hand, and he didn’t bring a weapon, unless you count that.” He pointed across the clearing to the plastic flashlight that had fallen in the dirt. “Even if I’d been some real park ranger and not, well, me, he still would’ve had a hard time killing me.”

Chloe considered these facts. It did seem pretty unlikely that he’d showed up unarmed, expecting to murder someone. She had to rethink the situation. Paul had called Bee from Winston’s house using one of the disposable phones that Winston already knew about. They’d assumed his Crew would be listening in on the call and had laid this trap, with Sandee as the bait. And Winston had fallen for it. It was obvious that Winston had sent the man, but the question was, why?

Now wasn’t the time to sit and ponder such things. “Come on, let’s get this fucker on his feet and take him back to the car.” She and Paul each grabbed an arm and pulled the man up. He grunted and complained through his ball gag, his face more desperate than angry. He was a big guy, solidly built and in his early 50s maybe. Holding his arm, Chloe felt the solid muscle of his bicep. Not the physique of a gym rat, but rather of someone who engaged in a lot of physical labor or exercise. His deep tan and weathered face spoke of a life spent outdoors in the elements.

With his limp it took them ten minutes to get back to the car. They decided to leave his truck where it was and forced him into the back seat with Sandee sitting next to him as a guard.

“Should we take his gag off?” said Paul. “Won’t it look strange to people as we drive by?”

“This is Key West,” Sandee said. “He won’t be the first old queen to be driven around town in handcuffs and ball gag. But are we really going to take him back to our house?”

“Might as well,” Chloe said as she started the car. “Winston already knows where we live, and it’s the most secure place on the island as far as we’re concerned.”

“And then what?” Sandee asked. “I’m not really down with the whole nonconsensual torture thing.”

“We won’t torture him,” Paul said. “We’ll ask him a couple questions and see what he says. And then, worse comes to worst and he’s not helpful, we turn him over to Isaiah and let those guys figure it out.”

They drove back to the house, and while Chloe did notice that a few other drivers gave their prisoner a surprised look or two, most of them were laughing as they did so. It was Key West. She pulled the car into the side yard and, much as they’d moved Raquel’s body into the shed less than two days ago, they now unloaded their prisoner. Time to get some answers.

Chapter 34

PAUL had never interrogated a prisoner before. Well, ok, that one time with Raff, but that hardly counted. That had ended up being more of a negotiation than anything else. Now the four of them were in Bee's shed, standing around a known killer who was handcuffed to a wooden chair in the center of the room. This was way outside their area of expertise and no one seemed quite sure how to proceed. They all just kind of stared at each other, even Chloe seeming unsure or unwilling to do whatever they needed to do next.

"I guess we could take off the gag," said Bee. "This shed is soundproofed." She'd spent a week soundproofing the workshop so she could use her power tools at all hours of the night without bothering the neighbors. Of course since then she'd taken to spending all her time with her cameras upstairs in the main house, but the soundproofing remained.

Sandee looked around at the rest of them for approval, and when both Paul and Chloe nodded, he stepped forward and undid the gag. The man gasped for breath as he spit the red rubber ball from his mouth with a wet plop. They all watched as he worked his jaw open and shut with slow, pained motions.

"Can I have some water?" he asked the room, looking in turn at each of them. No one moved or said anything. "Water?" he repeated.

"Sure," said Chloe. "We'll get you some water..." she started and then stopped. Then she started again, "But first you need to answer some questions."

He worked his jaw side to side now and ran his tongue over his lips.

"First I need some water," he said.

"We can give him some water can't we?" asked Bee in apparent discomfort.

"Bee, would you go inside and get him a glass," said Paul, realizing there wasn't any water out in the shed anyway. "Then we can talk about whether we'll let him have some to drink."

The man just nodded at this. Sandee, who was still behind him, shot Paul a kind

of pained, confused look the meaning of which Paul didn't understand. Chloe never took her eyes off the killer in the chair.

"What's your name?" she asked him. He didn't respond. "Come on, what's your name? Make one up if you want. We've got to call you something."

"Call me Jimmy," he said after a moment's thought. Then he started humming to himself.

"Ok, Jimmy," said Chloe. "Do you know why you're here?"

He just kept humming. And soon enough Paul recognized the tune as "Son of a Sailor" by Key West legend Jimmy Buffet. "Jimmy," thought Paul, "that's cute." The guy was beat up, tied up and locked in a shed and he was playing games with them, all of which led Paul to believe that he was probably a lot better equipped to resist interrogation than they were to do the actual interrogating. Better to try and meet him on their own ground, which was trickery, confusion and deceit.

"This is stupid," said Paul. "He's not going to tell us anything."

"Not telling us anything would be stupid," Chloe responded. Paul realized that she thought he was trying some sort of good cop/bad cop thing. He hoped she picked up on his actual tactics as they unfolded.

"He doesn't really need to tell us anything, does he?" said Paul. "I mean, what is it that he even knows that we don't?"

Chloe took her eyes off "Jimmy" for the first time since they'd sat him down there and glanced over at Paul. Their eyes met for the briefest moment, but that was enough for an unspoken signal to pass between them. They'd worked together so long that one of them following the other's lead in a con had become second nature. "That's a good point," Chloe said, prompting Paul to keep going.

"We know he killed Raquel. We've got pictures of him coming in and out of the guesthouse she was staying at. And we've got pics of him following her into Truman Annex from the time of the murder. So we know he killed her, and we know he dumped the body back in her room. Which means he had some help. There was someone else involved."

Chloe picked up the story. "And we know he was hiding out on Christmas Tree Island, and we know that after that he tried to kill a woman by the library."

"Where Sandee kicked his ass," Paul interjected.

"Where Sandee kicked his fucking ass up and down the street," Chloe agreed. "Which sent him running like a limp rabbit back to his hole. Or, more precisely, to a boat where he met with his master. None other than my old friend and mentor Winston, who welcomes him with open arms."

"And that same Winston," Paul said, "Had just been here at our house, looking at his picture and claiming not to recognize him. And then, when we set up a meeting with an innocent park ranger on a telephone call made from Winston's house. Who should show up at the park? Our friend the killer here," he said gesturing to the man. "So we know - without a shadow of a doubt we know that you killed Raquel and tried to kill at least one other woman."

"Sounds like he's got a problem with women," said Chloe. "Maybe some kind of crazed Jack the Ripper type."

"Could be," said Paul. "Could be. I mean he's obviously pathological in some way to kill people like that. But the question is, why's Winston working with him?"

"That is the question," Chloe agreed. "Although I'm not sure it matters."

"Doesn't matter?" asked Paul, surprise in his voice although in fact he'd been planning on saying something very similar himself.

"Nope. Doesn't matter."

"Why's that?"

"Because there's no excuse for trying to kill two women like that."

"And succeeding at killing one of them," Paul pointed out.

"And succeeding at murdering one of them. Exactly," said Chloe. "The 'why' doesn't matter. All that matters is that he did it and that makes him an evil fuck. I've got no use for him or for Winston anymore. They're both murdering fucks."

“So we should just forgo the interrogation and turn him right over to Isaiah,” Paul suggested.

“That’s exactly what we should do.”

Throughout their discussion they’d both been staring at “Jimmy,” who stared down at the floor the whole time, pretending to ignore them. Hell, maybe he really had been ignoring them. But Paul thought not. And he also thought that if Winston trusted him enough to use him as a killer, then the two of them might just be pretty close. They were about the same age. “Jimmy” could’ve been with Winston’s Crew for decades, which meant he might also share Winston’s motivations and goals. Time to test that theory.

“And you know what else?” said Paul. “Turning him over to Isaiah pretty much wraps up all the loose ends. We give him Jimmy and tell him and Eddie and the rest about Winston’s betrayal. Then the plan gets to move forward and we get an even better position in the shadow corporation because we saved the day.”

“Exactly,” said Chloe. “We’re the fucking heroes of the hour. Fact is, we can pretty much demand to be given Winston’s position on the board. Isaiah will love us. That woman Jeanie will love us for saving her and clearing her name. Even Eddie will love us.”

“Well, maybe not love us,” said Paul. “But once we explain that it was Winston who was framing him for the fall all along, I’m sure we’ll gain his grudging respect.”

“Good enough for me.”

“Me too,” said Paul.

They were both silent for a moment, waiting for “Jimmy” to say something, but he still hadn’t reacted. “Let’s give Isaiah a call,” Paul said, taking his phone from his pocket. “Tell him he can come collect his prize.”

“Sounds good,” said Chloe. Then, to the killer, “You got anything to say before we make the call, Jimmy? Wanna sing us a song about margaritas or something?”

The killer raised his head for the first time and spoke, “Where’s that glass of

water?”

“I’m sure Isaiah has water,” Paul said, dialing the phone. “I’ll put it on speaker so you can hear.”

The man said nothing and they all listened as the phone rang at the other end. After the fourth ring someone picked it up. Isaiah’s voice said, “Hello?”

“Isaiah, it’s Paul. We found the killer. Do you want him?”

There was a brief pause at the other end as Isaiah processed the statement and question. “Absolutely,” he said.

“Jimmy” finally relented. He nodded his head vigorously, mouthing the words “hang up,” silently. Paul was impressed that the man had the presence of mind to keep quiet and not reveal his voice over the phone line, giving Paul more options as to how to proceed.

“Great,” said Paul. “We should be able to turn him over in a couple hours. Where do you want us to bring him?”

“Call me again when you’re ready. I’ll tell you where to rendezvous.”

“Sounds good,” said Paul.

“Excellent work, Paul,” Isaiah said. “I’m very impressed.”

“Thanks, I’ll see you soon.” Paul hung up the phone and looked to the killer.

“So, did you have something you wanted to tell us now?”

“Call Winston,” the man said.

“Why?” asked Chloe.

“He’ll explain everything. Call him and he’ll lay the whole thing out for you.”

“Why don’t you lay the whole thing out for us?” asked Paul.

“Not my place. I’m no snitch. But Winston will want to talk with you. You should give him a chance.”

“Or what?” asked Chloe.

“Or you’ll have a gang war on your hands.”

THEY left him in the shed with a glass of water and Sandee standing guard over him. Back inside the living room, Paul flopped down onto the couch and rubbed his eyes. His hands were shaking from the tension he’d built up during the interrogation. Chloe collapsed down next to him and leaned close, her head on his shoulder.

“That was kinda weird,” she said.

“Kinda,” Paul agreed, realizing that interrogating a prisoner in his shed, while definitely weird, wasn’t nearly as weird for him as it should be for a normal person. “We don’t live a very normal life do we?”

“Nope,” said Chloe. “We sure as fuck do not.” They both sat there for a long moment, staring at the blank TV screen across the room.

“And that’s good?” asked Paul.

“Isn’t it?” asked Chloe.

Paul thought about it for a second and didn’t know if it was good or not. But he said, “It is good.”

“More often than not anyway,” Chloe added.

“Yeah, more often than not.”

There was another long moment of silence, maybe as much as a minute while they both thought about their situation and what the hell they should do next.

“Gang war doesn’t sound good, does it?” Paul asked.

“No.”

“So we should call Winston?”

“Yeah.”

Paul waited for her to move toward any of the dozen or so phones in the house.

“Are you going to call him?” he asked.

“Do you want to?”

He really didn’t. “I really don’t,” he said.

“So you want me to.”

“We could ask Bee to do it.”

“Let’s do that,” Chloe said and she stood up. “That’s a good plan.”

“It’s certainly a plan,” said Paul as he took the hand she offered and lifted himself off the couch.

They went upstairs and knocked on Bee’s door. “Come in,” she said, but of course when Paul turned the knob, it was locked. They waited while she undid the deadbolts and removed the security tape. She was in full crisis mode, and Paul looked around the hallway with some trepidation, knowing that Bee’s homemade defense systems were active and hoping that they wouldn’t go off when they weren’t supposed to.

“Hi, guys,” Bee said as she opened the door and ushered them in. “I was just about to call you.”

“You mean come see us?” asked Chloe.

“With the door locked, it’s faster and safer to call.”

“Fine. What were you going to call us about?”

“We just got an e-mail from Eddie.”

“Is it an e-vite to his birthday party?” Paul asked.

“No,” said Bee. “It’s a picture of you and Chloe and Sandee and that guy down in the shed.”

“That’s not good,” said Chloe. “Let’s see.”

Bee pointed to one of the screens, which showed an open e-mail addressed to the public account Paul had given the other Crews to use as a contact. It contained a pic of the four of them getting into their car out by the salt marshes. It showed just their heads and shoulders, so you couldn't tell that the killer had his hands bound. The caption said, "Nice company you keep - Eddie."

"Fuck," he said. "They were following us."

"We'll worry about this later," Chloe stated. "At least he tipped us off that he knows we have Jimmy."

"Why would he do that?" asked Paul.

"Because he's showing off. Or because he's stupid."

"Or because he's forcing our hand," Paul said. "We have to assume he sent one of these to Isaiah too."

"Or at the very least he's letting us know that he will send it to Isaiah if we don't..." Paul lost his train of thought. "If we don't what? What's he trying to force our hand into doing?"

"Assuming it's really Eddie who sent it," Bee said. "I mean, it's just from some anonymous Yahoo account. It could've been Isaiah or Winston who sent it."

"Or Raff," Chloe added.

"Or fucking Raff," said Paul. "I wondered what had become of him."

"Oh well, like I said, let's worry about this later. Even if it's only ten minutes later." Chloe turned to Bee. "Can you call Winston and ask him to come by here as soon as possible? Tell him we found something."

"And tell him to come through the back." Paul added. "We're probably being watched."

"I'm not picking up anybody on our external cameras. We can't be being watched. I'd see it. I'd know." Bee said in a rush, pointing over her shoulder to the wall of screens. Her voice was nervous, almost shrill.

“Winston doesn’t know that. The more paranoid he is, the better,” Paul said, although in truth he thought they probably were being watched, but he didn’t want Bee to panic. He glanced at Chloe and she gave him the nod. She understood.

“Thanks, Bee,” said Chloe. “Just call Win and get him over here. We’ll go get ready for him.”

THEY waited for him on the back porch, having decided that it was better not to let him back into the house if at all possible. Paul’s gaming laptop was still there where he’d left it earlier, and he fought the urge to pass the time by checking in on his character in Metropolis 2.0. He knew it would just piss Chloe off. She was busy pacing back and forth. They’d agreed upon a tactic to take once Win got there and there wasn’t anything else they needed to talk about. Getting too specific would just make them sound rehearsed when they actually talked to him, and Winston was good enough to notice the tiniest chink in their armor.

“You’ll wear a hole in your floor,” said a voice from beyond the screen door, startling Paul. It was Winston, who hadn’t made a sound as he approached.

Chloe opened the door and said, “Hey.”

“What have you found?” asked Winston. He had started to move toward the door that led into the rest of the house, but Chloe had gone back over to sit next to Paul. She gestured for Winston to take the seat opposite her.

“It’s been a tough few hours,” Chloe said, her voice weary.

“These are the times that try men’s souls,” her former mentor replied. “But we must stay focused.”

“I know,” said Chloe. “It’s just hard, you know?”

“I do know.”

“I mean, sometimes we make decisions in the heat of things that turn out to be big mistakes.”

“We all do,” Winston agreed. “The real test though is how long it takes for us to realize we’ve made a mistake and how quickly we can turn around and do the

right thing.”

“That’s what Paul was saying,” Chloe said, patting him on the knee.

“We’ve kind of screwed things up,” Paul said, taking his cue. “We didn’t know it at the time, but now we might’ve really messed things up.”

Winston gave him a reassuring smile and leaned back in his chair. He seemed to be enjoying the role of wise teacher. “I’m sure it’s not as bad as it seems. It’s often impossible to get perspective when you’re caught in the eye of the storm.”

“You have to understand,” said Chloe, “We were just reacting to circumstances. So much was happening we had to do something. How were we to know it would fuck things up?”

“We were just going off the information we had,” Paul added. “Which is all you can ever do, right?”

“Of course,” said Winston. “It is the way of the world.”

Paul continued. “And now we’ve got Eddie breathing down our necks and Isaiah has all these expectations. And someone’s screwing with our cameras and we’re understaffed and…”

“And we’re really sorry,” said Chloe. There were tears in her eyes. “We didn’t mean to.”

“Didn’t mean to do what?” asked Winston.

“Catch your friend,” Chloe responded, looking Winston right in the eye.

“What friend?” Winston asked. Although it didn’t surprise him, Paul was disappointed that Winston hadn’t shown the slightest bit of surprise or fear. His face was a mask of curiosity.

“Your friend you sent to the salt marshes,” said Chloe. “Your friend you met on the boat last night. You know, your friend who killed Raquel.”

Winston smiled in apparent confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re not really going to make me get the pictures, are you?” asked Chloe.
“The pictures of the two of you together on that boat. The pictures of him trying to jump that park ranger in the marshes. The pictures of Sandee disguised as that park ranger kicking his ass. The pictures of him tied up with a gun to his head.”

“Or we could play you the tape of him telling us to call you,” said Paul. “Telling us that you would explain everything. So go ahead. If you could just explain everything, that would be nice.”

“Really fucking nice,” said Chloe.

Winston sat in his seat, the smile frozen on his face. And although nothing had changed in his expression, what had at first seemed a confused grin to Paul now somehow looked like a smug sneer. “I should make you play the tape and show the pictures. Just to teach you a lesson about bluffing. But I suppose it’s not strictly necessary.” He looked around the porch. “But I’d prefer to talk inside, out of the line of sight of directional microphones.”

“That’s fine,” said Chloe, standing up. “We’ve already cleared all the bugs you planted inside, so no one who shouldn’t be can listen in.” She opened the back door into the rest of the house.

Paul and Winston stood at the same time, but before Winston could walk through the door, Paul stopped him. “We just need to make sure you’re not carrying anything,” he said, grabbing Winston’s arm.

Winston gently removed Paul’s hand from him, saying, “Careful, son. That arm’s tender. I got shot in that shoulder helping a friend out of a jam.” Not the most subtle reminder that Paul and Chloe had indeed once gotten Winston shot. Winston pulled his cell phone, wallet, and key ring from his pocket and handed them to Paul, who placed them on the table next to his gaming laptop. Chloe patted him down but didn’t find anything else. “Satisfied?” he asked.

“No,” said Chloe. “Wait here.” She went inside and came back out a few seconds later with a white robe from the Hilton draped over her arm. “Here,” she said.

Winston looked ruefully at the robe and sighed in resignation. He kicked off his shoes, dropped his shorts and unbuttoned his shirt. He stood naked on the porch for a moment, arms stretched out to each side as he turned slowly in place. He cocked his head to one side and looked at Chloe. She nodded that she was

satisfied. Winston took the robe and put it on. “This is a nice robe.”

“You can keep it,” said Chloe as she stepped inside. “Assuming we get an explanation and don’t have to lock you in the shed with your friend.”

Paul glanced around, wondering how many of Winston’s Crewmembers were waiting just out of sight and just how long they had before they came storming to his rescue. He wondered if Bee’s defenses would hold up.

Chapter 35

THEY were in the living room now, and Chloe had never felt more uncomfortable in her life. She'd hoped against all odds that Winston would break down, even a little, when they revealed that they knew he was a friend of the killer's and that they'd caught him. She'd dreamed of a tearful confession. But no. Instead he'd done what she'd actually expected him to do - put on a stone face and stared them down. He just sat there, waiting for her to ask him questions. Waiting for her to confront the man who'd been the closest thing she'd had to a father in twenty years.

"You going to tell us what's going on or not?" she finally asked.

"Why don't you tell me what you think is going on, and I'll tell you if you're right," he said.

She started to argue but bit the words back. Things would go faster if she just played along. He was either going to tell her or not, and she didn't have time to make him tell the tale on anything other than his own terms.

"Fine," she said. But then she wasn't sure where to begin. She was mad as hell at him, but she still couldn't quite bring herself to openly accuse him of murder. Not right to his face. Paul didn't seem to have the same reservations.

"Ok, I'll play along," Paul said. "Here's how it went down, at least the way we see things. Correct me if I get any of this wrong." Winston nodded in understanding and Paul continued. "You and your friend got here a few days before we actually saw you get here. You knew Raquel was coming and you instructed your friend to follow her."

Winston nodded.

"And follow her he did. We have him on camera doing just that. He waited until she was alone, which wasn't hard, because she was a bit of a loner right? But anyway, he tipped her off that he was following her, hoping that she'd try something stupid. You knew Raquel was too confrontational to let someone following her go uncontested."

Winston shook his head. "You give me too much credit. My 'friend' as you call him just got spotted because he was sloppy. He wasn't supposed to be."

"Even so, he saw his opportunity when it came. He followed Raquel to the Ft. Taylor Park. He hopped the fence and chased after her. But she was waiting for him on the nature trail. She jumped him and they fought. He killed her."

"And he wasn't supposed to," Winston said. "She attacked him. He defended himself. In the fight her head got hit..."

"He hit her on the head," Chloe corrected.

"And she died," Winston finished.

"And then he called you. And you or some people from your Crew met him on the beach in a boat. They carried her to the boat from the woods and at some point she got wet. They took her to a car or van - probably parked at the bight where we saw your other boat - and loaded her in the back. Then your friend and at least one other person broke into her room and lifted her up through the back window and put her back in her bed. All this while Chloe and I were meeting you and Lily at your other boat."

Winston nodded once more.

"And you came to the meeting with Isaiah and acted like you didn't know where Raquel was. And when she didn't show up you encouraged us to go and look for her. You suggested that she might be hurt or in trouble. So we stopped the meeting and everyone went out to try and see what happened to Raquel.

"And then we found her. We probably found her faster than you thought we would. My guess is you were going to 'find' her yourself, but you needed to take some time to make it look good. Then we beat you to it." The old man said nothing, which Paul must have taken to mean he was right, so he pressed on. "As it turned out, this wasn't a big deal, or so you thought at the time. You were pretty sure your friend had covered his tracks well, and the end result was the same - one of the Crews found the body, not the cops, and we all got your message loud and clear."

"You thought Isaiah's plan was dangerous and a really bad idea," said Chloe added. "So bad that it had gotten Raquel killed. You wanted to scuttle the

negotiations from the beginning.”

“I did,” agreed Winston.

“Then why come at all?” asked Chloe. “Why participate? Why suggest Isaiah have his meeting here, in our town? Why not just tell him to fuck off?”

Winston didn’t answer so Paul answered for him. “Because he didn’t want Isaiah’s plan to succeed no matter what. With the meeting here, he’d have us to help control the situation. He could use us as an extra weapon in his arsenal against Isaiah. Or as patsies if everything went to hell.”

“Not as patsies,” Winston said. “I wouldn’t have done that. But I did use you, I admit that. You were an unknown quantity in the equation, something Isaiah and the others couldn’t totally prepare for.”

“But why?” asked Chloe again. “Why do you care what Isaiah fucking does?”

“Because it’s wrong,” Winston insisted, a hint of passion creeping into his voice for the first time. “It’s buying into the enemy’s world view. And when you do that, you become the enemy. He wanted to create a corporation. A corporation. The most diseased, parasitic social institution ever invented. And he wanted to turn us into something just like them.”

“That’s a reason for you not to join,” said Chloe. “Not a reason to stop him. Not a reason to kill a woman...”

“It’s foolish,” Winston interrupted. “Corporations have names. Names have power. You give something a name and you give the enemy something to hang onto. Something to look for. Something the FBI could get subpoenas for and form task forces to hunt down. Something to infiltrate. It’s the oldest rule of magic, and the powers that be know it. To know a thing’s name is to have power over it.”

And there it was. The crack in Winston’s armor. Just for a second - a split second - he’d dropped his guard and Chloe had seen through to what was really going on. Three little letters. FBI. Winston had been part of the Weather Underground in the ’70s, which the FBI had hunted down for years. He was a former ’60s radical who’d lived for a decade as a wanted man. And then the world had moved on and stopped caring about old hippie radicals, and Winston had lived a

happy life off the grid and under the radar. But it was a new era now - the war on terror had brought the FBI and law enforcement in general a slew of new powers, new funding and new needs to justify their expenses. Winston's Crew wasn't the Mafia. They certainly weren't al Qaeda. And as it stood, they weren't worth looking into. But if there was suddenly some new quasilegal corporate entity taking down major corporations and financing crimes and cons across the globe, well, that would indeed be something the FBI might be interested in. And Winston didn't want that. For all his talk of revolution and overthrowing The Man, the truth was that he was complacent in his comfortable little world he'd built for himself.

"You're scared," said Chloe, looking right into his eyes. "You did all this because you're scared."

Winston just looked away. For the first time in her memory, he couldn't meet her gaze. He said nothing, and she knew that she was right. He was a frightened old man, and in his terror he'd lashed out at what scared him. And in lashing out, he'd killed Raquel.

"How's Jacob?" Winston asked, changing the subject. Chloe let him.

"Is that his name?" she asked.

"It's what I call him."

"He's in the shed with Sandee."

"Who doesn't really have a gun to his head I assume."

"He doesn't really need one," Paul pointed out. Chloe could tell from his voice that Paul was angry. Probably as angry as she was that all their recent troubles were the direct result of Winston's paranoia.

"I'm sure that's true," Winston said. "I'd like to see him."

"Nuh uh," said Chloe, shaking her head. "Not until we sort this all out."

"What is there to sort out?" asked Winston.

"What isn't there to sort out?" retorted Paul. "We haven't decided what to do

with him or what to do with you for that matter. Or what to tell Isaiah.”

“Why tell Isaiah anything?” Winston asked. “This is between just us, correct?”

“We told Isaiah we’d found the killer,” Chloe said, wishing now that they hadn’t, if only because it would give them more options.

“Tell him he escaped. Tell him you had the wrong man. Leave Isaiah and his Crew out of this. If you get him involved, everything becomes much more complicated.”

“And then there’s Eddie...” Paul started to say. “He...”

Chloe tugged on her right ear as if it was itching, a sign she and Paul had developed when they first arrived in Key West. It meant shut up. She didn’t want Winston to know that Eddie knew about Jacob. Not until she’d gotten him to suggest a plan of his own for dealing with the situation. Once she knew what Winston wanted to have happen, it would be much easier for her to decide what she was going to actually let happen.

Paul got the signal, like he always did. “He’s going to want someone to hang this murder on. And he knows it wasn’t him or his crew that did it, no matter how much you try and shift the blame to him.”

“So we shift the blame to your old friend Raff,” Winston said. “He’s as likely a candidate as any.”

“And Raff will just go along with that I’m sure,” said Paul. “Eddie’s not going to believe anything we say about him if they’re friends.”

“Raff left town. My people saw him get on a plane to Ft. Myers. And with him on the lam, he looks very guilty indeed. Besides, isn’t he the one you warned Isaiah about? Isaiah will accept that Raff and his Crew are the culprits. Even if he does not have full faith in your explanation, it will placate him for the moment and, as I’m sure you desire more than anything, get him out of your town and your lives.”

“So you think we should just let your friend go and forget everything we know about what really happened,” said Paul.

“I never advise anyone to forget anything,” said Winston, smiling for the first time since Chloe had called him out for being scared. “I just recommend that you keep your own counsel and not tell Isaiah or Eddie anything they don’t need to know.”

“So you get what you want,” Paul said. “Isaiah’s plan goes down the drain, at least for the time being.”

“And you get what you want, Paul. You get your life back, with all these pesky outsiders gone,” replied Winston. “Isn’t that what you two want?”

“What if we want more?” asked Chloe. “What about getting compensated for all the time and money we lost by getting dragged into this nonsense?”

“Name a figure that’s fair and it’s yours,” said Winston too fast, showing just another hint of what looked like desperation to Chloe’s trained eye. Winston never bought people off, certainly not friends. He seemed to realize his mistake and backpedaled at once, saying, “As long as it is actually fair, of course.” But the damage was done. If he was willing to buy them off then she knew he was more than a little worried that she and Paul might not play along.

“What about your promise earlier?” asked Chloe. “About you and us forming a group like Isaiah’s. About our Crews working together.”

“To be honest, I didn’t think you’d trust me enough after all this to want to work with me that close,” said Winston. He was testing her, calling her bluff. He was right of course - she didn’t trust him at all, and if she pretended otherwise he’d know she was lying.

“I don’t trust you,” said Chloe. “But I might be able to work something out with some of the other Crews that you’re in contact with. Isaiah wanted you because of your contacts, right? Well now that’s what I want. I want a rundown on all the Crews you know about. Nothing too specific - just general areas of expertise, what city or cities they run in and how many members they have. And their general character. You give me the whole catalog and I’ll pick three. You give me the contact info for those three and promise to leave us all alone from now on.”

“And this brings you what benefit?” asked Winston.

“The benefit is our business. You can figure it out yourself.” The benefit would be that she and Paul could start to put together their own alliance, modeled along what Isaiah had laid out. It wouldn’t be as big or powerful, but it would be a start. And it would extend their reach and their lives beyond this damn island. Assuming Paul would go for it of course, but that was an argument for another time.

“I think we could work something out along those lines,” Winston agreed. “Now if you’ll let me talk to Jacob...”

“No way,” said Paul. Chloe could tell that he was still angry, although she wasn’t sure if it was at Winston or at her or at both of them. But he’d never contradict her in front of a mark and so he kept whatever was bothering him to himself and pushed for a better deal. “You give us the rundown on your contacts now. Right here and right now. We go over them, we pick our three and then we make sure they’re legit.”

“That will take hours,” Winston pointed out. “And I need to consult my notes...”

“Oh, I call bullshit on that,” Paul said. “You told me it’s all in your head. The only place thieves and hackers can’t get at it.” He stood up and went to get a pad of paper and pen from the kitchen counter by the phone. “Well, I’ll meet you halfway. I won’t use any computers. But I’m going to have to write this shit down.”

Winston sighed and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eyes with his hands. He looked very, very tired all of a sudden, although Chloe suspected this was just another mask he was adopting. The world-weary veteran who might not remember all the right details. “Just make sure you burn that paper when we’re done.”

“Of course,” said Paul, tossing the pen and paper to Chloe. “You two get started. I’ll brew you some coffee. Don’t want you falling asleep on us, old man.”

Chapter 36

THEY'D been at it an hour when the phone rang. They had no way of knowing if Winston was just making all these people up or if they were actually real Crews out there in the wide world, but he'd gone through about half of his list already, and Chloe's head was beginning to swim with the possibilities. It would be hard to choose just three. It might prove actually harder to choose three that weren't really traps.

The truth was, this whole exercise was a stalling tactic to allow her some more time to decide what exactly she wanted to do about Winston. Turning him over to Isaiah along with the killer went against her every instinct. Well, every instinct except her desire for revenge, which loomed large in her brain, like a storm cloud ready to burst at any moment. She wanted to believe that Winston's info would actually be useful in some way - useful enough to justify letting him and his friend go.

It was Bee calling on the phone from upstairs. Chloe answered her cell and heard Bee say, "Eddie's outside. And he's got his friends with him. And they've got guns."

Chloe's heart jumped into her throat. "Ok, lock the place down."

"Cops or no cops?" Bee asked.

"No cops!" Chloe said, her voice too loud. Paul and Winston both looked at her in surprise. "And call Sandee." She clipped the phone back onto her pants and put the wireless earpiece on so she could remain in contact with Bee.

"What's going on?" Paul asked. He'd taken over note-taking duties after fifteen minutes of Chloe's painfully slow stenography. "What cops?"

"Eddie's back," she said. "Bee says he's got guns."

"Fuck," said Paul, standing up and stuffing the notes he'd taken into his back pocket.

"They're coming to the door," Bee said in her ear. "Three of them that I can

see.”

“They’re at the door,” Chloe reported as she stepped to the front door and threw the deadbolt.

“Can we get out the back?” Winston asked.

“Bee? Back?” Chloe asked.

“I don’t know. The camera back there’s on the fritz...”

“Did you disable our rear cameras?” Chloe asked Winston.

“I suppose I did,” he admitted.

“Well then, no telling how many guns are back there.” Someone pounded on the door, Eddie no doubt. “Who is it?” she asked in a singsong voice.

“It’s Edd-ieeeee!” he shouted back in a matching tone.

“We’re not decent,” Chloe said, motioning for Paul and Winston to head upstairs. Paul grabbed Winston by the arm and dragged him toward the stairs. “Can you come back later?”

“We don’t have to come in,” Eddie shouted. “Just send the guy who murdered Raquel out, and we’ll take off and let you and your trannie friend be indecent together.”

Chloe whispered to Bee, “Where are they? What’s up with Sandee?”

“They’re all by the front door,” Bee said. “Sandee’s locked up tight in the shed, and they don’t seem to have thought about looking in there.”

“Not yet anyway,” whispered Chloe. “Tell Sandee to stay put; we’ll come to him.”

To Eddie she shouted, “I don’t know what the fuck you’re babbling about, but would you please just get the fuck lost!”

Eddie resumed pounding, but the reinforced door shrugged off his blows with ease. “No I will not! We saw you with him! Now either give him to us or we’ll

tell Isaiah.”

“Yeah, you go run to daddy and tell him all about it,” Chloe shouted back as she retreated to the kitchen to lock that door as well. She took a peek out the back window through the porch but didn’t see anyone, which didn’t come close to meaning that there wasn’t anyone out there.

“Let us the fuck in!” she heard Eddie shout from the front. No way the neighbors were not going to notice that. She hoped they didn’t call the cops. As a matter of fact, she should probably be proactive and stop them from doing just that.

“Bee,” she said, “Shut down everything. Lock her up and say goodnight.”

“Really?” Bee asked. “What if we need to call...?”

“There’s no one to call. We’re all here.”

“Ok,” Bee said. “Here goes.”

“I’m coming upstairs,” Chloe said, and she ran back into the front room. As she did, she heard the motors of the automated storm shutters kicking into action. Tough aluminum screens descended from rollers above every window, a common enough safety feature in the hurricane prone keys. Outside the front door she heard Eddie or one of his friends express surprise with a muffled “What the fuck?”

She ran up the stairs as the house around her turned dark. Eddie and company could probably tear off the shutters if they had something to pry them out of their tracks, but it’s not the kind of thing that would go unnoticed, and it would take a lot of time. She was betting they would continue to concentrate on the front door. She wanted to ask Bee for an update but she knew that wasn’t possible. There wasn’t a phone within five blocks of them that worked now unless someone had a satellite phone.

Bee had gotten her hooks right into Verizon’s switching box for the neighborhood and installed a kill switch for just these kinds of occasions. It was controlled by a wireless receiver that Bee could activate with a call from anywhere. More importantly, Bee had similar kill switches in three of the local cell phone towers that provided coverage for this part of the island. No one was going to be talking to anyone for the next hour at least - probably more

depending on how long it took the phone techs to figure out what was wrong.

The door to Bee's room was open, and Paul was standing there, waiting for her. She rushed in, and he slammed it behind her and started throwing deadbolts. Chloe looked at the wall of screens and saw that Bee had them all showing different views from around the house. She saw the interiors of every room from multiple angles along with three different views of the front of the house, two of the side and two of the interior of the shed. Eddie, Marco and the big guy Quentin were all on the front porch, huddled together and trying to decide what to do.

"I thought you said they had guns," Chloe said.

"They do," Bee insisted. "Tucked into the back of Eddie's pants. And the fat one has one too." She clicked at her screens, and one of them showed a piece of video from a few minutes earlier. It was Eddie getting out of a car that was parked across the street and tucking a pistol into his shorts.

"Ok, I believe you."

"If you give me a phone, I can call for help," Winston said.

"No phones," Chloe said.

"I know you don't trust me, but..."

"She means no phones work," said Paul. "We shut down all the phones in the neighborhood."

"Why?" asked Winston.

"So no one can call the cops and so no one can call for reinforcements," Chloe snapped. She was looking at the screens. Sandee and the killer were in the shed. Sandee had a shovel in his hand, ready to take the head off of anyone who came through the front door. On the porch, the boys were still debating tactics.

"Which means you can't call for reinforcements either," Winston pointed out.

"We don't have any reinforcements. And right now we outnumber them."

“Assuming there aren’t more out back,” Winston said.

“And whose fault is it that we don’t know that?” she snapped.

“My people would be able to take care of...”

“Enough!” shouted Paul. “We’re on our own. Let’s formulate a plan.”

“Maybe they’ll go away,” Bee suggested. On the screen they continued to huddle. It looked like Eddie and Marco were arguing. The fat guy stayed out of it.

“If they do come through the door, they’re in for a nasty surprise or two,” Paul said. “I say we let them break themselves on the defenses and sweep up whatever remains.”

“I hate just sitting here like that,” Chloe said. “But I don’t see any other option.”

She watched the screens as the argument on the porch came to some sort of conclusion. Marco tried to use his cell phone but failed to get a signal. He threw the phone at Eddie, who was yelling at him and then stormed down the steps and back toward the car. Eddie flipped him off and then motioned for the big guy to bust down the door. As Chloe watched, Eddie drew the gun from behind him and held it barrel down as the big man slammed his whole body into the door.

Even from their position upstairs and at the back of the house, they felt and heard the building shake from the blow. The guy was sumo big and sumo strong. He slammed again. Chloe knew the deadbolts would hold, but she was worried about the door’s frame, which was no doubt already splintering under the onslaught. She turned to Bee and asked, “Is everything ready?”

“All charged up,” Bee replied, her eyes glued to the screen, her mouse cursor hovering over a button on the screen marked “LIVINGROOM DOOR 1E.”

“This ought to be good,” said Paul.

“He’s pretty big,” Chloe pointed out. “He might be able to take it.”

“No way,” Paul insisted. “He’d have to be an elephant.”

“We’ll see,” she replied with a smile.

About a minute later they did see. The door frame burst on the eighth blow and showered splinters as it gave way and the door came off its hinges. One more kick sent the door crashing back into the room, right on top of the metal plate hidden under the doormat.

“Oh shit,” said Bee. “They’re going to walk right over it.” She moved her cursor off the activate icon on her screen and over to another button marked “LIVINGROOM WALL 2A”

Chloe watched on the screen as Eddie followed the big guy into the room, both of them clambering over the door, which covered an electrical plate that would’ve sent a charge arcing through their bodies strong enough to knock them both unconscious. No one had ever considered the possibility that a broken-down door would cover the defense mechanism. Shit. Now all their furniture was about to be ruined, which totally sucked. She liked that couch.

Eddie was shouting something, waving his gun around like an idiot. It was a revolver, maybe a .38, if she had to guess. Didn’t seem like the kind of penis-replacement, nickel-plated automatic she would’ve assumed Eddie would tote. She guessed that he hadn’t brought a gun at all and had been forced to buy that off some crack dealer or down-on-his-luck local. She hoped he didn’t get trigger happy when...

The room suddenly went white. Even upstairs in Bee’s room they could hear the loud whooshing sound as a tear gas grenade hidden in the room’s ceiling fan filled the whole downstairs with noxious fumes. Fortunately their room was sealed tight, because the entire house was going to stink to high heaven for the next few weeks, she was sure. With the storm shutters down, there was nowhere for the gas to go but out the front door and up the stairs.

There was also nowhere else for Eddie and the Big Guy to go. Eddie, who hadn’t made his way more than a few feet into the house in the first place, retreated back out the door, coughing and wheezing. Chloe could see him stumble down the stairs and into the yard. She didn’t see the gun and hoped he’d dropped it on the floor somewhere. The Big Guy had just run straight ahead when the gas flooded the room, and somehow he’d managed to find his way onto the stairs, where he was now running ahead of the expanding cloud of gas.

Bee watched him on the stairwell camera and clicked the icon marked “STAIRSLIGHT 1,” switching off the light both by the stairs and in the upstairs hall. The internal cameras automatically switched over to night-vision mode. They watched as he fumbled around, tripping on a stair and falling forward onto his hands. He crawled the rest of the way up on all fours and started feeling his way along the hallway. They could hear him coughing from the tear gas.

As he approached the door to Sandee’s bedroom, Chloe watched Bee click three icons in rapid succession, each marked: “2ND FLOOR DOOR CHARGE.” Bee had hollowed out a space inside each door that contained the mechanism from a 100,000-volt stun gun. As soon as something touched the metal doorknobs the device went off, giving a nasty shock. That’s exactly what happened to the Big Guy as he reached for Sandee’s door. The current coursed through him and he screamed, pulling his hand away and falling to the floor in a twitching heap.

Chloe realized another flaw in their system. Ideally she would have loved to rush out into the hall, shock the guy again and subdue him. But odds were he’d be recovered by the time she undid all the locks and seals that Bee’s door had on it. Instead, she had to watch as he shrugged off the pain and shook his head from side to side trying to clear his vision. But his eyes were no doubt still tearing up from the gas, which was now spreading through the upstairs hall as well.

“Look there,” Paul said, pointing to one of the screens showing the outside of the house. Eddie was there with Marco, who’d run forward from the car to help his partner recover from the teargas attack. The two of them were pointing at the house and yelling at one another. As Chloe watched, two more guys she didn’t recognize came running around the side of the house, straight past the shed where Sandee and the killer were holed up. She didn’t recognize them, but they were definitely with Eddie. They must’ve been hiding out back. Good thing they hadn’t tried to escape that way.

The four men seemed to be debating what to do about the gas filled house. Marco was trying to pull Eddie toward the car, but he would have none of it. The two new guys just sort of stood there, staring down at the ground or back at the house. They reminded Chloe of a couple of kids trying to ignore the fact that their parents were fighting in front of them.

Meanwhile, their big house guest had recovered enough to continue feeling his way blindly around the hallway outside their door. He’d learned his lesson about

doorknobs at least, and had made his way to the end of the hall and the bathroom door (which wasn't electrified). The guy felt along the edges of the door as he stood up. Unlike Bee's door, the bathroom wasn't reinforced at all, and it gave a little as he leaned against it. The man didn't even have to try hard - one shoulder slam and it popped open. He flipped on the light switch and disappeared inside, shutting the door behind him.

"Where's the bathroom camera?" Chloe asked.

"There is no bathroom camera," Bee said. "I thought that would be weird."

"Unlike having cameras all over the fucking city, including bathrooms at the party?"

"But not in our bathrooms! That's icky."

Chloe looked around Bee's room. "Fine. Where's a gas mask?"

"In the chest by the bed," Bee replied.

"What're you doing?" Paul asked.

"I'm going to get that guy when he comes out," she said, opening the chest. It contained a jumble of gadgets and devices, most of them in pieces. But there were two gas masks. She took one for herself and tossed the other to Paul. "You want to help?"

He looked down at the mask in his hands and sighed. His forehead still had a nasty bruise from his fight with the killer. "Yeah, of course."

Chloe rooted through the chest some more and came up with a pair of handcuffs and some pepper spray, ignoring the fact that Bee also kept a vibrator with her other gear. She glanced at the screen to see that Marco and Eddie were still arguing in the front yard. The other two had retreated to the street where they were talking to one of the neighbors who'd come outside to see what all the fuss was about. They were probably trying to convince the old man that the white smoke pouring out the busted down front door was no big deal.

Paul finished unlocking and unsealing the door, and already they could smell the gas seeping in through the cracks. "Do you have any other gas masks for us?"

Winston asked, speaking up for the first time since the siege began.

“Under the bed,” said Bee. “Could you get me mine?”

Winston knelt by the bed and pulled out a long, clear plastic storage bin that was full of more gadgets and gear. “Which one’s yours?” he asked as he opened the box, but it was immediately clear to everyone. There were three gasmasks in there, one of which Bee had modified heavily to look just like a Hello Kitty face. “Never mind, I found it.”

Bee and Winston donned their masks, and Chloe and Paul waited by the door. “Ok, we’re going to get rid of this guy and then we need to bug out,” Chloe said. “Bee and Win, load one of those containers with backup drives and whatever else Bee wants to take. And Bee, turn off the security on the back door, ok? Once we’re done with the big guy, lock this place up - but non-lethal, ok? We’re gonna have cops and probably firemen here pretty soon, and the last thing we need is one of them getting zapped.”

“Bug out?” said Bee, her voice barely audible through the mask. “Not like...”

“No, of course not,” said Chloe, knowing how much Bee had hated having to abandon the crew’s house in San Jose on short notice. “We’ll just clear out until Eddie and any cops are gone.” She turned to Paul.

“You ready?” she asked.

“Someone’s going to have to stay and spin the police a story to make them go away,” he pointed out.

“I know,” she said. “Let’s get rid of fattie first though, ok?”

He nodded. She held up three fingers and counted down to one before throwing the door open. Bee hit the lights from her control panel, allowing them to see the bathroom door clearly. Chloe rushed down to the end of the hall and slammed her shoulder into the door, knocking it wide open. There was a very surprised man sitting on the toilet, a washcloth over his nose and mouth. Chloe emptied the can of pepper spray right into the guy’s eyes. He yelled in protest, although she wasn’t sure how much good it did since his eyes were already screwed shut as a result of the tear gas.

At the very least, it shocked him into momentary compliance. Chloe grabbed his right arm and Paul came in and grabbed his left. They pulled him to his feet and yanked him out of the small bathroom and into the hall. Then Chloe leaned back and swung him to her right while Paul let go. The big man fell forward, right into the door of Chloe and Paul's bedroom. He was so big it was impossible for him to miss the doorknob. She'd been hoping to shock him in the groin, but it looked like he got it in the hip. Either way he screamed again and collapsed to the floor once more.

Paul descended on him, rolling his spasming body over onto its stomach and handcuffing the man's hands behind his back. The guy wasn't knocked out though, and already he was struggling to get to his knees, even with Paul on his back. Chloe moved forward, pulled Paul away and gave the guy a swift kick in the ass as he stood up. He stumbled forward toward the other end of the hall, only stopping when he hit the wall beside the stairs.

Most of the fight had gone out of him at this point, especially now that he was back in the teargas-filled hallway. Chloe and Paul came up behind him, grabbed him by his elbows and marched him down the stairs and into the living room. Together they gave him a massive shove that sent the big man in an off-balance run through the front door and out into the yard. Chloe could well imagine the sight from Eddie's point of view - his buddy coughing and wheezing suddenly emerging from the gas-filled house.

"Shall we check out back?" Paul suggested.

Chloe nodded and they went through to the kitchen. She used a rubber spatula to poke at the pressure plate by the back door just to make sure Bee had actually turned it off. She had. She unlocked the door and they went out onto the porch. Everything looked clear, and no one shot at them, so she assumed all was safe. Time to get out of there.

They ran back in and up to Bee's bedroom. Bee had closed the door after they'd left, but Winston opened it up as they approached. "Your friends have decided that discretion is the better part of valor," he said. Chloe swept past him into the room and watched the screen as Eddie and his four Crewmembers were getting into their car and driving off. They had to go slow because the street was full of curious spectators. All their neighbors had come out to see the excitement.

“Let’s get gone,” said Chloe. “Bee, the car’s parked two blocks...”

“I know,” Bee said. “I’ve got the spare key in my pocket.”

“Ok, we’re going to get Sandee and go out the back way right now.”

They moved as fast as they could, locking every door behind them as they left. They went out the back door and so far they were lucky: None of the neighbors had come around back to see what was happening. But Sandee and the killer were still in the shed, and Chloe needed to get them out of there as well. She pulled Paul aside for a moment.

“I don’t trust Win alone with Bee,” she said.

“Neither do I.”

“Can you go with them to the car while I get Sandee and the other guy?”

“Yeah,” Paul said. “I’ll pull around and meet you guys on Olivia Street.”

“Great,” she said and, wanting to give him a kiss for luck she realized they were both still wearing gasmasks. She tore hers off and handed it to him. “Don’t forget to take this off.” He did, they kissed, and then went in opposite directions.

The fence screened the door to the shed from the street, which gave her a bit of privacy, at least for the moment. She knocked on the door and called out to Sandee, who let her in after quizzing her about the last tantric sex position he’d taught her and Paul. Inside, the killer was where she’d left him, sitting handcuffed to a chair in the middle of the room.

“We need to get out of here, the cops are coming,” she told Sandee.

“What happened?” he asked even as he moved to unbind their captive from the chair and get him on his feet.

“Eddie and his fucks broke down our door. Bee set off the teargas bomb in the living room. The neighbors are worried, but we shut down the phones.”

“There was a teargas bomb in the living room?”

“You didn’t know?”

“I thought she was joking when she told me,” said Sandee, hauling the killer to his feet.

“She doesn’t fuck around when it comes to security,” said Chloe.

“I guess not.”

“Paul’s going to meet you with the car on Olivia Street. Go out the back way.”

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’m going to stay here and find some way to convince the cops not to search our house.”

“No,” said Sandee. “You should go with this creep. I’ll talk to the cops.”

“Are you sure?” Chloe asked, although she was glad Sandee had volunteered for the duty.

“I grew up here. Odds are I’ll know at least one of them. Besides, it’s my name on the lease.” That last part was true. Although Keys Condos and Estates owned the house, Sandee, as the only person using a real identity, was the name on all the rental paperwork. “I’ll meet up with you later.”

“Thanks, hon,” said Chloe, taking the killer by his good arm and leading him to the door. “We’ll be at the safe house in New Town. And try not to let the firemen hose the place down. There’s a lot of smoke but no fire.”

“I’ll think of something to distract them,” he said with a wink. Chloe smiled and marched her prisoner toward the backyard. It was getting dark finally, and she was glad to have the cover of night for what was her umpteenth crime during the last few days. Was kidnapping a killer really a chargeable offense? She hoped she never found out.

Chapter 37

PAUL thought about what a motley group they made, stuffed into the Honda Civic as it pulled into the apartment complex in New Town. They stank of tear gas, and their party included a scruffy looking man with his hand in a sling, a short Asian girl in her pajamas and an old guy wearing nothing but a bathrobe. The “safe house” was an apartment out on 11th Street, well beyond the quaint old houses and crowded streets of Old Town. It could’ve been an apartment building in any city in Florida or the whole country for that matter. Not close to the beach or tourist attractions, it was the kind of place locals lived (those who could still afford to live on the island).

The apartment, one of the Keys Condos’ properties, was a one-bedroom on the first floor. It was stuffy and hot, but had a phone, Internet connection and a stash of emergency supplies hidden behind a false panel in the bedroom closet. It did not have any furniture. The group collapsed into separate heaps in the living room, with Winston choosing to sit right next to his murderous friend, Jacob. Paul and Chloe sat with their backs against the opposite wall, facing the two older men. Bee dumped a box of laptops and cell phones beside the pass-through counter that separated the small kitchen from the slightly less-small living/dining room area. She plugged in a laptop and started to fire it up.

“Does anyone need anything?” Paul asked. “A glass of water or something.”

“I could still use that water,” Jacob said.

Paul stared at him and then pointed toward the kitchen with his thumb.

“The kitchen’s right there.” The man looked over and seemed to consider whether it was worth the pain of getting back up and decided against it. He frowned and just looked down into his chest.

“May I use a phone?” Winston asked. “I’m going to check in with my people and let them know...”

“No one’s calling anyone until we decide what the fuck we’re going to do,” Chloe said.

Winston started to say something, stopped himself, then started again. "I thought we'd settled on a plan. I gave you contacts. We all go our separate ways."

"That won't work anymore," said Paul. He'd been thinking of nothing but the complications that Eddie's attack raised, and he was convinced that they couldn't just ignore Isaiah and the others or spin them some wild tale. Not after Eddie told them what he knew. "Isaiah's going to know that we have your friend Jacob and that we've been hiding him from the others. And he's not going to just let that go."

"I don't see that as a problem," said Winston. "We can be on a boat and out of..."

"And what about us?" Paul asked. "We're supposed to get on a boat with you as well? Give up everything we've built here?"

"Yes," said Winston. "If you can find a way to forgive me, then..."

"We can't," said Chloe, cutting him off. "We're not getting on any boat with the two of you." Paul knew how hard it must be for Chloe to say that about her old friend. Hell, it was hard for him to hear such anger in her voice directed at someone she loved. Or maybe used to love. But she was right, there was no way they were getting on a boat with these two.

"We need a new plan," Paul said. "One that includes making Isaiah a happy man. Or at least a satisfied one."

"The only thing that's going to make him happy at this point is if we turn Jacob over to him," Winston said. "And I'm not prepared to do that."

"Why not?" asked Paul.

"What kind of question is that? He's my comrade. One of my people. We don't betray our own. I know you've learned at least that much in this life of yours."

"But he killed a woman. An innocent woman..."

"In self-defense," Winston protested.

"And he tried to kill that other woman, Jeanie. He stabbed her with a damned

screwdriver, for God's sake. And tried to get me as well."

"You were attacking him..."

"He stabbed her in the back!" Paul shouted. "Came up behind her like an assassin and stabbed her in the freaking back. That's not self-defense." 284 Geek Mafia: Mile Zero

Winston looked over at Jacob, who was still staring down into his chest. "I'm sure there's more to the story than that. This Jeanie person might not have been attacking him at that moment, but she and Raff obviously had more planned. Jacob was just doing..."

"What?" asked Paul. "What was Jacob doing? Why did he meet her in that garden?"

Winston turned away from them all and looked out the window. "They were just supposed to talk," he said. "Just to see if there was any way of buying them off. That's all."

"I'm real sorry about that, Win," Jacob said, speaking up for the first time. Everyone stared at him in surprise. "I didn't mean for it to happen that way, you know. It's just, she was being so pig-headed and then she started calling me names and..."

"It doesn't matter," said Winston, putting an assuring hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm not giving up on you."

"Maybe you should," Jacob replied. "You shoulda just let me be in my cabin. I'm not fit for anything but jail or the wilderness. Just like any other animal."

"That's them talking, Jake," Winston said. "The establishment. Twentyfive years of their brainwashing and it's no wonder you're a little shaken up. But I'll help you through this. We all will..."

"I don't know," said Jacob. "I think I'm just broke. All I wanna do is stab or hit anything that gets in my way. That's just how I am now."

"That's how they made you," Winston insisted.

“Don’t matter. It’s still how I am.”

Paul understood the two men and their relationship now, and understanding made him all the more worried about Jacob. “You were in prison for twenty-five years,” he said. “What for?”

Jacob focused his tired gaze on Paul. “Armed robbery. Murder. We was robbing a bank in Louisville. Stealing some money for the cause, you know? And this security guard decided to be the hero. And one of my friends shot him. Shot him down. But we all five went up for the murder.”

“You were in the Weather Underground with Winston?” Chloe asked.

“Yeah, but this was after. It was another group. The People’s Front for Social Justice. More radical.”

“More radical than blowing things up?” asked Paul.

“There’s a lot of ways of blowing things up. Who knows how we would’ve been? But we weren’t around long enough. We got pinched.”

Paul did some quick math in his head. The Weathermen were all gone by 1980. If this other group came after... “Jesus, you can’t have been out of prison very long.”

“Three months,” Jacob said.

“Three months! Fuck,” said Paul.

Chloe directed her anger at Winston once more. “You brought a convicted murderer with only three months straight time into a situation like this? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“He needed a family,” Winston snapped back. “And I’m all he’s got left. He wanted to play a role in the group, so I let him. He’s one of us, and we have a lot of history together. I trust him, and that’s all you should need to know.”

“Yeah, that worked out real well,” Chloe said, her voice dripping with acid. “He went in a radical bank robber and came out a woman killer. That’s real great.”

“I didn’t mean to kill that first lady,” Jacob protested. “Things just got out of hand. She jumped out at me, and I just went on autopilot, you know?”

“Not really,” Chloe said. “I’ve never killed anyone on autopilot. Or at all.” Out of the corner of his eye Paul saw Bee flinch and look down as Chloe spoke. Bee had killed someone and still carried around a lot of guilt. Paul hoped she didn’t think she was anything like this Jacob bastard.

“You’ve never been in prison for twenty-five years,” said Winston.

“Which is kind of exactly my point.”

Jacob kept talking as if he hadn’t heard them bicker. “And the other woman. She was just talking circles around me and I got confused, and then when she turned her back on me, she gave me this look. This look of contempt. Like the guards might give. Or the younger cons. Like I was nothing. And...” his voice trailed off.

“And you stabbed her,” said Paul. “With a screwdriver.”

“I did,” he admitted with an angry whisper.

“None of this matters,” Winston insisted. “I’m not turning him over.”

“You’ve got to,” said Chloe. “Don’t you see? He killed that lady. Killed her for no good reason. And almost killed another. It’s not safe for him to be out doing this kind of thing. It’s not the way...”

Paul jumped in as well. “And it’s not like we’re saying that we’re going to turn him over to the cops. We’re just going to go to Isaiah and tell him what happened. Tell him that this is the guy who killed Raquel but that he did it in self defense. We don’t have to tell Isaiah about anything else. What’s he going to do? Call the cops? Arrest you?”

“He might decide to take his own justice,” Winston said.

“Maybe I’m saying this the wrong way,” said Paul. “I’m not talking about turning him over to Isaiah. I’m talking about the four of us going to Isaiah and laying it all out, just for the sake of clearing up the mystery. Once he knows what really happened, he can be sure that there was not in fact a security leak in the

group. He's safe to proceed with his plan. That will placate him a little bit."

"What about Eddie?" Chloe asked. "He's not likely to be in anything resembling a forgiving mood."

"Eddie's how we placate Isaiah the rest of the way," said Paul, the plan starting to come together in his mind. "Isaiah made it pretty clear to me last time we talked alone that he doesn't think very much of Eddie the man - he just wants access to his Crew's contacts and resources. Well, you saw how Marco and Eddie were arguing in front of the house. And I saw tension between them back at the church meeting too."

"I noticed that as well," Winston added.

"So we've got an opening there. Something we can exploit. We just need some way to drive them apart."

"What about Raff and his friend?" suggested Bee. She'd been typing away on her laptop, and Paul hadn't thought she was really paying any attention, but he should've known better. All Bee did was pay attention.

"What about them?" Paul asked.

"We could maybe make a deal with them."

"I don't know about that," Winston said, his voice wary. "Our last meeting with them didn't go so well."

"That was your last meeting with them," Paul said. "We haven't tried to kill them lately. That was you guys. Hell, I saved her life. Go on, Bee, what're you thinking?"

"Well, all that stuff Raff told me at the Garden of Eden. Mostly it was lies and stuff, I know that. But you know, we were wrong about them too. They had nothing to do with murdering Raquel. But it is Raff we're talking about. He's going to want what's best for him. If he wasn't loyal to Chloe and us, he's not going to stick up for a jerk like Eddie."

"So we get at Eddie and Marco through Raff," mused Paul. "It could work." And indeed it could. He'd have to swallow his pride some and play up to Raff's ego.

It would be slightly humiliating (or maybe more than slightly), but it would be worth it. He thought he could see a way through. The plan was beginning to gel in his head.

“One big problem,” said Chloe. “We don’t have any way to contact Raff or Jeanie.”

“That’s true...” said Paul. How would they find them? They could call the hospital. Maybe Jeanie was still there, but probably not. Isaiah and Eddie weren’t going to give out the number. “Wait, no it’s not. Winston, you must have a number for them.”

Winston stared back at Paul, but said nothing. Chloe prompted him to talk, saying, “That’s right. You two had to contact her somehow to set up that meeting. Do you have a number?”

He looked at her and then sighed, saying, “I think this is a bad idea. You can’t trust them.”

“We can’t trust anyone at all,” Chloe said.

“And we’re not going to trust anyone,” Paul added. “But we are going to call and set up a meeting with them. Now give me the number. We don’t have all night.”

Winston had the number memorized, of course. Paul took a phone from Bee’s box and went back into the bedroom to make the call. He didn’t want anyone listening in because Chloe was right, they couldn’t trust anyone at all.

Chapter 38

THE meeting place that Jeanie chose had surprised Paul. He wondered what kind of contacts she and Raff and their Crew had that they could gain access to an empty storefront so close to Mallory Square. Located between a cheap jewelry shop and a place that sold sandals, the former boutique's windows now sported white butcher paper in the windows instead of sundress-clad mannequins. The store had opened only six months earlier, but making any business work in Key West was an uphill struggle, even in a year without hurricanes. Paul could see slivers of white light shining through the cracks at the edges where the paper didn't quite cover the whole window. Someone was home.

Chloe knocked on the door and the two of them waited, looking around the empty street for signs of life. It was 3:30 a.m., and although most of the big bars didn't close for another half hour, this part of town was typically quiet at this time of night. Paul saw one homeless person trudging along back toward Mallory Square and wondered if he might not actually be a member of Raff's Crew. Or Isaiah's. Or Winston's. Or Eddie's. Christ, there were too many players in this game. He touched Chloe's shoulder and motioned toward the guy. She shook her head and whispered in his ear, "No, he's the real deal. I recognize him." She knocked again, louder this time.

A few seconds later they heard someone unlocking the door from the other side, and they both took a step back. The door swung open to reveal Jeanie, who smiled and stepped aside so they could come in. She was looking a lot better than the last time Paul had seen her. She wore a short denim jacket and blue jeans, with a dark green tank top underneath. She'd tied her dark hair back in a ponytail. If she was still suffering from the effects of her wound she didn't show it, as she seemed to move without pain or discomfort. But maybe she was just good at hiding her true feelings. Or maybe she was on painkillers. Or both.

"Come on in," she said, letting them walk past her as she took a moment to scan the street outside. "Is that homeless guy with you?" she asked as she closed the door behind them.

"Nope," said Paul. "He's local."

Jeanie nodded and followed them into the empty store. Paul looked around - it was a shop waiting for product, with shelves, display racks, dressing rooms and cash register all in place. There were even five naked mannequins lined up against one wall. Plenty of places to hide cameras or even people for that matter.

“I appreciate you coming out this late,” Paul said. “We need to sort this whole mess out right away.”

“I agree,” said Jeanie. She was watching Chloe as she spoke, who was wandering around the store, poking her head into the dressing rooms. Jeanie didn’t seem to like this and directed her next words straight at Chloe. “I know you and Raff have had your differences to be sure. But there’s no reason we can’t put that behind us.”

Chloe turned to face her. “I agree. Bygones be fucking bygones and all that.”

“Good,” said Jeanie. “Then maybe you’ll let Raff go.”

“Let him go where?” asked Chloe.

“Let him go. I assume you’re holding him somewhere.”

Paul didn’t know what Jeanie was talking about. “We’re not holding him anywhere. What makes you think we are?”

“I haven’t spoken to him since you and your friend in the pirate costume attacked our house.”

“Maybe he ran out on you,” said Paul. “He’s got a history of abandoning those who trust him most.”

“You’re assuming he wasn’t already working for me and my husband the whole time he was with you,” Jeanie said. “He was never disloyal to me.”

Paul didn’t quite believe her. Raff working for someone else the entire time? It didn’t make any sense. He was too independent and too ambitious. She was playing some game with him here, but he really didn’t want to play along. “Whatever,” he said. “Point is, we don’t know where he is, which is fine with me. If you’re in charge, then you’re the one we need to be talking to anyway.”

“Fine,” said Jeanie. “Then let’s talk. You said you have the guy who stabbed me?”

“We do,” said Paul. “And he’s prepared to explain everything and make whatever amends are necessary.”

“I’m sure an apology will be sufficient. He only tried to kill me, after all.”

“You can work the rest out with him,” said Paul. “That’s between you two. What I want to talk about is how we can help each other.”

Jeanie leaned back against the counter by the cash register, her arms folded across her chest. “Go on,” she said.

“You’re here because Eddie and Marco invited you. They told you they could let you in on a huge new scam that Isaiah is putting together. The only problem was, there was already someone else in your way - Raquel.”

“Eddie never told me any names or details, but so far that’s about right.”

“Well, we’re prepared to offer you something better - we can get you into the inner council of Isaiah’s group. A seat at the organizing table where all the biggest profits will be split. Eddie’s seat at the table.”

“And you have the authority to do this?” she asked. “I’m skeptical.”

“As well you should be,” Paul agreed. “Except we have Winston and his weight behind us, and once we turn the man who attacked you over to Isaiah, we’ll have his support as well. You know Eddie. He’s obnoxious. He rubs people the wrong way. He’s a liability. You help me remove him from the picture, and we’ll help you take his place. We keep Marco and the others on board to run the cruise ship end of things.”

“When you say ‘remove’ Eddie, what exactly do you mean?”

“Well...” said Paul, looking for the right words. “I mean...”

“He means kill me,” said a voice from the rear of the store. It was Eddie, emerging from the back room with three others. The first two were the other lackeys who’d been watching the back of the house. The third was the big

surprise - Isaiah's wife, Amelia. "Oh shit," Paul thought. "This wasn't the plan."

"Hey Eddie," Paul said. Chloe was moving over to Paul's side. At least there was no one between them and the front door. Assuming of course that the Big Guy wasn't waiting for them out on the street. "We were just talking about you."

"So we fucking heard," Eddie replied, stepping into the middle of the store. At least he wasn't brandishing a gun. But his two mooks were both holding baseball bats. Amelia remained back near the shadows at the rear of the room, watching as events unfolded in front of her.

Paul tried to ignore Eddie and his pals for a moment and focused his attention on Jeanie. "I assume you invited them?" he asked.

"Sorry," she said with a humorless smile. "I thought I should hear offers from both sides."

"Only one side worth listening to now," crowed Eddie. "The good guys. Unless you're happy to side with people who hide murderers in their house."

"See?" Jeanie said to Paul. "He makes a good argument."

"He hasn't made a good anything since he was shitting his diapers," Chloe said. "He's scum."

Eddie turned and called back to Amelia. "You see how much of a bitch she is? I told you! And you notice they don't even deny they've been hiding Raquel's killer all along. What did I tell you?" Amelia remained passive, saying and doing nothing but watching. Eddie turned back to Paul and Chloe. "Now, are you going to turn him over before we beat you or afterwards?"

"Why do people always want to beat something out of us with bats or clubs?" Paul asked Chloe.

"I know, right?" she said. "It's weird. It never happened to me before I met you."

"I guess I bring out the inner vandal in people."

"Not in everyone. Just in the assholes."

“Ha. Ha. Ha,” said Eddie. “Very funny.” He looked around the room, a triumphant, malicious grin on his face. “Let’s see how long you can keep laughing while...”

Paul and Chloe didn’t wait to listen to his bullshit. They were already running for the door, slamming it open and lurching out into the street. Good thing Jeanie hadn’t locked the door.

Chapter 39

CHLOE sprinted up Front Street back toward Duval, Paul pounding along a few paces behind her. Her morning jogs were paying off, and Paul's late night gaming and drinking sessions were showing. He was puffing hard but kept pace with her step for step thanks to the training regime Sandee had been putting him through. They only had a few blocks to go, so she was confident he'd make it. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed Eddie and his boys hot on their trail, but still a good block behind them. She didn't see Jeanie or Amelia anywhere.

They crossed over Duval and kept on Front Street. A few drunks winding their way back to their hotel stopped to hoot and holler at them as they ran by, urging them to go faster. One of them threw a necklace of plastic beads at Chloe, but it sailed high above her head. Another block and they were coming up on the corner of Simonton, but before she reached the intersection, she veered hard to her right into a clean, welllit courtyard. To her left was the locked gate that protected The Adult Experience, which sold upscale porn and sex toys along with sexy little outfits. Straight ahead was her destination: The Pirate Experience, an interactive museum and tourist trap.

She and Paul skidded to a stop at the door to the museum. She yanked it open, and Paul dove forward into the darkness. She waited with the door open, and looked back toward the street just in time to see Eddie's gang running past. Eddie was oblivious, but one of the other two saw her and shouted for the rest to stop. Appearing to be in a panic, she ducked inside after Paul and let the door close slowly behind her.

The Pirate Experience was one of Key West's newer attractions, the brainchild of a semi-famous self-help guru who'd decided that he wanted to open a pirate museum in Key West a couple years ago. Although the connection between self-help and piracy eluded Chloe, she had to admit that he'd done a good job. Of course Key West loved its pirate stories, and so did Chloe. The museum, no doubt inspired by Disney's own multimedia buccaneer successes, capitalized on the local pirate culture and the tourists' desire to be inside somewhere with air conditioning and high tech displays.

Although small compared to something like the massive Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disney World, the museum featured the same kind of atmosphere, with

fake rock walls made from hardened foam and a series of display rooms dressed up to look like the streets of some 17th-century colonial town or the interior of a pirate ship. Many of the rooms featured interactive video displays and even animatronic pirates that would act out mini-scenes of corsair history. Unlike a Disney ride, the Pirate Experience also featured a bunch of real museum artifacts, from cutlasses, cannon balls and an actual treasure chest to old maps, flags and pirate paraphernalia.

Since it wasn't normally open at four in the morning, most of the displays and robot pirates were currently turned off, and the only light came from the red glow of the emergency exit signs scattered throughout. Chloe turned to her left and ducked through one of these doors, finding herself in a dark hallway. She heard voices up ahead and moved toward them. She came to a door and swung it open to reveal Winston, Bee and Paul standing in front of four TV screens and a control panel full of switches. It was like being back at the house, only with a lot less screens and slightly more pirate shit.

"They're right behind me," Chloe said as she moved over to stand next to Paul.

"I know," said Bee. "They're at the door."

The small monitor was divided into four quadrants, each displaying a different exterior camera view. One of these views showed the front door, which Eddie was opening carefully while his two lackeys stood ready with their bats. Chloe glanced over at the other screens, which were almost completely dark. "What's up with the interior cameras?" she asked.

"No night vision on them," said Bee. "This whole set up is really cheap. My guess is they only put in the minimum that the insurance company demanded to cover all that pirate stuff."

"Well, we'll hit the lights as soon as they get a little further in," said Paul. "Then we'll know right where they are." His hand was poised over a row of buttons, each marked with a different room name and number. They'd gotten into the museum thanks to one of their regular party guests - a woman named Yolanda who worked at the museum and the porn shop. She'd been more than happy to earn an extra \$1000. From their current perch, they had control over all the displays in the museum, from the lights to the robo-pirates. If only they could make the pirates attack or something: that would be a much more

straightforward plan than the one Paul had come up with. Like all of his plans, it was complicated and theatrical and a little (ok, a lot) off the wall. But when they worked, they worked brilliantly. When they worked.

They all studied the screens closely, and Chloe was able to make out a figure as it passed directly underneath one of the exit signs. Paul noticed it too and said, "Perfect." He flipped a switch on the board, turning on the lights in one of the chambers three rooms away from where Eddie and his guys were. If they'd turned the light on where Eddie was, he might have freaked out, guessing that Paul and Chloe were somehow in control of the museum. But with the light going on in another room, Eddie was more likely to assume that she and Paul had screwed up or had given themselves away. Paul's little trick seemed to work as Eddie made his way straight toward the light.

The room where Paul had turned on the light was the largest and most impressive display in the museum. It featured a recreation of the final battle of Blackbeard aboard his flagship, Queen Anne's Revenge. Designed to recreate the deck of that famous ship, the room was the only place in the museum that didn't have any actual artifacts. Instead it featured an animatronic Blackbeard at one end, astride his poop deck with a pistol in one hand and a great, nasty cutlass in the other. His thick, coarse beard had the famous lit tapers in it, which glowed and smoked when the 'bot was activated. At the other end of the room was the brave English captain Robert Maynard, who would eventually behead the dread pirate. Each had a few companions, pirates and pirate hunters who were also animatronic, although not as animated as their leaders. When the room was active, it ran through a five minute cycle of movement, smoke, and sound that simulated the final battle. Although the two robots never moved from their positions, they exchanged pistol fire and curses. Then the far wall, which usually showed a projected image of the sea and the North Carolina coast, would display a short series of video images that told the tale of this most famous of pirates.

Right now though, the room was quiet, lit by the various fake lanterns, torches and a dim glow from the projected coastal image on the wall. Chloe knew most of this from memory of the room rather than from what she could actually see. Just one black and white camera covered the room, and they could only watch it on one quarter of one TV screen. Bee was right; the security system here was cheap. She just hoped that the few additions they'd made would push them over the edge and pull them through.

On the screen she saw Eddie's group move with care into the Blackbeard Room. From their body language she could tell that they were a little freaked out or at the very least confused by their surroundings. She turned and grabbed a golf bag from the corner. It held the tools she'd need to finish her part of the job, if indeed it came to that.

"I'm going to get in position," she said.

"Be careful," said Paul, although all his attention was focused where it should be - on the screens in front of him. She watched as he clipped a microphone to the collar of his shirt.

"Scare the fuck out of them, ok?" Chloe said.

Paul tore his eyes away from the screen, smiled at her and nodded. Then she ducked out of the room and into the darkness of the museum.

PAUL knew that they could've used any number of other locations to confront Eddie, including many that didn't contain millions of dollars worth of antiques. He'd justified his choice of the Pirate Experience to the others by pointing out that the museum already had security cameras and a whole video display system they could use. In fact, he was just showing off. He wanted the most impressive, disorienting location he could find. This was his island, and he'd be damned if he'd let a punk like Eddie get the better of him on his turf. And Eddie was about to learn just how much of a home field advantage Paul and Chloe had.

Watching them on the screen, Paul had the customary wave of doubt that he always experienced at moments like this. But he'd learned to take the second thoughts in stride and even to think of them as a good omen for future success. He tapped a key on Bee's laptop and the action began.

"Hello, Eddie," he said into the microphone, which was in turn plugged into the PA system for the entire museum. His voice boomed through the halls, and he grinned as he saw all three men jump in astonishment. The wall projection changed as he spoke, transforming from a picture of the Carolina coast to a blurry vidcap of Eddie taken from the hidden cameras they'd used to spy on him at the party. The pic showed him laughing and drunk on the couch.

They'd hidden a couple microphones in the room, including one in Blackbeard's beard, so Paul could hear Eddie's reply through his earpiece. "What the fuck?"

he asked.

Paul tapped a key on the laptop again, and the screen started to display a digital slideshow of images taken of Eddie through hidden cameras. Many were from the party, but others were from the bar where Chloe had first picked him up or shots taken in the street. The three men stared at the display, obviously not sure what was going on.

“Eddie, Eddie, Eddie,” Paul continued. “Did you really think you could do anything in this town without me knowing about it?”

“Fuck you, Paul,” Eddie shouted at the screen. “Like I didn’t know you were watching me? I knew! I just didn’t give a shit. Because it doesn’t fucking matter what you...”

Eddie’s voice was drowned out by a wave of sound played over the speakers in the Blackbeard room that normally broadcast the sounds of a pirate battle. Eddie found himself drowned out by a recording of his own voice, played back at rock concert levels.

“The guy in charge is a real dick!” Eddie’s recorded voice boomed through the room. He’d been talking to Sandee at the party about Isaiah when he said it. Bee and Paul had pulled out a bunch of choice sound bites for this little light show.

“He sure is,” Paul said into the microphone. “You sure are.”

Eddie pointed at the screen and shouted back, “What the fuck is this horse shit?”

“I’m just letting you know what everyone else around you knows, Eddie. You are a real dick.” Paul hit another sound bite from the list.

“I’m so fucking smart you see...” Recorded Eddie said this time.

“Well,” said Paul. “Not so fucking smart. Not smart enough to keep your mouth shut when you should.” He clicked a third clip.

“Not like these other fucks like that black fuck and that old guy and the other fuck. All their crazy pie-in-the-sky bullshit,” The drunken voice of Recorded Eddie slurred through the speakers.

“I guess I’m the other fuck,” Paul said. “Which would make Isaiah the ‘Black Fuck’ who’s ‘a dick,’ right?”

Paul watched on the screen as Eddie spun around in fury, looking for someone to hit. “This is bullshit!” he shouted. “You can’t just take shit out of...”

But Paul wasn’t about to let Eddie argue his case. This wasn’t a trial, it was a sentencing. He clicked again and started another clip. “Always trouble. Always telling people what to do and shit,” Eddie’s voice said. Then Paul replayed the first clip, “The guy in charge is a real dick!”

“Sounds like you don’t get along with your new partners very well at all,” said Paul. “I’ll tell you, when we played this for Isaiah, he wasn’t too pleased.”

“Then fuck Isaiah!” Eddie shouted. “Fuck him for being that stupid. Fuck his liberal nigger ass! This is all bullshit! You obviously just cut some shitty out-of-context tape together. If you really ever did play this for him, he’d see right through it! He’s not that stupid.”

Paul glanced over at Bee, who was working off her own laptop. She nodded and he nodded back. Bee unplugged a FireWire connection from his machine and plugged into hers and then hit her play button.

Eddie’s voice rang out through the speaker system once again, replaying part of what he’d just said, “Fuck Isaiah! Fuck him for being that stupid. Fuck his liberal nigger ass!”

“He’s just gonna love hearing that,” Paul said into the microphone.

“Oh come on!” said Eddie. “This is such bullshit.” He started to walk back toward the way he’d come, but Paul wasn’t done yet.

“Wait,” said Paul, as Bee plugged his laptop back into the control system. “There’s more. Watch.” Eddie stopped and looked at the projection of himself on the wall. As soon as he did, Paul clicked to change the image. It was a shot of the interior of the empty store they’d just been in a few minutes earlier. Amelia and Jeanie stood there looking up at the camera (which was hidden in a smoke detector). Standing next to them was Marco. All three waved. In fact, neither Amelia nor Jeanie had known anything about the camera or Paul and Chloe’s set up in the Pirate Museum. Only Marco had any idea, but Eddie couldn’t possibly

know that.

Paul thought he heard Eddie express some sort of horror or anger under his breath, but the microphones weren't close enough for him to hear the actual words. Paul could imagine his surprise though. "We played our little tapes for Isaiah and your buddy Marco too. Everyone agreed that you're a dick." In truth Isaiah hadn't seen anything at all, nor had Amelia. But her presence at the store actually worked in Paul's favor. "So we're cutting you out."

Paul clicked and the image changed again. It was a shot of the interior of the hotel room where Eddie was staying. It showed Sandee, dressed much like he'd been the night he met Eddie at the party, sitting seductively on Eddie's bed with a laptop Eddie would surely recognize as his own. "Your friends sold you out, Eddie," Paul said. "Or rather, cut you loose." This was actually a simple piece of Photoshop work - Sandee had never been in Eddie's room.

Another image came on the screen. It was the Big Guy, whose name they now knew was actually Wally, even though he'd introduced himself to Chloe in the bar as Quentin. His friends called him The Whale. The picture, taken less than an hour earlier according to the time stamp, showed Wally and Marco talking. Wally's face was all red and swollen from the tear gas and pepper-spray. It then morphed into a second picture of the two of them flipping the camera off.

"Even The Whale isn't behind you anymore," said Paul over the loudspeaker. "He too thinks you're a dick. We talked for a while. He's actually pretty cool." They hadn't talked at all, but Eddie didn't know that. In fact, it was Marco who'd sent him the pics, taken while he was giving The Whale orders that would keep him busy tonight.

Eddie blew up into a rage, grabbing one of the baseball bats from his mook's hands. He swung it wildly, breaking off a fake lantern from the side of the fake ship. "Come out here you fuck! Come out here and fight like a man! This is such BULLSHIT!" He swung again, slamming the bat down into the ship's railing, but not causing any real damage. Paul was very glad that Eddie had dropped his gun on their living room floor when the gas grenade went off.

"No," said Paul into the microphone. "It's not bullshit. It's us taking you down. It's me cutting you out. It's not what I wanted to have happen, but it is what you forced to happen. It's plan B."

He clicked another audio clip and Eddie's recorded voice filled the room one more. "Don't you know anything? You've gotta have a plan B in this business."

Eddie took a wild swing at the air, barely missing one of his own guys then. He'd obviously totally lost it at this point. He was screaming in utter, wordless rage. The two flunkies tried to restrain him, shouting for him to calm down, but he shrugged them off. With someone physical to focus his anger on he swung again, this time connecting with his Crewmate's shoulder and knocking him to the ground. The other one backed away, hands in the air.

"Come on, Eddie," he said. "Calm..."

"FUCK ALL OF YOU!" Eddie shouted, and hurled his bat at the other man. He dodged the flying hunk of wood and scampered off back toward the exit. Eddie turned back toward the screen and shouted again, "FUCK YOU, YOU FUCKING FUCKS! I'll fucking kill all of you!"

That's when Chloe came in and blasted him with the shotgun.

Chapter 40

IT was the longest they'd slept in days - a full eight hours. The house still stank of tear gas, so they'd checked into a room at Eden House for what remained of the night and all the next morning. Fueled by adrenaline and the excitement that came with victory, Paul and Chloe had fucked like crazy as soon as they got to their room. And then, of course, sleep. Blessed, blessed, sleep.

Now, in the afterglow of hot sex and restful sleep, he took some time to replay the previous night's events in his mind. He was, with good reason, damn fucking proud of what they'd managed to pull off.

He and Chloe had met with Marco six hours before they walked into the empty storefront to meet Jeanie. He'd been wary of talking with Paul, fearing a set-up, and it'd taken some fast talking and some big promises to get him to come to meet in a very public restaurant. In order to get free from Eddie's watchful and paranoid eye, Marco told him that Amelia wanted to talk technical details with him, knowing full well that Eddie hated technical details and would send Marco to the meeting alone. Paul hadn't been sure how Eddie would react to his proposal, but the fact that he came at all was a good sign. Marco was embarrassed by the fiasco at Paul's house and was obviously very pissed at Eddie for going crazy like that.

Paul laid out his case: that Raquel's death had been an accident and that Eddie was a loose cannon. If he agreed to help them take down Eddie, then they would do everything in their power to put Eddie in charge and together they could convince Isaiah to make sure Jeanie's crew assumed Raquel's seat on the board. Marco, skeptical and wary, asked a lot of questions, especially about Jacob and Winston and what exactly Paul wanted to do to Eddie. Marco didn't think much of his partner, but he didn't want to hurt the guy and certainly didn't want anyone to end up in jail. He agreed to withdraw his support from Eddie and to talk to other Crewmembers, but he said that they needed to find a way to draw Eddie out and make him do something stupid again. Most of them had grown tired of the man's temper and shenanigans, but The Whale remained loyal - he'd only give up on Eddie if everyone else did too.

Paul had assured Marco that he had just the thing in mind. Marco met with The Whale and Chloe took their pics from hiding which they'd then used in the pirate

museum. Marco gave the Whale a line about the police being after him and sent him off to Miami until the heat died down, taking his cell phone and credit cards from him so the cops couldn't trace them and giving him some cash to tide him over until the Crew came to get him in a few days. Still aching and sick from his rough treatment at the Crew house, he'd apparently been glad for the chance to rest. Meanwhile, Paul and Bee set up things at the pirate museum. Then it was time to call Jeanie.

The risky part was involving Jeanie. Eddie had brought her in, so she might have some loyalty to the man. On the other hand, Paul and Sandee had saved her life, and he hoped that might count for something in her eyes. At the very least it was enough to get a face-to-face meeting with her. Paul told her Marco would be there too as a kind of neutral observer. The plan was to show Jeanie how unstable Eddie was and to have Marco make her an offer. With her backing, Marco, The Whale and the rest of Eddie's crew would see that sticking with their bat-shit crazy leader was going to cause them trouble and cost them money - and maybe even lead to a direct conflict with Jeanie's crew.

Then all Marco had to do was return to the hotel and tell Eddie that Jeanie had gotten a call from Paul and that they'd set up a meeting. Eddie himself demanded that they come along in secret to ambush Paul and Chloe. As it turned out, he also invited Isaiah to send along someone as well, which would've been a smart move if Paul wasn't already two moves ahead of him. When Amelia had shown up by surprise, it worked all the better. They'd been transmitting a feed of everything Eddie said in the museum to Marco's laptop, and Marco had later told Paul that she'd been disgusted with Eddie's behavior, giving Marco even more data to convince his fellow Crewmembers that keeping Eddie around would be a grave error.

Paul looked at the time on his phone. Just past two in the afternoon. He wished they had room service here, but they didn't. A dip in the pool sounded nice. Maybe lie out in the sun for an hour or so. He looked down at Chloe's naked body, spread out on her stomach below him as he caressed her back. On second thought, it would be a shame to put clothes on. Maybe they could order a pizza to their room...

"We need to go soon," Chloe said. And she was right. They were supposed to meet Isaiah and everyone else at 5:00 p.m..

“Pretty soon,” he agreed, “but not yet. How’s your hearing?”

“Fine. When I woke up, the ringing was gone. That shotgun is fucking loud.”

“I told you.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t believe you.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ve never fired a shotgun,” she said.

“Yeah, but I’ve seen movies. Read books. I was right, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, dear, you were right.” She smiled. “I - I who have shot a shotgun before, mind you, just not indoors - I for some reason didn’t think the beanbag load would be as loud.”

“Is it the same amount of gunpowder?” Paul asked. The gun, which belonged to Party bartender Jesse, had been loaded with beanbag rounds. Instead of slugs or buckshot, it fired a small beanbag with tremendous force. Chloe had hit Eddie in the face from about fifteen feet away, breaking his nose and knocking him on his ass. She was lucky she hadn’t blinded him, but she’d been aiming at his chest and he ducked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I didn’t ask. It was enough to be loud. And to leave my shoulder a little sore. Is there a bruise?” She rolled over onto her back and pointed to the barely visible bruise. Paul kissed the sore spot gently and then moved his mouth down to her nipple.

“I know that’s not bruised,” she said softly, running a hand through his hair.

He gave her a playful bite, just the way she liked it. “Not yet,” he said.

“You’re a bad man,” she replied.

“The worst,” he agreed and then moved to her other nipple.

“The worst?” she asked.

Another light bite. “Yep.”

She spread her legs and pushed his head south. “Well then, do your worst.”

“Gladly,” he said, kissing his way down her stomach.

THEY were ten minutes late to the meeting at Isaiah’s. For once it was actually at a location which could be described as “Isaiah’s.” The house was in the southeast corner of Old Town, an unassuming place that no one would look at twice as they walked down the street. Paul himself must’ve walked the street a dozen or more times without paying it any mind. He wondered who it belonged to.

Inside, it was larger than he’d thought it would be, with a single great room along its south side that ran the length of the house. It was one of the bigger and more beautiful sunrooms Paul had ever seen. Blonde, hardwood floors waxed to a glossy sheen with a scattering of Persian rugs to break up the space into discreet areas. The room contained four different couches and numerous, low padded chairs. It reminded Paul of the lounge in some tropical gentlemen’s club from the 19th century.

Isaiah was standing at the far end of the room, by the bar, watching them as they walked down the length of the room. Nearby stood Marco, Jeanie and Winston, along with Amelia. Throughout the room were an alarming number of people Paul had never seen before. Although he recognized the man who’d met them at the door as the same Crewmember who’d stood guard at the La Concha on the first night, Paul had never seen any of these others before. There were eleven other men and women scattered around the room, none of whom he recognized. All of them wore similar clothes - khaki pants, dark olive or black shirts, black boots. They looked like an army at ease. How many people did Isaiah bring with him to Key West? Paul had to assume there were still more out of sight.

“Quite a show of force,” Chloe whispered into his ear.

Paul nodded, looking at Isaiah and smiling as he did so. He was nervous all of a sudden. No one was armed, no one looked unusually dangerous, but the whole atmosphere had just taken on an air of real menace. That didn’t make any sense did it? Paul couldn’t think of any flaws in his plan that might have left them exposed to Isaiah’s wrath. Then again, it’s not like he actually knew much about Isaiah...

“Come on in, friends,” Isaiah said to them from across the room. “Join the

party.”

“This is quite a place,” Chloe said as they strode past Isaiah’s cadre of similarly dressed Crewmembers. “Sorry we didn’t get the message about the dress code.”

Isaiah cracked the slightest of smiles. “No dress code required. We’re all very informal here.”

Paul and Chloe reached the other end of the room and joined Winston, Marco and Jeanie where they stood around Isaiah and Amelia. Marco nodded at Paul, but his face was an emotionless mask, as were those of everyone else.

“How is our friend Eddie?” Isaiah asked Paul.

“He’s on a slow boat to the Bahamas,” said Paul. “Well, I guess not too slow. It’s a cruise ship. But he’s on his way.”

“The steward helped you out?” Marco asked.

“Just like you said he would,” Paul affirmed. “Eddie’s locked in one of the crew cabins and will be tossed ashore with a couple hundred bucks in cash.”

“We left him a perfectly fair severance package in one of the Crew accounts,” Marco interjected. “The rest of our assets have all been moved out of his reach. Once he finds a way to get to Grand Cayman, he can get his money.”

“And you’re sure he poses no future risk to the rest of us?” Isaiah asked. “The man’s going to want to get even, especially with you and Paul here. Revenge is a powerful motivator.”

“I’m sure he’s pissed off,” said Marco. “But there’s not much he can do. For the past year I’ve been building a buffer between him and all our contacts. He doesn’t know who they are exactly, and they don’t know him. He called the shots, but I made the business happen. Without me, he’s going to be lost out there.”

“And we shall all endeavor to be very hard to find,” Isaiah concluded. “Ultimately this little internecine struggle between you two is none of my business. I know why it happened, and while I find it all more than a little distasteful, I’m not going to argue with the results.”

Paul suspected that what Isaiah found distasteful was the fact that Eddie hadn't actually done anything wrong. It was the false accusations Paul and Winston had leveled against him that drove him to respond with violence and general prickishness in the first place. He knew that if Eddie had been a nicer guy or if Marco hadn't proved so cooperative, Isaiah would never have accepted their little coup so easily. That's what you get for being a dick.

Isaiah continued, "But this is all largely irrelevant to the larger issues at hand. The first issue being, of course, justice for Raquel's murderer. I understand that you have the responsible party?"

"Yes," said Paul. "As I told you. And as I'm sure Eddie told you as well. We took the man into custody yesterday and we're currently holding him at a safe house of ours."

Isaiah turned to Winston, "And this man worked for you, right?"

"With me, yes," said Winston. "And he's a good man."

"He's a murderer," Isaiah replied.

"It was a confrontation that spiraled out of control," Winston insisted. "He never intended to kill her. He followed her, she set a trap for him, they fought, and in the course of things, she hit her head."

"He hit her head," said Isaiah.

"Her head was hit and, sadly, she died. He then, without my knowledge, moved the body to her hotel room with the help of another compatriot, and he went into hiding, afraid of becoming involved with the police."

Isaiah's cold eyes lingered on Winston, appraising his story. Then he said, "And when Paul showed us his picture, you didn't bother to inform us that he was one of your people."

"I was surprised to see him, certainly. But no, I didn't tell you because I didn't know myself what had really happened. Jake was in hiding, and I needed to hear his side of the story first. I've no duty to any of you, but Jake was one of my own. I was protecting him."

“So your withholding this information was not an attempt to sabotage our plans? You weren’t trying to subvert the entire negotiation process?”

“Of course not,” said Winston. “If that were the case, then why would I come here at all?”

“Then why did you try to shift blame for the murders to Eddie?” Isaiah asked.

“Because Eddie was a thuggish, hubristic lout,” said Winston. “And because he was working with Raff, who betrayed my friends Paul and Chloe and was responsible for me being shot. I did not trust him, and I’ll admit to being guilty of trying to subvert his position in the group. An unpleasant necessity in my estimation, but a necessity nonetheless.”

Isaiah moved his gaze from Winston to Jeanie, “But now you’ve come to an accord with Jeanie and her Crew. Why is that?”

“Raff seems to be out of the picture,” said Winston. “He’s disappeared. And now that Jeanie and I have had a chance to meet, we’ve resolved any differences we might have had.”

Isaiah raised a questioning eyebrow toward Jeanie, who said in response, “We’ve settled things. Assuming I get Raquel’s seat at the organizing table and everyone’s comfortable with that, then I’m prepared to let bygones be bygones between me and Winston.”

“And what do we propose be done with this murderer, Jacob?” Isaiah asked.

“We cut him out,” said Paul, who’d negotiated this alliance. “Marco, Jeanie, Win and I all talked about it, and that’s our suggestion. Winston promises to cut him out of his Crew, and he no longer has anything to do with any of us. He goes back to his little hometown in Oregon and we never see him again. He’s got to find his own way in the world.”

Isaiah frowned. “Just let him go. That’s your idea of punishment.”

“He’s sorry for what happened,” said Winston. “But it was an accident. He did not mean to kill her.”

“So you have said,” Isaiah replied, his voice dripping with uncharacteristic

sarcasm.

“Yes. So I have said. So he has said. You’ll have to take our words for it.”

“Leaving aside his attempt to kill Jeanie as well - if she’s ok with this, then who am I to argue - leaving that aside, what do you think Raquel would say to this arrangement? Doesn’t she deserve justice?”

All of them just sort of stared at Isaiah in confusion. Justice was something for the police and the courts. They were criminals and con artists. They weren’t in the justice business, at least not in the traditional way.

“This is our version of justice,” Paul was surprised to hear himself say. “This is all we have. We don’t have jails. We don’t do executions. All we can do is banish someone from our presence. Cut them out of the life.”

“Maybe you don’t do executions,” Isaiah said. “But maybe I do. Maybe the person responsible for Raquel’s death should meet the same fate.”

Paul was speechless. Was Isaiah really threatening to kill Jacob? That’s what it sounded like to him, and if that were so, he wanted nothing to do with him or his shadow corporation.

“You’re kidding,” said Chloe. “No one’s killing anyone.”

“Why is that?” asked Isaiah.

“Because,” Winston growled, showing real anger for the first time that Paul had ever seen. Winston’s eyes blazed, and his hands were balled into tight fists. “I won’t let you. I won’t let anything happen to Jake.”

“I’m not talking about your friend anymore,” Isaiah said. “Let him be banished. That’s fine with me. No, I’m talking about the person responsible for Raquel’s death. I’m talking about you, Winston.”

Chapter 41

WINSTON'S fury left him as fast as it had come. "Me?" he laughed.

"What insanity are you babbling about now?"

Isaiah wasn't laughing though. "No insanity. No babbling. Just some cold, hard facts to cut through all the bullshit you've been feeding me."

He held out his hand to Amelia, who placed a folder in his upturned palm. Isaiah opened it and began to read aloud. "Mackenzie Hoegarth, aka Mac Brown, aka Jacob Wright, aka Jacob Ondagio, aka Jake Lyle, aka your friend Jake." Isaiah paused to give Winston a meaningful look. "I'll skip over the various drunk and disorderly arrests and the time he served for assault and battery and go right to the big one. The hard time."

Isaiah resumed reading from the file. "Charged with murder for stabbing a security guard in a bank forty-three times with a bowie knife during the robbery of the First State Bank in Lawrence, Kansas. Pled guilty and served twenty-five years. During his time in prison, he was known by department of corrections officials to be the lead enforcer for The Order, a violent and powerful prison gang and suspected of murdering four other inmates during his time in jail and ordering the deaths of countless others. Prison nicknames included 'Jake the Stake,' and 'The Crucifier,' among others. Released at age fifty-three after serving his entire sentence.

"Shortly thereafter left Kansas for points unknown, although he's wanted for questioning by local police in connection with a gang-related murder that took place days after his release." Isaiah looked up from his file again, this time focusing on Paul and Chloe. "Apparently the victim - a woman - was the girlfriend of the leader of a rival gang. She was stabbed to death in her home."

"Jake had nothing to do with that," Winston protested. "I picked him up from prison. I took him straight out to the West Coast."

"So you say," Isaiah retorted. "But you're hardly the most trustworthy source when it comes to info on Jake. Just the other day you claimed not to know him at all."

“You know full well why I did that. I’ve already explained...”

“And I don’t believe your explanations!” Isaiah shouted. Paul glanced around the room and saw that Isaiah’s Crewmembers had moved closer, ready to back up their leader at a moment’s notice. “This friend of yours has been out of prison for three months. He has no experience with surveillance. He has no experience blending in. He has no knowledge of the terrain here in Key West. If you really just wanted to keep an eye on Raquel then you would’ve used someone with experience.”

“I didn’t have anyone else here,” Winston protested. “No one I trusted...”

“You trusted a murderer you hadn’t seen in twenty-five years more than you trusted your own protégé?” Isaiah asked, motioning to Chloe.

“What do you mean?” asked Winston.

“I mean here you have someone you’ve worked with in the past. Someone with a good heart who loves you. And she also happens to have control over one of the most extensive private spy camera networks I’ve ever seen. When you suggested Key West as a meeting place, my people checked the island out and found the cameras. We assumed that’s why you wanted to do things here. Hell, we tapped into the network ourselves to help keep an eye on all of you.” This little revelation gave Paul a momentary shock, but deep down he wasn’t all that surprised. He should have expected it. “With your close relationship with Chloe and Paul, you could easily have asked them to keep an eye on Raquel. I’m sure they would have done without even demanding to know why, just as a favor for you.”

Isaiah was right of course. If Winston had asked them to surveil Raquel, they would have done so without a second thought. Watching people in Key West was as easy for them as switching channels on the cable box. So why hadn’t Winston asked them to watch her? And then of course there was the fact that even though Winston was telling Isaiah otherwise, Paul knew that he really did want the shadow corporation to fail and that he really had tried to sabotage it. Isaiah’s questions left Paul wanting some real answers from Winston, but the old man didn’t seem ready to give any.

“I don’t burden my friends with my problems, and I like to handle things internally,” Winston said. “How my people work is none of your business, and I

don't have to explain my decisions to any of you."

"But I think you do," said Isaiah. "For Raquel's sake at the very least. Because I don't believe you when you say the murder was an accident. You knew Raquel. You knew she was too good not to notice a lummoX like your man Jake. And you knew she was too damn headstrong to simply run and hide. She'd confront him. You were counting on it. You set her up. Putting that killer of yours in conflict with her was like leading a lamb to a lion. Only one way that situation was going to play out. This wasn't an accident. It was plain old murder."

Paul and Chloe looked at each other in real shock. Isaiah was making too much sense. Much more sense than anything Winston and Jake had told them. All of a sudden Paul was worried for Sandee, who was standing guard over Jake back at the safe house. He reached into his pocket and turned on his phone, planning to send him a text message.

Chloe on the other hand was taking a more direct approach to the problem. She turned on Winston. "Is this true, Win? Did you set her up? Did you set all of us up?" She paused, her lips tight. "Did you kill that woman?" she asked through clenched teeth.

"No, of course not!" said Winston. "This is all ridiculous. It was an accident. Things got out of hand, as I said." Deny, deny, deny, thought Paul. Deny and buy time. That's what he's doing.

Jeanie apparently had her own doubts as well. "It's not ridiculous," she asserted. "He stabbed me in the back. And yes, I was willing to buy your story at first. But now that I've heard this new information from Isaiah, I'm having second thoughts. And third thoughts. Did you order him to kill me too?"

"What kind of person do you people think I am?" Winston asked. "I'm no killer. And I don't work with killers. I did not order anyone to kill anyone, it's as simple as that."

"And if we don't believe you?" asked Isaiah. "If, for some reason, we don't take your word over what all the evidence and all logic suggest, then what?"

Winston looked around the room, taking in Isaiah's Crewmembers. None of them had obvious weapons in their hands, but with their numbers, they didn't really need them. It's not like Marco or Jeanie would have Winston's back in a

fight, and Paul wasn't so sure which side he'd be on if the shit went down right now.

"What indeed?" asked Winston. "Are you going to string me up here and now? No trial? No evidence. I've told you what happened. You choose to believe something else. Fine. What do you propose to do about it?"

"The stringing up isn't the worst idea I've heard all day," Jeanie said. She'd made her decision, and she must've thought Winston guilty. Either that or she saw a golden opportunity to take a larger piece of the shadow corp pie for herself. Whichever, she was taking a position against Winston. "It's no worse than what you tried to do to me."

"I think I'm going to bow out of this," Marco said. "I didn't know Raquel well. He didn't try to stab me. This is between you guys, ok?" With that, he took a few steps back toward the window.

Winston turned to Chloe and Paul. "What about you two? You can see what's really going on here, can't you?"

In fact, Paul wasn't sure at all what was going on here. Did Isaiah truly believe Winston ordered the murder, or was this all some political maneuver? For that matter, did Winston do the things he'd been accused of? It was certainly possible. He looked at Chloe and her eyes made the slightest back and forth motion. She was saying no. No, don't support Winston. Don't get involved. She was cutting him loose. He spread the fingers of his left hand apart as it hung at his side, a motion that said "wait." He wanted a little more time, because he was pretty sure that if he didn't find the right way out of this situation, there was a good chance Winston and perhaps he and Chloe would end up dead. He finished sending his secret text message to Sandee before he answered Winston's question and then began with the first thing that came to mind.

"To be honest with you all," Paul said. "It's impossible to know what to believe at this point. We're all goddamned dirty liars. It's what we do. So I suggest we just drop the accusations and protestations and get down to the real facts we can all agree on."

"And what facts are those?" Isaiah asked.

"Fact number one: We're in this house and you have a bunch of tough looking

guys and gals ready and willing to jump into action. Now..."

"Fact number two," said Winston, cutting Paul off. "I've got my own people outside on the street and on the roof next door, and if I don't walk out of here in one piece, you're going to have a brutal gang war on your hands." Isaiah glanced at Amelia as he heard this and she nodded and withdrew from the room.

"Ok, ok," said Paul, "So that's two nasty facts right there that we have to deal with. And together they lead me to fact number three. Nothing nasty is going to happen to one person without something nasty happening to everyone else."

"Fact number four!" Jeanie interjected. "Winston's not the only one with people out there. My people are also waiting for the word from me and, quite frankly, I think Winston is full of shit. He doesn't have an army out there. He's got three or four people max. So he'd better think twice about threatening..."

"Fact number five!" said Winston. "I..."

"Oh come on!" Paul interrupted, frustrated and fearing they'd start a gang war before he even finished making his case for a peaceful resolution. "Can I just finish here? I'm doing the fact thing here. You know what? Forget the facts. Let me just make my point, ok?"

"I'm sorry, Paul, you're right," Winston said. "May I add just one piece of information to the conversation before you continue?"

"Sure, of course," Paul replied, hoping Winston's piece of information wasn't too incendiary.

"I have Raff," Winston stated, his voice flat but his words a very real threat.

"What?" asked Paul. The three words didn't even make sense together. What did he mean he had Raff? He'd been holding him prisoner all this time he was missing? This wasn't good.

"Where?" asked Jeanie. "Where is he?" She was pulling out her phone, no doubt intent on calling in her troops or something like that.

"Now everyone hold on here," Paul said, trying to calm the situation.

“I have him. He’s safe. We’ve been holding him since the night he got flushed out of your safe house. And he’ll remain fine as long as I remain fine. It’s as simple as that.”

Jeanie started to say something but stopped herself. She had a deep, angry scowl on her face, and her brow was furrowed as she stared daggers at Winston. Paul jumped into the moment of silence in an attempt to steer the momentum away from violence.

“Ok, well, I’m as surprised as anyone about that, but it only serves to reinforce my point. We’ve got your basic mutually assured destruction scenario here right? Or if not destruction, then mutually assured big fat pain in the ass. Everyone agrees on that, right?” No one said anything, which Paul took as a sign of assent, so he kept on going. “It seems to me that we need to work out a scenario that we can all live with.”

“And you think you can come up with such a scenario that will please all of us?” asked Isaiah.

“No,” admitted Paul. “Not please. But I think it’s something we can all live with. Emphasis on the ‘all live’ part.”

“Go ahead,” said Jeanie. “Let’s hear it.”

“First of all, I want to reiterate that ‘all live’ thing I just mentioned. We don’t have any proof that Winston ordered anyone killed and, quite frankly, there’s no way we have the right to kill someone based on our suspicions. We’re all liars. We’re all tricksters. If the police can frame someone for murder, then certainly any of us could. There’s just too much uncertainty in our world to do something as irreversible as kill someone. Plus it’s, you know, wrong.”

He looked around the room, and no one objected, so he pressed on. “So here’s my proposal. Winston lets Raff go. We let Winston and Jake go. Winston steps down from the project and leaves the rest of us alone. We decide whether to continue forward or not, but that’s a discussion for after Winston’s gone.”

“That’s not a deal,” said Jeanie. “That’s letting him get away with murder.”

“Ok,” said Paul. “But I’m not done.” He pulled a piece of paper from his back pocket. “This is a list of contacts Winston gave us yesterday. Contacts for other

Crews that might be interested in joining this thing of ours. I'm willing to turn this list over to the group for all of us to use."

"That's hardly..." Jeanie started, but Paul cut her off.

"Hold on, lemme finish," he said, turning to Isaiah. "The whole reason that you wanted Winston in on this plan of yours was because of his contacts, right?"

Isaiah nodded.

"Now obviously you can't trust him, and he can't trust you for any kind of long term relationship. We all agree on that. But if we can trust him to make one concession - and I think we can - then perhaps we can still get what we need from him." Paul now turned to Winston and said, "I assume you see where I'm going here."

"I do," said Winston.

"Well, what do you think? Give up your contacts - or a sizable chunk of your contacts. And in return, Jeanie and Isaiah forgo any claims to revenge or whatever. Plus let Raff go. How's that sound?"

Winston sighed and looked up at the ceiling, pulling on his beard as he thought the offer over. Paul could guess at what he might be thinking about and tried to mollify his concerns. "I know you think this is a bad idea," said Paul. "And I'm sure you're loathe to introduce us to Crews that trust you with their contact information. But these are all smart people, right? Otherwise they couldn't continue to exist as viable Crews. And if they're serious, smart, kick-ass Crews, then they deserve to make the decision themselves. They deserve that freedom. You can preface every introduction with your own warning. You can tell them whatever you want about how dangerous you think this scheme of Isaiah's is. Just give us an opportunity to state our case to them. That's all."

"Hell," said Paul. "We're going to find some of these groups anyway. Why not make sure you warn them all off first if that's what you think you want to do?"

Winston mulled all this over for another long minute. Everyone else in the room was experienced enough at negotiating to know that they needed to let him make the final decision on his own without any more kibitzing. Finally he looked right at Paul. "Let me summarize this. I give you contact information for all thirty-

seven of the Crews I'm in contact with and release Raff. In return you let me and my people go and promise not to attempt any reprisals against us."

"That's what I'm proposing," said Paul.

"And you're fine with this, Jeanie?" asked Winston.

"It works," said Jeanie. "But if you lie about anything or if Raff 's been hurt..."

"Then the deal is null and you'll all come after me," finished Winston. "I know."

"Then yes, I guess I agree, if only to get this whole ordeal over with," Jeanie replied.

Winston turned to Isaiah. "And what about you?" he asked. "Does this work for you?"

"Not in the least," Isaiah intoned. "The names are a fair trade for Raff 's freedom. And in the spirit of Paul's efforts to make a peace we can all live with, I'll concede that they're worth letting Winston walk out of here unmolested. But Jake is a vicious woman killer, simple as that. I can pretend that Winston didn't know or suspect what his friend would do. I can't pretend that killing Raquel was forgivable." Isaiah fixed his gaze on Winston, staring down the older man with dark, burning eyes. "I call your bluff. Let's see your army."

"You forget about Raff..." Winston started to say in a loud, angry voice.

"You're going to kill him?" Isaiah said. "Are you the type of man who can order someone murdered in cold blood just to save your own skin?"

"Isn't that precisely what you're asking me to do, Isaiah?" asked Winston, shouting now. "Let you kill Jake so I can save myself."

"I'm just going to see that justice is done. I give my word I won't kill him."

Winston snorted in derision. "And I'm supposed to trust your word?"

Paul saw that his negotiations had unraveled very fast and the gang war he'd been trying to avoid was about to break out right in front of him. "What if he went to jail?" Paul asked. "Back to prison."

Isaiah and Winston both turned to look at Paul. He took the opportunity to press forward. "I mean, it's not like you're equipped to hold him prisoner for a long period of time, right?" he asked Isaiah. "What else are you going to do with him?"

"We'll think of something," Isaiah said.

"Which is exactly what I fear," said Winston.

"So send him back to prison," insisted Paul. Not for Raquel's murder. For something else. Drugs or something. I'm sure if anyone can come up with a crime to frame him with it's the people here in this room."

Isaiah leaned over and whispered with Amelia for a few moments, then turned back to Paul. "That would be an acceptable outcome. The rest of his life in prison."

"Acceptable to you maybe..." Winston started to say, but Isaiah cut him off.

"No!" He shouted. "No more. You've lost and everyone here knows it. I called your bluff. You kept negotiating. You're finished and it's either him or you. What's it going to be?"

"I don't think you understand what..." Winston said.

"What's it going to be?" Isaiah asked again, talking over the old man. "You or him?"

Winston opened his mouth and then closed it, looking toward Paul and Chloe for some sign of support. Chloe wouldn't even look at him, and Paul turned away. He didn't want to give Winston any hope that there might be some other way out of this situation. In the end Winston chose.

"Ok..." he said, defeated. "Ok. But not for any violent crime or anything like child molestation. Drugs or bank robbery. Something that'll earn Jake some respect with the inmates."

"Fine," agreed Isaiah. "Although I'm sure he's never had a problem impressing his fellow felons."

WINSTON sighed, took a deep breath and then addressed the whole room. “I just want to say this. You’ve chosen a path of doom, my friends. By deciding to play by society’s crypto-fascist rules, you’re just setting yourselves up to be co-opted by the very forces you’re fighting against. I foresee many dark days ahead for all of you - days of NSA intercepts and FBI investigations and CIA assassinations. No good can come of playing this corporate game, and I encourage all of you to rethink your decision to participate. And rest assured I will be giving everyone I talk to the same warning. Yes, I’ll abide by our agreement and put you in contact with the other Crews, but I dearly hope that not a one of them makes the same mistakes that you are.”

Isaiah and the rest of them listened as Winston gave his speech, but the instant Winston stopped talking, Isaiah jumped in. “Those of us living in the 21st-century appreciate the rambling advice of a murderer and hypocrite and will certainly give it as much thought as it deserves. I’ve made the case for our plan, and everyone here has signed on of their own free will. You’ve made it clear what idiots we all are, so we wouldn’t want to trouble you with having to hear us making such grave mistakes. If you could follow Amelia into the other room, she’ll take down all the contact data you’ve promised to provide. Then I suggest you get the hell off this island right away.”

Winston chewed his lower lip as if actually biting back what he wanted to say. His rueful gaze passed over Paul and Chloe, neither of whom met him in the eye. Despite everything Winston had done and all the lies, Paul still felt sick to his stomach about betraying the old man like this. Even though Paul’s “betrayal” probably saved the guy’s life, he knew Winston didn’t see it that way. At the same time, an intense sense of relief flooded through his body - he’d managed to avoid a shooting war and actually came up with a peace plan that might work. He hoped Winston appreciated that at least. The old man finally just nodded once and followed Amelia out of the room, a knot of five of Isaiah’s Crewmembers following close behind.

No one said or did anything until they were well out of the room. Isaiah then stepped forward and held his hand out to Paul, saying, “Thanks for keeping a cool head, Paul. You kept things from getting ugly. I’ll have some of my people come buy and take custody of Jake. By tomorrow night he’ll be in a Florida jail cell, I assure you. It’s not the most pleasing outcome, but as you said, it’s one that we can all live with.”

“Thanks,” said Paul. “I did my best to keep things civil around here for once.”

“May I speak with you and Chloe in private for a moment?” he asked, gesturing toward the far corner of the room.

“Sure,” said Chloe, and she and Paul followed Isaiah across the room.

“I want to apologize for all the trouble our meeting has put you through,” Isaiah said. “I know you had no idea what was going to be coming down on you here. You all handled it very well though.”

“Thanks,” said Chloe.

Isaiah reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper and handed it to Chloe. “This is a cashier’s check for \$50,000.”

“So it is,” said Chloe, looking at the check. Paul, looking over her shoulder, was excited to see the money but confused about why Isaiah was offering it to them.

“I can get you cash instead if you prefer,” Isaiah said.

“That would be easier,” Chloe said, handing the check back to him. “And why’re you giving us \$50,000 again?”

“To cover some of the damages and expenses you’ve incurred these past few days. I feel in some small part responsible for Eddie and his outrageous attack on your home.”

“Responsible?” asked Paul, wondering for the first time if Isaiah had really set up the attack. Had he been pulling all the strings the entire time?

“In a small, indirect way, yes. I knew that Eddie’s temper was volatile, and yet I encouraged you to challenge him. In the end, we got the right result - Marco in charge of the Crew and Eddie out of the picture. But I never thought it would get as dangerous and violent as it did.”

“So you’re giving us fifty grand,” said Chloe. “Why do I get the feeling there’s more to it than that?”

“Because there is,” said Isaiah. “There’s no easy way to say this, so I’m just

going to say it. We're all impressed with how you two have handled yourselves. No one doubts your intelligence or drive. But there are concerns within the group about your close ties to Winston and about the relatively small size of your Crew."

"So you're not going to give us a seat on the board after all," concluded Paul. This didn't actually strike him as very bad news at all, but he knew Chloe probably felt different.

"Oh come on, that's bullshit," Chloe said. "We've stuck our necks way out there for this. We turned the killer and Winston in. My friendship with him is destroyed. Gone. Kaput. I think we've earned..."

"Were you planning on telling us that Winston had been trying to subvert my plan all along?" asked Isaiah. Chloe didn't have an answer. In his haste to avert violence, Paul had admitted knowing that Winston was working against the shadow corporation. "I understand why you did what you did. You no doubt made some deal with Winston in order to get him and Jacob to come forward at all. I understand, really. But you can see how this works against you. It leaves one with the impression that you, at least until very recently, valued your connection to Winston more than the security of the group."

"So you're just going to just pay us off and kick us out," grumbled Chloe.

"Pay you off, yes. But not kick you out. We're simply not inviting you to sit on the board. You and Paul will be our first regular members. You'll get all the benefits I've discussed before and you'll play valuable supporting roles in taking down our first target."

"Supporting roles. We just won't be in charge of setting things up," said Paul, trying to put a positive spin on Isaiah's offer. It sounded fair to him, and quite frankly he was happy to not have the burden of trying to herd this corporation of cats that Isaiah was trying to put together.

"And we won't have a full share of the profits," added Chloe. "Or a say in how things are run."

"All members will have a say in how things are run. An equal say," insisted Isaiah. "As for your share, it will be commensurate to your contribution as a supporting member. But as long as you stay with us and pay your dues, you'll

reap many benefits.”

“And how much are these dues?” asked Chloe.

“We’re starting at \$50,000 per year,” he replied with a straight face.

Chloe gave him a short, humorless chortle. “You got some fucking balls on you.”

Isaiah smiled a wide, white toothed grin. “You better believe I do.” He held out the check to her again. “Do you still want this cashed or shall I put it toward your dues?”

Chloe and Paul looked at each other and both knew immediately what the other was thinking. “We’ll get back to you on that,” said Chloe. It wasn’t a decision to be made lightly and in the heat of things. Big money decisions never were. “We need to talk with the rest of our Crew.”

Isaiah nodded. “That’s fine,’ he said. “You have until 10 a.m. tomorrow to let me know. Otherwise I’ll send someone around with the cash.” He put the check back in his shirt pocket. “Now if you’ll please excuse us, we’ve a lot of work to do here still. Can you see yourselves out?”

They could and they did.

Chapter 42

PAUL and Chloe sat on a low wall on Duval Street, eating ice cream. They sat in silence for a long time, just watching the flow of tourists as it moved back and forth in front of them. To their left stood a man with a parrot in one hand and an iguana in the other, offering passersby a chance to pose with his pets for a mere \$5 a picture. More than a few took him up on it. Just one more of the many weird ways people made a living in Key West.

The unasked question between the two of them was how were they going to make a living? Would they keep the status quo or try and break out into a brave new world through Isaiah's shadow corporation? Paul wanted the former, Chloe the latter. Both of them knew that as soon as they started talking about it, the conversation would become heated, so they both were trying to put it off as long as possible. But they'd run out of other topics to delay the inevitable, and the ice cream was almost gone.

"I think we should let Isaiah keep the money," Chloe said.

"You mean as our first year's dues?" Paul asked.

"Well, maybe. But either way. I don't want to take his money. I don't want to feel like we owe him."

Paul thought about that for a moment. "On the other hand, we could take the money and still not feel like we owe him anything. I pretty much feel he does owe us at least that much. Plus we'd have the money, which we could use."

"Hmm," mused Chloe. "That's a good point. Money is good."

"Money is good," Paul agreed. "So we should take the cash?"

"Unless we want to use it for our dues," she said.

"Yeah, well, that's true..."

"Do we want to use it for our dues?" she asked.

"Do we want to pay dues?"

“I guess that’s what I’m asking.”

“What do you want?” Paul asked. “Do you want to pay?”

“I don’t want to pay. I never want to pay. But I think maybe we should.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because it’s a good idea,” said Chloe. “It’s a big opportunity for us, and big opportunities are few and far between on this island.”

“And you’re not happy with the way things are?” Paul asked.

“Why do you ask questions you already know the answers to?”

“Just stalling for time, I guess.”

“Yeah,” said Chloe, taking a bite of peanut butter cup ice cream. “So what do you think?”

“You know what I think,” he replied.

“You’re happy the way things are.”

“I am. Mostly. Mostly I am.”

“Just mostly?” she asked.

“Well, I’m not happy that you’re not happy. I am happy to not have to worry about Isaiah and Winston and Eddie and Raff and...”

“Me too,” said Chloe, interrupting him.

“You too what?” he asked

“I’m happy too that we don’t have to worry about them. It’s like wrestling with moray eels, dealing with all those guys.”

“We’d be doing a lot of wrestling if we started paying them dues,” Paul pointed out.

“Yeah.”

Paul ate the last of his Oreo ice cream, scraping the bottom of the cup with his plastic spoon. “What about what Winston suggested?”

“Which thing that Winston suggested?”

“About striking out on our own.”

“We’re already on our own,” Chloe pointed out. “That’s the problem.”

“But we have those names he gave us. We have some new contacts. Maybe there’s some middle ground.”

Chloe finished her ice cream, sucking the sugar cone dry and crunching through the last of it. “Middle ground. Do it on our own. No Isaiah or Jeanie or Marco...”

“Or Raff,” Paul added.

“Or Raff. We form our own little shadow corporation. Follow Isaiah’s plan but follow it on our own.”

“How hard can it be?”

“Pretty fucking hard, I would imagine,” said Chloe.

“Well, it would give us something to do,” Paul replied with a smile. “And we’re pretty smart folks. I’m sure we can figure it out.”

“Yeah,” she said. “We are. But we’ll need more people to make it work.”

“I know.”

“And we’re not going to find them here in Key West. It’s going to involve a lot of travel. A lot of trouble. A lot of talking to some real freaky people,” she said.

“Oh, I know. And a lot of testing and false starts and background checks and all kinds of other challenges.”

“And you’re up for that?” she asked.

“I am if you are. I’m up for doing it together.”

“Together,” Chloe agreed. “Absolutely.”

They sat together and held hands, watching the crowd flow by, happy for the moment that they had a plan. Even if it was a crazy plan. But they were all crazy plans. That’s what made them worth doing.

Chloe’s phone rang. She unclipped it from her belt and looked at the caller ID before answering it. “Hello?” she said.

“Hi, it’s Sandee,” said the voice on the other end.

“Hey sweetie,” said Chloe. “Everything ok? Did Winston pick up Jacob and all that?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” Sandee said. “Bee and I were just watching the two of you hold hands on the camera here and we wanted to tell you, you look awfully cute.”

Chloe looked up and around and spotted one of Bee’s hidden camera mounts on a telephone pole across the street. She waved at it. Paul, realizing what she was doing, did the same. “That’s sweet of you to say,” Chloe said to Sandee. “Was there anything else?”

“Just that that ice cream is going to go straight to your ass,” said Sandee.

“Is there anything else I don’t know?” Chloe asked with a laugh.

“Oh yeah, Bee wanted me to ask what we’re going to do now that all the out of town guests are leaving?”

Chloe turned to Paul and said, “Bee wants to know what’s next. What should I tell them?”

“Tell them we’re going to get some more ice cream and then we’re coming home,” said Paul.

“And after that?”

“After that, we’re going to get drunk as skunks.”

“And after that?”

“After that, we’re going to start our own little revolution,” said Paul with a grin.

“Did you hear all that?” Chloe asked Sandee.

“Ice cream, fat asses, drinks, revolution. Got it,” replied Sandee. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Sounds crazy to me,” said Chloe. “But yep, that’s the plan.”

She hung up the phone and then gave Paul a great big wet, sloppy French kiss.

“What kind of ice cream do revolutionaries eat?” she asked him.

“Whatever kind they want,” said Paul. “What’s the point of smashing the state if you can’t have your favorite ice cream?”

“No point at all,” said Chloe.

Hand in hand they started down the street, back toward the ice cream shop.

“So where do you want to start?” she asked him.

“Well, I thought we’d wait at least until we got back to the house, but I’m sure we could find a quiet alley...”

She laughed. “I’ll give you a ‘maybe’ on the alley, but I meant where do you want to start recruiting people? I was thinking maybe Miami or Atlanta. Hell, even New York.”

“I was thinking Las Vegas.”

“Vegas? That’s a long way to go. Why?”

“That’s where DefCon is.”

“DefCon? Sure, if you wanna go there, let’s go. But I was talking about finding new recruits.”

“So was I.”

“At a hacker convention?” she asked.

“At a hacker convention,” he confirmed.

“That’s a fucking good idea. Although I have no idea how we’d pull it off.”

“Trust me,” he said, kissing her on the cheek. “I’ve got a plan.”

THE END