DARKENING WATER

by Susan LaDue

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**1.**

Cameron contemplated the decomposing body at the bottom of the hole.  *Dumb verga couldn’t follow rules.*  The dead man’s name was Raoul Bautista, and he’d had a plum of a job working for Cameron as an excavation foreman at the construction site that Cameron managed. He’d have made good money, including some extra on the side, if he had just turned a blind eye to some ditches that weren’t on the blueprints.

Bautista’s job was more than most guys could hope for; and Cameron had recently promoted him to head up the crew digging the ditches for pipelines. It had been the last of the jobs required to get construction moving, and indeed, the project had been on track until the order came down to silence Bautista. Now Cameron would have to work on damage control and find a replacement for the dead man.

“Fuckin' Mexican,” he muttered, spitting into the gaping pit at his feet. He climbed into a bulldozer that rumbled nearby and felt the big machine roar to life as he pushed pile after pile of black earth into the hole. He had left Bautista’s body uncovered so it would deteriorate quickly. He tried to avert his eyes, but as he worked, he could see Bautista’s legs disappear beneath the earth, and then what remained of his head. Finally, a cascade of soil enveloped his blood-stained T-shirt.

Mixed with stone dust, the black earth that the dozer pushed into the hole replaced the excavated muck that lay in a sloppy heap on the far side. Packed down with gravel, the earth would solidify into a base before concrete was poured to create a landing platform for helicopters.

When the earth rose above ground level, Cameron jammed the dozer’s gear shift into reverse and drove back and forth over the dirt until its treads had packed the soil into a tight mound. Finally, satisfied.that the mound was the right size to fill the hole as the new dirt settled, he shut the dozer down.

No one knew if Cameron was his first name or his last, or if he had another one. A stocky Caribbean islander in his forties, he was of average height, with a full head of straight black hair that he gelled and combed back. He had copper-colored skin etched with acne scars, and sharp features with a high forehead that was bisected by a widow’s peak. Physically fit from years of manual labor, his body was compact and muscled. In a strange roll of the genetic dice, his lips were full and sensuous, a marked contrast to the rest of him. He wore a faded denim shirt, the sleeves rolled to his elbows, and creased tan Dockers. His boots were caked with the sticky muck that sucked at the boots of every construction worker in the coastal lowlands.

With the bulldozer silent, Cameron returned to his mud-streaked F-150 and climbed into the bed. He picked up the rumpled tarp in which Bautista’s body had been wrapped and shook it out to fold it. But when he held it up for inspection, he noticed dark smears, so he wadded it up and jammed it between the tool locker and the wall of the cab. He’d toss it into a dumpster later. The dumpsters were swapped out twice a week, so it would soon be buried under a mountain of debris. He jumped to the ground, slid into the cab, and started the engine, blasting the air conditioning.

He pulled up next to the dented trailer that served as his office. Inside, the odor of stale cigar smoke and burned coffee permeated the air, but at least the trailer was cool. Besides, he didn’t spend much time there, except to do paperwork. Most of the day he walked the vast site that was to become the first waste water treatment plant in the province. He emptied the morning’s coffee grounds and rinsed the glass container. A fresh cup set to brew, he sat down, and put his feet on the desk. He lit one of the fragrant cigars that his friend Felix supplied and picked up the phone. Catching himself, he replaced the phone in its cradle. Instead, he reached into his shirt pocket for the burner he’d bought that morning.

He punched in a number known only to him. “Everything’s taken care of.”

“No problems?” the boss replied.

“*Cero*. What you wanted is done.”

And the waste?”

“There is no waste*.* By the way, we finished leveling the site for the helicopter pad. We relocated it farther from the intake building. I want to finish so you can bring choppers in when you want. In a few days we pour.”

“Pour today.”

“Whatever you want. But the fill’s gotta settle; then we top it up. Otherwise, there’ll be a depression.”

“Okay. But be quick.”

“Sure. And I’ll call you with a name for an excavation foreman.”

“This time we vet him here.”

Cameron flinched. Apparently, Bautista’s big mouth was on him. But he just replied, “Sure, boss.”

He slipped the burner phone back into his shirt pocket and sighed. As the computer finished booting up, he poured coffee. Strong with three sugars, the way his mother had made it. He sipped and stared at the job applications on his computer screen, reminding himself to make a note in the daily log that Raoul Bautista hadn’t returned from lunch.

**2.**

It was just a trip to the lumber yard, an ordinary errand. But it turned up a red flag that Kristen should have taken seriously. Had she heeded the signs, had she been just a little more careful, her life might not have been turned upside down.

She had just returned from a buying trip to Miami, flush with the energy of the coming season, when she noticed the displays in her resort wear boutique looked tired. The new inventory was on its way, which made a trip to the building supply place almost palatable, though it would normally bore her. One hot October morning, she climbed into her dusty Toyota pickup with her Labrador retriever and headed down the packed dirt street that served as the town’s main thoroughfare. It led from her shop to the depot, as people called the lumber yard, because it had once been a train station.

Kristen Maroney owned a boutique called Kristen del Mar in the town of Cahuita, a reconstituted fishing village on the Caribbean coast of Guatemala. The official language was Spanish, but a Creole dialect and American English were what you heard on the street. Her shop was situated on the aforementioned packed dirt road, which was called Mahogany Street. A short walk down its dusty, rutted length got you to the beach, with its endless expanse of turquoise water. It was only a short walk to anywhere in Cahuita. On a good day, about two thousand souls called the town home, and an average of eight hundred tourists swelled that number in the high season.

Cahuita business owners depended on visiting cruise ships to make money. The Beachcomber, a luxury resort that lay south of town on a peninsula, helped too. But that didn’t stop people from griping about both the ships and the resort, because tourism and development degraded their quality of life, even as it provided income. Also, the large-scale construction meant to accommodate ever-increasing numbers of tourists was generally done as quickly and as cheaply as possible, which meant that the environment suffered. When Kristen went scuba diving with her boyfriend Adam, they rarely enjoyed the crystalline water and abundant sea life they had taken for granted when she had moved to Cahuita from Los Angeles ten years earlier. Construction runoff, untreated sewage, and climate change had permanently clouded the water and killed off fish and corral.

Before they reached the lumber yard that October morning, Kristen and her dog Diego were caught in one of the sudden downpours for which the coastal lowlands were known. *One minute you’re happily gazing at a clear blue sky,* she thought, *and the next minute you’re drenched.* The storms usually let up after a short time though, so they waited in the truck. When the rain eased, they made their way across the muddy parking area to the store, hopping puddles as they went. The damp air was thick with the odor of salt and decaying vegetation, along with a hint of sewage. The stink of garbage was a fact of life in the tropics because waste management simply couldn’t keep pace with development. In Cahuita it didn’t even try.

As they entered the depot, she told Diego, “no pee,” a command that she used to help him differentiate between indoors and out in a region where buildings often opened onto nature. He wagged his tail and set about exploring the merchandise while she continued through the store and out to where the lumber was stacked behind the building. She was relieved to see that Willy, the handyman she had hired, was already there, poking around among lengths of two-by-four. Willy supervised the maintenance crew at the Beachcomber, as well as being a skilled carpenter. Once when vandals had trashed her shop, he had rebuilt it at very little cost, and she’d employed him ever since, except that now she insisted on paying a fair price. In Cahuita, most families lived hand to mouth, and they could use any available work. Willy was more fortunate than many in that he had a permanent job.

“Hey Willy, thought you might have to work this morning.”

“Morning, Kristen. No offense, I like to choose my own wood.”

“None taken. It occurred to me you wouldn’t be happy with what I selected.”

Diego trotted up to greet Willy and then occupied himself sniffing stacks of lumber. “No pee,” Kristen repeated.

Still turning over pieces of wood, Willy asked, “You okay they put the supplies in your truck?”

“Sure. You’re not going to get in trouble with the boss, are you?”

“Nah. He knows I'm here. I had breakfast with David at McGarrity’s. He’s back from his stint on the oil rig. Working construction at that waste water treatment site south of town. Lord, that boy can eat. But I saved you this.” He proffered a cinnamon bun. He knew she loved them.

Kristen laughed. “Thanks, Willy! And here I’ve been trying to rein it in.” Her boyfriend Adam called her voluptuous, but he wasn’t stupid – she tended toward chunky. She scarfed down the bun. “I’m going to look like a beach ball if I don’t watch it. David doing okay? It must be nice to have him home.” David was Willy’s son.

“Yeah, he talked about his new job. Offered to pay rent, if you can believe that.”

“Sure. That’s a government-funded project that he signed onto, so the pay must be good.”

With a sly grin, Willy remarked, “Funded by angels too.”

“Well I’m sure David will do fine.” She avoided his allusion to mysterious funding of the sewage treatment plant that had provided his son’s job. It sounded like something she’d be itching to know more about, and she reminded herself that that kind of itch usually ended in a toxic rash, metaphorically speaking.

“Maybe,” Willy grumbled good-naturedly.

She indicated the items on Willy’s list. “You want me to ask Russell to round up the other stuff?” The owner was always good about helping.

“Sure.”

She went back inside where the air was thick with the odor of damp sand and assorted construction supplies. Fumes emanating from pressed wood cabinets made Diego sneeze as he trotted past them to join her. Russell’s wife, Juana, was stocking shelves and turned as they approached. She was petite and wore a faded cotton dress in a large floral print. Unlike most Cahuitans, she rarely smiled. Her brow remained perpetually furrowed, and she placed her hands on her hips when she talked. Though in her late fifties, she routinely hefted twenty-kilogram bags of cement onto her thin shoulders.

“I hear you’re remodeling the shop.”

“Not really. More like a face life.”

“Business good?”

“No, but it’s about to pick up.”

“Damned tourists,” Juana murmured, referring to the cruise ships that were beginning to arrive. They exchanged a look that communicated their shared distaste.

“This year’s inventory is about to arrive, and I need new displays.”

Kristen handed Juana Willy’s list, and Juana nodded and disappeared among rows of shelves. While waiting, Kristen occupied herself by browsing through the plumbing accessories. Her bathroom needed help, and she’d been putting it off until the new season ramped up. Her landlord would pay for labor, but she wanted a designer toilet and sink, and she’d have to buy those herself.

Suddenly, a male voice rasped in her ear, “I know you. You’re the lady cain’t mind her business.”

Kristen flinched. She hadn’t noticed the man in the soiled T-shirt and muddy jeans. He looked like he hadn’t shaved or changed his clothes in days, and he swayed on his feet. He had wiry salt and pepper hair that stuck out in all directions and big calloused hands. Kristen reached out to steady him, but he backed away, stumbling on a boxed faucet that she’d put aside. He looked vaguely familiar, though she couldn’t place him. Regardless, people were generally trustworthy in Cahuita, so she was more concerned about him than alarmed.

She also thought maybe the guy had a point. Sometimes she did get more involved in things than she should. Some people even said she looked for trouble, though she just meant to help. But there was some truth to her boyfriend’s contention that she couldn’t resist people in a jam.

As she was trying to figure out what to do about the tipsy guy, Willy appeared and stepped between them.

“Mornin’, Adrian,” Willy grinned. “You picking up for a job?”

“Got no job. An’ it’s her fault.” He jabbed a finger at Kristen’s chest.

Willy wasn’t big, but he’d done manual labor all his life, and his arms were corded with muscle. With one hand, he grasped the wrist that belonged to the jabbing finger and lowered it to Adrian’s side while he threw his other arm across the man’s shoulders.

“You know what?” he said. “You and me, we’re gonna go drink a coffee. I bet there’s still a coconut muffin at McGarrity’s.” He kept his arm around Adrian’s shoulders as he turned to Kristen to explain that Russell was loading the lumber into her truck. She nodded and watched him steer Adrian out to the parking lot.

“Who is that guy?” she asked Juana, who was ringing up her order.

“That’s Adrian Petters. Brother of the lawyer you sent away. He used to fix up houses for Hector’s real estate clients.”

She’d never sent anyone away in her life, but one time, Willy’s daughter-in-law had been facing eviction, and she had asked Kristen to check into it. Kristen hadn’t felt that she could say no, but the situation had mushroomed out of control before she knew it. She’d stumbled onto a big real estate scam and Adrian’s brother Hector was one of the lawyers involved. He ended up in jail and she wondered at the irony of unintended consequences: she’d tried to help a young bride stay in her home, and Adrian had lost his job.

“Couldn’t Adrian hire on where David’s working?” she asked Juana.

“Huh,” the other woman grunted. “Tarred with the same brush as his brother, ain’t he? Government contract, they look into a man.”

In Kristen’s experience, hiring for government contracts was determined by politics and graft, but she refrained from saying so. Instead, she pulled a credit card out of her wallet and put it on the counter. She only had one card, and it was already loaded up with the new season’s inventory. *Time for a cheaper cable package and fewer meals out*, she reflected.

“Twenty-seven hundred and eighty-six,” Juana declared, handing her the slip. That was Guatemalan quetzels, which came to about $380.00. She pushed the credit card toward Juana, who ran it through.

“Watch those potholes, you’re riding low now,” Juana advised.

Kristen called to Diego who was sprawled on the cool concrete, and they headed for the parking lot. Diego jumped into the truck’s dented cab, smearing the faded seat fabric with his muddy paws. She sighed as she knocked gunk off her sandals before pulling her own feet into the driver’s side.

As they drove past McGarrity’s, she saw Adrian and Willy sitting at an outside table, deep in conversation. She had an uneasy feeling about Adrian, but she brushed it aside. “Just drunk,” she thought. “And I’m part of the reason he can’t find a job.” She decided to forget it and turned her thoughts to finding help unloading the truck. It wouldn’t be long before she’d regret stifling the niggling voice in her head.

**3.**

The following morning, Kristen and Diego headed down the mountain into town. She had awakened in her house in the hills haunted by thoughts of Adrian Petters, and she didn’t feel any less guilty than when he'd confronted her at the lumber yard. It was hard enough being an American shop owner in a third world town where people were likely to see you as an exploitive interloper, without feeling that she had deprived a family man of his livelihood. Adrian needed a break.

In Cahuita, people tarred whole families with the same brush if there was one wayward member. Years before, her neighbor Liz's housekeeper had an affair with a married man, and the townspeople still considered the housekeeper a loose woman. There was even a rumor that the housekeeper, Ana, seduced Liz for her money, which Liz thought was hilarious. It made no difference that Ana’s beau lured her from Cincinnati to Cahuita with a promise of marriage, when his real intention was to set her up as his mistress. Unbeknownst to Ana, he had a wife who lived in Panama while the beau worked in Guatemala City for the family grocery chain. He came to Cahuita to open an additional store, and he wanted Ana for his comfort and pleasure when he was in town.

Eventually, his wife and children moved to Cahuita and Ana lost her lover and her reputation. Fortunately, she found employment working for Kristen’s neighbor. And she managed to befriend people who realized that the system was messed up. Married men were free to have mistresses, but mistresses weren’t free to have married men.

In the same vein, no one was likely to hire the brother of a jailbird lawyer, unless it was an outside business that was immune to town gossip. The only employer she could think of in that category was Caritec, the construction company that was building the sewage treatment plant south of town. She didn't see any harm in taking a ride to find out if they were hiring.

Kristen and Diego drove through the village and turned south on route eighty-five instead heading for the shop. It was a picture-perfect tropical morning, and she sang along with the radio as she drove down the beach toward the construction site. Sunlight bounced off the water and into her eyes, so she reached into the glove compartment for sunglasses. Diego went on full alert when he realized that they weren't heading for the shop as they usually did. He stood with his rump braced against the passenger seat, his nose creating smeary designs on the windshield.

Kristen’s view of the water was periodically obstructed by rickety wooden booths that sold plastic beach paraphernalia. The flimsy structures managed to elude the no-build regulation that protected Cahuita's beaches because the stalls fell under the “temporary” exception. A great number of them looked as though they’d been plopped down along the road, and there they remained in all their disreputable glory. Most years, they were knocked down by high winds during hurricane season, but they always rose from their ashes, phoenix-like.

In fact, they seemed to multiply. When Kristen had first moved to Cahuita, she could drive from there to the Honduras border without seeing a commercial establishment on the beach. There were just the shacks where local fishermen kept their equipment. In those days, their overturned rowboats lined the beach in the evening like so many beached whales.

Kristen rounded a curve and found herself staring at an artificial mountain. Its top was shorn off and leveled, and a gravel road wound its way up from route eighty-five to the flat summit. A dump truck piled high with thick muck made its way down, growling and whining as the driver used the gears to control his descent. She pulled over to make the turn but waited until the truck had rumbled away before starting the climb.

At the top, she found a chain link fence with a sliding gate. Inside the gate a double-wide trailer was parked so that the length of its side served as a storefront. An air conditioning unit spanned the back end. Over the door hung a plastic banner that read "*Informacion.*" Tacked beside the door another one in Spanish and English read "All visitors must register."

She told Diego to sit tight and left the car's engine running so he’d stay cool. He whined and fidgeted, but she hadn’t brought a leash, and there was no way she was turning him loose on a construction site.

Inside the trailer she encountered a uniformed *federale* holding a thick china coffee mug, one elbow propped on a counter that ran the length of the trailer. *Federales* were Guatemala's national police who served a variety of purposes, including guarding government facilities. Next to this one stood a *mestizo*-looking security guard who wore a baseball cap emblazoned with the Caritec logo: a line drawing of a factory with “Caritec” above and “Construction” below. To their right, a hinged section of counter permitted people to enter and exit the tiny office that lay behind it.

Slowly and deliberately the two-man security detail took Kristen’s measure. Then the Caritec cop asked grumpily, "What can we do for you?"

She resented his attitude and ignored him, speaking instead to a woman seated at a desk behind the counter. The woman looked familiar. "I'm wondering if you're hiring?" Kristen asked.

The cop replied for the woman. "The office jobs are taken."

Kristen continued to ignore him. "I have a friend who's available," she said to the woman on whose desk a name plate read "Marita." "Are you Marita?"

"Yes, and you’re Kristen from the beachwear shop."

"I thought I recognized you!" Kristen exclaimed. The security detail shifted uneasily on their feet.

"I used to work in the cycle place across the street from your shop. I applied for vehicle maintenance here, but they gave me this," Marita said. She stood and opened the hinged section of counter. "It's okay, *hijo*s," she smiled at the cops. The men looked at each other, set down their mugs, and left. They didn't thank her for the coffee.

“And what do you do?" Kristen inquired.

"Oh, you know, secretary, this and that. I'm the first line of defense against the public. These guys, they think they're running a military base. And macho? No women, *nunca*!" She mugged an angry frown. "Where's your dog?"

"You know I have a dog?" Kristen asked.

“Diego? He used to come to the back of the bicycle shop at lunchtime. I scolded him that he never came just to see me."

"I'm afraid Diego has a one-track mind. Anyway, he's enjoying the air conditioning in the car."

"Bring him in!" she urged. "He'll recognize me."

“I don’t have a leash,” Kristen replied. Marita dug around in a pile of miscellaneous equipment and came up with a length of rope.

Kristen thanked her and went to turn off the car engine. She tied the rope onto Diego’s harness and, sure enough, his ears perked up when he saw Marita.

"Hello, hungry boy," she laughed. The dog’s tail thumped against Kristen’s leg and he pulled on the rope to get to her. "You think I don't know what you want, *bribon*?" Marita added.

Kristen dropped the makeshift leash, and Diego scooted under the counter to Marita’s desk. She took a packet of vanilla wafers from her desk drawer and held one out to him.

"But you have to sit like a good boy." Diego sat, a string of saliva dangling from his lip. He swallowed the cookie whole and looked at Marita as if she hadn't given him anything.

"He is about food the way men are about sex," she laughed.

"That about sums it up," Kristen agreed, though she reflected that Adam wasn't like that all. Well, he liked sex, but not the way Diego liked cookies.

"I take the job applications," Marita informed her. "Who's the friend who needs a job?"

"Adrian Petters. A while back I helped Flor Weedon with a real estate problem, and it turned out she was the victim of a scam for which Adrian's brother was a front man. He did legal work that screwed his clients."

"I remember that. What a bastard. Lot of families kicked out of their houses because of him."

"Well, it's no fault of Adrian's, and now he can’t find work. Is there anything here for him?"

"Not officially. I’m supposed to tell people to fill out an application and they’ll be called if they’re needed. But for Adrian I can ask around. He’s a good man, better than some of the lazy bones here."

"Thanks, Marita. You want me to tell him to come?"

"Nah, I'll stop by his sister's place with an application. Her daughter baby-sits Adrian’s kids. She’ll give it to him."

"Thanks, Marita!" Kristen repeated. Marita shrugged her shoulders.

"Give me a call next week.” She wrote a phone number on a Paste-It note. Kristen reached into her bag for her wallet and extracted some bills to leave on the counter. Marita would know what palms to cross.

**4.**

By the end of the next day, Kristen and her shop assistant, Belinda, had put all the merchandise outside that fit on their temporary display tables. It would stay there until Willy finished the new designs. What didn’t fit on the tables, they left in cardboard boxes. Kristen was hoping that the discounted items would sell fast enough that they’d replenish the stock from the boxes, and that the boxes would be empty by the time the new inventory arrived.

At six o’clock, Belinda brought the tables inside and covered them with plastic sheets. Kristen looked around to make sure that everything was ready for Willy, and the two left the shop, followed by Diego. Willy could let himself in later with the key she’d given to him. On the sidewalk, she said good-bye to Belinda and headed for Mitchell’s, the town’s only upscale food market.

Mitchell’s was part of a Central American chain owned by a Panamanian family and it offered an array of international products, as well as local meat and produce. Kristen bought some stew chicken for Diego and a nice slab of snapper to grill for herself. She also stocked up on local fruit and vegetables. When she had moved to Guatemala from Los Angeles, she hadn’t been able to get over how good fruit tasted compared to the agri-business fare that she’d been used to. In the States, produce was more suitable for display than for eating.

She finished her shopping with a loaf of fresh-baked bread and a pound of Guatemalan coffee. She asked the cashier for paper bags. Plastic grocery totes were part of the human trash that killed turtles and other sea life when they mistook them for jelly fish and ate them, so Kristen avoided using them.

As she drove up into the hills, Kristen turned off the air conditioning and opened the windows to catch the evening breeze. Diego stuck his head out of the passenger side to savor the panoply of rain forest odors. She wondered if he could differentiate them when he tested the air, snout extended. She caught only a whiff of wood smoke and the ever-present odor of decay, the latter a scent that you got so used to that you no longer associated it with rot.

Her cell phone rang as they neared the house. It was her neighbor, Liz, asking if she’d like to come for dinner. She told her she was almost home but had just picked up snapper. Liz said to bring it along for Ana to grill, and Kristen could share their rice and vegetables. Kristen thanked her and offered fresh pineapple for dessert.

Liz was a retired professor and a writer. In her sixties with a handsome, barely-lined European face, she spent her time on her veranda, hunched over her laptop or gazing out at the view. The view included unspoiled rain forest and, in the distance, the Caribbean Sea. She was tall, thin, and elegant in the way that once beautiful women can be.

She’d moved to Guatemala from Boston ten years earlier hoping to simplify her life, which in Liz’s case meant clearing away social clutter so she could write. She was extremely private, sometimes reclusive, and Kristen had only gotten to know her over the years. Gradually, she'd uncovered layers of complexity. Liz was prickly and kind, distant and caring, intellectual and down to earth. But she had one uncomplicated characteristic: she was determinedly rational. So, whenever Kristen found herself entangled in complexity, Liz became her go-to person. Diego and Kristen often visited Liz and Ana in the evening when they weren’t staying with Adam at The Beachcomber. It was a comfortable habit.

Kristen continued up the mountain until Diego greeted the sight of their house with a vigorous whapping of his tail against the truck’s seatback. She had to roll up the window, so he wouldn’t jump out. By the time she pulled into her parking spot under the house, he was scratching at the passenger door and barking. She reached over to open the door and he leaped out to begin his nightly patrol of the grounds, a job he regularly tackled with considerable seriousness of purpose. He marked the shrubs as he went, so Kristen assumed that he was redrawing the property line, which seemed to need doing every time he came home. If there were night visitors, he redrew it in the morning too.

She gathered her grocery bags and headed up the stairs that led from under the house to the deck outside the kitchen. She set the bags on the kitchen counter and went to stand at the deck railing. Even in the hills, the air carried a hint of salt. The aroma of hot oil and onions from a neighbor’s kitchen wafted on the breeze. The view, the sensations, and the peace and quiet always reminded her of why she felt attached to Cahuita and to her life there.

When Kristen lived in Los Angeles, neither the city nor her marriage to Mark gave her much pleasure. She designed resort wear with considerable success, but the work took up an absurd number of hours. Rarely did she get to enjoy Los Angeles. She dressed models for shows and customers for profit, always under pressure, and she didn’t like any of it. The excitement of fast living wore thin, and then she began consuming prodigious amounts of cocaine and scotch to tamp down her discontent. Her dream of creating a constantly evolving esthetics of leisure through clothing design rapidly evaporated in a caustic swirl of money and ego. Accommodating peoples’ vanity became increasingly difficult as time went on, as did controlling her dependence on drugs and booze.

Her husband at the time was hot, and he played that card for all it was worth. His name was Mark, and he sold real estate and modelled men’s clothing when he could find work. He’d been attentive and romantic with Kristen at first, but they hadn’t been married a year before he’d begun to find reasons to absent himself in the evening. And then one afternoon, she’d come home early, depleted, adrift, and in need of a safe harbor, and found Mark in the shower with another man. She’d packed a bag and repaired to a hotel, never to return to their condo.

As she looked back on that time, she wondered why she’d imagined feeling at home in a business that fattened her wallet while it starved her soul. She had nothing against money, and she loved designing clothes, but she was by nature haphazard enough without the influence of drugs. Her life felt perpetually out of control. Her job demanded physical toughness and she exercised to keep fit, but junk food was always a temptation, and the industry culture required thinness. Skinny was never going to be Kristen’s look. In fact, she was always a few pounds overweight. However, she had wonderfully thick, curly black hair, and people said she was sexy with a wasn’t-born-yesterday look.

Suddenly a wet nose thrusting itself into her palm pulled her out of her reverie. Diego wanted his dinner. She put the groceries away, fed him, and sliced the husk off the pineapple she’d bought. She cut the fruit into chunks, put the pieces in a glass bowl, and drizzled rum liqueur over them. She unwrapped the fish and shook her special rub over it. She placed it in a baking dish and covered it with a dish towel. She didn’t use disposables like plastic wrap, because Cahuita couldn’t deal with the garbage it already had.

“Don’t bump into me,” she told Diego as she headed down the stairs balancing the dishes. Before she reached the landing, Diego pulled up and growled.

She saw a beat-up green sedan stop in front of the house. As she tried to figure out if she knew the driver, he pulled away. Diego relaxed, and she thought nothing more of it. A few days later, she would see the man walking in town with a group from the wastewater treatment plant, and he looked like the driver of the green car, but still, she didn’t think anything of it.

Since Kristen was the only person besides Liz to use the path that went between their two houses, some jungle wildlife treated the path as their own trail. A short way along, Diego again pulled up and growled. Kristen stopped, and an anteater made its way out of the bush onto the path, its long snout to the ground. A baby anteater followed close behind. The animals’ only reaction to Diego’s grumbling was to pause before Mama began raking the ground with her great front claws. Anteaters didn’t see very well.

“Stay put,” Kristen commanded sharply. But it wasn’t necessary; for a Labrador retriever, Diego was smart. He knew better than to tangle with the resident wildlife. He might or might not get the better of an anteater, but either way he’d pay a price. Or Kristen would, considering the cost of visits to the veterinarian..

The anteater finished eating whatever she had found under the leaves and continued across the path, followed by her offspring. When they disappeared into the dense foliage, Diego ran ahead, and Kristen followed with her dishes.

“Liz, it’s us,” she called up the stairs to the veranda.

“Who else would make such a racket?” Liz replied. “Mind the stairs, Ana just washed them.”

Liz talked tough and there was indeed a hard edge to her. But she had an affectionate heart, which Diego had figured out years ago on his very first visit. He’d been 14-weeks old at the time, clumsy and lovable. She’d held him on her lap and fed him steak scraps, and he’d been the president of her fan club ever since.

“If I fall, dessert goes down with me,” Kristen said, testing the surface of the tiled steps

with one foot.

Ana appeared at the top. “They’re dry by now, but let me take the food,” she said, starting down. When they both reached the veranda, Ana lifted the towel off the fish and declared, “Excellent choice. I’m grilling mahi-mahi. I hope you bought yours at Mitchell’s and not from the locals.”

“Of course,” Kristen replied, “but it kills me not to support the town fishermen.”

Mitchell’s bought fish from wholesalers who sourced from offshore trawlers, while the villagers fished closer to shore. Reports of pollution abounded in the Caribbean, though the devastation was hardly reported in the world at large. Whatever progress the environmental groups made was generally undone by higher priorities, like money.

Ana’s caution was well-founded. Both red snapper and mahi-mahi were sometimes contaminated by eating toxic plankton found in seaweed, sediment, and coral rubble. The plankton had always been there, but it was thought that it now flourished in areas where the coral was dying off. Small herbivorous fish ate algae off the rubble, and then larger fish came along and ate the little ones.

The toxins didn’t harm the fish, but they remained stored in their flesh, and if you had the misfortune to eat a contaminated fillet, within twenty-four hours you were down with something called *ciguatera*. It was rarely fatal, but the symptoms could torment your digestive tract for months, largely because there was no cure. So, when reports of *ciguatera* circulated, people bought from chain stores like Mitchell’s. Our delicious reef fish became a kind of Russian roulette.

Ana set Kristen’s dishes down and returned to her seat beside Liz. Without missing a beat, she resumed the chatter she’d evidently enjoyed before Kristen’s arrival., Sharing the gossip that constituted Cahuita's social glue was her favorite pastime.

"Get yourself a drink and join us," Liz interjected.

Kristen made her way into the kitchen to explore the refrigerator. She poured herself a glass of papaya juice and added a couple of ice cubes from the freezer. Liz kept a well-stocked bar on the deck. She selected a bottle of Grey Goose vodka and added a splash to her juice.

The air had begun to cool, and a breeze rattled the leaves of the coconut palms. She hefted a lounge chair and plunked it down on the opposite side of Liz's rocker from Ana, so she could enjoy the view with them.

“Dare I ask what you've been up to?" Liz asked.

"Oh, come on,” Kristen replied. “You sound as if that were a loaded question."

Liz’s comment annoyed her because she thought it implied a habit of foolhardy activity on her part. Despite the occasional uproar that unsettled her life when she set out to solve problems that she didn’t know anything about, she usually lived quietly. She enjoyed her friends and led an ordinary life. In fact, you would have to be a hermit not to have friends in Cahuita, because people were incurably nosy and liked to visit. They lived outdoors, and they talked to each other all the time, which made gossip the primary adult pastime. By and large, it was a reassuring, comfortable world.

To her objection, Liz only replied, "Hmm." But Ana chortled.

"For your information, everything's fine.” Kristen added haughtily. “We're about to enter the money season, Adam and I are snug as a bug in a rug, and more turtle hatchlings made it to the water this year than in recent memory."

“And your grandmother called," Liz added.

Kristen choked up a piece of the fish she was eating and sat bolt upright. "What do you mean Gram called?"

"I mean the phone rang, Ana answered, and she passed it to me. When I said 'hello' your grandmother screeched: 'Where's Krissie?'"

Gram had called Kristen ‘Krissie’ all her life. She was ninety, and she lived in Las Vegas with Kristen’s parents. Once a year she arrived in Cahuita, sometimes unannounced, always demanding that Kristen come get her at the airport.

When Kristen was in elementary school, both of her parents had worked, so Gram had collected her at three o’clock every afternoon and, unbeknownst to her parents, they’d walk to a casino where Gram played the slots until it was time to go home for dinner. They were always in good company, since most of Gram’s retired friends spent the afternoon there, and then dined on the early bird special at the casino’s least expensive restaurant. Gram was a vocal gambler, and sometimes she and Kristen got thrown out, much to her friends’ amusement. But Kristen learned a lot about the gaming world as she wandered the floor while Gram did battle with one-armed bandits.

To prevent herself from overspending, Gram had never carried more than five dollars, and when she lost, she took it in stride. Sometimes she called it quits when she’d won ten or fifteen dollars, and then she would treat them both to ice cream cones. But when Kristen wandered among the younger people in the afternoon crowd, the truly addicted, she didn’t miss the jitter in their eyes, or the sour odor of their tenuous hope. In their desperation, they seemed more real to her than Gram and her friends, who were just passing the time of day.

Once, Gram had taken out a reverse mortgage on her house without telling anyone. She had thought it dandy to get a check every month, and she’d spent liberally while refusing to tell Kristen’s parents where the money had come from. When the bank notified her that she’d reached the limit of her equity, she was furious. She called every bank officer whose name she could get hold of, after which she harassed reporters from the Las Vegas Times until someone agreed to write an article about how seniors got duped by unscrupulous lenders.

But Gram hadn’t been duped. Reading that according to the terms of her mortgage, she couldn’t get kicked out of her house, she decided that the payments were free money. What she hadn’t counted on was the bank’s insistence on a certain standard of maintenance, and now they served notice that the roof had to be repaired.

“I’ll be damned if I’m going to let a bank tell me what to do with my own house,” she declared during a phone call to Kristen. She contacted a lawyer who advised her not to waste her money hiring him. After that she called a moving company and appeared on Kristen’s parents’ doorstep unannounced. Kristen’s mother then phoned Kristen in a panic, but there was nothing to be done, since Gram was fresh out of money, and the bank wouldn’t let her stay in the house unless she fixed the roof. Kristen felt terrible for her parents. They had an extra bedroom; but living with Gram was no picnic. So, when Liz told Kristen that Gram had called, she knew Gram had gotten bored again and if Kristen didn't stop her, she would land in Cahuita any minute.

"What time did she call?” Kristen demanded. “I can't have her coming here with the season about to start!"

Ana chuckled. "That ship has sailed."

"What do you mean?" Kristen asked.

"She called from Houston," Liz said.

"Houston? What’s she doing in Houston?"

Ana grinned; she was enjoying herself. "She has a ticket to the Astros game tonight. The World Series."

"The Astros? Where would Gram get a ticket to the World Series?" It was out of her mouth before Kristen realized that it was a silly question. Gram had a gift: if she wanted something, she wheedled, threatened, scammed, and extorted until she got it. Kristen wondered who was missing a baseball ticket.

Kristen quaffed her drink. "I know they're in the World Series! What did she say?"

Ana couldn’t hide her delight. "Two PM tomorrow. The flight from Belize City."

"No!" Kristen cried.

It's not that she didn't love her grandmother. She was the daughter whom Gram thought she should have had because she found Kristen’s mother dull. Besides when Kristen was little, Gram had been her fail safe. But Gram was a handful. Their usual routine in Cahuita was that she stayed at the Beachcomber while Kristen alternated between leaving her there during the day and bringing her to the shop to hang out with Belinda.

Diego and Kristen slept at Adam’s for the duration of Gram’s visits, and she and Gram ate dinner in the casino restaurant, sometimes with Adam, who was a good sport about it all. On weekends, she took Gram for rides. They saw the same stuff every year, but Gram never tired of it. She especially liked the golf cart tour of the rain forest. Kristen had learned to take it in stride when her grandmother hollered, “My jungle, my monkeys!”

The problem was that she couldn’t leave Gram alone for long without consequences. Gram loved to chat people up, so she high-tailed it to the casino bar when she got tired of TV, and there she held court. The bar patrons enjoyed her, but inevitably they bought her too many drinks, so it never ended well. When Kristen showed up to collect her, she was likely to yell, “She locks me in my room!”.

At Liz’s, Kristen leaped out of her chair in a panic, and pressed Gram's number into her cell phone. It rang as she headed to the kitchen for privacy and prayed that Gram had taken her battered iPhone 4 to the baseball game. Just as Kristen was about to give up, the roar of a crowd sounded in her ear.

"Gram!" she yelled into her phone. On the veranda Ana laughed.

*“What?* Not a good time. Jose Altuve just hit a homer, two on!" Gram yelled back.

“Gram, where did you get the money to buy an airplane ticket?”

The crowd noise subsided as she replied, “Your mother’s credit card. She’s the one who suggested I come.”

*No kidding,* Kristen thought, but Gram wasn’t done*.*

“Meet me at the airport with a wheelchair. They’ll deliver me to the baggage claim and you can get me and my stuff. Park right outside, so we don’t have far to go. My plane lands at two twenty. That’s PM.”

Kristen was beside herself. “Listen to me! This REALLY isn’t a good time. The shop is getting busy, and I won’t always be free in the evening.”

"Don’t worry, you’ll have plenty of time to love up that boyfriend of yours. What a hunk. If I was twenty years younger, I'd have a go myself."

“Gram, for crying out loud! If you were twenty years younger, you’d be in your sixties, and Adam doesn't date sixty-year-old women."

“He'd of dated me, I was hot!" she exclaimed.

Mind you, Gram wasn't wrong. A few years after Kristen’s grandfather died, she began a series of affairs with men she met at casinos. When, in her childish innocence, Kristen would ask, "Where’s Uncle Izzy?" Gram would reply, "Oh honey, Uncle Izzy wasn't right for Gram." She never knew if Gram ended things before her lovers could, if they bailed on her, or if she didn’t care which because she was just looking for a roll in the hay.

“Please, don’t come now, Gram,” Kristen pleaded. “In a few months, I’ll have more time to spend with you.”

“What kind of moron goes to the tropics in the summer? You tell your boyfriend I want a room on the first floor. Handicapped everything. I’m paying.”

Kristen groaned inwardly. When she didn’t bring Gram to work, the latter spent her days bedeviling the life out of the Beachcomber staff and flirting with guests half her age. If Kristen brought her to the shop, she would chat up the customers, and that didn’t always end well. One day she’d held a bikini up to an obese woman and commented, "You buy this, you’ll lose weight!"

At the moment, Gram was caught up in her ballgame and in a hurry to get off the phone. “See you tomorrow. Don’t forget: two twenty, Caribbean Air baggage claim,” and she hung up.

"There's no baggage claim in Cahuita," Kristen whispered into dead air.

**5.**

Cameron considered himself a patient man. Growing up in Trinidad, he learned carpentry from his father, and perfected that and other trade skills over the years. In his twenties, he followed the available construction work, taking jobs here and there throughout the Caribbean basin. He mastered masonry and concrete, and he learned how to follow a blueprint. He worked his way up to foreman, filling several such positions on increasingly large projects until he could run an entire build himself.

In his early thirties Cameron married a Guatemalan woman whom he’d met in Belize City where her uncle owned a heavy equipment business. They settled in Cahuita on the advice of a family friend who owned businesses there. The friend, Felix Dupree, convinced him that Guatemala was about to catch fire in an explosion of new construction bankrolled by greedy *Norte Americanos*. Felix offered an interest-free loan for a hacienda-style house in Cahuita’s prestigious Coconut Bay enclave, where Felix himself lived. But Cameron didn’t delude himself: he knew there were strings. There were always strings.

In time, he learned that Felix had his fingers in many pies, including the brokering of construction materials, so he sent lucrative contracts his way without having to be asked. Soon, Felix summoned him to a dinner with some slick Guatemalans who wore custom-tailored European suits. The suits were looking for a site manager to oversee the construction of a wastewater treatment facility that was slated to service the coastal towns, of which Cahuita was one. It was a windfall for Cameron, the biggest project he’d ever managed, and rich with unspoken opportunity. You didn’t grow up in construction without understanding how things worked. This job would pay off Cameron’s house and would put him on the map.

A studied blend of diligence and restraint fueled his success. He analyzed projects in painstaking detail and mapped out a plan. When things went wrong, he rolled with the punches, revised the plan, culled personnel, and soothed the bosses with judicious adjustments. He supervised closely, making sure that his men had what they needed; but he also made sure that they worked to plan. He took pride in coming in on schedule and on budget, an unusual feat in his business.

When he got the sewage treatment job, life began to unfold nicely; money and respect flowed his way, and people in town greeted him with recognition.. His family settled in, and construction got off to a good start. And then, suddenly, the bosses told him to deal with Raoul Bautista in a way that seemed both excessive and unnecessary. Sure, the excavation foreman had been out of line, but that was a solvable problem. Cameron could have taken him for a beer and explained the situation. He could have brought Bautista around to following directions without asking questions, like everyone did. But the brass didn’t give Cameron a choice.

Since the Bautista order, Cameron had grown wary of his bosses, and that eroded his previous feeling of good fortune. His unease was compounded one morning by Rafael Sousa’s sudden explosion into his trailer.

"You hire an excavation guy?" the engineer demanded, eschewing a greeting.

Cameron bit his tongue. "Working on it."

“I'm doing my own job and supervising excavation too.”

"It's only been a week,” Cameron pointed out.

Sousa was a civil engineer, one of a bevy of professionals whom Cameron had inherited when he took the job. He knew the professionals were hand-picked, and that they acted as the bosses' eyes and ears. Most of them were easy enough to work with, and they respected his authority, though none of them reported to him. They were supervised via phone conferences to which he was never invited, and Cameron was careful about what he said in their presence.

Sousa was the pain-in-the-ass exception to the rule, in that he treated Cameron like a lackey. Pugnacious and arrogant, he turned every conversation into a confrontation and, hoping to make Cameron nervous, he frequently alluded to his relationship with the brass. He came from a rich Brazilian family with ties to organized crime, and he had an engineering degree from MIT. Cameron hated him with a bitterness that turned his stomach. The situation was made worse by the fact that the other engineers looked up to Sousa. Or maybe they were simply afraid of him.

“So how long?" Sousa demanded.

Cameron struggled to hide his disgust. Through clenched teeth he said, “I have a guy coming in today.”

"Well, he’d better be good. I see you got the helipad poured.”

Clearly, Sousa either knew or suspected what was buried there. Cameron was damned if he’d take the bait. "Yeah. There's already a slate of visitors scheduled. Locals, feds, even international watchers. There's a woman from Costa Rica coming tomorrow. They're planning to build a plant on the Pacific side, near Jaco. You'll need to show her around."

“Only not around the helipad, right?"

Sousa’s heavy-handed insinuation repulsed Cameron, but he only said, "What can I do for you?"

"Just want to make sure we're close to hiring a new foreman." Sousa turned toward the door. On the way out, he called over his shoulder, "You know, the first time is the hardest."

When Sousa had closed the door, Cameron leapt from his chair. He paced and then he emptied the ash tray and rinsed the coffee beaker, busying himself in an effort to contain his agitation. In truth, Sousa scared him; the guy was pure evil. Cameron reflected that he should have realized the bastard would know about Bautista. And it was disconcerting that Sousa also knew that Cameron had never killed anyone before. *So, what?* he tried to tell himself. But, of course it did matter. Sousa was a loose cannon and he had the Man’s ear. Feeling exposed, Cameron headed out to walk the site, hoping to clear his head.

As he neared the excavation for the collecting pools, the memory of Bautista's death dogged him. Rather than calming him, each step brought the scene closer. He and Bautista in his truck, driving from the drain pipe ditches to check the helipad dig. Bautista updating him as they went. Cameron remembered the sweat dripping down his back toward the .38 caliber handgun that was tucked into his waistband. It had dug into his butt crack.

"Could be a sink hole," Cameron had told Bautista. "They can’t pour until they’re sure."

“I went over there yesterday; the ground looked alright," Bautista had said. He stared straight ahead through the windshield without a glance at his boss. Ever since he’d told him that something was wrong with the way they were digging the piping ditches, he’d been nervous around Cameron. Cameron had assured him that it was all according to plan, but they both knew better..

"So, let's check things out, see if we need the geologist." He pulled the truck in between a parked bulldozer and the excavation. The bulldozer blocked the view from the main site to the helipad, and the space between it and Cameron's truck provided an aisle of privacy.

When Bautista jumped out of the truck to head toward the hole, Cameron called to him from the driver's side, “C'mere a minute.”

"*Por que?*"

"Just c'mere."

Bautista shrugged and stepped between the truck and the bulldozer. Cameron darted behind him and caught him in a choke hold. In the same motion, he reached behind his back for the .38. As the foreman clawed at his arm and gurgled in protest, Cameron tightened his hold, and jammed his knee into the small of the foreman's back. He shoved the gun between his chest and the back of Bautista's neck, thinking, *“I'm gonna get splattered.”* He tilted the barrel upward into the base of the skull, took a breath, and on the exhale, he blew Raoul Bautista's brainstem to smithereens.

And then he turned away from Bautista’s body and puked on some dozer tracks. Rattled, he ripped off his bloody shirt, wiped his mouth with a clean patch of sleeve, and used the rest to cover the gloppy mess that had been Bautista’s head. He reached into the truck cab for a clean shirt, his hands shaking. He wore the shirt open, because his clumsy fingers couldn’t manage the buttons.

**6.**

"Get the suitcase!" Gram yelled from a cluster of deplaning passengers. Kristen spied wisps of white hair ruffling in the hot breeze behind a Belizean man who leaned down to retrieve his briefcase. A Garifuna boy was piling luggage on the long table that passed for baggage claim. One would have thought Gram was fighting the crowd at O'Hare, the way she exhorted Kristen to snag her luggage before the non-existent carrousel could carry it out of reach.

"That one's mine," Gram announced to a pleasant-looking blond woman who stood next to her, as though the woman were about to steal the scuffed white Samsonite case that Gram had found in someone’s trash. "That other one too," she added. She pointed at a small battered box that might once have been a makeup case.

"C'mon Gram, nobody takes anybody’s stuff here."

"You can't be too careful, Krissie. If there's anything I've learned, it’s that you can't be too careful."

Kristen could count on one hand the number of times Gram has been careful about anything. She’d married Kristen’s grandfather because she thought his mustache was cute. Later she told Kristen’s mortified mother that the marriage had been a good decision because Gramps was a wild man in bed, a revelation that caused mom to reach for the bottle of bourbon that she stashed in the kitchen cabinet behind the spices. Kristen’s mother was a modest soul, and Kristen suspected that Gram had embarrassed her for her whole life.

"Where's your car?" Gram demanded, twisting in this direction and that, as she leaned forward on her canes.

"In front of the building. And perhaps you haven't noticed, but I'm pushing a wheelchair here?" Kristen rolled the seat up to Gram's butt and she flopped down, leaving the canes to stick out in front of her. Kristen scooped them up, and then turned the chair toward the opening in the chain-link fence that surrounded the tarmac.

Gram looked disgruntled. "This is one of them foldables. Not as good as the real ones. You could fall right through this here seat."

Gram was five feet tall and skinny. She couldn't weigh more than ninety pounds, though she ate like an adolescent boy. The last time she’d visited Cahuita, Adam’s teenaged sons were there; so, wanting to entertain them, Gram had challenged them to a hot dog eating contest and won. Kristen still had the video and the action wasn’t pretty. As far as she knew, Gram had kept it all down. She sometimes wondered if toxic chemicals were what preserved her grandmother.

"Where we goin’?" the old woman demanded.

"To the Beachcomber. I'll help you into the car, and then I'll go back for your bags.”

Gram craned her neck, trying to see behind her granddaughter. "You mean you left 'em there inside the fence?"

"Gram, please shut up," Kristen admonished, wanting to just get Gram settled. Gram shook her head, but she did stop talking. Kristen pushed her through the terminal and out to the car, a rental that she’d parked in one of eight available spaces, four on either side of the entrance. Gram had difficulty getting in and out of Kristen’s pick-up truck, so she rented a sedan whenever Gram arrived. She helped her into the car and lay her canes on the back seat. Then she turned on the air conditioning and went back for her grandmother’s dented case and its diminutive mate.

"What do you put in that little box?" She slid into the driver's seat.

"Oh, so now I can talk?" Gram sneered.

Kristen sighed.

"That's my sundries box. Got spare teeth and an extra hearing aid with batteries. Plus, my pills and my diary. With the trouble you get into, I was going to bring Grandpa's .44, but your mother wouldn't drive me to the airport unless I gave the gun to her. I don't know where she gets that timid streak."

"Gram, you can't board an airplane with a firearm. You would have been searched and probably detained.”

"You know, Krissie, I worry about you. Sometimes you sound like your mother. You better watch that. Lotta people turn into fuddy-duddies when they get old."

"Gram, jail’s not a nice place. Don't even think about traveling with a gun. Everything's x-rayed." Gramps’s ancient .44 probably didn't fire, but that wouldn't get Gram into any less trouble.

They drove out of the airport onto route eighty-five, the north-south road that followed the coast. Gram hummed tunelessly as they passed through Cahuita and on down to the peninsula where the Beachcomber Casino and Resort were located.

"Things are looking up," she declared. "More dough."

"What are you talking about?" Kristen asked.

"Them houses, they weren't there before. And the beach looks like an interior decorator got hold of it." She pointed to a new development on the opposite side of the road from the beach and to a long stretch of sand dotted with restrooms, beach furniture, water fountains, and snack bars.

"Those houses were underway when you came last year. But I guess the beach does have more stuff than I realized. This summer, there was a drive to 'improve' it by our equivalent of a Chamber of Commerce. Looks like they put in water fountains and changing rooms."

"Hope they got showers. Last time I had to go back to the hotel lookin’ like a castoff."

The previous year Gram had donned a skimpy bikini - orange flowers on a royal blue background - and trotted into the surf, flaps of skin jiggling from her upper arms, and deflated breasts flopping against her belly. Varicose veins formed detailed topography on her legs, and her butt seemed to have disappeared entirely. Tourists stared, but the locals didn't seem to notice until Gram yelled that she couldn't go back to her room without a shower. Kristen shushed her and pushed her under one of the outdoor spigots that the Beachcomber provided for guests returning from the beach. She squealed under the rush of cold water, and Kristen winced at the dirty looks that people sent her way.

"You can rinse off under the hotel's outdoor showers like last year, and for heaven’s sake let me give you a one-piece bathing suit.”

"How’ll my tummy get brown with a one-piece? No sense going on vacation and coming home pasty."

"Gram, who's going to see your tummy?"

"Got me a new beau," she beamed. "Found him at the senior center. There was a bunch of old biddies after him, but they were no match for me."

"Great. What's his name? Why didn't you bring him?" Kristen resisted a mental picture of Gram and Senior Center Guy in the sack.

"Ralph don't like airplanes. He says if God wanted us to fly, he'd ‘ve given us wings. Kind of old fashioned; but he's some pinochle player. I told him he can't die until I figure out how to beat him. Your mother doesn't approve."

"Why not?"

“Oh, some gossip about his family and that casino that the government closed down.” Wonderful, Gram was dating a mobster.

"Never could teach your mother not to judge a book by its cover,” Gram added.

Happily, the appearance of the multi-story Beachcomber Hotel relieved Kristen of any need to pursue that subject. When she pulled up to the hotel’s glass doors, Adam stepped into the merciless sun wearing creased tan dockers and a linen sport shirt.

"Welcome to The Beachcomber, Mrs Carillo." He smiled as Gram lowered her window. Carillo was Kristen’s mother's maiden name. Gram referred to her parents' marriage as Ireland sticking it to Italy.

"My room ready?" she demanded.

"Nice to see you too. We're full up, but they made you a nest in the third-floor hallway, away from the elevator. Nice ‘n quiet.”

"Naw, I'll just bunk with you.”

"Gram!" Kristen objected.

Adam remained unfazed. "You see, Mrs. Carillo? She has me on a short leash."

Gram grinned. "She always was a greedy little thing."

Adam opened her door and they worked their way through the process of setting up the wheelchair, unloading the suitcase, and settling Gram into the chair as she issued non-stop orders. Inside, Kristen wheeled her through the hotel lobby to the condo unit where Adam always hosted her, regardless of what she paid. Kristen didn’t feel right about it, since the condo rented for eight hundred American dollars a night, but Adam insisted. That way, Gram had her own fully stocked kitchen where she could make herself breakfast and lunch. And unlimited phone service to the United States, which she used to call everyone she knew, except Kristen’s parents.

When Kristen had unpacked Gram's clothes and hung them in the bedroom closet, Gram declared that she would have a nap before dinner, and Adam and Kristen gratefully withdrew to his office.

Adam Stimson was Kristen’s very own tough guy. He managed the Beachcomber casino, and he lived in a hotel suite that was one of the perks of his job. He was the most interesting man Kristen had ever known, a cross between a thug and an aesthete. When he was not handling disgruntled customers, he was reading a novel or a book of poetry. He subscribed to the New York Review of Books and read every issue, cover to cover.

That said, he had dropped out of college to join the army and was immediately sent on tour to Afghanistan. There he had trained as a munitions specialist which prepared him to blow up Al Qaeda hiding places, knowing there were people inside. Kristen suspected he had killed people in fire fights too, though he had never said so. He had nightmares, which is how Kristen knew about the violence in his life. They’d been together for seven years, and their agreement was that if one of them went astray, the other was free to hit the road, no questions asked.

When he was working, Adam wore a gun. He kept it holstered under his left arm, a 9 mm Smith and Wesson that he concealed under a cream-colored Beachcomber blazer. There was also a Glock 18 machine pistol in his hotel suite. For a while, Kristen had objected to the presence of guns in his life, and then she’d stumbled into a couple of dangerous situations that changed her mind, and Adam had bought her her own .38. He took her to the firing range with insistent regularity, and that’s the only place she’d ever seen his machine pistol. The .38 fit her hand nicely and she was glad to have it, but by and large it lived in a spare flour canister on her kitchen counter. She kept it because, well, things happened. She’d acquired a scar on her cheek, thanks to some unscrupulous turtle egg poachers who’d attacked her because they didn't want a group of environmentalists patrolling the beach during the nesting season. She also limped, due to a confrontation with two black-clad enforcers who had showed up at her house to dissuade her from helping Willy’s daughter-law.

"So, Cupcake, nice surprise?" Adam asked, as they sat on the butterscotch leather couch in his office. "Airport go okay?"

"Peaches,” Kristen replied. "Gram panicked, thinking that a well-dressed American woman was stealing her suitcase. She couldn't have paid her to take the dented relic."

“What's the plan?"

"Survival. I'll go back to the shop for an hour, and then bring Gram some take out, so we can have dinner in her condo and watch Jeopardy. I told her I'd be back by seven."

Adam gathered her in his arms and buried his face in her dark curls. "Can you stay?" he murmured, slipping his hand under her tank top.

Adam smelled like cinnamon, though she’d never seen him use aftershave. She inhaled deeply. "Took you long enough to ask.”

**7.**

It had rained during the night, and thin wisps of vapor rose from the mud as Cameron made his way toward the excavation for the outflow pipe in the early morning sun. The muck sucked at his boots with each footstep, but he was grateful for the cool air that the rain had brought. It would be gone before lunch, but for now, the air was comfortable. Cameron had regained his composure after Sousa's visit, but he continued to brood. Had he covered his bases? His shirt had gone into a dumpster, along with the tarp in which he’d wrapped Bautista’s body; and the gun and its hollow-nosed bullets drifted somewhere on the ocean floor out beyond the reef.

He had laid Bautista's tarp-wrapped body in the bed of his truck and covered it with empty cement sacks for a few hours while the helipad excavation advanced. He’d hosed down the truck's bed, but was it enough? Maybe he should wash it again, this time with bleach. He’d use the power washer when the site quieted down for the night.

Twenty feet from a partially excavated ditch, a crew of three men unloaded lengths of vitrified clay piping from a flatbed truck. VCP sections with their watertight joints would be used throughout the facility. They would go from the pumping station that lifted raw sewage up to the screening chamber, and into the discharge system that released treated water into the ocean below.

Cameron appreciated Caritec's decision to buy long-lasting piping even though it was costly. The bosses might be ruthless, but like the big energy companies, they knew to climb on the environmental bandwagon. When showing people around, he liked to pause by the piles of red cylinders to emphasize his employer's commitment to ecologically sound materials. He did not think about the contradiction between the expensive clay pipes and the company’s plan to pump raw sewage into the ocean. Or about their ruthless dispatching of Raoul Bautista.

"That it then?" he called to the guy who was using hand signals to direct the crane that lifted pipe sections from the truck to the stack on the ground.

"That's it for here," the man replied. "They got the same load for over there." He pointed to the second outflow ditch.

"Send the crew back so they can get on with it. We need to lay the pipes." Cameron liked to remind the men that they were on a schedule.

"Ok, *jefe*,” the man replied, turning away to hide his resentment.

Cameron saw that the digging for the first ditch had reached the point where it would angle downward toward the sea. He eased a cell phone from his back pocket to call Sousa; time for the engineers to check the grading. The ditch would get progressively deeper as it approached the edge of the plateau, and the piping would be laid at an angle calculated to keep the flow at the proper rate.

A technician answered the phone, a guy with the annoying habit of walking the site with rolled up blueprints under his arm and a notebook in one hand. "What's up Cameron?" the kid asked, as though he were Cameron's equal, or maybe his better.

"Time to verify the grade of the outflow ditch."

"It's in the blueprints," the kid countered. "Just go by the blueprints."

Cameron snapped, "Right, I'll have my equipment operators take a look." He wished he could send the punk technician packing. Hopefully, the kid at least understood sarcasm.

"Just joking,” he chuckled. “I'll tell Sousa."

“Yeah, do that.”

Satisfied that the piping ditch was on track, Cameron continued toward the excavation for the aeration basins. The prints specified three huge outdoor pools where waste water would sit after the large solids and grit had been removed. The bar screening and grit removal phase would be housed in a building whose structure had begun to take shape, but the outdoor basins were behind schedule because the mucky soil had been wetter than anticipated, and drainage was difficult.

They were also behind schedule because the work of installing the second set of VCP lines had to be done under the cover of night. Those pipes would bypass the clarifying, filtering, and UV disinfection pools where some of the sewage would go. The lion’s share of the waste would go into the clandestine pipes and end up in the ocean. That shortcut would create a windfall for the bosses, who would book and bill for many times what the plant actually treated. Cameron knew all about the night crew’s work, but he never spoke of it. He would build the plant that was specified by the government-approved blueprints. He reasoned that if there was more to it than that, it was none of his business.

He surveyed the digging for the aeration basins, relieved to see that yesterday’s partial collapse of a dirt wall had been remedied with retaining mesh that they’d welded to a grid of steel beams. The rest of the mesh was now going into place on the wall that had held up so far. A foreman standing at the bottom of the hole sent Cameron a thumbs-up. Cameron nodded and pointed to the stack of mesh next to the foreman. He was asking if there was enough to finish. The foreman shook his head no, so Cameron made his way to the metal shack that served as a break room for the crew.

Inside, a desk and phone sat beside a water cooler, a mini fridge, and a small table that was surrounded by four plastic chairs. Someone had set up a cheap coffee maker on the table. Its ready light glowed, and the place smelled of burnt coffee. Cameron switched off the pot and rifled through the papers on the desk. Eventually he found the requisition form for the steel mesh and beams, noting that the field for a delivery date was empty. He logged onto the computer and typed in the code for purchasing. Reading through the site’s procurement menu, he found and selected the numbers for the mesh and beams.

Delivery to the main on-site supply depot had occurred, but there was no order to move it to the aeration basins. Cameron sighed and typed in the information, using his personal digital signature. The depot would see that he had intervened, and they’d pay attention. He typed URGENT in capital letters and specified the next day for delivery. Even if it didn’t happen that quickly, he would have sent a message.

He sat back and sighed. His mind wandered, eventually lighting on his sons. He was proud to be able to provide his kids with the stability that he hadn’t known growing up. His family had had to keep moving to where the work was. But for his boys, Guatemala was the only home they knew. He should take the family to Trinidad, Cameron thought, show them the places where he’d lived.

As he gazed out the shack window at the landscape of mud and machines with its skeletons of buildings, he imagined what it would look like years from now. The architect had shown him a mock-up of the completed project, landscaping and all, and he mentally translated that into the reality that his site would become. One day he would bring his boys here. He’d show them how he’d overseen the construction of the first sewage plant in the Province of Izobal.

**8.**

For a moment, Kristen thought she was waking up in Los Angeles in her marriage bed. She lay cocooned in a puffy comforter and her nose was cold from the air conditioning. The other side of the bed was empty. And then Diego launched himself onto the comforter and she felt the full impact of his weight on her bladder. This was not Los Angeles.

“Dammit!” She yelled as she shoved the dog off and sprinted for the bathroom.

Diego barked enthusiastically, eager to join the game. While she settled on the toilet seat, he ran into the living room to grab a huge, roughly chewed nylon bone that Adam had bought for him, racing back to dump it on her bare thigh.

“Ow! That hurts!” she cried as the tough nylon scraped her skin.

Diego grabbed the toy back and slapped his tail on the bathroom tiles in a delirium of joy. She had to admit, he was cute, crouched in front of her with the stupid bone in his mouth, his eyes bright and his body tense with anticipation.

“You are an incorrigible puppy,” she murmured, giving his neck a scratch. “Now it’s your turn. Need a pee break?”

Diego had been badly hurt when the turtle poachers had come to teach Kristen a lesson, and she loved him even more since he had sustained the beating. His veterinarian hadn’t been sure at first if he would recover. Like her, Diego limped, which made her feel guilty for having put him in danger, and she supposed that her guilt was part of the reason for his weight problem. He’d grown skillful at wheedling bites of food from her.

She retrieved shorts and a tank top from a drawer that Adam reserved for her things, slipped them on, and headed for the leash that was draped over the knob of the apartment door. Wrapped around the nylon cord was a note from Adam: “Diego fed and walked. Talked about you.” He had added the time; it was less than an hour earlier.

“You’re scamming me,” She said to her dancing dog. “When are you going to learn to tell the truth?” She tossed his leash on the couch and went into the kitchen where Adam had left her coffee. He generally didn’t make it strong enough, but at eight o’clock in the morning her java standards were modest, and she appreciated his thoughtfulness. He said she drank too much coffee, but she thought he was wrong. She never drank anything caffeinated except for coffee, and only two cups of that a day.

She found fruit salad and cottage cheese in the fridge, along with a still edible half loaf of French bread. She sliced the bread lengthwise and slipped it into the toaster oven while she heated coffee and spooned up fruit and cheese. Adam’s point in providing healthy food was to cut down on the fat in their diet. When he ate bread, he either spread cottage cheese on it or ate it dry. Kristen, on the other hand, believed that French bread was created for butter. Ask any self-respecting Parisian what he had for breakfast, she thought, and he would answer “*une* *tartine*,” meaning a baguette sliced lengthwise, slathered with butter, and dunked in a bowl of strong coffee with hot milk.

Adam’s patio was really a terrace. He lived on the ground floor, and he had installed an outdoor gas grill, along with a fireplace for the occasional cool evening. He had also built upholstered benches around a kapok tree that seemed to grow out of the tiles covering the terrace. It was an ideal setting for entertaining, and Adam often threw parties for VIP customers.

Kristen cranked open the umbrella and settled in with *The Guatemala City Times* to enjoy her breakfast. She wasn’t a news junkie, but Adam liked his morning paper, so sometimes she looked through it when she slept over. If nothing else, it helped her Spanish. Just as she was dipping her toasted baguette into an improvised cappuccino, Diego barked and began to slap the floor tiles with his tail. Adam appeared in the sliding patio door, looking freshly showered in a print shirt and navy-blue cargo pants.

“Workout this morning?” she asked.

“Yup. Showered and changed in the locker room. If I’d brought my sweaty body up here, you wouldn’t have been able to keep your hands off me.”

“Yeah, you’d hate that.”

“Not true. But last night you depleted my resources.”

She smiled. When it came to Adam’s stamina, she had nothing to complain about.

He went to the kitchen to get himself coffee and came back to sit across from her at the table

“Thanks for taking care of Diego this morning,” she said. “He tried to tell me that you were in too much of a hurry to feed or walk him.”

“Yeah, see, you deprived him of his balls, and now he plows his whole libido into eating. In our natural state, we guys eat less and screw more.”

“You think I want a dog who’s like you?”

“No, you’re right. One of me is as much as any woman can handle.”

Adam didn’t usually brag. He was even unduly modest, so his bluster struck her as cute. He sometimes joked about being big and strong, but he wasn’t cognizant of the qualities that were most important to her. For example, he could be yielding in a way that no previous boyfriend - or husband - had ever been. One afternoon a year earlier, they’d had a terrible fight and she had driven home from work terrified that he would break up with her. When she had pulled into her parking spot under the house, he was there, leaning against a Beachcomber SUV, looking tense. When she’d gotten out of her truck he’d said, “Okay, let’s try this again. What are you trying to tell me?”

She didn’t take such moments for granted. When they fought, his temper sometimes frightened her, but for the most part, he stayed on an even keel. She thought that he had been raised by the right kind of parents. His father had died in a motor cycle accident in Seattle just before his son, Jake, was born, and he said that he’d lost Jake’s first year to grief. During that year he had moved his mom to California to be near him and his wife, but she’d died of a stroke shortly afterward. He’d never gotten over his parents not being around to see his kids grow up. He didn’t have brothers or sisters, and Kristen thought that he was lonely for family.

“What’s on the program today?” he asked.

She hesitated before deciding to tell him about Adrian Petters. As she began the story, he put his coffee down, knitted his eyebrows, and leaned back in his seat. Though uneasy, she kept talking. She didn’t know where matters with Adrian were going, if anywhere. But she did have a history of getting into dicey predicaments, and Adam could smell dicey a mile away. Because something about the conversation with Marita had seemed off, she couldn’t hide her discomfort.

“You went to the Caritec site to get Petters a job.” Adam said.

“Yeah, you know, he was pretty down in the dumps.”

He frowned some more. “And you feel you owe him.”

“No! Well, maybe a little. The real estate scam had to be squelched, but it’s not fair that no one will hire him just because his brother is a sleaze.”

“No, it’s not.”

“And I was the one who opened that can of worms.”

“You were.”

“So, I went to see if there was a job for him. You know, just to ask. There’s a girl named Marita who used to work at the bicycle shop across from the shop. She likes Diego, and she’s

going to look around for Adrian. She’s, like, a receptionist. They’re not officially hiring, but she thinks there may be a spot somewhere on the roster. So that’s good, right?” She was babbling and she couldn’t stop. Adam’s brow stayed furrowed, so Kristen added, “She knows Adrian’s sister because the niece takes care of Marita’s girls when she’s at work.” With that, Kristen vowed to stop talking.

Adam sighed and turned away, gazing unseeingly at a flowering hibiscus.

“Adam…”

He stood up. “No problem.”

Surprised by the sudden end to the conversation, she watched him disappear into the condo. She tried to tell herself that it was nothing. She picked up the paper and tried to read an article about the coming of the wastewater treatment plant. But why, she wondered, had Adam shut down like that? She hadn’t confronted anyone, wasn’t doing anything risky. Adrian would hand in the application that his sister had given him, and it would be out of Kristen’s hands. Even if Adrian didn’t fill out the application, she had done all she could.

She wandered into the living room to retrieve her bag and Diego’s leash, repeating to herself that the Adrian thing was over, and there was nothing to worry about. Diego trotted at her heels and they piled into the rental car to drive to the shop.

To reach Cahuita’s main drag from The Beachcomber, she drove through residential neighborhoods near the beach. Unlike in more fashionable resort towns, Cahuita’s beach streets were lined with modest one-story dwellings that weren’t in great shape. They weren’t shacks, but the stucco was cracked, the gutters sagged, and the concrete walkways crumbled in spots.

She remembered from the real estate blowup that Adrian’s sister lived somewhere in that neighborhood.

In the end, Adam’s reaction to her helping Adrian and his subsequent refusal to talk about it grated on Kristen. If she wanted to help someone, then she would do it, she thought. She would find out if Adrian had turned in the application.

She didn’t know Adrian’s sister’s family name, but Petters would suffice. She drove slowly away from the beach toward the center of town, looking right and left at the ramshackle stuccos fronted by listing porches. Finally, she pulled to a stop alongside a pedestrian, an older woman whose arms were weighed down with bulging plastic grocery bags.

Kristen lowered the passenger window, grasped Diego’s harness, and called to her, “That’s a lot to carry. Can I offer you a ride?”

The woman’s lined mahogany face crinkled into a smile. “Well thank you miss, do I know you?”

Kristen ordered Diego into the narrow back seat, and the woman climbed into the truck, dropping the grocery bags at her feet.

“I’m Kristen from the beachwear shop. Tell you the truth, I’m looking for someone and I thought you might be able to help.”

“All right, then. I live over on Baylor. Go on down and turn right. It’s not far.”

Kristen did as she indicated, handing her a bottle of water from the cooler that she kept on the floor in the back. The woman unscrewed the cap and took a long pull.

“I’m Laura Cadenas,” she said when she’d slaked her thirst.

“I’m looking for Adrian Petters’ sister,” Kristen explained. “The one whose daughter babysits Marita’s kids.”

“Oh, that’s the Abana family,” Mrs. Cadenas said. “Shiraine’s the oldest. They’re not far from me, on Macaw. What do you want with them?”

In Cahuita, people always found out what you were up to when you asked a question, and it was a bad idea to lie. You’d inevitably get found out, and then they’d wonder why you’d bothered to lie, since everyone knew that there were no secrets. You ran the risk of being viewed as gratuitously deceitful or maybe flat-out stupid. It was best to just answer the questions you were asked.

“Marita dropped off an application there, for work at a construction site, and I want to see if Adrian picked it up. I ran into him the other day and he looked like he needed a job.”

Her face lit up. “Oh yeah! You’re the one put Adrian’s brother in jail. Now you want to get him a job?”

Kristen winced, then nodded. “I feel bad that Adrian is out of work because of his brother.”

“There’s enough in this world to feel bad about, if you want to go looking,” Mrs. Cadenas replied, shaking her head.

“Well, no one will hire him and it’s not fair. He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“Lotta things not fair.” The woman pointed to a one-story house with faded green shutters. “That’s us,” she added. “Coming in?” It was expected that if you took someone home, you’d sit awhile, and enjoy a cool drink.

“I can’t stay, but I’ll help with your groceries. That’s too much to carry,” Kristen said, indicating the clutch of bags at Mrs. Cadenas’s feet.

“Somebody has to do the shopping and cooking. Rest of the family works or goes to school.” She sounded proud of the fact. “My daughter and the grand babies. Three of them, and one more trouble than the next,” she chuckled.

As they climbed the cracked concrete steps to the front door, Kristen heard voices. Apparently, Mrs. Cadenas’s daughter was home for lunch, because small feet pattered over a wood floor, and then came a stern command: “Come back here, you’re not finished.”

Mrs. Cadenas opened the screen door and three grade school-aged children grinned up at the new arrivals. Kristen greeted them and apologized to the daughter for being in a rush, but she wanted to get to Adrian’s sister’s house.

“Where on Macaw does the Abana family live?” she asked.

Mrs. Cadenas answered. “There’s no numbers on that street. Look for a gray wood house with cinder block steps and yellow shutters. It’s halfway down on the left. Ava will be home, but Shiraine’s over at Marita’s with the kids.”

Kristen assumed Ava was Adrian’s sister. “Okay, thank you!” She repeated her apology for not staying to chat, and Mrs. Cadenas said to let her know if she found work for Adrian. As if she wouldn’t have news before Kristen did.

**9.**

Kristen drove down the street to the main road that led from the beach into town. It wasn’t long before she spotted a concrete telephone pole with “Macaw” painted on it in faded black letters. She turned right and easily found the Abana house, just as Mrs Cadenas had described it: peeling grey clapboard with faded yellow shutters, a bungalow like the others on the street. There was no doorbell, only a banged-up screen door that didn’t close all the way. She rapped on its wooden frame and called out, “’Anyone home?”

A woman’s voice replied, “Si, si, pasa!”

Kristen entered a family room with a worn linoleum floor, a flat-screen TV, and abandoned child paraphernalia: a plastic rocking horse, a scuffed soccer ball, two dolls wearing only underpants, and a stack of board games, their boxes crushed. Behind the family room she stepped into the kitchen where a woman of about thirty was kneading bread on a floury Formica counter top. She glanced at Kristen before calling out the back door to five barefoot children playing in the sand.

“Come inside, all of you! It’s too hot!” she told them. She turned to Kristen “You’re Kristen, right? I know your shop. Your Belinda’s Alex is here today.” She pointed to a boy of about eight dressed in grubby cargo shorts and a blue and black striped t-shirt. “You told Marita to bring me a job application for Adrian.”

Without waiting for an answer, the woman opened the refrigerator door to get a pitcher of something the bright blue color of toilet bowl cleaner. She filled five plastic tumblers arranged on a tray.

“And you’re Ava?”

“Sure.” Ava raised the almost empty pitcher in an offer to pour Kristen some. Kristen shook her head and she put it back in the refrigerator.

The children filed outside with their drinks toward a lopsided picnic table in the shade of a coconut palm. A short-haired brown dog tied to the tree strained toward them at the end of his tether. A rusted bicycle lay in the sand not far away.

Looking for a way to open the conversation Kristen ventured, “Your own bread?”

“Yah, every day that I’m not too busy. It’s cheaper than store bought and the kids like it.”

“How could they not? It smells wonderful and you haven’t started baking yet.”

Ava shrugged. “Once it’s in the oven, I go outside. Not much cooler, but in here is a sauna.” She picked up her mound of dough, punched it down, and resumed kneading.

“Thank you for helping Adrian.” Ava’s tone was cordial but distant, and she didn’t look up from her work.

Kristen assumed that Ava shared Adrian’s resentment of her role in bringing down their brother Hector, but she was too polite to say. “You know, I didn’t mean for any of that real estate business to happen. When I decided to help Flor Weedon, I had no idea what was going on. I’m really sorry about Hector.” She wasn’t sorry at all, but she wanted to ease things.

Ava shrugged again. “Hector made his bed. Couldn’t resist easy money. But people are wrong to hold it against Adrian. He’s an honest man.”

“My thinking exactly. Did he fill out the application?”

“He fussed, but I think he did it. He says it’ll just be one more let down.” Ava still hadn’t looked up from her kneading.

“I hope not.” Kristen wondered if her uneasiness showed. “Marita is a fan of his, and she’s willing to put in a good word.” *Not to mention greasing palms.*

“Well it’ll be good if they hire him. Now all he does is drink and feel sorry for himself. But you know that.” Ava finally looked up from her work.

Kristen realized that she’d heard about the encounter at The Supply Side. There really were no secrets in Cahuita. “Yes.” She picked up her bag to leave. “Will you let me know if they hire him?”

“Sure. But you’ll find out. Somebody’ll stop by your shop.” She rounded her mound of dough with flour-coated hands and set it in a baking tin to rise.

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After the conversation with Ava, Kristen’s life seemed to quiet down. Gram behaved herself, feeding nickels into slot machines and charming people into buying her drinks. Kristen ran into Ava’s daughter Shiraine at McGarrity’s, and the girl told her that Adrian had been hired as a carpenter and was working in a phase one building. She didn’t know what that meant and was impressed that Shiraine did. Mostly she felt relieved and a bit smug that, contrary to people’s expectations, she hadn’t stumbled into a mess. She told Adam that Adrian had a job, and after that they both avoided the subject.

A few days after Shiraine’s news, she decided to invite herself and Gram to Liz’s for dinner with the caveat that she was buying. It was ungodly hot, the air thick as syrup, so she stopped at Mitchell’s with a cold meal in mind. She left Gram in the car with the air conditioning running because if she took her into the store, Gram would insist on buying whatever struck her fancy and none of it would go together.

Inside, Kristen selected lobster salad made that morning, and cucumber in coconut milk. The cassava bread smelled heavenly, so she picked out a loaf. Gram loved avocado, so she selected a tub of it: chunks in a lemon dressing. For dessert, there were individual cups of coconut pudding and she found a ripe mango for garnish. The lovely thing about local fruit was that it didn’t have to be picked early, so it was fully ripe and bursting with flavor when bought.

“You get them conch fritters?” Gram demanded, before Kristen could settle into the driver’s seat.

“No Gram, you eat conch fritters hot. I told you, we’re bringing a cold dinner.”

“I’d eat ‘em hot or cold. Can’t get ‘em back home. You probably got regular stuff, right? That don’t make sense, coming all the way down here to eat coleslaw.”

Kristen couldn’t tell her what was on the menu because she’d inevitably demand that they turn around and go back for something else. Instead, she promised her a frozen margarita instead of wine, and that did the trick. She had brought fresh limes from a tree in her yard, knowing that Liz kept the other ingredients on hand.

Most of the time, it was easy for Kristen to put up with her grandmother’s peccadillos because the two had a special bond. She didn’t take after her mother temperamentally, but she bore a distinct resemblance to Gram in that they were both rebelliously independent. Gram’s defiance took the form of an unswerving refusal to act normal, whatever the circumstances. She dealt with the consequences of her behavior by proclaiming them preposterous.

For her part, Kristen’s independence involved the refusal of the traditional woman’s role. Now in her forties, she was content to leave it to her Las Vegas sister to produce offspring, which she did at an alarming rate. At Christmas time, Kristen had to work to make a list of her nieces and nephews, a list that she checked with her mother for accuracy. But her sister’s fecundity kept their traditional-minded mother off Kristen’s back. The sister’s absorption with child rearing satisfied their mom’s need for what she called a “regular American life.”.

Sometimes Kristen wondered if she was missing something by not having children, but usually more immediate thoughts – like dinner - distracted her before she could get upset about it Besides, Adam’s sons visited every summer, and she and Adam had a wonderful time with them doing family things. But Kristen felt wistful, even bereft when they left.

Today Gram was on a tear. “Adam bought me fish tacos for lunch. You should marry that one.”

“We’re happy the way we are, Gram. We’ve been over this before.” It was no use explaining for the hundredth time that marriage meant different things to her and her grandmother.

“You sure?” Gram looked out the passenger window.

“Sure about what?”

“He don’t look happy to me.”

Kristen puffed up her cheeks and blew out air. “Have you been prying, Gram? I’ve asked you not to do that. Besides, Adam is fine.”

“I was subtle. Asked him what was wrong.”

*Of course, she did*. “And what did he say?”

“He denied it, whaddya think? Krissie, you got to take care of your man if you want to keep him.”

Remembering her dealings with Gramps, Kristen snorted derisively. “Tell me, Gram. Tell me how a girl takes care of her man.”

“Well to start with, she don’t believe him when he says nothin’s wrong,” Gram declared, oblivious to Kristen’s sarcasm. “You get to the bottom of things.”

“Uh huh. And what did you find at the bottom of Adam?”

“He’s not my man, but I’m telling you for your own good, somethin’s eating him. You got to find out what.”

“How do you know?” .

Gram shook her head as though her granddaughter were too dumb for words. “’Cause he said it was nothing to worry about, that’s how.”

**10.**

Kristen’s friendship with Liz Janner was something of a balancing act. It was especially so when Liz was having difficulty with a love relationship. Recently, she’d been seeing an African woman whose family didn’t approve, and the family had forcibly taken the woman back to Chad. Kristen had to remain sensitive to her neighbor’s vulnerability on that score, but Liz could bristle if you erred either on the side of neglect or on the side of too many questions. So, Kristen had to express her concern, while respecting Liz’s privacy. But she didn’t always succeed in striking the balance.

For that reason, she was glad that Gram and Ana would be joining them for dinner. Not for the first time, Kristen reflected that relationships, all kinds of relationships, were complicated.

Ana had made a pitcher of margaritas and they’d no sooner arrived than Gram cackled, “What’s everybody else gonna drink?” She had struggled up the stairs to the veranda, the ache in her knees evident, but that didn’t hobble her tongue. She’d tapped one of her canes on the tile floor and ordered whoever would listen to start pouring. Kristen filled a glass and Gram sat down to savor its contents.

With her customary good manners, Liz remarked, “Nice to see you, Mrs. Carillo.”

“Nobody’s glad to see me,” Gram snorted. “I have too much fun. Nice veranda you got here.”

Liz smiled wryly. “Yes, you say that every year.”

Gram shrugged. “It’s true every year.” She sucked up her margarita through one of Liz’s glass straws. She looked like a wrinkled ten-year-old working on an ice cream soda. They drank and chatted, and then Ana set the food on the veranda table, adding plates, napkins and cutlery.

Kristen filled a plate for Gram who studied its contents. “No coleslaw,” she said.

Exasperated, Kristen said, “You just told me it’s not worth coming to Guatemala to eat coleslaw!”

“Geez, Krissie, calm down, I’m just sayin’. You’ll be as stressed as your boyfriend if you don’t watch it.”

“Adam is stressed?” Ana piped up, always eager for news. She had a kind heart and she took good care of Liz, but she lived for gossip.

Kristen hastened to quash any rumors. “Gram’s overactive imagination. Adam’s fine.” Gram stared at her, her mouth full of lobster salad.

“I don’t mean to take sides,” Liz said, “but something is going on out at Beachcomber Point. Maybe it’s on Adam’s mind.”

“Maybe what’s on Adam’s mind?” Kristen asked.

At the same time, Gram swallowed noisily. “Told you so!”

Liz gazed at the view absently, which meant that she was weighing things in her mind. “Tell her, Ana.”

Ana jumped in, the words tumbling over each other to get out of her mouth. “So, you know my friend Amelia has a brother who works at the airport, right? Well, the brother says that a couple of muckety-mucks from Beachcomber headquarters came through. And that’s not all. They were met by *federales!* And then yesterday, two official-looking foreigners arrived, and it turns out that they’re with CAGA. That’s the Central American Gaming Authority,” she added for Gram’s benefit.

Gram stopped eating and tapped her fingers lightly on the arms of her chair. “Shit,” she murmured.

“Gram,” Kristen admonished. Gram ignored her but kept silent, a bad sign. She played the incorrigible brat, but she was canny: with the years, she had acquired a respectable store of knowledge about the ways of the world.

Trying to sound more confident than she felt, Kristen declared, “If anything were wrong, Adam would tell me.”

Liz sighed. “Probably so, probably so.”

Ana was less reticent: “He hasn’t mentioned any visitors?”

Kristen proffered an explanation. “Doubtless they haven’t been to the casino. It probably has to do with the hotel.”

“CAGA doesn’t regulate hotels. And the only other casinos are miles away.” Ana was enjoying herself.

“I’m sure Adam will tell me,” Kristen repeated. Her scalp tingled. She glanced around seeking reassurance.

But Gram wasn’t talking.

“Gram?” Kristen bleated, feeling like the child Gram had once dragged through Las Vegas casinos.

“Never mind, Krissie.”

Ever gracious, Liz changed the subject to talk about how casinos weakened family ties in the communities around them. She currently had a contract for an article on the subject and was full of comments, but Kristen hadn’t recovered enough from the CAGA news to fully attend to the conversation.

Around nine, Liz’s eyes grew heavy and her shoulders slumped, so Kristen said their good nights and told Gram to go through the house to the front door where she would pick her up. It would avoid Gram having to negotiate the veranda steps again. Like Kristen’s house, Liz’s was built up against the road, which gave easy access but caused them to live out back, Liz on her veranda, and Kristen on her deck. Kristen almost never used her front entrance.

They drove down the mountain toward Beachcomber Point and Gram nodded off in the passenger seat, depriving Kristen of the opportunity to pursue the topic of the CAGA officials’ descent on Cahuita. Back at The Beachcomber she accompanied her to her condo, kissed her good night, and went to the casino to find Adam.

If Liz repeated the same mistake every time she fell in love, it was largely because she had emotional walls so thick that they prevented her from seeing red flags. Adam did something similar, but his scenario played out differently. Like Liz, he appeared unflappable to the casual observer, but unlike her, he had spent his whole life driven by a kind of low grade fear, and it was magnified by his unwillingness to call the fear what it was. For Adam, manhood required a categorical refusal of faintheartedness, so he wouldn’t let himself be afraid of things that should have given him pause.

On the plus side, Adam could do scary things, like plant explosives in a terrorist stronghold, as he had in Afghanistan. On the minus side, he didn’t respect an attack of nerves as a useful caution. Rather, he thought it indicated cowardice. If it terrified him to advance on a terrorist stronghold, he would have to do it, come what may.

As Kristen went looking for him, Adam walked the floor of the casino, tracking activity he might have been afraid of if he’d thought about it. Ostensibly, he wanted to keep the gamers happy, and he generally did, which won him both admiration and excellent compensation from Beachcomber, Inc. But in truth, Adam feared the gamblers. Somewhere buried in his complicated mind was the conviction that the losers would eventually go crazy, wreaking who-knows-how-much havoc. He walked the floor in case the dreaded violence should surface, when in fact the Security Chief and his staff could just as well do the job. The fact is that customers were almost never aggressive; they were generally too well lubricated by alcohol and too focused on winning to resort to temper tantrums.

Regardless, as the evening wore on and alcohol consumption increased, Adam spent increasing amounts of time with the casino patrons. When Kristen arrived, the gaming tables hummed with activity, and he circulated among the high rollers, shaking hands and slapping backs. Kristen found his hail-fellow-well-met routine disturbing, for she thought it too easy to charm gambling addicts out of their money, even, and perhaps especially, if Adam also schmoozed them for purposes of control.

Finally, she spotted him. He wore a cream-colored Beachcomber blazer with the logo on the left breast, and a chocolate dress shirt that lay open at the neck. The cuffs of his perfectly pressed beige slacks broke on top of his loafers. Kristen waited for him to finish a conversation before stepping in.

“Got a minute?” she asked.

He smiled, but she could tell that he wasn’t glad to see her. It was a busy night and his job was to work the crowd. Just for something to say, he asked “Hey, Sugar, you want to sit in?” They were standing next to a thousand-dollar poker table. That was a thousand American dollars just to be dealt in. You had to win that back and then some for a successful evening.

Kristen noticed that the security chief, Romulus, leaned against a pillar a few tables to her right. He was watching Adam. Rom was Adam’s backup; he filled in when Adam was absent, such as when he and Kristen took a vacation. He wore an off-white blazer identical to Adam’s, which signaled that he was management. The floor staff and the security guards wore burgundy blazers. Dealers tended to take their coats off and hang them on the backs of their chairs, so they could work with rolled up sleeves and bare forearms, so they also wore burgundy-colored shirts with the Beachcomber logo.

Rom was an Ecuadoran whose transfer from the Beachcomber resort in the Galapagos Adam had requested. Another security guard who had once worked for Adam in Belize City, and who now ran his own detective agency in Quito, had told Adam about Rom’s ability to identify and defuse risky situations. So, Adam flew to South America to talk with him and came back pronouncing him a solid professional. Indeed, even Kristen noticed his sharp eye. And she appreciated his unwavering loyalty to Adam. Once a member of the Ecuadorean equivalent of Special Forces, he was big, with muscles that strained the seams of his blazer, and he was quick on his feet. He remained cool as a cucumber until someone crossed an invisible line, and then he could be merciless. His staff were professionals, and Kristen would have trusted him with her life. At the same time, she wouldn’t have sworn to the transparency of his private business dealings.

Adam signaled to him that all was well and turned to Kristen with a questioning look.

“Can you take a break?” she inquired.

He frowned. “What’s up?” She didn’t generally interrupt him when he was working, so she had his attention, but she was obviously an unwelcome distraction.

“No emergency, but I have a question. In private.”

“Not a good time. I’ll try to get back to the apartment early.”

Adam rarely finished before two a.m., since he liked to verify that the night’s receipts had been properly counted and signed out to Brinks, which then trucked the money to a bank in Puerto Barrios. It was unlikely that Kristen would be awake when he came home.

“Why don’t we talk over coffee in the morning?” she suggested. “Or I can call you from the shop if you’re not up when I leave.” She didn’t want to talk over the phone, but with the evening a busy one, he might sleep in, and she didn’t want to wait until the next evening, only to run into the same problem.

“Okay.” He turned to a woman who had plucked at his sleeve to get his attention.

Kristen went to check on Gram, found her fast asleep, and decided to turn in herself. Despite her concern about the CAGA visitors, she quickly fell into her dreams.

**11.**

Kristen was aware of Adam when he came to bed, but she couldn’t wake up enough to talk to him. So, she called him from the shop in the morning while he was sipping his second cup of coffee in the casino office.

“You were out cold last night,” he said.

“I guess I was.”

“Just as well. Busy night. What’s up?”

“Look, don’t get upset, but apparently someone at the airport saw CAGA officials coming to town.”

“Apparently?”

“Well, Ana’s friend Amelia knows a guy who works there.”

“Amelia always knows a guy.”

“Oh, come on, everybody here knows a guy.”

“Okay,” he sighed. “What does this guy say?”

“Only that a couple of CAGA people arrived from Belize City. Is anything wrong?” Kristen couldn’t totally disguise her apprehension, and she knew that he could hear it in her voice,

“Does something have to be wrong because inspectors are here?”

“So, it’s routine.” There was no answer, so she tried again. “Is it?”

“You know I can’t talk about casino business,” he hedged.

Except that he *did* talk about casino business. “So, something is up,” she concluded.

“Nothing’s up. Just a financial review.”

“I would expect that from Beachcomber headquarters visitors, but CAGA?”

“Sometimes they do spot checks. To keep the casinos honest.”

“First I’ve heard of it.”

“First time it’s happened here. We’re relatively new, remember?”

“Well, are they finding anything?” she asked.

“Do you have to know everything? I said I can’t get into it,” he snapped.

“Oh, now I feel better. Look, I don’t want you to hide it if there’s something on your mind. You’re digging in your heels. And you’re using your ‘over my dead body’ voice.”

“So, stop pushing! A CAGA review is bound to be on my mind. I’m not going to talk about it. It’s confidential.”

“Okay,” Kristen relented, only because she couldn’t think of anything to say. Then she did have a thought.

“So, you can’t talk about it. But how come you didn’t at least mention that it was happening?”

“For crissake, it was a surprise. That’s how they do it.”

He sounded exasperated, but Kristen persevered. “And once you were surprised? How come you didn’t say something?”

“Dammit!”

“Calm down.”

“I’ll calm down when you back off.”

“Well, pardon me for caring.” Kristen sounded like a petulant teenager to herself, but she couldn’t help it. Adam’s temper had that effect. Feeling defenseless, she hung up before he could.

Adam wasn’t aggressive on the face of things, but there was a street tough aspect to his personality. Though Kristen was sure that he would never hit her, she was not unmindful of his physical power.

She remembered a night when casino security had called him to a table where a high stakes poker player was working himself into a lather over lousy cards. The player was shoving the guards who were trying to placate him. He was a big, overweight guy in wrinkled trousers and a Hawaiian shirt, who sported gold rings with big stones on both hands. High stakes gamblers drank designer booze for free at the casino, and this man had taken full advantage.

When Adam reached the table, Mr. Big Stones wheeled around snarling, "Who're you?"

“Name’s Adam Stimson,” he said, extending his hand to shake. When the customer grabbed it, Adam pulled him off balance, whispered something in his ear, and pushed his knee into the guy's crotch. There was a muffled "unhhh,” and then Adam steered the guy to the lobby where he put him in an elevator and keyed in the penthouse suite.

“Compliments of the house,” Adam smiled. None of the other guests had a clue as to what had happened, and the customer didn’t lodge a complaint.

**12.**

# Adam paced his office, poisonous thoughts crawling through his head like centipedes. He yanked a desk drawer open and snatched up the holstered Smith and Wesson stashed there. He dropped the cartridge out and replaced it with an empty one, aiming the weapon out the window and dry firing at a buoy that bobbed lazily fifty meters from Beachcomber’s dock.

“What do you think, Fritz?” he said to his gun. “Should we take on a platoon of Uzi’s, just the two of us? Have Security tail Kristen and me twenty-four seven, on the lookout for the odd killer lurking in the shadows?” He hurled the gun at the couch where it bounced off the pillows onto the floor.

He stomped out of the office, and snarled at a startled Romulus, “Load the Smith and put it away, will you?” At Rom’s puzzled look, he added, “Cover for me, I’m in the gym.” He headed for a back staircase, calling over his shoulder, “And send Petrie down.to the locker room.” Petrie worked for Rom and boxed on the amateur circuit.

In the locker room, Adam tore open his black *Columbia Tamiami* shirt, too impatient to undo the buttons, and one of them popped off and rolled on the floor. He ignored it. He dropped his perfectly creased *Hugo Boss* slacks, leaving them in a crumpled mound where they landed on top of his shirt. Petrie appeared at the door.

“You looking for me?”

Adam grabbed a second pair of trunks and a clean jock strap from his locker and tossed them to Petrie. “Work out with me.”

Petrie shrugged and began to undress. Unlike Adam, he draped his shirt and pants on hangers that dangled from hooks on the wall. He was a compact guy, a transplant from upstate New York. Scottish origin, curly red hair, and all. His nose had been broken more than once, and a pink scar bisected his right eyebrow. He had the muscled upper body and slim waistline of a serious athlete.

Adam stripped off his boxer shorts, pulled on a jock strap, and yanked purple satin trunks to his waist. He worked his hands into a pair of leather boxing gloves and closed the Velcro wrist straps.

He strode into the gym bare-chested and assaulted the heavy bag as though it had insulted him. At first, he punched as though trying to destroy it, but with time he fell into a rhythm of moving around and varying his blows as if to outwit an opponent. Petrie emerged from the locker room carrying a bundle of protective gear and climbed into the ring that took up a good portion of the gym floor. He dropped one set of gear in a corner and went to the opposite side of the ring to put the second set on.

“What’re we doing?” Petrie asked.

Adam hesitated for a minute. “Warm up, then three times three minutes. Full bore on the rounds.”

Petrie thought about their unequal skills. “You sure?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

They did stretches in their corners and then moved to the center of the ring where each began a series of feints at the other, running through the different kinds of punches and circling one another. After a few minutes, Adam went to the clock, set it for three minutes and faced Petrie. “Full bore.”

Petrie shrugged and quickly landed a light punch to Adam’s chest. Adam saw that he was holding back, so he went for Petrie’s chin, jabbing sharply. Petrie swatted the punch away but looked surprised at its force. “Okay,” he mumbled. Slightly crouched, he moved in and landed a solid right to Adam’s collar bone and then two thumping body blows.

Adam shook his head and came back at Petrie, going for his body with a cross. Petrie blocked the punch and landed another right to Adam’s temple. Stunned, Adam stepped back to recover. As he was debating how to attack, the clock sounded its three-minute clang.

A light middleweight, Petrie didn’t pack a big punch, but he was quick, accurate, and smart. He watched Adam, and much of the time, he accurately predicted his next move. He showed good fakes, and Adam couldn’t always tell the difference between that and a real punch. After one round, Petrie seemed relaxed and barely winded. Adam, on the other hand, breathed heavily, sweat running down his torso and dripping onto the canvas.

Petrie kept Adam on the defensive for the next two rounds, landing punch after punishing punch. But Adam couldn’t give up. It just wasn’t in his nature to call it quits. Time after time, he came at Petrie without the speed or the skill to hit him. Petrie avoided punching Adam hard, but he contemplated knocking him down, just to put an end to the beating. When nine minutes had elapsed, he took off his head gear and asked Adam how he was doing.

“Peachy.” Adam yanked his helmet off. Angry that he was no match for Petrie, he socked at his sparring partner impulsively. Petrie blocked the attempt and punched back, more by reflex than plan.

Petrie immediately saw that Adam would probably have a black eye. “Ice your face, ok?” He was nervous about having pounded his boss’s boss.

“I know what the fuck to do, Go, shower,” Adam snapped.

Petrie was only too glad to retreat to the locker room while Adam slid down the wall, his back to the painted cinderblocks. His legs felt like pudding.

Rom found him like that, slouched on the floor in a puddle of sweat, holding his head in his hands., Head cocked to one side, the Security Chief contemplated his friend. “Good workout?” When Adam didn’t answer, Rom bent down, and grabbed a tired hand to pull Adam to his feet.

“Ow!”

Rom noted with surprise that Adam was shaking. “Hot shower,” he ordered. “And don’t forget to ice.”

“Fuck you.”

Rom shrugged and turned to walk away.

When he was half-way to the locker room, Adam mumbled, “Rib might be broken.”

Rom paused, then said. “Come into the locker room. I’ll take a look. You never did know how to fight.” Still, he didn’t ask questions. He’d never seen Adam in this state, and it unsettled him.

**13.**

That evening, as Kristen was preparing to close her store, Willy stopped by to discuss the new displays. She’d planned to use sets of free-standing wooden boxes stacked at odd angles and placed around the store. Willy was going to build the boxes because they would be cheaper and better made than if she ordered them from a merchandising warehouse. Also, she knew from experience that they would need to be nailed to each other and then to the floor, because customers knocked things over, and didn’t pick them up. Her theory was that women - who were most of her customers - spent their lives picking up after children and men, so for them shopping was a kind of vacation: they could make a mess and someone else would clean it up.

Kristen and Willy talked about the size of the boxes. Willy was concerned about their weight, and how to angle the stacks so they’d be stable. As they talked, he consulted notes that he’d made when he’d refurbished the shop after vandals trashed it. He wasn’t sure the floor could support the displays and customers too. She thought that was funny, since it would take a miracle for more than three people to browse her shop at once.

It was after seven by the time she and Diego started for The Beachcomber, and almost eight before she arrived at the restaurant. She needed to take Diego to Adam’s suite, feed him, and take him for a walk; only then she could join Gram and Adam in the Sandbar, the more casual of the casino’s two restaurants.

“Nice of you to join us,” Gram hollered when Kristen appeared at the restaurant’s hostess station. Other diners stared at her, and then at Gram, as Kristen hurried to the table, patting the air with her hands to get Gram to pipe down.

“You think these people care what I say?’’ Gram screeched. “This ain’t the Ritz.”

Of the two Beachcomber restaurants, they frequented the more modest one, mostly because it was easy. Gram accused Kristen of being cheap, but she would have squawked like a startled chicken if her granddaughter had made her dress up. Except, of course, if it were her idea. Kristen was considering a rejoinder to the Ritz remark when she noticed Adam’s black eye.

“What *happened*?”

He shrugged. He didn’t want to tell Kristen about his occasional sparring match with Petrie. “Former boxer staying at the hotel. We worked out for a while. He’s no champion, but still out of my league.”

“You went up against a professional boxer?”

“Not a professional, just a guy who kept at it after college. It’s just a bruise. My eye’s fine.” At the same time, he glanced around nervously.

“What’s going on with your side?” You flinched when Gram poked you.

“Got me in the ribs.” He forced a laugh and picked at the cuticle of his thumb.

He wasn’t a good liar, and she didn’t believe his story. “Apart from your eye, your face looks alright.”

“We wore equipment.”

“Is the rest of you okay?”

“Pretty much,” he said, signaling for a waiter. She knew avoidance when she saw it, but she decided to let it slide because she didn’t want to pursue things in front of Gram. Gram, however, felt no such compunction.

“You left me all by my lonesome? Two sweaty bodies whaling on each other, and you left me watching Oprah? You got no consideration, fella.”

Adam smiled. “You don’t look like a gym rat.”

She didn’t miss a beat. “Don’t know what that is, but I know somethin’ like that could get me sexed up,”

Kristen choked on a piece of bread. “Gram, for crying out loud, that’s disgusting!” Relieved at the change of subject, Adam covered his grin with his hand.

“Wait ‘til you’re my age, Krissie, you’ll see there’s nothin’ disgusting about it. Besides, senior sex is all the rage, don’t you read?”

“Is that what they talk about on Oprah these days?” Kristen asked.

“They talk about it there and everywhere. Sex for seniors, come and get it.” With a sigh, she sucked on a crab leg and hummed tunelessly.

**14.**

After their fight, Adam and Kristen avoided each other. She dropped in on Gram for lunch but didn’t take her to the shop. She left her to her own devices for dinner. Kristen wasn’t sure Gram ate dinner, but she did hear that she made friends at the casino bar, where she drank grapefruit margaritas, and told people that she’d heard about them from Ernest Hemingway, whom she’d dated in Key West. Kristen wasn’t sure Gram even knew who Hemingway was, but at least she stayed out of trouble. And Diego and Kristen were free to spend a couple of days concentrating on the shop and themselves. They even enjoyed two nights of watching “Law and Order” reruns at home on her own couch.

The third night, Kristen called Liz after dinner to ask if she could come by. Liz’s voice sounded off, but she said yes, and offered dessert: coconut pudding topped with fresh pineapple. Kristen had been eating healthily at The Beachcomber and she was ripe for a treat, so she and Diego made their way over with a bottle of Chateau d’Yquem to accompany the pudding. It was a pricy wine that she’d been saving for who-knows-what, and she knew that Liz had a weakness for it. Though Liz never complained, her sadness persisted. It was evident in her unfocused gaze and her lack of enthusiasm for life’s pleasures. Kristen thought the good wine might cheer her up.

Diego charged up the stairs to her veranda, despite his bad leg. Kristen didn’t eat much meat, so when he smelled whatever it was that Ana had grilled that evening, he became a skillful tripod, scrabbling up the steps in a crab-like dance to save his sore leg. And indeed, Liz had saved pork scraps for him.

When Kristen saw Liz’s face, she struggled to keep the alarm off her own. Her lips and cheeks seemed to have stiffened into a bizarre caricature of her usual autumnal beauty, and her eyes were red from crying. Neither she nor Ana would meet Kristen’s eyes, and Diego stood looking back and forth between them as if at a tennis match. For a moment Kristen tried to join the charade and act as if everything were okay.

“You spoil my dog, Liz,” she managed. “What I give him pales in comparison.”

“I expect he’ll forgive you.” She sketched a smile that didn’t make it to her eyes. “How are you doing with your grandmother?”

“A thrill a minute. She landed on Adam for not inviting her to a boxing workout with a hotel guest. I won’t tell you exactly what she said.”

Ana chuckled. “It’s not hard to guess. Your Gram has the libido of a teenager.” She poured the wine and distributed dishes of pudding. They ate and drank in silence. Diego licked the plate that had held his scraps.

“Ana,” Kristen said finally, “forgive me, but there’s something I need to talk to Liz about.”

“What’s so private? It’s about what’s going on at the casino, right? I mean, that’s all people in town are talking about.”

Kristen didn’t bite. She wanted to know what was going on with Liz, and, as for her own problems, maybe people were talking and maybe they weren’t, but in any case, gossip wasn’t the issue. “Please,” she said.

Ana picked up her pudding dish and wine glass, glared at the two women for a beat, and then flounced into the kitchen.

“She’ll get over it,” Liz said.

“I hate to hurt her feelings, but I don’t want to feed the rumor mill.”

“I know.” Liz never pressed, and rarely did she initiate what she suspected would be a serious conversation. She didn’t need to, because her air of expectation was palpable, even as she sat with quietly folded hands.

“Liz, what’s wrong?” Kristen asked.

“Never mind,” Liz replied in a way that told Kristen that whatever it was was off limits. “Let’s talk about you.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No, I’m not. You wanted to discuss something?”

Kristen gave up and complied. “Well, you remember I told you that Adam had been working out with a hotel guest? Boxing, to be specific.”

“Yes.”

“It was true as far as it went. At least that’s how he explained his black eye and sore rib. But he had no bruises or marks except the eye. He said they wore head and abdomen protectors, but still, it seemed odd. He looked like he was lying. Wouldn’t look me in the eye.”

Liz refilled their wine glasses. “And have you an explanation for that?” she asked.

Kristen took a big sip of wine. “We fought that morning. After Ana talked about CAGA officials showing up at the airport, I asked Adam what was going on. Our conflicting schedules prevented us from talking in person, so I called him the next morning. We fought on the phone, and it was awful. He basically told me to buzz off.”

“That doesn’t sound like Adam.”

“Exactly.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know. He’s not himself, he’s tense and preoccupied. I didn’t want to make too much of it, but then I heard about the CAGA visit, and now I wonder. Maybe he’s in trouble or something.”

“I have an uneasy feeling about the casino as well. I can’t think why, but it’s been on my mind.”

Kristen waited to see if there was more, but Liz sketched a rolling motion with her hand, meaning that she should continue. “I went on the internet to find out what CAGA actually does. Their job seems to be to keep casinos clear of vices that are illegal in the host country. As opposed to say off track betting and prostitution, which are of course legal here. More like drug dealing and the child sex trade. They publish standards and regulations, of course, but it’s mostly about technical stuff that the casinos are supposed to take care of. Like honest slots, balanced roulette wheels, and properly weighted dice. When they intervene, it’s about issues that give the industry a bad name.”

“As if that ship hadn’t sailed,” Liz muttered. She got up to clear their plates and brought fresh mango slices and more pudding from the kitchen.

“Right,” Kristen said when she returned. “But I’m talking about problems like the cocaine dealing at the Blue Moon in Guatemala City last year. It was CAGA that caught that one. Management paid their card dealers to snitch on the drug pushers, which worked, and they supposedly flushed the casino clean. I can’t help but think that some people worked both the snitching and the drugs, but never mind.”

“I would say that’s a good guess.”

“The thing is, Adam said CAGA is auditing his books. I didn’t find anything like that in their charter or in the newspaper articles that I read. There was one case where skimming was uncovered, but that was largely thanks to casino management. Why would CAGA want to see his books?”

Kristen was having trouble thinking straight. It was as though a butter churn were folding her thoughts over on one another. Dazed, she fell mute. Liz sat quietly too*. Adam doesn’t usually lie about important things, so CAGA probably is vetting the financials. But why?* He had a reputation as a good business manager. He was careful about details. He made his goals. Sometimes he even caught things the accountant missed.

Suddenly, the ocean breeze felt clammy on Kristen’s skin. The only situation about which Adam might not tell her the whole story would be one where he himself played a shady role. It didn’t seem possible, but there was no denying the sinking feeling in her stomach.

One thing about Liz, Kristen knew never to ask her a question she didn’t want answered. So, counting on her friend’s forthrightness, she said, “Putting aside that you don’t know what’s going on, what do you *suspect*?”

Liz turned her level, blue-eyed gaze on Kristen. “Well then, I suspect that dirty money has found its way into the casino.”

Kristen felt the air whoosh out of her lungs. She’d dealt with bad stuff before, but this was different. This wasn’t about a friend who’d gotten into a jam, this was about Adam, her sometimes thuggish, straight arrow, complicated honey bunch. She stared out at the view from Liz’s veranda. She sipped wine, though she no longer noticed the perfect contours of the Chateau d’Yquem.

At some point, Liz reached over and patted her hand. Kristen’s throat tightened, and tears dribbled down her cheeks. Then they more than dribbled. She dabbed at them with a napkin and Liz handed her some tissues. She blew her nose, and, at the sound of her honking, Diego put his paw on her knee and whined. When she looked at Liz, she was crying too, whether because of her own troubles or Kristen’s, the latter couldn’t tell. She thought what a sorry picture the three of them made: *Anti-paradise in the tropics*.

**15.**

Hoping to ease the tension with Adam, Kristen called her friend Claire who, with her husband, Jordan, owned Cahuita’s only dive shop. She needed to swim the reef, to enjoy the peacefulness of drifting with the sea life, of being part of a beautiful world. She set a date for a dive, and when she checked with Adam, he delighted her with the first real smile that she’d seen in weeks.

At the appointed time, he left his Beachcomber SUV at Kristen del Mar and they walked to the dive shop. It was too hot to wear full wet suits, so they rented shorties, short-sleeved wet suits without legs. They added tanks, regulators and vests. Neither Adam nor Kristen owned equipment because it was bulky to carry, and you could rent it anywhere you wanted to dive.

Jordan was in a fine mood after a day of ferrying divers around on Reefer Man, his aptly named boat. As he loaded supplies, he sang at the top of his lungs, something light and buoyantly Italian.

“Mozart?” Adam asked.

Jordan chuckled. “Dom Giovanni. It’s my motto: ‘I don’t wanna serve no more.’”

It was a perfect late afternoon as they headed for the reef. Adam fussed with his equipment, checking and double checking. Kristen tested her tank and regulator before suiting up, but Adam was like a pilot with a preflight checklist. He inflated and deflated his vest to make sure he’d get the buoyancy he wanted; and then he put his mask to his face and sucked air through his nose to make sure he could achieve a perfect seal. He examined his flippers for the smallest crack. He dunked his depth gauge overboard on a tow line to make sure it worked.

At the helm. Jordan grinned, “So, everything copacetic, mon?”

“Yeah, everything seems to be in order,” Adam replied, oblivious to Jordan’s teasing or to the potential insult that his inspections represented.

Kristen was embarrassed. Jordan wouldn’t stay in business long if his equipment weren’t in shape. But she decided against chastising Adam in front of the others.

He wasn’t going to make it easy. “At least test your BC,” he urged her.

“Hey, Jordie, how many dead divers you had so far this year?” Kristen called, hoping Adam would finally get it.

Jordan laughed. “We don’t talk about that, love.” He pulled back Reefer Man’s throttle as they approached her favorite diving spot.

Kristen spoke to Jordan’s wife, who had been her friend since she’d arrived in Cahuita. “Claire, how about we buddy for a change?” she asked. Usually she dove with Jordan and Adam buddied with Claire.

“Mind if I take the lead?” Claire asked. “I want to check the reef for damage.”

When Kristen had left Los Angeles, she’d chosen the Caribbean coast of Guatemala without much thought. It was remote, quiet, and above all, not chic. However, any idea that she’d had of a forgotten hideaway proved delusional. Cahuita was hardly immune to the vices that came with rampant development, and certainly not to unscrupulous contractors who would gladly turn the earth into a sludge pit rimmed with luxury high rises.

There was so much dumping of sewage in Guatemala that the reef was dying. Antler corals had turned a sad yellow, and sea anemones drooped despondently rather than drifting brightly on the current. Not many years earlier, Kristen had been able to swim through whole schools of parrot fish every time she dove. Now she saw only singles or small groups. Nevertheless, the pleasure never went out of the sport.

“Works for me,” she replied to Claire’s suggestion. She rinsed her mask, spat in it to discourage fogging, and slipped it over her head. The women then jumped overboard, inserted their mouthpieces and slowly sank beneath the surface. When they’d exchanged the “ok” sign at about forty feet, Claire swam away, and Kristen followed.

Scuba diving was the closest thing Kristen knew to prayer. You swam effortlessly, caressed by turquoise water, and everything but the present disappeared. Things happened in slow motion, and your being merged with a resplendent world. Brightly colored fish drifted before your eyes. Eels peeked out of the reef and anemones waved. A manta ray swam by, graceful in aqueous flight.

Though they weren’t supposed to, divers fed the fish – needlefish, clown wrasse, parrotfish, grouper, angelfish, grunts - so some came to nibble their fingers. It reminded Kristen that there was violence here too; everybody had to eat, and in the ocean as on land, life forms devoured each other. But unlike among people, violence here was natural, a necessary part of a cycle.

The reef was a gigantic living wall. They swam along it, Claire pointing to things of interest. Kristen wasn’t always sure what she wanted her to see, but she nodded anyway. About fifteen minutes in, they were surprised by a huge green turtle. It had been cruising lazily behind them, and then it overtook them, its flippers drifting up and down. Kristen wondered what it was up to, since green turtles usually grazed on the abundant sea grass in the shallows.

The turtle swam by and then doubled back and headed for Claire. Claire held still, suspended in the water. The turtle circled her slowly and then gently bumped its nose against Claire’s chest. Time seemed to stand still. Claire touched the creature’s neck and it hung in the water. The scene resembled an ancient ritual; an acknowledgement of kinship. Claire and the turtle knew each other.

Kristen thought about how essential the ocean was. Yet, it commanded the respect of so few. She felt her love for it, with its grace and drama. Anger filled her: anger about the fouling of the water by the countless people and industries that dumped their sewage as though nature were not also a living being that yearned to prosper. Behind her mask, Kristen’s eyes welled up. *“This ocean, it’s why I live here. And they’re killing it.”* The once bright, crystalline water had grown so cloudy that she and Claire had to swim to within ten feet of the reef to see the life that it sheltered. *“I’m witnessing the darkening of the water.”*

After ten more minutes, at Claire’s signal, Kristen followed her friend to the surface, stopping for the requisite decompression break. She was filled with a strange mixture of joy and sadness; and when they had removed masks and fins, she was slow to swim to the boat.

Already aboard, Adam took her equipment and helped her up. She picked up a towel and collapsed against the starboard rail exhausted while Adam stowed their equipment.

“What’s up with that sea turtle?” Kristen asked Claire.

“Sea turtle?” Adam said.

“Yes, we saw it by the wall at about fifty feet, and it went right up to Claire and bumped her. A full-grown adult, beautiful.”

“She was saying hello,” Claire explained. ‘‘When she was little, an industrial shrimper’s propeller ripped through the adult turtle that she was following and killed it. Like all turtles, greenbacks never see their mothers after hatching, but they tend to follow adults. Sometimes adults will get between predators and the younger turtles, though no one knows if it’s on purpose. Anyway, Jordie and I built a small aquarium in the boathouse and nursed the girl that Kristen and I saw until she was ready to go back out on her own. The conservation people named her Lola, and the good news is that she was grazing on the seaweed attached to the coral in the wall. That helps prevent the seaweed from suffocating the reef. Oh, and our aquarium worked out great for showing kids some of the smaller sea animals.”

“How could you tell it was Lola?” Kristen asked.

“Sea turtles’ shells are unique. Hers is dark around the edges.” Kristen reflected that the reef was like home to Claire. She knew and cared about its inhabitants. She protected them and she fought to preserve them, including patrolling the beach at night during nesting season to deter turtle egg poachers.

As daylight waned, the foursome headed back to the dock. They showered and changed at Jordan and Claire’s. and headed into town for dinner. They ate lobster in coconut milk at The Lonely Mermaid and drank white wine. Afterward, Adam and Kristen took Diego back to The Beachcomber and when they went to bed, they made love in the way of those long familiar with one another.

**16.**

But Adam soon lapsed back into his previous silence. One morning, after tossing and turning for hours, Kristen gave up trying to sleep and drank coffee on the patio before sunrise. After a while, her mood heavy, she roused herself to go inside and check email. There were no messages of any importance. She opened the accounting application that hosted her shop’s books. The numbers were the same as the night before. She fed Diego, took him for a run on the beach, and showered slowly. When the hour had advanced enough that she wouldn’t feel silly opening the shop, she and Diego made their way into town.

She parked behind the shop. She’d been up for hours without eating, and her stomach rumbled. She called Diego and they headed up Mahogany to McGarrity’s. Part way there, she saw Adrian Petters walking toward her. She recognized him, of course, but he looked like a different man than the one who’d startled her at The Supply Side in October. His salt and pepper fright wig had become a neatly trimmed Afro, and his beard was shaped to conform to the contours of his jaw. His T-shirt and jeans were clean, and his gait was purposeful.

*Is he still angry with me for having sent his brother to jail?*

“Mornin’ Kristen,” he said. “Early one for you, no?”

“Couldn’t sleep, so I may as well get to work.”

“Yeah, work clears the mind. Reminds me, I never thanked you for the job.”

“It was the least I could do. You’re not accountable for other people’s doings.”

“Huh.” He shrugged his shoulders as if he didn’t believe her.

“You’re not.”

“I knew it wasn’t right when all them people lost their houses. Jus’ put it out of my mind.”

“One doesn’t want to lose steady work.”

“Ain’t that the truth. You goin’ for breakfast?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Mind if I join you? I got an hour before my shift. Jus’ walked the kids to school.”

He’d looked like he was coming from breakfast, so Kristen wasn’t expecting the suggestion. Also, she felt awkward. What would they talk about? She had a feeling he had something on his mind and, as a friend of hers used to say, it couldn’t be good for the Jews. Kristen had fulfilled her obligation to Petters and had put him out of her mind. She didn’t want him back in there, and she didn’t want to think about Caritec.

Nevertheless, she acquiesced. “I was getting a muffin to go, but I guess we could have coffee. Sure.”

He looked at her in silence.

“Okay, let’s find a table,” she said.

Petters fell in beside her and remained silent until she’d picked up her cappuccino and a blueberry muffin at the cafe. He selected a bottle of sweet tea from the cooler. When she glanced at his tea, he said, “Not drinking no more. Can’t seem to get enough sweet.”

“Not surprising,” she said. “Alcohol is mostly sugar.”

“Well, I was gettin’ a lot of it.” She assumed that was his way of apologizing. Neither of them wanted to refer to their Supply Side encounter.

“You look good. The job agrees with you.”

“Job’s okay. Money’s good, and the work’s right down my alley.”

She sensed a “but” and it made her nervous. “Nice to work regular hours, huh?”

“Yeah. Wife is happy, and I get time with the kids.” He didn’t look particularly happy, and Kristen couldn’t think how to steer the conversation to safer waters. She had enough on her mind without inviting an earful from a man she hardly knew. She didn’t like the way he was staring into space, as though trying to figure something out.

“What’d you do before your store?” he asked.

“I lived in the States. Designed clothes in Los Angeles.”

“You like it?”

“I liked designing clothes. My specialty was casual wear, like the stuff I sell now.”

“Was there somethin’ you dint like?”

“Yes. I didn’t like the fast lane, or the greediness, or the back stabbing.”

“That’s the thing.”

“What’s the thing?”

“You cain’t get away from people.” He shook his head.

“It wasn’t people that got to me, at least not most of them. It was the big money and the ugliness. Climbing over others to get ahead.”

“There’s always bad apples. People get evil over money.”

Finally, she couldn’t stand it anymore. “Is something bothering you, Adrian?”

“I got a feeling about this job.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a lotta rules, but nobody talks about ‘em. Nobody tells you. They’re just there and you fall over ‘em.”

“Rules?”

“Like you don’t go certain places on the site.”

“Aren’t there always restricted areas?”

“Maybe yes, maybe no. It’s jus’, you don’t ask questions. The girders arrive when they’re needed, or they don’t. If they don’t, you jus’ sit down.”

“Sit down?” She wanted to end the conversation, but she couldn’t think of how to do it.

“Well yeah. Yesterday they run out of studs. Guys just lit up and hung around. I said, ‘Shouldn’t we tell somebody?’ and Tito, another framer, he says, ‘Not our job, buddy.’ I start to reply, and he shakes his head no, so I stop.”

“Any idea why Tito said that?” she asked.

“Because it’s like that. You work ‘til you run out of material. An’ you pretend not to notice when some days the usual men don’t show up; and then new ones appear outta nowhere. An’ you act like it’s natural that places are off limits when they look the same as everywhere else. I think there’s a night crew comes in after everybody leaves. They must be the ones working where you’re not supposed to go.”

Kristen didn’t like the feeling she was getting. “It’s probably nothing.”

“You don’t know what people are up to when things are all hush-hush. Don’t know who’s your friend and who isn’t.”

Kristen wanted to get away from Adrian. Why should she care about this? *Not my business*, she told herself. “Well, I don’t know that there’s anything you can do. As you mentioned, the work is steady, and the money is good.”

“Yeah.” He hesitated for a moment. “Y’know, Ava says you’re smart. You figure things out.”

“Ava doesn’t know me.”

“She knows you good enough to see you get people out of jams.”

*Oh lord, not this*.

“You think you can find out why people at work are wrapped so tight?”

“No, I don’t. “I don’t know anything about construction, and even less about sewage treatment. And my hands are full, with the season starting.”

“You dint know nothing about turtle poaching neither. An’ you put a stop to those boys running off with the eggs.”

“No, I didn’t! I didn’t do any such thing. And what I didn’t do? It got me this scar on my cheek and almost killed my dog!”

“Thing is, you figured it out.”

“Things happened on their own, I wasn’t responsible.” She stood up. “Listen, I need to open the shop, and you’re due at the plant. Nice to see you again.”

“Same here.” He looked at her expectantly. And then, he said, “Have a good day,” rose from the table, and ambled down the street. Kristen watched him go, a sinking feeling in her stomach.

**17.**

The new season’s apparel showed up shortly after Kristen and Diego arrived at the shop, so she and Belinda got busy entering each item into the computer, pressing out wrinkles, and hanging things on racks. Willy had just started the new displays, so they had to use the temporary ones for now. Belinda was her usual cryptic self about what Kristen had bought in Miami, but Kristen was pleased with her choices. The economy was on the mend, and she anticipated a good year.

During the afternoon, her good mood flagged. The morning conversation with Adrian nagged at her, as though there were something she should be doing. She tried to put it aside and concentrate on her work, but the secrecy that Adam had described keep wriggling its way back to center stage in her mind. She thought increasingly about the sewage plant. Maybe because the casino audit scared her too much to dwell on it. Marita had alluded to the secrecy too.

After work, hoping to reset her thinking, she joined Gram for dinner, because Gram could reset anyone. Kristen wanted to return to the comforting routine of life, with a few barbs from her grandmother thrown in. Adam ate with them, he and Kristen respecting the unspoken truce they’d observed since their argument. They talked about the new line of clothing that had just arrived at Kristen’s store, but Gram remained uncharacteristically silent. Optimistic that she and Adam might be making progress toward their characteristic openness, Kristen stayed the night with him. He held her, and one thing led to another, but his passion proved half-hearted. Adam just wasn’t there.

In the morning, haunted by how things had changed between them and unable to get the conversation with Adrian out of her mind, Kristen decided to head for the plant to talk to Marita again. She had to make progress on *something.*

“Kristen! What brings you here? Adrian Petters is all set.”

“I know. Thanks. I was just wondering, is he doing ok?”

Haven’t heard, but I assume so. Why?”

“No reason,” Kristen lied. “Well, I ran into him in town, and he looks better than before. But he didn’t seem as happy as I would expect him to be, now that he has a full-time job.”

“Did he say why?”

“Not exactly. But I don’t think he feels at ease here.”

“He’s new; it takes a while. The guys he works with are friendly enough”

“I guess. It’s just that he seems a little nervous.”

“And you drove all the way up here for that? You adopted him, or something?” She studied Kristen quizzically. She knew she was fishing.

“Okay, the thing is, when I was here you mentioned that the people in charge act like this is a secret military installation. The security guards treated me like hair in the soup. The message was ‘no jobs, beat it.’ You’d think Caritec would welcome visitors. It would be good PR. But they obviously don’t. And now Adrian says he doesn’t dare ask questions. About *anything.* Don’t tell anyone he said that, though. I just want to make sure I didn’t get him into something.”

“Something, like what?”

“I don’t know. I guess I feel responsible.”

Marita studied Kristen again, this time intently. And then she shrugged and opened the counter flap, waving her in. When Kristen declined her offer of coffee, she sat down and indicated that Kristen should do the same while she rummaged in a desk drawer in search of a cookie for Diego.

“I’m not sure why you care,” she began, “but it’s no secret that Caritec is a rough outfit. They think in terms of turf. You know: my house, my rules, like petty dictators. It’s what they call a closed system. Guys come in here and treat me like their maid. They stand around drinking coffee as though I didn’t exist. No one ever talks to me except to tell me what to do. And when they run out of things to say to each other, they ogle my cleavage.”

“Good lord,” Kristen said.

“Yeah, but you can’t do anything about it. You have to be careful ‘cause they’re mean and they’re ignorant, and it’s a bad combination. Not one of them would believe I can fix a dozer faster and better than half of the clowns out there. I grew up on a farm, no brothers, and I was the oldest. I know machines.”

“What kind of farm did you grow up on?” Kristen asked.

“My father grew for *Tabacos & Puros Finos.* We worked 10 hectares.”

“That’s a lot of tobacco.”

“It was hard work, but we did okay. My father sent me to school, but my first love is still machines.”

“Why’d you leave the bicycle shop? Bikes aren’t exactly machines, but at least it’s mechanical work.”

“Not enough hours, and rotten pay. When this job ends, I’m going to work at Puma’s. My uncle knows Mr. Mendosa.” Puma’s was an auto repair shop, and Marita seemed proud of her future.

“Good for you!”

“It took long enough, but they finally agreed to try me. I’ll make them sorry they waited so long.”

“I’m sure you’ll be great. But be careful not to make the boys look bad.”

“Are you kidding? They only have Eduardo and his no-good brother. It takes a week to get your car fixed. I’ll make their cash flow hum.”

Marita was turning out to be a happy surprise, full of gutsy determination, but patient enough to abide the Neanderthals she worked with.

“I admire your resolve,” Kristen said. “But the secrecy around here, it doesn’t get to you?”

“Like I care. They make me turn in the keys to the file cabinets at night, so I turn them in. They don’t trust me? Their problem. I hear rumors, but I don’t pay attention.”

“What kind of rumors?”

Marita stared at her. “Kristen, you gotta watch out. I don’t know what these *ladrones* are up to, but if you keep asking questions, they’re not going to like it.”

“I don’t work here, so why should I care?”

“Because that turf I was talking about? It’s anywhere they want it to be.”

**18.**

Retooled Central American fishing villages like Cahuita were rife with marginally respectable businesses. Fishermen who smuggled contraband; innkeepers who collected kickbacks from casinos; and taxicab drivers who delivered underaged girls to exclusive hotel suites. Maybe it’s because the living was hard. Or maybe the opportunities were too numerous and too easy. Whatever the reason, in Cahuita, if people were poor and their moral compass needed calibration, they were unlikely to resist easy money when they could avoid getting caught with a modest bribe.

Felix Dupree was such a businessman. Raised in Newark, NJ, he pretended to American southern gentility, as if his family were from old money. It was a habit originally designed to cover up shabby beginnings on the streets of poor urban neighborhoods. His father had been a hard drinking, fist fighting Louisiana shrimper who’d been driven north by the ever-dwindling Gulf harvest. In Newark he continued to drink so much that he barely held down the occasional odd job.

At some point in his youth, Felix abandoned the unforgiving streets of Newark and headed for New Orleans, where he engaged in small-time criminal endeavors like running numbers. He built an escort service, using only a computer and women he met when patronizing call girls. He was both seductive and ruthless, and he raked in his ill-gotten gains without attracting the law’s attention, which led him to believe that the angel of vice watched over him. He plied his illegal trades in New Orleans, and then in Trinidad, and finally in the Dominican Republic.

Twenty years after leaving Newark, he arrived in Cahuita with a newly acquired taste for respectability, and enough cash to start several businesses, all of which were successful. His favorite was his restaurant, The Lonesome Mermaid, where he installed a mahogany-paneled office in which he administered his domain and held court.

Kristen met Felix when Adam invited her to a business dinner. The two men had just concluded an agreement for Felix to base his Skidoo rental business at the Beachcomber marina, and they were in the mood to celebrate. During the evening, Felix made an effort to engage Kristen, which she appreciated, since she usually found herself relegated to the role of fly on the wall when Adam entertained for Beachcomber. After that, Felix and Kristen would have coffee or a drink when they ran into each other in town. Gradually they became friends.

What Kristen knew of Felix’s life, she learned on the internet. Over time she found him to be sleazy, secretive, disrespectful to women, and ruthless about money. But he wasn’t uncomplicated. He cultivated a kind of misshapen loyalty to his friends, and he developed a soft spot for Kristen. It allowed the two of them to form an alliance that was bolstered by unspoken trust. Whenever she found herself wading into murky waters, she sought his advice, and he inevitably pointed her in the right direction. She kept his name out of whatever she was involved in, and he got to see himself as rescuing a damsel in distress. In a pinch, Kristen was not above flirting to obtain his help, and he made no secret of his pleasure in her acquiescence.

Felix seemed the only possible next step if Kristen was to get to the bottom of Marita’s warning. And by then, she was hooked on the question marks in her mind regarding Caritec. The day after talking to Marita, she walked into The Lonesome Mermaid at lunchtime where the wait staff ignored her as she breezed through the dining room toward Felix’s office. They knew her, and besides they were scurrying to accommodate the growing crowd of diners. In his office, Felix sat hunched over a laptop, while whiffs of pleasantly aromatic smoke rose from a cigar he held clamped in his teeth. When Kristen greeted him, his head snapped up.

She grinned. “What’s the matter, profits not what you’d like?” He leapt to his feet, looking splendid in summer-weight slacks that he’d likely had tailored on Savile Row, and an equally posh-looking safari shirt. He was a tall, thin, dapper fifty-something, with a full blond mustache and clean-shaven cheeks. His perfectly trimmed gray-blond hair was neat as a pin. It was said that he flew to Palm Beach for haircuts.

“Kristie! Well, I declare.”

No one called her Kristie if she could help it, but she’d given up on trying to correct Felix. At some point, she’d realized that he did it deliberately. It gave him an edge, which was one of those allowances that she was forced to grant him if she wanted to stay in his good graces. “You’re busy, I see. I should have called. Shall I come another time?”

“My stars, I’ll be confounded if I’m too busy for a visit from a beautiful woman. Sit down darlin’, you’re a sight for sore eyes. My, what a pretty blouse.”

He took in her cleavage without discretion or pretense. His presumption of familiarity would have chafed Kristen, except that he was that way with everyone. The waitresses said that he gave new meaning to the term sexual harassment. And there were no laws to protect women from such behavior in Cahuita, not that anyone would have enforced them if they’d existed. Felix’s exploits were legendary. No one knew how many waitresses had left Cahuita with broken hearts, but the number was said to be significant.

Apart from casual flirtation, Kristen was safe enough, because Felix would not risk ruffling Adam’s feathers. Adam had connections that Felix might need, and besides, Adam was naturally generous with help and information; and he never asked for anything in return. When the Beachcomber dredged a harbor to build a marina, Felix got discounted dockage for his rental boats and skidoos, and his business tripled.

As for Kristen, there was something that kept her beholden to Felix: he knew that she only came to him for information when she had no alternative, and, knowing that, he never let her down. Of course, the price for his willing guidance was putting up with behavior that she wouldn’t have tolerated from anyone else.

“I’ll have one of the girls bring you a refreshment,” he said. He pressed a button on the phone console and ordered an iced latte. Felix never asked what you wanted, and Kristen had learned not to object. That too was part of his edge.

“Thanks, Felix. It’s nice to see you,” she said.

“One of these days I’ll have to stop by that store of yours. I’m sure you have something my Martha would like.”

“Any time. I don’t know your wife’s taste, but we’ll find something.”

“I’m sure you will, darlin’. You always look the picture of taste. Now, what brings you to see your friend Felix?”

Since he had opened the door to conversation, Kristen stepped through it. “Do you by any chance know anyone at the Caritec construction site? The waste water treatment plant?”

“Well, I have a young acquaintance named Cameron down there. I was pleased to help him and his family settle in Cahuita. His father was a friend in Trinidad.”

“What does Cameron do?”

“Why, he’s in charge, darlin’. Runs the show.”

“So, he works for Caritec?”

“I assume so. Doesn’t everybody down there?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know the setup.”

“I wonder if I might inquire into your interest? You don’t seem the construction type.”

“I helped someone get a job there. I want to be sure I did the right thing. He needs the work, but he seems uncomfortable.” No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she wondered if she might be getting Adrian in trouble. She didn’t know Felix’s connections, but too often her life ran amok with unintended consequences. So, she hastened to add, “I know a woman who works there, and I asked her what it was like.” She hoped there was more than one woman on the site.

“I’m sure it’s like any other construction.” He paused to relight his cigar. “Hot, dirty, and lucrative.”

“Well, he does like the steady hours and the money.”

Felix looked at her. “What exactly doesn’t he like?”

It occurred to her to wonder if Felix knew about Adrian. She shifted her approach. “He’s okay, Felix. No need to dwell on him. But when I went down there to ask about work, the place was zipped up like a wetsuit. A couple of security guards made it clear they wanted me gone. And I hadn’t been anywhere except to the so-called welcome trailer that they’ve parked at the gate. It’s where everyone goes to apply for a job.”

“Is that what brings you here? I surely wouldn’t worry.”

They were engaged in a familiar dance, and Kristen was growing impatient. Felix liked to make her work before he gave her anything. As she thought about what to say, a woman who’d once waitressed at the casino knocked on the door and brought her iced latte. They smiled at one another.

“Well, I was curious,” Kristen continued when the woman had left, “so I searched online for newspaper articles, starting from when Caritec broke ground.”

“Why’d you do that?” Felix’s feigned indifference had slipped slightly.

“Workmen have disappeared. Raoul Bautista for one. He was a foreman, and one night he didn’t come home. Hasn’t been seen since. His family are devastated, and all Caritec will say is that he didn’t come back from lunch.”

“Maybe that’s all they know.”

“When I mentioned to Adam that I was helping a friend get a job with Caritec, he clammed up. That’s not like him. He was obviously upset, and he hasn’t wanted to talk about it since. Really, Felix, what’s up with Caritec?”

“What’s up with your Adam is more like it, darlin’.”

She was getting annoyed. She and Felix always did this, but not usually for so long. “Come on,” she said, “just tell me why everyone’s so tight-lipped about Caritec and that plant, and I’ll go away.”

Felix sat back and sighed, stroking his mustache. “No, you won’t. You’re too curious by half. But you don’t want to get involved with construction. I don’t invest in it myself. It’s tainted, you know that.”

She wondered why Felix felt the need to distance himself from Caritec. If they were building in Cahuita, Felix would know all about them. “There’s tainted and there’s *tainted*. I need to know why people disappear. I need to know if my friend could be next.”

“No need to exaggerate.” Felix soothed her. “Those Caritec folks are probably just cutting a few corners. It’s understandable they don’t want prying eyes.”

“Cutting corners? A man has disappeared! And what makes a visitor to their welcome trailer ‘prying eyes?’”

Felix sighed again, straightened his leg, and adjusted the already perfect crease in his trousers. “You are about the most stubborn gal I’ve ever met. Some would say downright pig-headed. I’m going to tell you this only once: do not stick your nose into Caritec. They didn’t build their empire by being nice. You could get hurt, Kristie, and all for nothing. Fellows like them don’t need a reason to play rough, and I’d feel terrible if anything happened to you.”

“So, I’m right to worry, something is going on. Something that’s making them piles of money, I’ll bet. But why would I get hurt? I’m no danger to anyone.”

“No danger? You have a reputation for being meddlesome. As for what’s going on, use your imagination. I’ve heard of folks renting prison labor for peanuts and charging the client top dollar. There’re substandard materials, and there’s taking short cuts around the blueprint. A couple of years ago, Americom got caught charging for employees who didn’t exist, you might have read about that.”

“And, hypothetically, if they wanted big money on a regular basis?”

He contemplated her as he puffed on his cigar. She waited. He’d either answer or not, and she knew she couldn’t push him. They sat like that for several long beats.

Finally, he said, “A dangerous combination, pig-headed and smart.” Another long pause. In the end, he got to his feet and said, “If you want to make real money in the long term, you arrange to operate for a lot less than you charge. A lot less.” With that he opened the office door and waited for Kristen to leave.

**19.**

Kristen wasn’t sure that the conversation with Felix added anything to the picture, but at least she had confirmation that something was up. If Caritec were engaged in just the usual construction shenanigans, Felix would have left it at that and not answered her final question. *So where do I go from here*? she wondered.

Since nothing came to mind, she decided to put Caritec aside. *Why do I need to know more?* she asked herself. Sure, Adrian wanted her to look into things, but she didn’t owe him that. She continued to feel uneasy about the plant, and especially about Adam’s over-reaction. But she might have let it go if she hadn’t run into Adrian again. In retrospect, she would wonder if that was an accident. Perhaps Marita had cautioned him, and her warning had made him more stubborn than before.

One morning soon after she talked to Felix, Kristen looked up from the beachwear that she’d been arranging in the new displays to see Adrian standing in the doorway.

“Hey, Kristen, openin’ up?” He retreated a few steps and sat down on the porch steps, as though for a chat.

His face was an open book, so Kristen surmised that he had a reason for coming, and it was surely his job again. “Just about,” she answered. “What’re you up to?”

“Walked the kids to school. Dessie went early to a job in the Grove.” He meant Coconut Grove, where well-to-do North Americans and Europeans hired day maids from among the locals. Apparently, Adrian’s wife was such a hire. He took a pack of Marlboros from his shirt pocket and lit one, stretching his legs and inhaling deeply.

“Shouldn’t you be getting to work?” Kristen asked.

“I told ‘em I’d be late ‘cause of the kids. One thing they’re not strict about is family. Speaking of work, I hear you talked to Marita.”

So that was what brought him back. “I did. But look, Adrian, your company may be up to something and it may not; but I’m not going to find out one way or the other. All I know is that Caritec is good at playing its cards close to the chest; and they don’t like gossip.”

“She told you I was right, then, Marita.”

“No, she didn’t. But the bottom line is *don’t fool with these guys*, you hear me?” She picked up the empty cardboard boxes and headed into the shop.

“So, it don’t matter there’re outflow pipes going to the ocean without their bein’ attached to primary?”

Kristen’s curiosity got the best of her. “What’s that supposed to mean?’”

“Primary’s where they get the solid waste out.”

“So… what are the pipes that go to the ocean connected to?”

“Don’t know. I just saw where there’s ditches and they don’t go to primary. They start from influent alright, but they go right toward effluent.”

She could guess what effluent was. If Adrian was right, raw sewage was going to be pumped up to the plant from the towns, and then right back down into the sea. “You’re a carpenter, how do you know about these ditches?”

“Don’t matter, I jus’ know. Not somethin’ you’d mistake.”

Adrian wasn’t just easy to read, he was downright foolhardy. “Well, for heaven’s sake, don’t go around talking to people about it! Just do your job and collect your pay.”

He stood and stretched lazily, raising his arms high so his T-shirt lifted to reveal a flat stomach. His underarm hair was speckled salt and pepper like his Afro. “Not talkin’ to people, jus’ you. I admit, I’m surprised. Thought you’d be interested. This here isn’t right.”

“Not my problem,” she declared shortly and continued into the shop, closing the door to end the conversation. She flipped the switch for the air conditioner and stood wondering what to do with her bad mood. Peace of mind just didn’t seem to be in the cards.

**20.**

Kristen and Adam were barely talking, though she spent her nights at The Beachcomber. She couldn’t think of a way to broach the subject of CAGA’s continuing presence, or to relate what she’d learned about the waste water treatment plant without reigniting their quarrel, and Adam certainly wasn’t raising the subject. So, they tip-toed around each other, trapped in their shared avoidance of strife.

Kristen felt miserable, but she couldn’t go home. There was Gram, and there was the fact that she couldn’t abandon Adam when she suspected that he was involved in something bad. From the way Gram’s eyes darted back and forth between her and Adam, she noticed their distance, but even she wasn’t eager to address the elephant in the room.

One Sunday, Adam left Romulus in charge of the casino and he, Gram, and Kristen drove to Tikal, a Mayan ruin. The ancient city didn’t seem to interest Gram, but she did enjoy dissing the tourists. She scoffed at a man who snapped countless pictures, his belly spilling over the waistband of his plaid Bermuda shorts.

“Like he cares about them Indians,” Gram chortled. “He don’t even know what he’s taking pictures of. Course if I was hitched to that hag, I’d find a camera to hide behind too.”

She indicated the man’s wife, with her damaged blond hair, and buck teeth. The woman carried a multi-colored straw bag that sagged with the weight of souvenirs. They sold rocks in Tikal, and she’d apparently bought some. She tagged along behind her picture-snapping husband, rattan sandals slapping at the soles of her feet.

“You’d think people would look in the mirror before leavin’ home,” Gram declared to no one in particular.

*Yes Gram, you’d think*. Her grandmother was wearing an orange tank top with skinny straps and iridescent purple tights. Her arm flaps jiggled as she gesticulated.

Gram was exhausted by the time they got back to the Beachcomber, so Adam and Kristen escorted her to her condo and retired to his. They walked Diego and then sat on the patio. Afterward, Kristen wouldn’t be able to remember what had been going through her mind, if anything, but suddenly she took Adam by the hand and led him into the bedroom.

He pulled her to him, and she kissed him with the full hunger of her loneliness. He responded instantly, slipping her shorts over her thighs and squeezing her butt. She unbuckled his belt and unzipped his fly, but before she could grasp him, he pushed her onto the bed and stripped off his jeans. He covered her mouth with his and arched over her. Nibbling at her neck, he entered her roughly.

She tensed with the momentary pain, but she didn’t object. Digging her nails into his back, she heaved up at him, and he returned her fierceness. In that moment of lust and need, they knew neither themselves nor each other, each of them trapped in their own isolation. He drove into her like a predator bent on domination, and she constricted around him, a spider consuming her mate. Kristen wished she could savor the moment, but she couldn’t slow down.

When it was over, they lay on separate sides of the bed, stunned. *What was that?* Kristen wondered. But she couldn’t bring herself to speak, and Adam seemed miles away. After a while, she got up to shower, and when she had dressed, she saw him sanding a piece of furniture on the patio. She went to the casino kitchen to order them something to eat.

After that, their conversation reverted to what it had been, utilitarian exchanges of information. *“You want coffee?” “Has Diego been out?”* Kristen spent as much time as she could at the shop, and Gram amused herself hitting up casino guests for food and drinks. Kristen heard that she got a Silicon Valley software engineer to stand her $100 for the slots and won a bundle. As for herself, she tried to keep both CAGA and Caritec out of her thoughts, but it was a losing battle. In the end, her effort proved irrelevant.

**21.**

On the evening of the feast of Santa Maria Soledad, the patron saint of Cahuita, Kristen wasn’t in the mood for fireworks or noisy festivities. After Belinda and Elena had gone home, she sat on the shop’s porch steps feeling like she had nowhere to go. The air was stiflingly hot, and she was thirsty, but she couldn’t summon the energy to go buy a cool drink.

A battered yellow and black Fiat screeched to a halt outside the shop. Suddenly alert, Kristen got to her feet and grabbed Diego by his harness. Two rough-looking men jumped out of the junker and rushed her. She backed up as Diego snarled and tried to break her grip. The men weren’t big, but she could tell by the bulges under their shirts that she was in trouble.

The one who reached her first had burn scars on both forearms, and his partner’s bizarre smile revealed stained and broken teeth. Before she could break out in a run, the two grabbed her by the arms and pressed a dirty, sweet-smelling rag over her face. Diego barked and then yelped while Kristen kicked, twisted, and slid into a black hole.

When she awoke it was as dark as pitch. Her head pounded, waves of nausea rolled over her, and she couldn’t move her arms or legs. Fighting panic, she forced herself to take stock. She lay on her side, hog-tied, but her mouth was uncovered, so there was probably no point in screaming. She concentrated on not vomiting, since if she did, she wouldn’t be able to move away from it. She twisted and strained, until the exposed areas of her skin were rubbed raw from the rough surface on which she lay. Her wrists burned from trying to loosen the duct tape that bound her. After what felt like hours of struggling, numb with pain, she finally capitulated and lay still.

Increasingly, her bladder commanded her attention. She tried to think about something else, like lying in bed with Adam on vacation, but in the end, she had to give up. The air was damp and chilly, and as the warm puddle that formed under her thigh gradually cooled, it added to her discomfort. *Why is this happening?* *Am I going to be left here?* If they’d abandoned her, how long would it be before she died, and how much would she suffer?

Recognizing the danger of such thinking, she forced herself to focus on what to do. She used the tips of her fingers to test the surface on which she lay. It was rough, damp, and hard, most likely cement. Despite her discomfort, she wiggled her bound wrists and continued touching the floor, in search of something to abrade the duct tape. Nothing. She discovered that she could shimmy her way forward. So, she inched along in what she hoped was a straight line. Pretty soon, she’d scraped the skin on her arm and leg raw, but she kept going. After a while, the constant motion did seem to loosen the duct tape. She rested periodically and then resumed her creep. The effort increased the pain in her arms and legs, but she couldn’t stop because that would mean giving up.

She was thinking that she’d made headway, when she heard the clatter of a metal chain. An anemic rectangle of yellow light slid into the room. She heard footsteps but didn’t raise her head. In a cold sweat, she waited. Two pairs of battered gaucho boots planted themselves a couple of feet from her nose. She felt someone bend over her, and with a whiff of cheap tobacco and stale onions, a scratchy voice said, “’Wake now?”

*Frick and Frack*, she thought. The guys in the Fiat.

“You piss yourself, eh lady?” Frick kicked her in the stomach.

“She no lady,” chortled Frack. “She a nosy *puta*.”

Frack snapped the blade out of a silver stiletto knife and leaned down. Kristen felt herself peeing again, but he only slid the blade under the duct tape to sever the lengths that bound her wrists to her legs. He freed her ankles from each other, and Frick grabbed her hair and pulled her to her feet. She yelped in pain and struggled to get her legs under her, but they were numb, so she lurched sideways and sat down hard, unable to break her fall with her still-bound hands. Frick seized another fistful of hair.

“Easy, *muchacho,”* Frack said*, “puta* work on her back. She no in shape.”

Frick giggled, and they each snagged an arm and dragged her forwards through the open door. Dim though it was, the light hurt her eyes, so, she didn’t see where she was until they’d bumped her up a set of stairs, the tops of her feet hitting the edge of each riser. She began to focus when they stood her against a wall. They unlocked a door. Frick turned and shoved her through, and she landed face down on a grimy linoleum floor.

“Water,” she gasped.

“Aw, puta thirsty,” Frack said.

Frick giggled again and left the room. Frack picked Kristen up and threw her into a greasy upholstered chair with broken springs and no cushion. After lying hog-tied on a wet cement floor, the chair felt good. Frick came back carrying a plastic pail and tossed its contents in her face. It had the consistency of water, but it smelled like chicken shit. And now so did she.

“You wanna know why you here?” Frack said.

“Sure,” she croaked. He slapped her across the face. Then he leaned down so his eyes were level with hers.

“You don lie to me. Every lie, something bad happen.” He straightened up. “You wanna know why you here?”

“I’m g- guessing Caritec s-sent you,” she stammered.

“Very good. You see? No slap. Why Caritec want to talk to you?”

Kristen wondered fleetingly if Felix had betrayed her, but that didn’t make sense. Word could have just gotten around that she’d stopped by Marita’s office.

“I asked Marita what it was like to work there,” she said.

“Good again.” A long, scary pause. “You not sorry for that?”

“Yeah, okay, I’m sorry.”

Frack took an unfiltered cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it. He inhaled and studied Kristen as smoke drifted from his nostrils, He unbuttoned her blouse. He watched her tremble, and then he pressed the lit end of the cigarette between her breasts and held it there for a couple of beats. She screamed in agony as she smelled something disgusting. When she didn’t stop, Frack slapped her again. She forced herself to calm down, but she couldn’t stop sobbing. Her chest was on fire.

The cigarette in his mouth, Frac leaned against the wall and watched her. Frick giggled.

With the searing pain between her breasts, Kristen panicked. “I’m really sorry. I won’t ask any more questions, I promise.”

Frack studied her some more and then landed a punch to her jaw. Her head bounced off the back of the chair and things went black for the second time that night.

More chicken water in her face. She opened her eyes and puked. It landed in her lap. Frick left and then came back dragging a garden hose that spouted a steady stream of water. He rinsed her slowly from head to toe, leering at each part of her body as water streamed over it. She shivered convulsively.

“Drink?” she bleated. Despite the pain, she burned with thirst, her mouth and throat raw.

Clearly a hair guy, Frick grabbed a bunch and yanked her head back. Then, he jabbed his fingers into her throbbing jaw to force her mouth open. He jammed the hose into her throat.

“Suck, *puta*!”

She gagged and spasmed, and then forced herself to swallow water as fast as she could. Soon it spurted out of her nose and mouth, which seemed to be what Frick was after, because he shrieked with delight and did a little dance. The hose fell to the floor, still streaming water.

Kristen stopped retching and struggled to breathe. Frack continued to study her. “More water?”

Kristen’s jaw screamed when she spoke. “No, thank you.”

“No, thank you, what?”

“No, thank you, it was very good.”

Frack smiled. “So, what you learn today, *puta*?”

“I learned I’m a *puta*.”

Frack glowered.

Hastily, she added “And I’ve never heard of Caritec.”

He knotted his brows and his stare turned menacing. Kristen had to think of something, “You’re a good teacher!” She’d have sold her mother to keep him from lighting another cigarette.

He smiled, this time for real. “And how we make sure you don’ forget, *puta*?”

“I won’t forget!” Her jaw screamed louder.

“I hope not, *puta.* Tonight, you go home. Next time you no go home. And my associate, he have his fun. You unnerstan’?”

“Yeah, I understand. Please, thank you.” Tears streamed down her face, but she didn’t dare make a sound. Out of nowhere the filthy rag reappeared; and once again she slid into a black hole.

**22.**

Landing face down in the mud, Kristen lay on her belly, her arms splayed above her head. The car sped away, skidding sideways as it accelerated. Her jaw throbbed, and the wound between her breasts burned, so she lay still until the pain subsided, and then she gingerly patted cool mud onto her jaw and chest. With more determination than skill, she managed to lurch to her hands and knees. The effort made her retch and she collapsed again. Vomit leaked from her nose and from between her clenched teeth. As bad as that was, the prospect of opening her mouth seemed worse.

Realizing that she was in the middle of the road, she inched her way toward the weeds growing alongside it. Headlights appeared. H*ow ironic,* she thought.  *I survived Frick and Frack and now I’m going to be run over.* She tensed, waiting for the impact and then relaxed when she realized the vehicle had slowed to a stop. The glare of its headlights blinded her. She heard a door open and footsteps approaching. She squinted, waiting to see if this was a good samaritan or just more trouble. A man squatted beside her. He smelled of bay rum after shave.

“Oh lord, Miss Kristen, they hurt you bad,” he said.

She recognized the voice, but it was all she could do to hold herself up; she was on all fours swaying like a drunken marsupial. She thought the voice belonged to someone she knew, a twenty-something patrolman.

“You lay down now, the ambulance is coming.” He eased her onto her side as gently as a mother with a newborn. The muddy road cooled her scraped arm and leg. She didn’t know how long she lay there. Later, she would only remember that she’d felt cold.

More headlights appeared. Hands lifted her onto a gurney, and she cried out at the pain from the cigarette burn when they covered her. Adam’s face suddenly loomed over her., his expression tight with concern. She heard Gram yell instructions to Cahuita’s equivalent of an EMT, and Diego whimpered as he licked her eyes. The dog stood on his hind legs, his front claws clinging to the frame of the gurney. She was safe, finally, and the realization made her cry.

Later, she would learn that when she’d been taken, Diego had raced up and down Mahogany Street barking frantically. People had looked for her, and finding the shop locked and her truck still out back, they had alerted the police, who had been looking for her for most of the night. Adam had been summoned, and he, Diego, and Gram had ridden with one of the cops.

When she woke up, she heard a young man in a blue dress shirt say, “Your jaw’s been dislocated, and there’s a fracture.” The man had the full features and russet skin of a mestizo. A single lock of black hair fell onto his shiny forehead and a stethoscope hung around his neck. “We don’t need to wire you shut, but you’ll be restricted to a liquid diet for a few days. And you should try not to talk. You have a serious burn and a concussion. The rest is scrapes and bruises. You’ll be good as new in no time.”

*Fuck you know*, Kristen thought. Adam stood beside the bed holding her hand, Gram by his side. Liz stood opposite them. Kristen didn’t want them there; she wanted to curl up with Diego. She wanted to sleep forever.

“How long will she be here?” Adam asked.

“A day or so,” the doctor replied. “We need to monitor the concussion and she’ll be on IV fluids and antibiotics. The burn is deep.”

Gram remained uncharacteristically silent. She patted Kristen’s foot through the sheet and looked unhappy. Liz stroked Kristen’s cheek, and Kristen didn’t have to look at her to know that Liz understood the sense of violation that coursed through her veins like a toxic ablution. She raised her hand to touch Liz’s and gave her fingers a tiny squeeze.

“Diego?” she whispered.

“Don’t talk,” Adam said from the other side of the bed. “He rode in the ambulance with you. Threatened to tear a cop’s hand off when he tried to pull him out. He’s in Liz’s car now. Don’t worry about a thing. When they let you go home, Gram and I will take you. Belinda knows, so she’ll open the shop in the morning.”

Adam was talking too fast. Sleep, Kristen thought, please, sleep. She closed her eyes and imagined herself in Liz’s arms.

Throughout the day, there was more time that Kristen couldn’t account for. At some point, she realized she was in Adam’s bed.

Occasionally there was the smell of food or the feeling of a drink straw being pressed to her lips, but the thought of swallowing nauseated her, so she pushed it away. Whenever she awoke, it seemed that Liz was there, standing quietly beside the bed. She didn’t know how much she imagined, or how often Liz actually came, but she felt her presence.

During the night, she fought to shake off a dream about liquid fire that threatened to consume her. In her dream, she knew that if she could free herself of the fire, Adam would come. And then, she saw Liz again, as clear as a spring morning, an exquisite angel in a shimmering silk gown, silver hair cascading to her shoulders. “I love you,” Kristen whispered.

“You should,” Liz replied. Kristen wanted to reach for her, but darkness descended.

The next time she awoke, she was lying in Adam’s arms, Diego at her back. It felt like refuge. She slipped back into dreamless sleep.

**23.**

The next day, Kristen found she was able to stay awake all afternoon. Previously she’d been heavily sedated because of the pain from the burn and her fractured jaw and because she thrashed about in the bed, even when asleep. By the evening of the second day, the pain had eased enough to be managed with oral medication. She sipped broth through a straw and ate some apple sauce. Liz came, and Kristen told her that when she’d been sedated, she had imagined her friend was an angel.

Liz laughed good naturedly. “I’ve always been your guardian angel,” she said. “You just haven’t noticed.” She picked up the copy of a Patricia Cornwell novel that lay on the night table and offered to read to Kristen. Of all those who came to see her that day or the following one - Adam, Gram, Belinda, Rom - only Liz understood the healing power of being read to.

Adam stayed by her side, propped up against the headboard, chatting about casino customers, Gram’s antics, and the news of the world. On her third day at the Beachcomber, she got up and ate – at least she sucked on orange sections and sipped at cottage cheese that Gram had liquified in the blender. Days went by as she sat on the beach and threw a ball into the waves for Diego, who never seemed to tire of the game. At night she read novels and streamed movies on TV.

She dialed up Belinda who assured her that the displays were not only done but brimming with merchandise. Business had picked up, so Elena was working at lunchtime and after school. Everyone asked about her, Belinda said. Kristen could have gone back to work by day four, but she didn’t have the heart. It was still hard to talk and the idea of dealing with the public made her want to run for cover.

Late one morning, Gram came and sat next to Kristen on Adam’s patio. “You want soup for lunch? They got conch. I can grind up the chunks.”

“Sure,”

“Okay, I’ll get some.”

She came back with a bowl of warm tropical gruel. She set the soup in front of Kristen and asked if she wanted a straw or a spoon.

“Spoon,” Kristen said.

She went into the kitchen to get one. When she came back, she said, “Krissie, you got to go to work.”

“I know.”

“I mean now. You can’t just sit around. Adam’s bad enough, but now you’re in a sulk.”

“I’m not in a sulk. And Adam is just angry that Caritec hurt me. He doesn’t know what to do about it.”

“It’s time I went home, but I can’t leave you two like this.”

Kristen wanted to tell her that leaving them like this would be just fine.

“That Adrian Petters wants to talk to you,” Gram said. “I’m no fool, I see what he’s up to.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he’s the one got you into this. He played on your sympathies.”

“I just helped him get a job.” She didn’t mention that he’d pressured her to find out what Caritec was involved in.

“And now he’s got somethin’ else on his mind. He don’t care what happens to you, you know. He just wants answers.”

Kristen looked at her, wondering how she knew so much. Then, she turned her attention to the gruel. She didn’t want to think. “What if I flew back to Vegas with you?”

“You was never a quitter, Krissie. Now’s not the time to start.” Leave it to Gram to cut to the chase.

“I don’t know what to do,” Kristen whispered.

“Get that detective fella, the dumpy one. And Liz. She’s a cold fish, but she’s got a good head on her shoulders.”

**24.**

Gram was right. Luc Vargas was the most honest, dependable cop in Guatemala. The only detective on Cahuita’s tiny police force, he dated a McGarrity daughter, fished on Felix’s yacht, and mingled with almost everyone. He seemed ubiquitous, but despite a complaisant social life, he was tough, discerning, and focused on his job.

Kristen didn’t think Vargas liked her, but he made a point of being friendly with Adam, who was happy to act as his eyes and ears on the peninsula. Adam trusted Vargas and kept him informed; as a result, if there was trouble at the resort, Vargas came in a flash.

The next morning, Kristen made her first foray into the world. She drove home to load her gun, which she decided to carry on her hip in full view. She hoped that Frick and Frack wouldn’t learn of her intended visit to the police station, but she would be ready if they came for her. She headed back into town, glancing nervously in the truck’s rearview mirror. Even Diego seemed nervous. She invited the dog into the station, because it felt better having him with her than not. No one sat at the reception desk, so she walked past it to Vargas’s office. His door was closed.

Henry Santos, the cop who’d found her in the road, appeared at the entrance to the cells. “Hey, Kristen, you look better than the last time I saw you.”

“Couldn’t look much worse.”

“How’re you doing?”

She shrugged. “Vargas here?”

“Yeah, he’s on the phone with Guatemala City. You want to wait?”

“Please.”

He pushed an orange plastic chair toward her. After staying at the resort, she found the station bleaker than usual. It stank of unwashed bodies and stale tobacco, and with every breath, she inhaled burned coffee. She sat down and tucked her hands under her thighs, and then quickly withdrew them, repulsed by the chair’s stickiness. The cinder block walls looked grimy, and accumulated crud stuck to a barred window. The place exuded poverty and despair. She was considering leaving when Vargas opened his door.

A rumpled, low-center-of-gravity figure, Vargas would have been comical were it not for his demeanor. He was grumpy and curt, and his brow stayed knit in a permanent scowl. To the uninitiated he could seem brooding, even despondent. Those who had felt the weight of his suspicion knew better. He had a habit of studying his quarry until they wanted to squirm. In the end they believed he knew them better than they knew themselves. Time and again, he had pried self-disclosure from the wary.

Kristen stood up. “Good morning, Luc. May I speak with you?”

He stepped aside and indicated that she should pass.

“I’m feeling better, thanks. Nice of you to come out to the peninsula to talk to me.”

He lit an unfiltered cigarette and she shivered involuntarily.

Remembering the cigarette burn he’d heard about, he crushed his out in a tin ashtray. “Sorry for what happened to you.”.

“I can tell.”

He shifted on his feet, but he didn’t look guilty. “You needed time to get better.”

“Considerate of you.”

He ignored her sarcasm. “Adam told me what the guys looked like. That they drove a yellow and black Fiat. They’re known in Guatemala Central. They’re low-rent enforcers who’ve been around for years.”

“Oh, well then.” Kristen said snidely. She couldn’t suppress her anger.

“They’ll go to jail, but it won’t change anything.”

“Adam isn’t the one who got pounded. That was me.”

“Is the description wrong?”

“What I’m asking is why the hell you asked Adam about them, and not me?”

“Like I said, you needed time to get better.”

“Were you ever going to ask me?”

Vargas remained unmoved. “Adam was supposed to call me when you were up to talking.”

“Nice of you boys to make my decisions,”

“Start from the beginning. Don’t leave anything out, I need to know everything they said and did.”

Kristen did as he said, slogging her way through the story with difficulty, choking on the details. Describing to Vargas what Frick and Frack had done gave her the shakes. It brought back the greasy chair, the filthy pail of water, and the smell of her own flesh burning. Sitting in Vargas’s office, her voice trembled, and sweat trickled between her breasts, stinging the still raw burn. Diego paced nervously while Vargas took notes. Part-way through her story, the lieutenant left and came back with a cold can of Mountain Dew. She gulped some before continuing.

“When I told them that I thought they’d been sent by Caritec, the guy who was in the lead replied, ‘very good.’ It was an admission. Your Guatemala City people should be able to find out who hired them.”

“They’ll go to jail, they’ll do their time, and they’ll keep their mouths shut. It’s that or get killed. Caritec has a long reach.”

“So, you’re not going to find out who ordered this?”

“I didn’t say that. But it’ll take time. Me or Guatemala Central, somebody has to find a weak link.”

“How long will that take?” Kristen demanded.

“Hard to tell.”

“Are the Guatemala City guys motivated?”

“Everybody’s sick of Caritec pushing people around. Here, in Honduras, everywhere. There are bound to be cops on the take, but not everybody. I have a couple of friends in Central.”

She couldn’t contain her anger. “Oh well, that’s good.” She pushed back her chair and stood.

Kristen left the station feeling no better than when she’d come. How hard would the police press? To be sure, Vargas would love to nail Caritec for assault, but she wasn’t confident that either the *federales* or the Guatemala City police would feel the same. From where she stood, the company looked all-powerful, and they had deep pockets.

As she and Diego walked down Mahogany Street toward Kristen del Mar, she realized that she was less interested in whatever Caritec was doing at the waste water treatment plant than in getting back at them. The shame that had followed the abuse was fermenting. She was angry. As she walked, she thought about shooting her gun at somebody, *anybody*.Maybe she should spend some time at the range. She tried to put her anger aside and stopped at McGarrity’s to get a take-out lunch.

When Kristen arrived at the shop, Belinda and Elena took a long look at the gun on her hip and then sat down to eat the McGarrity sandwiches that she’d brought. She lunched on chunks of milk-poached mahi-mahi. The soft, fragrant flesh tasted good, and, wary of the pain that still inflamed her jaw, she forced herself to eat slowly. Afterward, she checked the register receipts for the previous week, and admired the new displays. When two women in capri pants and flowered tops entered the shop, she left Belinda to her work and took Diego for a walk along the water in front of The Beach Shack, a local hot spot overflowing with the lunch crowd. Her choice of places to walk wasn’t ideal, since Diego was more interested in the food he smelled than in exercise, but at least they were safe in the crowd.

Despite lingering soreness and the burn on her chest, it felt good to walk among people in town after days of The Beachcomber’s artificial ambiance. Kristen realized that the root of her reluctance to resume a normal life had been more mental than physical. Unsure of how to gin up her courage, she decided to start by switching into a more active mode. Nothing dramatic, she thought, but maybe if she had a sense of purpose, she’d feel steadier on her feet. Besides, she needed to do *something* about what those two dirt bags had subjected her to. She needed to show herself that shame didn’t run her life. It was no use thinking that there was nothing to be ashamed of. She had to step right up to the humiliation and spit in its eye.

Although wary of stirring an already volatile pot, she couldn’t wait for the police to find their weak link. She signaled to Diego that they were leaving the beach and headed back up Mahogany Street to the Lonesome Mermaid. Felix sat at a table in the dining room chatting up a new waitress, no doubt arranging to meet her after work.

“Felix, can I talk to you?” Kristen interrupted, without a greeting.

He leapt to his feet. “I heard what happened to you, darlin’, how awful! Are you feelin’ better? Come into the office.”

When they were seated in matching chairs that were upholstered in a sumptuous striped fabric, he surprised her by falling silent. Evidently, they weren’t going to dance around one another today.

“I need your help,” Kristen said.

“Anything I can do. I don’t hold with violence.”

“The guys who kidnapped me as much as admitted that Caritec hired them.”

“I was afraid of that.”

‘Felix, what do you know?”

“Not much, darlin’, not much.”

“You’re friends with the construction manager at the waste water treatment plant.”

“Not exactly.” He clipped the end of a cigar that was the color of Cuban coffee. “A friend asked me to help the boy get settled in town.” He rolled the cigar between his fingertips, held it to his nose to test its fragrance, and flipped open a gold lighter.

“Do you think he knows who hired my attackers?”

“No idea, but he’s a sharp fellow. He didn’t get his job by being dim.”

“Will you talk to him for me?”

Felix held the lighter’s flame to the tip of his cigar and puffed slowly. A spicy aroma filled the room.

“And ask him what? If he enjoys abusing women for sport?”

Unfazed, Kristen said, “Tell him that the attack has caused alarm. Tell him someone has to answer for it, or it won’t go away. Tell him it’s bad for business. Tell him whatever will get him talking.”

“That’s all true, mind you,” Felix replied quietly.

“So, talk to him, will you?”

He continued to puff thoughtfully. “He and his lovely wife live in Coconut Grove. I suppose we could invite them for dinner. Afterward, Cameron and I could adjourn to the patio for a smoke.”

“Sooner rather than later, ok?”

“I understand, Kristie. I truly do.”

**25.**

Kristen could barely sit still. After her conversation with Felix, she couldn’t focus on everyday things and was forgetful at the shop. When she tried to watch “Jeopardy” with Gram, the old woman kicked her out of the condo because, she said, she was too goldarn fidgety.

“Whatever’s eatin’ you, take a pill. Between you and your hang-dog honey, you got me climbin’ the walls. You wanna tell me what’s goin’ on around here?”

“I’ll be glad to tell you, as soon as I find out.”

“Well, then get busy,” Gram ordered, as she turned up the TV volume.

That night, Kristen pulled on a T-shirt and tights before going to bed and programmed herself to wake up after Adam had fallen asleep. Sure enough, about three AM she opened her eyes and listened to his breathing. It sounded deep and regular. When she was confident that it would continue like that, she slipped out of bed and tip-toed to the dresser. She collected his keys, careful not to jingle them.

She closed the condo door and crept into the dimly lit hallway, Diego padding along behind. The casino was dark except for red security lights and an ambient glare from the outside spots. She tried key after key in the office door until she found one that turned. Too late, it occurred to her that Adam might have alarmed the place. She whipped her head around, looking for a security panel, but saw none. She took a deep breath.

When she tried to open the center drawer of Adam’s desk, she found it locked. Likewise, for the others.

“I wonder what Adam is hiding in his desk?” she whispered to Diego. He thumped his tail on the carpet and stared at the drawers, hoping to see her liberate a cookie. She went through a succession of keys again and finally found one for the drawers. She flicked on her cell phone light to have a look. The center one contained a clean pad of paper, pens, rubber bands, paper clips, a ruler. In the top drawer of the side stack were more office supplies and Beachcomber forms: personnel reports, requisition forms, financial transaction forms. The middle drawer contained his 9 mm Smith and Wesson, loaded she judged by its weight. She thought to leave it where it was, but when she shined the light in the drawer, she noticed an airplane ticket. She slipped it out and saw that it was the passenger copy of a round trip fare to Houston.

Her heart started to race. When had he gone to Houston? She checked to make sure the ticket was in his name and noted that the date was the same week that he had said he was in Costa Rica at a Beachcomber meeting. She put the gun on the floor and dug into the papers. There was a credit card receipt for two nights in a Houston hotel and more receipts for restaurant meals. *What was he doing in Houston that he couldn’t me about?* Beachcomber headquarters was there, so what was the big deal? Had he been called home for a woodshed conversation that he didn’t want to discuss? What kind of trouble was Adam in?

She replaced the ticket, receipts, and gun and checked the bottom drawer. Nothing of note. She stood up and looked around the office. There was a safe somewhere, a place where he kept important documents and sometimes cash. She walked the periphery of the room and finally realized that it was hardly hidden. In a credenza that contained liquor and glasses was a compartment with a door, and behind the door was the safe. It wasn’t a real one, just a big metal box with six numbered wheels on its lid. She tried all the obvious combinations: his birthday, his sons’ birthdays, the day the casino opened, her birthday, the first day they had sex. Did Adam even remember the first day they’d had sex? *What else would he use for a combination?* she asked herself.

On a hunch, she went back to the desk. She was about to pull the center drawer out to look at its underside when Diego pricked up his ears and growled. *Shit, there’s a night watchman!* She shut down her cell phone and lay curled up in the well of the desk, Diego squeezed up against her. *Diego, quiet!* she ordered and held her breath. The dog acquiesced, but his ears stood at attention as he stared at the back panel of the desk, on the other side of which was the office door.

A key turned in the lock and the door opened. She wrapped her hand around Diego’s muzzle and prayed. Under the lip of the desk’s back panel a flashlight beam swept by. After an eternity, the beam disappeared, and a key turned in the lock. *Thank God, I closed the door of the credenza.*

When she could breathe normally, Kristen rose to her feet. Diego had gotten bored and fallen asleep. She checked the undersides of the desk drawers, and the bottom one in the side stack proved the winner. On it was a piece of tape bearing six digits. She opened the metal box. *Nothing of interest*, she huffed. Just papers, most of them having to do with Brinks cash pickups.

She was about to replace the stack when the word “holdback” caught her eye on the top sheet.. She put the other papers down and examined it. There was a date and an amount of cash received, but in place of the Brinks pickup time there was that word “holdback.” The amount held back was over a hundred thousand dollars. Must have been a busy string of nights. She put the sheet of paper aside and sorted through the others, finding a mix of some with pick-up times and some with the holdback notation. All of the sheets were dated in the last six months.

The holdbacks ranged from twenty to a hundred thousand dollars, and they were spread out over the six months. Why would Adam have kept all that cash? If Brinks hadn’t picked it up for deposit, where was it? Did Adam have a secret account in the Caymans or something? But that didn’t make sense because he had never cared about money, and even if he had, he’d hardly steal it. Was it possible that he’d been fooling her all this time and was really a thief? It didn’t seem likely, but what were this Houston trip and the holdback papers about? She stood up and tapped the sheet of papers on the credenza to neaten them. She replaced them in the box and spun the metal wheels to lock it. Turning a key in each of the desk drawers, she whispered to Diego to come with her and they slipped out of the office and back into Adam’s condo.

For a long time, she sat on the living room couch in a daze, listening to Diego snore. She turned on the TV and muted the sound, then turned it off again. Finally, she went into the bedroom and slid under the covers. She stared at the ceiling for an hour, finally falling into a troubled sleep as false dawn crept across the horizon.

**26.**

Cameron replaced the phone in its cradle and gazed out the trailer window. *Felix has never invited me to dinner. Except that time the bosses, wanted to look me over. Why now?* It couldn’t be a coincidence that the casino manager’s girlfriend had just gotten out of the hospital. Cameron felt uneasy enough about what they’d done to her, without Felix getting involved.

When he had told the bosses about Kristen’s talk with the secretary, he hadn’t meant for her to get hurt. *This plant, it’s men’s business*. Bautista was one thing, but a lady who sold bikinis? It had to be a question of something that involved her casino manager boyfriend. It would be like them to hurt a woman in order to get to a man. But what could possibly be the connection between the casino manager and the plant?

Cameron didn’t like complications, and now his situation involved critical unknowns. Things were becoming messy and out of control. Whatever the reason for Felix’s invitation, he had some questions of his own.

It rained the night of the dinner, and Cameron’s wife fretted about her hair.

“Is my hair okay, Cam? I know what we owe Felix. I don’t want to show disrespect to his family.”

He arranged a lock of hair here and there, soothing her with the unnecessary adjustments. “You are beautiful.”

She smiled at him. “Really, I look okay?”

“You are perfect, Yuanita. That dress, the green is perfect with your eyes.”

“It should be. You picked it out.” She laughed and touched his freshly shaved cheek.

At the Dupree’s door, Felix welcomed them with an apology for not having invited them sooner.

“Life is good, is it not?” he said. “It makes time slip by.”

Cameron took Felix’s hand in both of his. “It does, my friend, and I see life is good to you. Your home is lovely.”

“You’ve met my wife Martha?” Felix said.

As Yuan stepped forward to greet her hostess, she smelled the nimbus of alcohol that surrounded her. “I know about you, of course,” Yuan said. “But I had no idea how pretty you were.”

“Oh, I’m an old woman, but you, look at you! And three children, I hear?”

Yuan nodded appreciatively, and Felix led them into a luxuriant conservatory that featured a flowering orange grove, upholstered chairs, and a Tommy Bahama canvas sofa. A dark-skinned man in a starched white shirt served cocktails. Cameron contemplated his benefactor’s affluence with interest, knowing the same could be his one day soon. If he could just get past the bosses’ recklessness.

Drinks and dinner seemed to take forever, but finally it was time for the men to adjourn for cigars and brandy. Felix settled into a cushioned lounge chair by the pool and indicated a like one for Cameron. The dark-skinned man served them finely-aged cognac and slipped away like a shadow.

“My oh my, sometimes I wonder at my own good fortune,” Felix sighed. “And you, my young friend, how is the world treating you?”

Cameron took his time lighting a cigar and then made unctuous noises to indicate his pleasure. “I’ve never met a man with better taste in cigars.”

Felix chuckled. “That’s very kind, but you know, I’ve had a few years to learn.”.

“You’ll have to teach me. This one is Brazilian?”

“Now, why do you ask when you’re obviously an aficionado?”

“Not at all. It’s the spiciness. I recognize the Cubra seed.”

“I do like Escurios. The tobacco is actually blended with leaves from Ecuador and the Dominican Republic.”

“Ah, so that’s why it’s smooth.”

“You see, you *are* an aficionado; you know Brazilian tobacco is rough.”

Cameron chuckled. “Everyone knows Brazilian tobacco is rough. Except the Brazilians.”

Felix smiled and puffed contentedly, while Cameron waited. It wouldn’t do to ask questions before his host had opened the conversation.

“You look well,” Felix finally said. “Not working too hard?”

“I look my best when I work hard. It’s what I’ve always done.”

“And it has paid off! That’s a big job you have.”

“Big enough. Computers have made it easy to keep track of things. There’s little risk of overlooking anything.”

“Still, it must be a lot to stay on top of. How’s it going?”

“We’d be on schedule if it weren’t for the weather. It was a wetter than usual summer, not something that we could have predicted, so the ground isn’t as solid as we’d like. We’ve had to do extra reinforcement, and the winter months will only bring more rain. But we’re not far behind.”

“Well done, then. Caritec must be pleased.”

Cameron reflected that Felix wasn’t going to reveal his reason for the dinner invitation before finding out if he himself had something on his mind. But he was mistaken.

“I’ve heard no complaints so far,” he replied to Felix.

“Not even about Kristen Maroney?”

*An unexpected leap.*  Cameron was alarmed. He studied Felix for a moment. “Kristen Maroney?”

Felix chuckled. “Oh, I just mention her because she’s been asking questions. She has a reputation for nosiness in Cahuita. I’m sure your employers have heard about her if they’ve done their homework.”

“They always do their homework,” Cameron said, playing for time.

“She’s had a terrible misfortune.”

“I don’t know much about that business, but it sounds awful. Why would anyone attack a woman – just because she’s nosey? Surely, she can’t do any harm. What does she even know about construction?”

“True enough, true enough. I do hope nothing else happens to the poor thing.”

“Seriously though, why would anyone want to hurt her?” Cameron pressed.

Felix rolled his cigar in his fingertips. “Unscrupulous people will do anything to get a point across, don’t you think?”

“It’s hard to imagine what the point would be.”

“You tell me.” Felix paused. “Anyway, people do like her, and there’s a fair amount of talk about the attack. As a business man, I worry about the tourists. What’s anybody going to think when a woman gets kidnapped from her own front porch? I don’t know what it will take to calm things down.

Not wanting to get the message wrong, Cameron asked, “What do you think it will take?”

Felix stared calmly at him. “Time will tell, I guess. But it would be better if people knew who’s responsible. They want to see the evil doers held accountable.”

Cameron said nothing.

“For instance, if someone was trying to send a message by hurting that girl, they in turn would need to get a message.”

“I still don’t get the point.”

“These things often have to do with family, don’t you think? Or what passes for it?”

“I guess they do. Anyway, It’s a shame.”

“Yes, it is.” Felix finished his cognac, stood up, and stretched. Cameron followed suit and they returned to the house.

The evening wound down quietly. Martha visibly fought the urge to fall into a stupor, and Yuan tactfully expressed concern that their baby sitter needed to be taken home. Cameron and Felix shook hands, and Felix held his guest’s eyes for one beat longer than was strictly polite.

**27.**

Before Adam had taken the Beachcomber job in Cahuita, his boss, the Caribbean Area Manager, Diane, had debriefed him in Houston. As they’d pored over documents at a conference room table strewn with file folders and abandoned coffee cups, she’d reviewed the Executive Committee’s plan. In line with their policy of doing business in-country, the executives had wanted Caribbean contractors to build Cahuita. However, experience had taught them that when they did that, an impenetrable fog of corruption could obscure their view into their own operation. As a result, they’d grown wary of large contracts. On the theory that smaller ones would allow for greater control, they’d broken big projects into manageable pieces. Adam called this policy ‘divide and conquer,’ since each company involved in any given project invariably passed damaging information about the others back to Houston.

It hadn’t surprised Adam that the executives had tasked Diane with soliciting three different sets of bids: one for the hotel, another for the casino, and a third for the marina that would harbor boats destined for the use of the hotel guests. Caritec had bid on all three jobs and had been rejected, largely because they were viewed as shifty players. Added to that, they had proposed to dredge a harbor and build a marina when they’d had no experience in marine construction. The final nail in their coffin had arrived in the form of news of a lawsuit alleging poor quality and sizable budget overruns. Beachcomber’s lawyers had discovered the litigation on their first pass.

“Caritec eliminated,” Diane had explained, “the winnowing of bidders moved along. Our financial people did due diligence, and everyone forgot about Caritec. But I didn’t.”

“Because?” Adam had asked.

“Because Caritec never forgets.”

Adam waited for her to elaborate, but she simply watched him in silence. “Meaning I shouldn’t either.”

She shot him with a finger pistol. “Two months after they broke ground in Cahuita, the screw-ups began. Equipment broke down, workers didn’t show, and materials were late. For crissakes, excavation for the hotel didn’t conform to blueprint. Our Costa Rica people sent a team to investigate, but, surprise surprise, they were stonewalled. In the end, three members of the Executive Committee got on a plane. Word has it they met with The Guatemalan Minister of Development for a whole day. Whatever happened at that confab, I was handed a changing of the guard in Cahuita. I didn’t comment, just kept my mouth shut and welcomed the new team with open arms. Went to Cahuita with them, in fact. And when we got there, it wasn’t hard to see that Beachcomber now commanded peoples’ attention, right down to the equipment operators.”

“Because?” Adam said.

“It turns out that our employees had been constantly harassed by shadowy messengers. Guys who slipped on and off the construction site, distributing both payments and threats. Before I even got back to Houston, the mystery men vanished, the harassment stopped, and hurdles toppled like dominos.”

“And now?” Adam asked.

“So far, so good. But watch your back, Adam. And call me at the first sign of trouble. Those bastards aren’t done, I can feel it in my bones.”

Adam had never told Kristen about the conversation with Diane, but the way things were going, he figured it was time to level with her., The day she talked to Felix, he knocked off work early and returned to his condo at eleven o’clock. He found Kristen working on her computer and told her he needed to talk. He went over what he and Diane had discussed and added that Diane had been correct in her belief that Caritec wasn’t done with Beachcomber. Turned down as bidders, and then busted for sabotaging the winners, Caritec had felt twice dissed; and in their world, such disrespect required retaliation. It was time, they had felt, to send a message.

“What happened?” Kristen asked.

“When I first got here, everything went fine,” Adam said. “I hired a building and maintenance crew, and the gaming equipment arrived on time. Almost everything checked out according to spec. The building’s infrastructure was already in place when I arrived, so all I had to do was finish the walls and floors. The build-out was slow, but that’s not unusual. The details never seem to end when you’re fitting up restaurants and gaming rooms. It was toward the end, when it seemed like we’d been at it forever, that I began to get a bad feeling.”

“What kind of bad feeling?”

“Like, I didn’t have peoples’ attention anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’d tell guys to lay down carpeting, and then I’d go off to do something else. When I’d get back, there’d be little or no carpeting.”

“What happened when you asked about it?”

“I’d get some cock and bull story about how this came up or that came up. I’d tell them to go back to work and not get distracted again.”

“But it kept happening,” she guessed.

“Yeah. Got worse, in fact. Pretty soon I realized that something bad was going on and no one was going to tell me about it. So, I called Diane.” He stopped and stared out the window.

“What?”

“Just remembering that conversation, that time in general. It’s depressing.”

“What did Diane say?”-

“That it was Caritec. That they’d interfered with my workers somehow. She told me to come to Houston for a face-to-face. That wasn’t what I’d expected when I called, but I couldn’t say no. I went, but I worried about what would happen here while I was in Houston.”

“Why a face-to-face?” Kristen asked.

“That’s the thing. I get to Houston and Diane tells me she doesn’t trust the phones, even our company lines. She’s not a nervous nelly, you know? In fact, she’s kind of steely - and she thought someone in Cahuita was bugging phones? I tell her I’m confused, and she brings me up to date. On the big picture, I mean.”

“What big picture?”

“Well, Caritec had threatened Beachcomber,” Adam explained. “They intended to get their pound of flesh for being shut out of the action in Cahuita. By that time, they had somehow worked it so that they were finalists for the waste water treatment plant, and they were feeling their oats. Everybody knows that they use construction workers to move drugs. It’s a lucrative sideline; or maybe construction is the sideline, since it serves as a front for selling cocaine into new territory. Anyway, Diane thought maybe I had a cocaine problem with the workers.”

“Holy crap. Did you know about this ‘sideline’ when you took the Cahuita job?”

“Sort of. It’s rumored in the industry, but Caritec had no contacts in Guatemala apart from the waste water plant negotiations, and after the sabotage stopped, we thought we had clear sailing.”

“But it sounds like Diane knew. She warned you and then she sent you into the middle of it?”

“She didn’t know for sure. She’s ambitious, but she’s not evil. She was hoping Beachcomber would look like small potatoes, not lucrative enough, and Caritec would leave us alone. We’re just a low volume casino and hotel.”

“But you weren’t small potatoes. Shit, Adam.”

“Not small enough, I guess,” he murmured.

“What happened when you got back from Houston?”

“Company brass tried to pressure the Guatemalan government again, but this time it didn’t work. Caritec had probably gotten to the pertinent officials, the way that they hadn’t been able to when they’d tried to cover up sabotaging our build. In the end, Diane suggested that I sit down with the bastards, that I actually deal with them. Beachcomber had already sunk money into Cahuita, she said, and the brass weren’t willing to bail. They wanted to know about it if Caritec intended to meddle some more.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I wish I were. If I’d realized what I was getting into, I would have dug in my heels. But instead, the call came in about Romulus, and I went to Quito to reel him in. He and I talked about Caritec after the hire. His information was that Caritec’s drug action usually existed in tandem with their construction work. He said that typically, once building occupancy took place, the drug sales stopped at the site because the market had been established in the general population. Diane had the same information.

“So, you talked with them? You made a deal with a drug cartel? We’ve been together how many years, and you never told me you made a deal with killers?”

“No.”

Kristen was furious but determined to keep a lid on it. “Can I ask why?”

“Not sure I have an answer for that. Maybe I should just finish telling you what happened.”

She bit her tongue. “Okay.” Though seething, she knew that if she jumped all over Adam, he would clam up. She took a deep breath and asked, “What was the ‘deal?’”

“I would look the other way, and they’d let me fire anybody who was caught selling or using on the job. Or even not performing because they were using too much on their own time. I realize how this sounds now, but back then it gave me some leeway. It meant that I could brace my construction people, tell them I knew what was going on, and that anybody who didn’t cut it would be let go. I did fire a few people, and then they realized I was serious. After that, work started getting done right.”

Pressure built in Kristen’s head. “And this arrangement lasted how long?”

“As you remember, we were only a few weeks late opening the casino. It was a big success.”

“Just tell me, how long?”

“A couple of months after we opened, the resort was clean. Rom and his guys made sure of it. It was just like he’d said: once the suppliers had established themselves in Izabal, they didn’t need us.”

Kristen finally exploded. “Oh, for crying out loud, Adam! You helped bring big drugs to Cahuita, and you kept it from me. I knew that heroin had made it into town, but I had no idea how, and all along my boyfriend was responsible!”

“In my defense, I wasn’t responsible. More like a bystander. The drugs would have gotten to Cahuita one way or the other.”

“Oh, that’s pathetic. My god, you’re better than this. What happened to you?”

“I know, I know.”

“Don’t you a feel a little bit bad about how the drugs got here?”

“I feel a lot bad. But I had a new job and I was doing what had to be done.”

“Okay,” she sighed. “So, this all happened when you and I were just getting started, right?”

“It did.”

“Still, you didn’t tell me.”

“No. It was almost over. There was no reason to tell you.”

Kristen felt a new wave of anger, along with the frustration of wanting to verbally pound Adam into the ground. She walked to the window and looked out. Finally, she said, “But Caritec’s sleazes came back.”

Adam nodded. “They came back. Years later, but they came back.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe the leadership changed; somebody got drunk one night and decided Beachcomber hadn’t paid enough dues; or they wanted me to stop you from poking around at their waste water treatment plant. Whatever.”

“You couldn’t have stopped me from poking around.”

“Seriously.”

“Caritec doesn’t get who I am.”

“No.”

“Was that their point in resurfacing? To prevent me from interfering with their sewage dumping plan?”

“Their point was that Caritec owned Izabal. The Beachcomber and Cahuita included.”

**28.**

After Adam’s confession, Kristen thought they’d turned a corner. Not only was she doing things instead of sitting around, but if Felix’s contact at the plant was the man who had ordered her humiliation, then Felix would convince him to back off. He was good at such things. If Cameron wasn’t behind the attack, then he’d pass the word to whoever was. From now on, Kristen would lie low, she and Adam would figure things out together, and nothing bad would happen.

She did need to do something about the plan to dump raw sewage into the ocean. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be able to live with herself. There was the environmental devastation, and there was the potential shame of capitulating to the bad guys. But she didn’t need to blow the whistle herself; she could get someone to do it for her.

During the real estate fracas, she’d met a Guatemala City lawyer named Antoinette Moore. Environmental law wasn’t Moore’s field, but she was highly regarded, and well connected. Kristen could drive to the city to pay her a visit. There had to be inspectors for sewage plants, and maybe she could sic them on Caritec to discover the illicit pipelines. It all depended on whether the government was in cahoots with Caritec. But even if it was, Moore might know where to turn.

The day after their conversation, she found Adam in his office wearing sweatpants and a work shirt, the sleeves rolled to his elbows. He was sitting on the edge of the couch reading papers in a manila folder that was spread open on the coffee table in front of him. When he rose to greet Kristen, the work shirt fell open, revealing a sleeveless tank. It bore the logo of the winter Olympics, and the contrast between the triumphant torch and the look of defeat on Adam’s face tugged at her heart. On the one hand she seethed with resentment that he was still keeping crucial information from her. It violated the trust on which their relationship was built, and it raised questions about the role that their bond played in his life. On the other hand, she loved him, and she wanted to share the burden that caused him to behave secretively. So, she parked her anger and took his hand. He moved to take her into his arms, but she pressed her palm to his chest.

“Sit, talk to me,” she said.

“Got a subject? Never mind, I can guess.”

They settled on the couch. “I drove into town,” she began. “I stopped by the shop, and then the Lonesome Mermaid.”

“Good, you’re back in action,” he said. “You talked to Felix.”

“Yes. I don’t think he’s involved in the sewage dumping plan, but he knows who is. And despite his phony southern charm, he does care about me. He was upset that I got hurt.”

“Felix doesn’t like people operating on his turf. And you and I are both part of his turf.”

“Maybe, but whatever the reason, he wants to stop the violence. I don’t think it’s just me. Raoul Batista hasn’t been found, and Marita indicated that turnover at the plant is high, which doesn’t make sense in this economy. What’s happening to the men who leave the job? I think Caritec removes them one way or another, once they know more than the company wants them to know. Adrian Petters, for example.”

“What about Petters?”

“Before Caritec had me kidnapped, he told me he plans to quit. He says they’re laying pipes from the intake area straight to the outflow. They’re going to dump sewage into the water, and then, as the official plant operators, they’ll make a ton of money doing it. Them and the government.”

“Petters is in danger, then. More than he knows. I don’t think everybody who leaves gets killed, but if Petters is talking about what he’s figured out, he’s in trouble.”

“I told him to keep his mouth shut. He doesn’t think they realize what he knows, and he wants to get out before they do. Plus, he wants me to magically do something about them.”

Adam shook his head. “What they did to you, it was for practically nothing. If Petters has been poking around, he’s up to his eyeballs whether he works there or not. We should talk to Luc Vargas right away.”

Surprised, she asked, “We?”

“Yeah. Listen, I’m sorry things have been strained around here.”

“Adam, look. I got sick of you not talking to me and I had a look around your office.”

“You creeped my office?”

“Get off your high horse. You’re the one who’s been keeping secrets. I found an airplane ticket to Houston, plus credit card receipts for a hotel and meals. What’s more, there’s paperwork in your safe for cash holdbacks of hundreds of thousands of dollars in casino receipts. I think it’s time you filled me in.”

“You broke into my safe?”

“No, I opened your metal box. You keep the combination taped under your desk drawer.”

He jumped to his feet. “Goddammit, Kristen…”

She stood up too. “Can it, Adam. Now you fucking tell me, what is going on?”

His shoulders slumped, and he fell back onto the couch like a deflated balloon. “The truth is, I’m in kind of a bind.”

“No shit.”

“I wouldn’t have kept it from you, except that Diane insisted. But she’s just the messenger.”

“Diane, your boss? What’s she got to do with anything?”

“A few months ago, I got a call from a Caritec guy requesting a meeting. I think he’s one of their financial people. I talked to Diane, and she said to see what he wanted.”

“So, you met with this guy? Is this a repeat of your first year on the job?”

“Yes, but this time what they wanted was for me to create bogus poker losses using the names of Caritec big shots and their guests.”

“What? Why?”

“So they can report the losses as entertainment expenses.”

Now it was Kristen who deflated. “And then you give the money back that they supposedly bet.”

“Exactly. They book payments to yet more phantom players who supposedly score big at high stakes poker. Caritec can explain their excess profits as poker players handing their winnings over to the company because it all happened on company time. The problem is, on our books the cash flow changes dramatically, both in and out. They’re essentially laundering money and oh, by the way, I get a cut. There’s an implied threat if I don’t comply, like that’s going to make any difference.”

“So, you said yes.”

“No, I told the guy that I’d think about it. After meeting with him, I went to the American Consulate in Guatemala City and asked for a secured line to Houston, saying that I needed to discuss business that could have international implications, etc., etc. You can imagine the drill. I was suspicious enough to distrust regular phones.”

“You called Diane,” Kristen guessed.

“She told me to come to Houston right away; and while I was on the way, she had a sit-down with the same execs who had come here to clear up some problems before I was hired. By the time I met with Diane, the execs had already pulled in a buddy from Homeland Security. Which was stupid, because of course the bastards at the CIA wanted us to go ahead and launder the money, while essentially working for them as snitches. That way they’d get to bring down Caritec and look good.” His fingers etched quotation marks in the air. “‘U.S. Intelligence thwarts international money laundering scheme.’”

“This happened that time you told me you were meeting with the Costa Rican casino manager?”

“Right.”

“So now you’re laundering money for Caritec with the CIA watching? For God’s sake, why doesn’t Beachcomber just tell Homeland Security to go fuck themselves and talk to someone who can stop this?”

“A couple of reasons. First, this is bigger than local Caritec guys squeezing me. The money they’re laundering comes from somewhere and is going somewhere; and everybody who’s watching is looking for proof of where, including the Guatemala national police and the CIA. Like with everything else, the Americans want to know if the funds are going to terrorists. Second, it’s gotten ugly.”

“If it’s gotten ugly, that’s a reason to stop, not to keep going.”

He went to his desk and pulled some 8x10 photographs from a drawer.

“My partner in crime has been increasing the amount of money he wants laundered. That’s why you saw so much holdback in the papers you snuck. This was an iffy scheme from the get go, but with hundreds of thousands passing through, it would be a joke. So, I’ve balked. They don’t seem the least bit worried about declaring profits due to gambling gains, but CAGA has certainly noticed the irregularities in our books. They’ve picked up the spikes, and now they’re about to uncover the whole megillah. With the difference between our cash flow now and before, we might as well wave a red flag.”

“Can’t Houston make the excess cash flow go away?”

“Houston doesn’t want to get involved. They need to stay clean. They’ve already submitted quarterlies to the IRS with our inflated numbers, so of course CAGA is all over us.”

Kristen sighed audibly. “And you’ve finally decided to tell me about this because…”

“I planned to talk to you after you got out of the hospital. I was going to blow it wide open because Caritec carried out their threat against you even though I was cooperating. I told Diane I was done, that if Beachcomber wanted to fire me, fine. We communicate via satellite phone these days.”

“What about Homeland Security?” she asked.

“Like you said, fuck ‘em.”

“What were you waiting for? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You seemed pretty far gone, I thought you were in shock. But we would have talked this afternoon anyway.”

He handed Kristen the photographs, three black and white glossies. There was one of Gram outside talking to a sweaty Willy; another of Kristen throwing Diego’s ball on the beach; and a third of Adam’s son, Jake, leaning against a car with two boys his age. She recognized the San Diego neighborhood where Jake’s mother lived from other photos that the boys had showed her.

“Where did you get these?” she asked Adam/

“They came in the mail, one at a time. The first arrived the day Caritec grabbed you. The one of Jake came this morning. As absurd as it is, I think this mess is down to you and me. We need to figure out how to blow the whole thing sky high without somebody getting killed. I don’t understand what the stakes are for Caritec, but they’re pulling out stops left and right. Diane’s solution is to bring you and me back to the States, close the casino while headquarters explains things to CAGA, and hire 24-hour protection for us and our families. I don’t feel good about any of that.”

“It leaves Caritec free to wreak havoc however they want. Not to mention their plan to dump sewage and rake in piles of money doing who knows what else.”

“Right. And it basically hangs us out to dry. I’m not letting that bunch of douche bags anywhere near my kids. The boys don’t know it, but they’re carrying tracking devices as of yesterday. A friend of Rom’s is watching them.”

“Does their mother know?”

“Hell no.”

“Ok, let’s think for a minute,” Kristen said. “Luc Vargas and Felix might be able to help; and then there are your contacts at the Office of Tourism. Liz knows a lot about international crime and she has contacts too, because of research she’s done for articles that she’s published. And today I remembered Antoinette Moore. Maybe she’ll know of a way to arrange for an inspection of the sewage treatment site that will uncover Caritec’s plan.”

“A lot of loose ends there. Friends can’t protect us from the bastards. But, you’re right, we can make some phone calls. You take Felix, Liz, and Moore, and I’ll talk to Vargas and the Office of Tourism. Maybe we can meet with somebody in Guatemala City.

“Are you going to talk to Diane?”

“Not this time, Kris. I fucked this up. Now, we’re on our own.”

He was wrong about fucking up, but anything Kristen could say would only make things worse. She kissed his stubbly cheek and went in search of her grandmother.

**29.**

Kristen rummaged through the refrigerator in Gram’s condo to make sure that she had the makings of a few meals, and then explained that she’d be busy for a couple of days.

Got a handle on things, do ya?” Gram grinned.

“Maybe. The good news is that Adam and I are in this together now. The bad news is we don’t have a posse.”

Gram’s face lit up. “Want me to talk to somebody? Nobody messes with me when I get my dander up.”

“What I really want is for you to go home, Gram. I love your company, crazy though you are. But you need to go now.”

“Crazy like a fox,” she cackled.

“That too. But things could get dicey here, and I can’t protect you. You’d have to stay cooped up in the condo with a Security Guard.”

“Hah! You think you can do that?”

“No, which is why you should go home.”

“And miss the fun? I got friends here. Regulars in the bar, outside on the grounds, in the restaurant.”

“A few days ago, you said it was time to go home,” Kristen reminded her.

“That was then. Things change, Krissie, you got to keep up.”

“They took a picture of you talking to Willy; and they sent it to Adam.”

“Dumbasses. They think they can scare me? I’d rather die here than in some smelly nursing home.”

“It’s not just about dying,” Kristen admonished her.

“An attack? Picture this, Krissie: me kicking and screaming until I get a heart attack; or they kill me because they’d do anything for some peace and quiet. What about you? I bet you were brave.”

“Actually, I groveled.”.

“Smart girl!”

“What’s so smart about babbling whatever the bad guys want to hear?”

“They let up, didn’t they?”

“Yeah, they did.”

“Well, I got nothin’ to prove and I ain’t afraid. When you know you’re livin’ on borrowed…”

“Don’t go there, Gram.”

“I’m stayin’.”

“Gram…”

“I’m stayin’ and that’s all there is to it.”

Kristen couldn’t remember ever winning with Gram when she was like this, so she sighed and stood up to leave.

“Get it right, Krissie, don’t screw this up, you hear me?” Gram admonished.

Kristen swung by Adam’s suite to get Diego and drove up into the hills. Missing her home and a normal life had become a permanent ache in her belly. As soon as they started the climb, Diego got to his feet, thwacking his tail against the seat back. He hung his head so far out the window that Kristen had to clip a leash onto his harness and hold on to prevent him from jumping out. For fifteen minutes, they pretended there was no quagmire, that they were just going home for dinner as usual, and that they’d have a nice nightcap with Liz. It almost worked.

She pulled in under the house and headed directly for Liz’s, punching her neighbor’s number into her cell phone as she walked.

“Can I interrupt you? It’s important.”

“Of course,” Liz replied.

“In person.”

“Where are you?”

“At the bottom of your steps.”

Liz appeared above her, dressed in a full-length jungle print skirt and an emerald green tee. Kristen admired her ability to create casual elegance. “On your way out/”

“Just back.”.

“Lunch with your editor?”

“A trip to Mexico City. It’s the closest consulate of the Republic of Chad, the country to which my friend was taken.” Kristen raised an eyebrow, but Liz shook her head.

“Nothing good to report. They’ve heard stories like mine so many times that I’m not sure they care anymore, if they ever did. Women who get forcibly repatriated by implacable relatives are lucky to be alive, is the impression I got.”

“Where does the visit leave you?” Kristen ventured.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore. What brings you here?”

“Can you stand being needed right now?”.

“It might be the only thing I can stand.”

“Okay, I need you to think with me. As you know, I hibernated at The Beachcomber for a while. Now I’m back in action.”

“Meaning…”

“Meaning, I have a couple of answers and even more questions.”.

“Drink?” Liz offered.

“Juice if you have it. I’m off alcohol.”

“Good idea. It doesn’t go well with trauma.” She picked up a sweaty pitcher and poured a glass of mango papaya juice. “I’ve been worried.”

“I’m sorry, I…”

“Stop. I would have been worried if you’d called every day. Have you talked to anyone?” Liz meant a counselor.

“I don’t need to talk. I need to find my way out of this mess. Our way. As you intimated, Adam is involved.”

“I’ll leave it for now, but we will get back to your state of mind.”

From her tone, Kristen had no doubt that they would. *Heaven help the friends of people who discover talk therapy*.

“What have you found out?” Liz asked.

“From what my attackers said, and from what Adrian Petters has seen at the construction site, Caritec is up to no good. I think they’re building a plant that will treat some waste while also dumping untreated sewage into the ocean. They’ll make money billing for the volume that comes in, not for what goes through the treatment process. Since they can run more volume by sending some of it directly into the ocean, the profits will be considerable.”

“They’ve contracted to operate the plant?”

“Yes. The government owns the land and will own the plant, but Caritec will operate it for 10 years and then the government will take over. Apparently, Caritec runs sewage treatment facilities all over Mexico and Central America.”

Liz looked skeptical. “Did they build the plants that they operate?”

“For the most part. Sometimes they take over the operation of an existing facility. They probably have sites that run legitimately. What’s the matter?”

“It doesn’t make sense, you can’t hide contamination. Any ecology group can test a plant’s discharge. They probably will. It goes on wherever industrial outflow runs into public bodies of water: manufacturing plants, nuclear power plants, waste water discharge, even agricultural runoff.”

“That’s the most disturbing part. Caritec doesn’t seem to care about cover. Look how they grabbed me. It was broad daylight, and anyone could have seen me struggling with my attackers. It was as though they wanted people to know”

“They would have to be immune to the law to pipe sewage into the ocean,” Liz insisted. “It’s not just Guatemala Natural Resources that monitors waste treatment. There are regional authorities, like CAGA for casinos. There are inspections.”

“I don’t know. Even if the watcher agencies are above board, Caritec could be buying off individual inspectors. They operate all over the place. I doubt that this is their first crooked plant.”

“You’re sure about these pipes?”

“I haven’t seen them myself, but Adrian Petters is an experienced carpenter; he can read a blueprint. He said the pipes don’t go into the first phase of treatment and they aren’t on the plan. How does a regional authority work?”

“I’m no expert, but I did research on a case in California where a class action suit was brought against the city of Long Beach because of the Catalina Island Fish Habitat. Let me get my notes.”

She left and returned with an accordion file and a different laptop from the one she’d been using when I’d interrupted her. She booted the new one up and studied the screen.

“In California, permitting for waste water discharge is subject to the Porter-Cologne Water Quality Control Act. The regulations for the water are issued by the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) program. So, I’m going to assume inspection is by individual state agencies in the U.S. I don’t know that for a fact, but it’s a good guess. In turn, the EPA is supposed to keep the state agencies honest; it issues regulations and investigates violations, but there are so many that they pick and choose who to prosecute. It’s not clear what their criteria are, but it’s surely political.”

Kristen urged her to get back to Central America. “What about here?”

“I’m getting to that. Most of what you find about Latin America concerns the low percentage of the population that’s even connected to a sewage system – it runs 10 to 50 percent.” She rummaged through the accordion file. “Of the waste water that enters a system very little gets treated before being discharged. For example, I see that in Paraguay only 4 percent of sewage is treated before being discharged, and Costa Rica is the same. But Chile treats 90 percent. So, the disparities are huge. Hope for improvement lies with cooperative international agencies like UNESCO’s Hydrological Program and the World Bank.

“If untreated discharge is common, maybe Caritec is counting on nobody caring if their outflow isn’t clean.”

Liz shook her head, brandishing an article that she’s extracted from her file. “There may be few plants, and their capacity may be insufficient to meet the demand, but once a plant that can treat sewage is built, it is expected to discharge clean water. Often the funding source inspects. For example, the CAF, the Development Bank of Latin America, has recently added waste water treatment to its agenda, which was formerly limited to adequate water supply. They are joined by the Inter-American Development Bank, and the two have started funding big projects in the region. Quito is an example. Quito’s goal is to treat 90 percent of their wastewater by 2020. The two Latin American Banks in turn get data, funding, and strategic help from the World Bank, which recently published a report on infrastructure in Latin America.”

“Do these banks inspect?” Kristen asked.

“They either inspect or, more likely, they contract with independent inspectors, both during construction and after. But regulation of the construction comes from provincial governments, as it does in the U.S. The progress of construction is linked to permitting that occurs in stages. And each country has its own set of standards.”

“Oh, for god’s sake.,” Kristen lamented. “That means that if the Guatemala government is in cahoots with Caritec, we’re sunk.”

“Even if there’s collusion, it’s unlikely that everyone is corrupt. It would be a question of finding the honest people and getting their attention.”

“That’s what Detective Vargas says.”

“You’ve talked to him?”

“About my kidnapping. He said they’re looking for a weak link in Caritec, someone to tell them who paid my attackers.”

“Well, I wouldn’t call honest people weak links, but yes, there have to be people in Guatemala City who would want to stop Caritec from dumping sewage into the ocean.”

“Thanks, Liz. You’re quite the repository of knowledge.”

Liz shrugged. “Before you go,” she asked, “what did you mean about Adam’s being involved?”

“Caritec is leaning on him to launder money. It’s a long story, but he’s doing it with the knowledge of Beachcomber management. And the CIA, which Beachcomber called in. The CIA hopes to nail Caritec, but you can imagine how long such an operation might take. They could spend months watching Adam launder money, and he can’t take it. Beachcomber has filed tax returns that show abnormally large numbers for the Guatemala casino. That’s how CAGA got wind of the problem.”

“What a mess.”

“Yeah.”

“Kristen?”

“What?”

“Take care of yourself.”

Kristen looked away, embarrassed. “A propos, thanks for…”

“Oh, for pity’s sake, will you just stop talking.”

**30.**

Kristen feared she had poked a beehive without a protective suit. She was also afraid that Adam had incurred Caritec’s wrath with his phone calls to Houston. If they came after him, it would probably be worse than her ordeal, given their habit of escalating things. She felt exposed, and she wished Liz could protect her, which seemed selfish, given Liz’s own problems.

When Kristen left her neighbor, she went home to sit on the deck with her arms around Diego. He licked her face while she told him how ashamed she’d felt since the kidnapping. He was the only guy she knew who could listen to a tale of woe without having to fix it. There was no need for her to make sense, either. She just babbled on while the sun sank into the trees behind them. After a while Diego brought her back to earth by trotting to the door and back several times. He wanted his dinner.

She fed him, showered, and changed into jeans and a T-shirt. It was all she could do not to collapse onto the couch for an evening at home, but she forced herself to call Felix and then headed back down the to the Lonesome Mermaid. When she pulled up to the restaurant, Felix waited outside; he motioned for her to roll down her window.

“Park, and we’ll take a walk,” he said.

They strolled down a side street to the town fish pier where men sat eating sandwiches retrieved from metal lunch pails, fishing lines dangling in the water. At the end of the pier, they leaned against a railing and looked back at the beach. The sun had disappeared, the water was smooth as glass, and children kicked a soccer ball on the beach. It was difficult to believe that Cahuita harbored men who killed for the privilege of fattening their already bursting wallets.

“Felix, I need to speak plainly,” Kristen began.

“Go on, then, darlin’, we’re all right here.”

“Have you talked to your friend at the construction site?” He nodded. “What do you think he’ll do?”

“Cameron is under a strain. But I think he’ll do the right thing.”

“Was it him? Did he hire those two freaks?”

“I don’t think it was him personally. You know, men will go to great lengths to protect their own, whether it’s people or property. They do what they didn’t intend, and then they keep doing what can’t be helped to cover what they didn’t intend.”

“What? You think Cameron is some kind of amateur screw-up?”

“Oh my, no. I just think we don’t any of us see clearly when it comes to our own best interests.”

“Does he know who attacked me?”

“He wouldn’t have names. What he has is access to the people who make decisions, whether it’s about the project or about protecting the company’s interests. I think you and Adam can rest easy.”

“Hardly, Felix. They’ve got Adam over a barrel. He’s laundering money for them and they’re threatening us if he doesn’t increase the amounts.” She could feel Felix’s hackles rise. He hadn’t known.

“How long?” he asked softly.

“Months.” She turned to look at him and was surprised to see his eyes flash with anger; Felix didn’t usually show feelings. Maybe Adam was right, maybe Caritec’s machinations made Felix feel that they were trespassing on his turf. Felix had long since staked his claim on Cahuita’s shores, and he wasn’t about to suffer interlopers.

“Who knows about this?”

“Some Beachcomber executives, the CIA, and now CAGA.”

“The C… Oh, lord.” His tone had gone bland but there was menace in it.

“I need someone in a position of authority,” Kristen explained, “someone to inspect the construction site. I need to find a way to make the government break their contract with Caritec and get them out of Guatemala. And then I need to make it not in Caritec’s interest to kill Adam and me.”

“That’s a tall order, darlin’.”

“Maybe. But it’s what has to happen. Can you help me?”

“What has to happen is that things need to be put right. You go home now; let your friend Felix have a good think.”

He turned away and gazed out over the water. She realized that she’d been dismissed.

**31.**

The next morning, Kristen went to Gram’s apartment for a cup of coffee. When she opened the door, she spotted Gram on the balcony talking to someone on the lawn.

“Hey there, sonny, you’re workin’ awful hard,” she called down. Kristen joined her and saw that she was addressing a maintenance guy pruning a hibiscus. Gram ignored Kristen, so the latter spoke up.

“That doesn’t look like such hard work, Gram.”

Irritated, Gram snapped, “Can’t you see? I’m chattin’ him up. You want a man’s attention, you got to chat him up, Krissie. Ain’t I taught you anything?”

The guy she was talking to was about twenty years old.

Kristen laughed. “Only all I know.”

But the old woman wasn’t interested in her granddaughter’s conversation. “Mind those shears,” she called, “they look awful sharp.” The young man smiled and waved. “Ain’t it about time for a break? I got some fresh coffee up here if you want to take a break.”

“Thank you, mam, it’s not time yet.”

“Well, when it is time, you come on up. Condo 2C. I got some etchings to show you.”

Kristen gasped. “Gram, cut it out! That’s embarrassing.”

“Embarrassin’ my foot. You don’t try, you don’t get. That’s the way it works.”

“Come inside, why don’t you? Have coffee with me.”

“Well, I wasn’t kidding that fella. I got a fresh pot.” She went into the kitchenette and poured two mugs.

“What have you been up to that I probably don’t want to know about?” Kristen asked.

“Won a hundred dollars yesterday.”

“How’d you do that?”

“Got an insurance salesman to stand me fifty at the roulette table. I convinced him I was a better bet than playing the slot machines. Promised him double or nothing and played red.”

“I didn’t know you played roulette.”

“I don’t, but I’m tired of the slots. It’s not rocket science if you just play red or black. Anyway, I kept goin’ until I had three hundred dollars. Gave my banker his hundred and kept the rest. Lost another hundred though.”

“That’s too bad.”

“No, it’s just the breaks. You got to be a philosopher if you’re gonna gamble.”

“Well, I’m glad to know you’re staying out of trouble.”

“It’s not like life is dull down here. Not like at your mother’s.”

Kristen didn’t want to get into a conversation about family with Gram. “Glad to hear it.”

“Yeah. Fact is I’m a little tired today ‘cause I stayed late at the bar.” For Gram, nine o’clock was late.

“Why’d you do that?”

“’Cause I had a patsy, that’s why. I told this gal from Florida I was ninety-two and then bet her a glass of champagne I could name every capital in the US. She fell for it like a ton of bricks.”

“You know all the capitals?”

“Maybe yes, maybe no, but she sure don’t.”

Kristen laughed. “So, you got your champagne.”

“And then some. Bet another lady I could name twenty breeds of dog. Pretty soon I had a crowd gathered. People was askin’ me to do all kinda things, like one fella bet me that I couldn’t name the countries in the European Union. Guy was too dumb to know there ain’t no Czechoslovakia no more. Folks here are a hoot, but they’re not so bright.”

Kristen just shook her head. The stuff that Gram had packed into her brain never ceased to amaze her. She decided to change the subject before Gram told her a story that she might have to do something about. “Adam and I are driving to Guatemala City this morning.”

“Yeah, what for?”

“To see if we can round up that posse that I told you we don’t have.”

“You’re makin’ progress, then.”

“I don’t know. The idea is to drum up an inspection of that construction site where bad stuff is happening. Between Adam’s connections and mine, we might be able to pull it off.”

“What about them comin’ after you again?”

“I am worried about that. Plus, there’s more, Gram. Caritec is forcing Adam to launder money for them, and my best guess is that the money is coming from the sale of illegal drugs.”

Gram whistled. “I knew that boy had somethin’ on his mind!”

“He sure does.”

“Well, you got yourself a right sorry mess, dontcha?”

“Thanks for the support, Gram.”

“You got to carry a gun. You got a gun now?” Her eyes were bright with excitement.

“Yes, but it won’t help if they catch me by surprise.”

“I know you, you’ll outsmart ‘em.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“You always land on your feet, honey, and you will this time.”

Flattered, Kristen gave her a hug and left her to her flirtation.

Adam put Rom in charge, and he and Kristen drove to Guatemala City in a Beachcomber SUV. It was a cool cloudy day, perfect for driving, and they took their time, sipping coffee from paper containers while they discussed their situation. Later they stopped for a roadside lunch, and Kristen asked Adam who he wanted to talk to first.

“When we were fitting up the casino, I met a guy named Eduardo Ortiz. He works in the Office of Tourism. We went back and forth about marketing, about casino capacity, safety, stuff like that. I had a good feeling about him, so I called him a few times about other matters. We got to liking each other, and sometimes we have a beer when I’m in Guatemala City.”

“How do you think he can help?” Kristen asked.

“He might be able to point me to someone who knows about waste water permitting. It’s natural that I’d be concerned about the water quality near The Beachcomber. I can tell him I don’t trust Caritec and want to make sure they’re following regulations. He won’t bat an eye.”

“I have an appointment with Antoinette. I haven’t talked to her, but her secretary said she’d see me.”

“She probably thinks you’ve stepped in dog poop again. Which is about right, though you have my help this time. You haven’t contacted her since the real estate scam, right?”

“Right.”

“What are you going to say?”

“With Antoinette, it’s best to lay it on the line. I’ll tell her that someone I referred for a job says that Caritec is up to no good. Depending on how the conversation goes, I can get into details. She’ll know if there’re any rumors about the Cahuita plant. Like you, I want to find out who issues permits and how we can get them to inspect the site.”

“Yeah, well, don’t forget to ask where the land mines are buried.”

“You know Antoinette. She’ll tell me that whether I ask or not. So, once we’re done with Ortiz and Antoinette, then what?”

“Early dinner, I guess. There’s a tapas place across from government plaza. Let’s meet there at 5:00 o’clock.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

He dropped her at an ancient office building near the plaza. It was unrestored 19th century hodge-podge: gothic arches, classical columns, and baroque ornamentation. And it featured a tedious walk up grimy steps that belied Antoinette’s flourishing law practice. Kristen had always wondered why she didn’t move to a nicer location, but maybe a fancy address wasn’t as important as it was in the States.

Moore’s secretary, Roberta, sat behind a double pedestal steel desk opposite two sleek metal chairs that were pushed up against the wall in front of her. A vase of tropical sage and some family pictures added warmth to the room’s otherwise sterile ambiance.

Roberta rose to greet Kristen. “Good morning, Miss Maroney, how are you?”

A thirtyish Caucasian woman, Roberta had an open face and a ready smile. Today, her chestnut hair was pulled back into a bun that accentuated good cheekbones and a high forehead. She wore little makeup and was dressed in the uniform of young professionals: dark slacks and a white linen blouse. A tan silk jacket hung on the back of her chair.

“I’m well, thank you,” Kristen replied. “and yourself?”

“Well also.”

“How is the family? Your son has started college?”

“Yes, it’s very exciting. He’s studying to be an engineer.”

“Here in Guatemala City?”

“No, no, he’s at the University of Central Florida in Orlando.” Her tone indicated that her family wouldn’t choose a local school. An American degree was more prestigious.

“You must miss him,” Kristen said.

“We do. Go right in, Antoinette is expecting you.”

She entered a room far more appealing than Roberta’s office or the building’s shabby exterior. Antoinette rose from behind an intricately carved wooden desk created from a mix of teak, mahogany, and Spanish cedar. Vines and blooms covered the surface facing Kristen. A worn Oriental rug in blue and green lay in front of the desk. On two walls, floor-to-ceiling bookcases displayed rows of leather bindings, and the large windows behind the desk were hung with light green vertical blinds that complemented the rug.

Antoinette was born and raised in Ecuador and her considerable beauty drew on the best of her Spanish and Incan ancestry. She was petite with straight black hair that fell loosely to her shoulders, chiseled features, bronze skin, and large brown eyes. Her family had made its fortune in rubber in the nineteenth century, and when she told her father that she wanted to be a real estate lawyer, he sent her to Harvard College and Harvard Law School.

Regardless of her family background and education, Antoinette operated like a woman of the people. After a divorce from a fellow attorney in Boston, where her family had emigrated, she came to Guatemala to set up a practice for reasons that she’d never revealed, at least not to Kristen. About a quarter of her case load consisted of *pro bono* work for clients who had had their property stolen out from under them, mostly Creoles and Garifuna. The rest of her work consisted of civil and criminal cases in which people of modest means sought justice for their cause. Regardless, she wore only custom-tailored summer-weight suits in tasteful tropical hues, with matching pumps. She was a formidable negotiator and didn’t suffer fools gladly.

“Kristen, nice to see you.”

“It’s generous of you to agree on such short notice,” Kristen replied. “With the pace of building, you must have a full plate.”

Antoinette indicated an upholstered couch, and they sat at either end of it. Roberta appeared with a coffee tray and Antoinette poured. “The property title situation in Guatemala is a train wreck. Now more than ever. Even the purchase of a one-bedroom bungalow requires the services of someone like me. Developers and speculators have perfected the art of obscuring ownership histories, not to mention falsifying documents. Like everywhere, they want to bull doze single families and build huge multi-use tracts. Wealthy people suffer too. One lives in fear of a knock on the door that will bring a suit contesting one’s title.”

“I’m never going to buy,” Kristen remarked. “Renting is so much easier.”

“Providing you have a good landlord. What brings you to see me today? Not another wrongfully evicted friend, I hope.”

“I wish it were that simple.”

Antoinette cocked her head to one side and raised an eyebrow.

Kristen took a deep breath and plunged in. “The short version is that a corrupt construction company has insinuated its crooked way into Adam’s and my lives and we’re in danger. They’ve pressured Adam into laundering dirty money, and Beachcomber management has brought in the American authorities to try to entrap them. Added to that, the same corrupt company is building a waste water treatment plant in Cahuita, and they plan to pump raw sewage into the ocean. And the two matters are related.”

“Ah, Caritec,” Antoinette sighed. “Give me the short version and tell me how you think I can help.”

She condensed the story as much as she could without eliminating pertinent details. When she’d finished, Antoinette topped up their coffee and sat back.

“You know, this is hardly my bailiwick.”

“No, of course. But have you heard anything about the Cahuita project?”

“Yes, and I’ve also heard that your Luc Vargas called to ask the Guatemala City police to pick up the men who kidnapped you.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

“Because I wanted to hear the story from you. I didn’t know how the rumors that I’ve heard fit together, or if they even did. How are you doing?”

“Better than I was. Let’s back up a minute. First, I expect to be billed for your time today. Second, I’m not here for your legal expertise, I’m looking for information. I need to know what you’ve heard and what is known about Caritec in Guatemala City. And most important, who has power over waste water permitting. If you don’t know the latter, perhaps you can point me to someone who does.”

“Alright,” Antoinette agreed.

“So, what have you heard?”

“It’s common knowledge that a request for bids went out regarding a sewage plant in Cahuita. In fact, it’s big news in Guatemala City. There’s a pent-up demand for sewer hook-ups, and articles on the subject appear regularly in both the print and the digital press. When word went out that Caritec had won the contract, outrage erupted in the op ed pages, and the wind went out of the average joe’s sails. The prevailing feeling is that it will be a cold day in hell before Guatemala City will get hooked up to a sewage system with such corrupt people building the plants.”

“Caritec is that well known?”

“In the press, yes. And people talk. Everyone knows someone who knows someone who worked for them in Costa Rica, or someplace. There are rumors of kickbacks and sub-standard construction. Some say that Caritec is in bed with the Mexican drug cartels, which would explain why they need to launder money.”

“Adam mentioned that. He said they enlist workers to sell cocaine and heroin. What else have you heard?”

“Nothing about sewage dumping specifically, but I can’t say I’m surprised. Why don’t you and Adam just get out of the country?”

“Neither of us would feel safe, wherever we went. They sent Adam a picture of his son talking to some other boys in San Diego. Impossible to know who took it. Adam has a private detective watching his boys now.”

“Well, even for Caritec, killing Americans on American soil would be a stretch, if that’s what you’re afraid of. I don’t think one project would be worth it to them, and a relatively modest project at that.”

“At least one person has already disappeared from Cahuita, and I rather doubt that he’s coming back. Plus, Izabal is a new drug market in a region that doesn’t have either the resources or the political will to fight the cartels.”

“Still…”

“We can’t take the risk, Adam and I. Myself, I don’t want to go back to the United States, and even if I did, I would always be looking over my shoulder. The people responsible for that man’s disappearance and my kidnapping are probably local Caritec employees and frankly, I think they’re completely nuts. Laundering large sums of money through a casino as small as ours is foolhardy, even if they’ve bought off the right people.”

Antoinette studied her nails for a moment. “How can I help?”

“The only plan we’ve come up with so far is to blow the whistle on Caritec’s plan to pump sewage into the ocean, and hope they get kicked out of Guatemala. We’re looking for someone with the authority to inspect the site.”

“There is physical evidence of their plan?” Antoinette asked.

“Apparently. A knowledgeable worker whom I referred to them says they’re laying a pipeline that goes from the intake area directly to the water.”

“And you trust this person?”

“He has no reason to lie. He needs his job, but he’s so uneasy that he plans to quit. He has asked me to look into what the company is up to.”

“If the situation is as dangerous as you believe, why do you want to get involved, Kristen?”

“As I said, that train has left the station. Adam is under pressure from both the good guys and the bad to continue laundering money, and I’ve been warned off. With some emphasis, I might add. We can’t go on this way.”

Antoinette sighed and held her gaze for a moment. Then she went to her desk, wrote something on a notepad, and came back to hand Kristen a slip of paper. “This man works for the Department of Natural Resources. They are responsible for verifying that environmentally risky facilities qualify to receive permits. My understanding is that they re-qualify at different stages of the build. I assume that involves inspections, though I don’t know for sure.” She indicated the piece of paper that she had handed to Kristen. “You can talk to him in confidence. He won’t reveal you as a source of information. More than that I can’t tell you.”

“How do you know him?” Kristen asked.

“We dated briefly.”

“I see. I take it you parted amicably.”

“Let’s just say that he can be trusted. His career has suffered from his honesty, and it hasn’t deterred him from doing what’s right.”

“Then he’s the guy I need. Thank you, Antoinette.”

She rose and waited for Kristen to do the same. “You’re welcome. Let me know what happens. From your point of view, I mean. There will of course be rumors.

“Of course,” Kristen agreed. “And thanks again.” She returned to the reception area to say good-bye to Roberta and headed for government plaza to meet Adam.

**32.**

“Did you call the guy she recommended?” Adam asked through a mouthful of *chorizo con queso.*

“No, I came straight here,” Kristen answered.

“You did better than I did. What I have is mostly background.”

“Is it relevant?”

“Yeah. Ortiz didn’t much like my story; went out of his way to caution me. I told him about your kidnapping, and he seemed upset. He didn’t have a name for me but said I should familiarize myself with the Department of Natural Resources. Apparently, they have aroused some jealousy among government agencies because their budget has grown while others remain flat or shrink. Their mandate is to lay out a program for clean air, water, and soil, pretty much on the Costa Rican model. There’s a plan to create a couple more National Parks and to increase the size of protected areas. Not surprisingly, Natural Resources is trying to link arms with Eduardo and the Tourism people while it’s also incurring the wrath of the Ministry of Development. No one is charge of the balance between development and conservation, so everyone is. It sounds like a free-for-all.”

"Just the kind of situation that a company like Caritec would take advantage of.”

“Ortiz thinks they have the Ministry of Development in their pocket, but not Natural Resources, which would jive with Antoinette steering you to the latter. But it also suggests a David vs. Goliath scenario since ministries have more juice than departments.”

“Well, the question is can Development interfere with Natural Resource’s decisions about construction permits?”

“It’s complicated,” Adam replied. “Development also oversees construction, but not for projects with significant environmental impact. They’re under Natural Resources. In theory, Natural Resources supports the Ministry of Development by ensuring that Guatemala is a clean country to invest in. In practice, Development measures success in terms of new construction. So, the two agencies aren’t particularly friendly.”

“I take it they each oppose the other’s permits?”

“Ortiz didn’t say specifically, but he did mention that the approval of some permits has been escalated all the way to the vice president’s office. The two agencies can certainly slow each other down that way.”

“Did he say if any of the escalated cases involved Cahuita?” Kristen asked.

“He didn’t think so, but you can check with your guy.”

She picked up her phone and pressed in numbers. “His name is Devlin Machado. Maybe he eats lunch at his desk.”

The phone rang for a while and then a woman picked up. She told Kristen that everyone was at lunch and that Machado was traveling. She didn’t want to make an appointment for him while he was away. He would be back the next week. Kristen left a message using Antoinette’s name and asked that Machado call back as soon as possible.

Adam ordered coffee and they lingered over it before deciding there wasn’t much more they could do in Guatemala City before heading home to Cahuita.

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To Kristen’s considerable surprise, as soon as she opened the shop the next morning, Felix stopped by. He greeted her with a flap of his hand, which for once was cigar-less, probably out of consideration for the clothes on display. As Kristen stood dumbfounded, he spent twenty minutes considering two Carolina Herrera silk faille blouses, each of which retailed for over thirty-five hundred quetzels, or $490.00 American. With unfailing good taste, he chose the color that would best complement his wife’s complexion, and Kristen showered him with complements.

“My Martha, she’s not drinking anymore,” he beamed. “She’s managing the Lonely Mermaid. She does everything, I do nothing. I talk to the customers”

“Felix, that’s wonderful! I’m happy for you both. She’s enjoying the work, I take it?”

“She is, and I’m embarrassed that I ignored her abilities for so long. We men, sometimes we’re a bit dense.”

“No argument there!” she chuckled, as she wrapped his purchase.

“But for you, Kristalena, for you I wish I had such good news.”

Her heart fell. When Felix spoke in a sadly affectionate manner, it meant trouble.

“What is it?” she asked.

“This business that you and Adam are asking about, it’s very dangerous. And complicated. It’s bigger than it should be, with people acting secretive and threatening each other. I don’t know exactly who’s doing what to whom, but drugs, guns, and flagrant fraud are involved.”

It was alarming for Felix to say such things. Kristen had never known him to fail to get to the bottom of a situation, details included, once he put his mind to it. “So, you are telling me to back off?” she asked.

“If you’re going to fight, you have to know your enemy. These people, they’re not just one organization. One cannot know who is doing what. And the government, perhaps some governments, have a hand in.”

Felix set down his package and placed both hands on the counter. “I have no doubt that if you continue, I will have the displeasure of attending your funeral. There are people involved with that plant for whom life is nothing.”

He picked up his wife’s gift again and headed out the door. As he stepped off the porch into the street, he turned back to her and said, “And we know, do we not, that life is everything?”

And then, he walked away, looking defeated. Despite his warning, Kristen would keep going.

**33.**

That evening, Kristen drove up the mountain to her house where she swept the floors, vacuumed the rugs, cleaned the kitchen, and fed her dog. Then she made tea, which she drank on the deck, her mind in a fog. She gazed down at the Caribbean without seeing it. She felt as though she were waiting for Felix’s message to sink in. Or for it to make clear sense. Or to get a hint of what to do next. She could tell Adam what had happened and ask him to just give it up, but that would leave him in the mess of a US - approved money laundering scheme that involved people who had threatened to harm his family. Both of them would feel that they were without protection, since they knew not to trust the CIA, the Guatemala government, or Beachcomber management. If Felix was right (and Kristen had never known him to be wrong,) she and Adam had become disposable pawns in a macabre chess game where the board was rigged, and losers died.

*I must be depressed*, she reflected, since in her mind, the possibility of death didn’t seem overly frightening, unless it involved serious pain. Like, what if some drug kingpin decided that hearing her beg for mercy would make his day? And then there was the question of her loved ones. What about Adam, and Gram, and Liz? For crissakes, what about Diego? Just how far would Caritec go, and what exactly was her responsibility in this mess?

Really, though, there was no feasible plan, she thought. There was no instruction manual to tell her where to go from here. *That’s something that women accept more readily than men*, she reflected. At that very moment, Adam was probably driving himself crazy, trying to put the pieces together in a way that would solve the problem without anyone getting hurt. Her idea, on the other hand, was to put one foot in front of the other. Felix was right: living was better than dying. She decided *that* was her plan - to deal with things as they happened and try not to get killed. Just as this idea settled in, her cell phone sang out “If I only had a brain,” the tune from The Wizard of Oz. It was Antoinette.

“Hola, Kristen. I have news,” she said without preamble.

“I hope it’s good,” Kristen replied.

“I had dinner with Devlin Machado last night.”

“Who?”

“The man I sent you to, but you didn’t call him.”

“I did call him. He was traveling; I left a message.”

Antoinette made a “hmmm” sound. “So, either your message wasn’t passed on, or Devlin was lying to me about not hearing from you. I would be careful with his office if I were you.”

“What did you two talk about?”

“I drew him a rough outline of the situation in Cahuita, and he seemed genuinely concerned.”

“Did he ask you how you knew about it?”

“I didn’t say I knew. I asked him about rumors that I’d heard in the real estate world. People are worried about property values.”

“Is that true?”

“Not that I’ve heard rumors, but yes, people are worried. There are fortunes to be made in the development of your area. The Beachcomber Resort is just the beginning. Adam will soon be facing competition.”

Kristen was growing impatient. “What did Machado say?”

“He asked a lot of questions that I couldn’t answer. I suggested that the only way to know what’s going on was to inspect the site.”

“Did he agree with that?”

She laughed. “Devlin doesn’t agree or disagree. I think he was trying to figure out if an inspection was in his interest.”

“So, what did he say?”

She sighed. “Kristen, you are so American sometimes. Do you think he engaged in a tete-a-tete with me? He’s not going to show his hand. I’m a real estate lawyer and, as I said, there are fortunes to be made. And investors would be more confident if the plant were in someone else’s hands besides Caritec.”

“So why did you say you had good news?”

“Think about it. Caritec already knows that the Department of Natural Resources is unhappy that they are building the sewage plant. Devlin is in no danger if he makes a move against them. Even if he inspects, and they manage to hide their scheme, he hasn’t lost anything. The Department will applaud his diligence. His only issue will be to ensure that the timing of the inspection corresponds to the completion of a construction phase.”

“So, he’ll definitely do it?”

“It’s like talking to a bag of rocks,” Antoinette declared as she disconnected.

Kristen fell into a reverie in which she wandered down several mental roads at once. One possibility was that in preparation for the inspection, Caritec would manage to cover the pipeline leading from the intake to the ocean, and to hide any supplies that would be superfluous if they weren’t destined for that pipeline. In which case, she and Adam would have to think of another way to stop them. Another possibility was that they would rip out everything that wasn’t on the blueprints, but she abandoned that idea as unlikely. Caritec had known about the phase inspections all along, so they surely had a plan to get through them. Since they would want to avoid the delay that creating a full cover-up would cause, they might simply buy off the inspection team. That would mean they had a way to find out in advance who was on the team, which made Kristen think about Antoinette’s warning regarding Machado’s office. Finally, if Caritec had friends in the Ministry of Development, as Ortiz had told Adam, they might appeal to them for a waiver of inspection on the grounds that speedy completion of the plant was vital to coastal development. That argument would probably carry the day if the right people were on Caritec’s payroll.

Kristen called Adam’s office and left a message that she and Diego were sleeping at home, and could he please tell Gram? She wasn’t up for a phone conversation with her grandmother. A night alone at home was just what the doctor ordered, and if she called her, Gram would tell Kristen to come collect her, because she “hadn’t had a chance to visit the house this trip.” The truth would be that she was bored, and, knowing that, Kristen wouldn’t have the heart to refuse her.

She tossed a frozen dinner into the microwave and filled Diego’s bowl with a mixture of kibble and canned stew. He came galumphing up the steps before she could put the bowl on the floor. Since he’d been out overseeing his domain, she marveled at his ability to hear his bowl being filled. Or did he just know what she was doing, like instinctively? Was that possible? He gulped his food while she carried her dinner and a glass of beer into the living room to watch the news.

**34.**

Cameron kicked the wastebasket hard and it flew across his office and clattered against the trailer’s metal wall. Its contents scattered on the floor. *What do they take me for*? He’d just ended a conversation with one of the bosses, and he could hardly believe his ears. They wanted him to talk to the Bikini Lady, and they made it clear that at the end of the conversation she should be willing to stop meddling in their business. First Bautista, and now this? Why couldn’t they just let him do his job? He needed to get ready for the inspection. And then the light dawned. When the bosses had been told of the inspection, they had probably assumed that Bikini Lady was behind it. Or maybe they knew people in the Department of Natural Resources, who had told them she was behind it. How did she manage to cause so much trouble?

Cameron hadn’t slept well, and it left him edgy. Grim dreams disturbed him nightly, and he awakened exhausted and irritable. At work, he was on time and on budget, yet every little mishap caused a flood of anxiety. He was off his food, and he was drinking too much. He couldn’t focus on his family when he was home, and at work he found himself dreaming of the day when he could walk away from this accursed plant. Should he just leave the project now? Did he have enough money to do that? But no, if he ran, Caritec would hunt him down. He would have to finish the job, which was why every delay was intolerable.

He left the trailer to walk around the periphery of an excavation for an aeration tank and tried to figure out how to talk to the Bikini Lady. It wouldn’t be enough to write or call her. She would have to see his face and hear his voice, to grasp the seriousness of the situation. He couldn’t not give the bosses what they wanted, either. Which meant Kristen was going to know that he was involved in the plan to dump sewage. He’d have to scare her enough to keep her quiet. What did she value? Her boyfriend, of course! He thought how strange it was that he was going to threaten a guy to persuade a girl to knuckle under, rather than the other way around. He pulled his phone from his pocket and checked his schedule.

Two days later, Adam got an anonymous phone call. A male voice told him to be at The Beachcomber dock that night if he valued his girlfriend’s safety. The voice promised that the caller just wanted to talk, and that nothing would happen to Kristen if Adam showed up at the dock. Adam immediately went into what he thought of as “incoming mode.” In Afghanistan, he’d learned that when under fire, you concentrated fiercely, you stayed intensely aware of your surroundings: of the direction of the attack, of the landscape, and of your friends’ whereabouts. No thinking. You relied on your best instincts to dictate your choices.

“What did you want to discuss?” he asked the caller.

“You will be there, Mr. Stimson.”

“Could be, if you tell me why you are threatening Ms. Maroney. What does she have to do with anything?”

“Don’t do that, Mr. Stimson. Don’t underestimate the people I represent.”

“And that would be Caritec, Inc.?”

“Eleven PM. Please don’t be late. And don’t involve anyone else.” Then the caller was gone.

Adam didn’t take time to mull things over. He sat perfectly still, his mind crystal clear. He visualized a horizontal line that was scored at intervals with points in time, and he assigned a task to each point. When he had included all the tasks required to get to the end point of 11 PM, he double- checked the feasibility of each interval, and then he filed the plan in a part of his brain that had lain idle since Afghanistan. He sat still and took calm, measured breaths, and then he picked up his phone and called Rom. When the latter arrived, Adam asked him if there was an up- to-date schematic of The Beachcomber property, including every structure, tree, stone, and body of water. Rom nodded, and Adam told him to get it.

When Rom returned, Adam asked him to close the door. “You were Special Forces in Ecuador, right?” Rom nodded. “Did you ever kill anyone?” Rom nodded again.

“If there was a good reason, would you do it again?”

This time Rom asked, “What’s going on, Boss?”

Adam indicated a chair and chose one for himself. “I have a story to tell you, and then I need you to put Pablo in charge and clear your calendar for the next forty-eight hours. Can you do that?”

**35.**

At 9 PM, Adam left the casino to return to his condo where Kristen waited. He filled her in on the phone call and on his plan. She watched as he retrieved a Heckler and Koch 50mm sniper rifle from the top shelf of his closet. She knew about the rifle because he’d pointed it out a couple of years earlier, not wanting her to happen upon it. He mounted the sight, then loaded the gun and slung it onto his shoulder. He hesitated a moment, looked at Kristen, and then walked out onto the terrace.

He paused to take stock of what he could see, hear, and smell. And then he walked toward the dock. Later he would tell Kristen that at first, all was quiet; that the marina was desertedonly The only people around were small clusters of guests lounging in lawn chairs, drinks in hand. He raised the binoculars that hung around his neck and examined every face to make sure it belonged to a guest. The only boats out on the salt were at least a mile away, so no danger there, unless his caller was operating without running lights. He listened intently and heard nothing of note.

He and Rom had divided up the grounds so that each was responsible for watching an approximately equivalent piece. For the next hour Adam walked his allotted area and noticed only Romulus doing the same on his patch, the Glock riding the security chief’s hip and his back pockets bulging with ammo. Rom hadn’t called Adam on his cell phone, which meant that he wasn’t seeing anything out of the ordinary either. At 10 PM, they took up their posts. Adam settled on the ground in a thicket of fishtail palms that stood about 50 feet from the dock, while Rom started his watch further down the beach in a cluster of night jasmine. Adam wondered how Rom would fare surrounded by the blooms’ heady fragrance. In any case, once the caller and/or his people appeared, the plan was for Rom to be on the move.

Time passed slowly. No boats made for the dock. The guests left their lawn chairs and started for the casino; two stray dogs headed for the dumpster; ibises foraged in the shallow water. Despite his and Rom’s patrols, Adam thought that the caller had probably slipped onto the property and was lying in wait somewhere, just like he and Rom. That didn’t seem very smart, since if the caller wanted to hurt or subdue Adam, these were not the ideal conditions. It was Adam’s turf and he was on maximum alert.

Eleven o’clock came and went, and still the men waited. Adam began to wonder if his failure to appear had caused the caller to postpone the conversation. He phoned Rom to go over the possibilities, and they decided that Adam should emerge from the palm trees and head for the dock in the hope of provoking a move. Rom would move closer to cover him.

Adam grasped the rifle in his left hand, leaving his right free to hold the 9 mm he that he carried in case of a fight at close range. As he walked, he watched both the water and the land, paying close attention to reflections, and to trees and shrubs. By the time he reached the dock he had all but decided that the caller had stood him up. It was eleven thirty and nothing had happened. He walked cautiously onto the dock, and still nothing. He scanned the beach for a rowboat, a kayak, or a canoe, but he saw only the resort’s racked kayaks on the lawn.

And then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a figure in a wet suit standing in the water by the dock with what looked like a big cane in one hand. *The sonofabitch had been under the dock!* Adam raised his Beretta and fired, but a sharp pain stabbed at the back of his knees and his legs were whipped out from under him. He hit the water and kept firing, dropping the rifle to grab for the shepherd’s crook that his assailant had used to yank him off his feet. The guy dropped the crook and slammed a blackjack down on Adam’s gun hand. The pain was enough to loosen his grip, and the guy grabbed the Beretta before Adam could resume firing. They heard the whine of an outboard motor coming up the beach in the opposite direction from where Romulus was racing toward them yelling at the top of his lungs. The assailant caught Adam across the temple with the blackjack and grabbed his hair. He secured him in a cross-chest carry and, supported by his partially inflated buoyancy vest, propelled himself and Adam towards the oncoming boat on their backs. Rom raised the Glock, but the assailant held the Beretta to Adam’s head, and he didn’t have a clear shot. He watched helplessly as the outboard drew alongside the men in the water, and in the ambient light he saw Adam come to, only to be conked on the head again, this time by the boatman. The abductors pushed and hauled Adam aboard, and then the scuba diver handed his tank to his accomplice and climbed in too. As the boat pulled away, Rom fired the machine pistol at full bore hoping to penetrate the hull, but he had to aim low for fear of hitting Adam, and most of the rounds hit the water. He raced for a Beachcomber SUV and accelerated in the direction of the beach to which the boat appeared to be headed, but despite hours of searching, he wasn’t able to locate either the boat or its passengers. Around 2 AM, he gave up the hunt and returned to the casino to meet with Luc Vargas, who had arrived with the police whom Kristen had called when she heard shots fired.

Adam awoke to a vicious headache and rolling swells of nausea, but he found himself seated comfortably in an armchair. He could smell fresh coffee. His hands were tied to the chair’s arms, and duct tape covered his eyes, but his mouth was free, and his auditory powers worked perfectly. His clothing felt dry and seemed more like sweats than the jeans and T shirt that he’d worn when he hit the water. He heard someone moving around, and he smelled cigar smoke. And then a cold compress was pressed to his throbbing temple. Soon after, another one was applied to a lump on the back of his head. Not ice packs, he thought, more like those chemical jobs. The person smoking the cigar slipped something stretchy over his head to hold the cold packs in place. Adam leaned back to get the full benefit of the cold against the hollow at the base of his skull.

“Thanks, I guess,” he ventured. It was all very disconcerting. Someone had kidnapped him, and now they were playing nursemaid? A cup of coffee was pressed to his lips. He was afraid it would exacerbate the nausea, but he sipped some anyway, because he needed the caffeine.

From across the room a creole-sounding voice said, “Relax, we don’t hurt you no more. Some people want your girlfriend to pay attention, that’s all.”

“What for?” Adam asked.

“Me and him, we do what we’re told.”

Adam gave up and drank the coffee that was held to his lips. If he was in any danger, they were being awfully nice about it. And somebody had good taste in cigars.

**36.**

For Kristen, the evening that Cameron abducted Adam consisted of one long anxiety attack, punctuated by short bursts of hope. She paced Adam’s living room, desperate for news, her hands shaking. She feared the worst. Her skin stung as if she were being attacked by ants, and she couldn’t get herself to breathe right.

When Rom called the first time to say that Adam had been taken and the abductors had headed off in a motor boat, she thought Cameron and his accomplice couldn’t possibly escape, since a car moved faster than a boat and there was only so much beach to cover. But then came the first letdown: the police found an abandoned outboard drifting near the beach not far from The Beachcomber’s dock. The bastards had doubled back, probably to a vehicle that lay hidden somewhere.

And then it occurred to Kristen that if they had taken the road near The Beachcomber, the police wouldn’t be far behind. There weren’t many places to escape to around Cahuita. But again, her hope proved futile, for the police shortly found a stolen pickup truck not far from the little airport. Did they have a private plane? Had they flown Adam someplace? The airport was closed at this hour, but that wouldn’t prevent them from taking off illegally.

By that time, Rom had returned to The Beachcomber. He believed that Caritec had indeed taken Adam. He told Kristen they were probably hiding him on the construction site. Since the company had refused to allow the police to search, Vargas requested a search warrant, but getting one was not a sure thing -- he had no evidence that Adam was there.

Next Vargas called Rom to say that the local district court judge had denied the warrant. Caritec Security would do its own search, a company spokesperson told the judge. Vargas escalated the matter to a judge in Guatemala City, but a decision would take more time than they had.

Kristen was beside herself. “What the hell?” she cried to no one in particular as she paced Adam’s living room. “Caritec hires perverts to torture me, and now they kidnap Adam? And we can’t go after them?”

“There’s no proof,” Rom reminded her. He paced too, obviously trying to think.

She snatched up her keys. “Yeah, proof. I’m not waiting for Adam’s body to surface so they have proof.”

Rom grabbed her arm. “C’mon, don’t go nuts. Does he know anything that would make him a risk to them?”

She yanked her arm free of Rom’s grasp. “He has no more proof than anyone else. But who cares? They’ll hurt him just for the sake of intimidation. They must know that we went to Guatemala City. They must have our contacts there. Christ! Is there no end to this?” She headed for the door.

Rom stepped in front of her. “I can’t let you leave.”

“*Let me?*”

With that, they glared at one another like blood enemies. Kristen would never know what might have happened next, because Gram burst into the room, jabbing the door open with her crutch.

“What the bejesus is goin’ on? It’s crawlin’ with cops outside.” She looked around, then pointed a crutch at Romulus. “Why aren’t you on the job? Where’s Adam, anyway?”

Kristen gulped. “Come in and close the door, Gram. We have a problem.”

“Who has a problem?”

“Rom and I do. Someone has kidnapped Adam. We don’t know where he is but Caritec is behind it. The local judge won’t give permission to search their site, and Rom won’t let me go there to find Adam.”

“Good thing somebody has a brain,” Gram snorted. “You wouldn’t find him if you went, and then you’d both be in the soup.”

Kristen was amazed at her calmness. “Gram, they’re going to hurt him!”

“Settle down, Krissie. You’re the one causin’ all the trouble; it’s not likely him they want.”

“Then why didn’t they take me again?”

“Cause you’ll back off for Adam faster than you will for yourself. Go make us coffee, for cryin’ out loud. I been on my feet all day.”

“Coffee? Don’t you get what’s going on here?”

Rom’s saucer-sized eyes flicked back and forth between them. He felt like he was watching a tennis match at an insane asylum. Gram gave Kristen a little shove toward the kitchen and declared, “What’s going on is they’re going to call. Shut up and make coffee. And while you’re at it, think about what you’re gonna say. They’ve got your number from Adam by now.”

“Adam wouldn’t…” but Kristen thought better of finishing that sentence. Trembling, she headed for the kitchen.

Gram turned to Rom, “And what do YOU think she should tell them, you great big bite of steak?”

But crazy or not, Gram was right on the money. Kristen had just managed to pour three cups of coffee when her phone sang out ‘If I only had a brain.” The caller was, of course, Cameron.

“Good evening, Ms. Kristen. Or should I say good morning?”

“Where’s Adam, you fucker?”

Gram barked a laugh. “Quite the negotiator, ain’t she?”

Cameron’s voice was smooth as silk. “You have questions, of course. And I called to give you what answers I can.”

She wanted to tear him to pieces. “Where’s Adam, Cameron?”

“There’s no need to worry Ms. Kristen. You and I, we will come to an agreement, and your man will come home, safe and sound.”

“Don’t you “Ms” me, you pig. The whole country is looking for Adam, and when they find him, I’m gonna cut your…”

Rom grabbed the phone. “What do you suggest, Mr. Cameron?”

“Ah, you must be the esteemed head of security.”

“Just tell me how this is going to work,” Rom growled.

“I see you’re a reasonable man, Mr. Security. You see, Ms. Maroney has been, how shall I say, inquiring into matters concerning my company’s operations. And unfortunately, our site is the home of a government-secured, classified project. It’s a sad fact that terrorists target a country’s infrastructure, you know? One cannot be too careful about the details of how a facility is built.”

“Right, national security. Which is why the police are turning over rocks to find Mr. Stimson and rack up evidence against your company.”

“Ah, the local police. I believe that is a matter of delayed coordination with Guatemala City,” Cameron said, alluding to his company’s influence with the *federales*.

“Whatever. How will this work?” Rom’s voice was full of menace.

“The way it will work is that Ms. Maroney will cease to make inquiries and promise not to start up again.”

“Or what?” Rom demanded.

“Oh, I’m not threatening anyone, Mr. Security. It’s just that I have it on good authority that if she makes that commitment, things will go back to normal. It will be as if nothing has happened.”

“Why would you take her word for it?”

“An excellent question. I don’t know of course, but I suspect that the people who are presently keeping Mr. Stimson company will be less civil next time.”

“So, she says she’ll stop asking questions, and Stimson comes home? It’s that simple?”

“I don’t control the time table, but yes, I believe that will work. And please, don’t involve the police. It’s really not worth wasting their time,” Cameron added, underlining the fact that Caritec had powerful friends.

“And if I do?”

“Who knows? But I think it might delay Mr. Stimson’s ride home.”

“Half an hour, buddy. Longer than that and all hell breaks loose on your construction site.” With that, Rom handed Kristen the phone. Still trembling and without the least intention of keeping her word, she said, “Okay, Cameron, you win. I won’t ask any more questions.”

“That’s good, Ms Kristen. And it would be best to stay away from the construction site. It’s dangerous.”

“Agreed.” she said from between clenched teeth. “Half an hour, maximum.” And she hung up.

**37.**

Forty-five minutes later, Adam came walking up the Beachcomber’s approach road under the pole lights that stood on either side like sentries. Rom trotted out to meet him while Kristen waited, as she knew she must. When Adam reached her, she launched herself into his arms and they held each other without a word. Rom started for the casino and she stepped back to examine Adam’s face. Apart from a line across his forehead left by duct tape and a lump on his temple, he looked none the worse for wear. He took her hand and led her to his living room.

“They treated me like a guest,” he assured her, “apart from blindfolding me and taping down my hands. Gave me dry clothes and coffee, and never a harsh word. Of course, they didn’t tell me anything, either.”

“What did they want?” Kristen asked.

“They wanted to get your attention. There was a guy with a local accent, and someone else who was smoking a pricey-smelling cigar. I assume that was Cameron. They requested your phone number, promising no rough stuff, and I gave it to them. I knew that we’d find out their game that way, and if they intended to hurt me, they were certainly being hospitable about it. What was your phone conversation like?”

“I had to promise to stop asking questions in exchange for your return.”

“You must have loved that.”

“I have no intention of keeping my word, even if they have proved they can hurt you whenever they want. We already knew we were out on a limb.”

“Why am I not surprised?” He went into the kitchen and came back with a bottle of aspirin and a Coke. “We have to be careful, though. They know we went to Guatemala City to drum up support. By now, Caritec has received a notice of inspection.”

“It’s hard to know how to be careful when we don’t have a next move,” Kristen countered.

He tossed back some aspirin and swallowed Coke. “I have a nasty headache. Let’s get some sleep and then we can figure it out. After I talk to Vargas, that is. Rom will take care of things at the casino.”

Kristen agreed, and they went to bed, the both of them asleep in minutes.

Only a few hours later, Adam and Kristen drove into town in separate cars, he to see Vargas, and she to spend the day at the shop. They met at lunchtime at the Lonely Mermaid, and Felix joined them at a secluded corner table where they would have the privacy to update him. Adam and Kristen each told their story while Felix ate slices of cassava melon wrapped in prosciutto. When he’d finished, he asked what they planned to do.

“I was hoping you’d have an idea,” Kristen said.

“You know what I’m going to say, Kristie.” He never called her “dahlin’” in front of Adam. “I wouldn’t do anything for the moment.”

“Well, there’s still the matter of forcing me to launder money,” Adam objected. Then he turned to Kristen. “You did tell Felix about that?” She nodded.

“So, keep on, then,” Felix advised.

“Until what?” Adam said. “Until CAGA closes down the casino?”

Felix replied, “Adam, I understand you’re in a tight spot. But your company knows what’s going on, am I right?”

“Sure, but that doesn’t prevent the situation from worsening until there’s some sort of explosion.”

“We have to do something,” Kristen agreed.

“Short of going home, whatever you do will cause reprisals,” Felix replied, “and even a, you t home, you can’t be sure you’d be safe.”

Kristen touched Felix’s hand. “What would you do?” she asked softly.

He considered the dish of *tapado Garifuna* that had been set in front of him. It was seafood stew in a coconut milk broth. “I’d stop interfering, as you promised, and then I’d give the bastards marked bills from your company’s Langley friends. I suspect the CIA won’t like it, but they’ll cooperate. They’re greedy, but they’re not stupid.”

Kristen was surprised at Felix’s apparent familiarity with the CIA. Had he made his own deal with them in the past? She put that thought aside and dug into a dolphin filet while considering his marked bills suggestion.

Adam was less hesitant. “If I contact the CIA, Caritec might know.”

“Of course, you’ll work it through your company,” Felix said. “Just use a secure phone.”

Adam and Kristen finished lunch and thanked Felix. She headed back to her shop, and Adam started out for Guatemala City, where he would find an anonymous landline to call Diane. Afterward he would call his CIA contact.

**38.**

Still in turmoil, Kristen took Diego for what she hoped would be a calming walk after she closed the shop that night. She ambled down Mahogany Street and then turned into one of the alleys where local family businesses served the working people of Cahuita. Hungry, she savored the ever-present aroma of hot oil and onions, sometimes with the added enticement of chicken or fish. Street vendors abounded in the neighborhoods where most people lived, and in the evening, they offered rice and beans and various fried veggies with the traditional proteins. She stopped at a window, a framed opening with a wooden flap that the cook propped up when she was open for business. Kristen asked what was good, and the cook said there was fresh shrimp. In Cahuita, shrimp were the size of Louisiana crayfish.

“Did you make broth today too?” Kristen inquired.

“Of course.With coconut milk and plantains. I’ll put some shrimp and onions in.”

“Perfect.”. Kristen sat in a straight plastic chair on the woman’s porch and ate from a paper bowl, sharing pieces of plantain with Diego. The woman laughed at the foolishness of giving perfectly good food to a dog.

“He eats like a king,” she said.

“He thinks he is a king,” Kristen replied. To her relief the woman laughed good naturedly.

Since darkness was closing in, she headed back to the shop, where she’d parked her truck. As she turned onto Mahogany Street, still on foot, a Caribbean-looking man stepped into her path. He wore a work shirt and tan Dockers. His copper-colored skin was scarred from acne, but his features were well defined and pleasantly symmetrical, and the almond shape of his eyes suggested Arawak ancestry. As soon as he spoke Kristen realized who he was.

“I looked for you at your store. I’m glad to find you,” he said.

She stepped back, alarmed, and glanced down the street to make sure they weren’t alone. Diego paced nervously between her and the man, his back up.

“Keep your distance, Cameron,” Kristen warned. “What do you want?”

“It’s not me you need to ask, Kristen.” His use of her first name without a “Ms” bespoke danger, and she stepped back farther.

Diego growled, and she placed her hand on his harness. She was determined not to show fear. “If you’re trying to say that Caritec is calling the shots, it doesn’t matter. You and they are one in the same.”

“Not quite. Myself, I would ignore you and get on with my job. Whatever you think you have discovered is of no importance. We will finish the project and be licensed by the government, which gives us its full support. I will go to another job, and others will operate the plant according to the proper standards.” He shrugged. “You are of no interest.”

“So why did you torture me, abduct Adam, and now accost me in the street?”

“I did none of those things, except that I’m talking with you this evening. I simply acted as a messenger the night your boyfriend was persuaded to accompany a couple of friends.”

“*Friends*?”.

He ignored her. “Tonight, I am again a messenger. Your Adam drove to Guatemala City today. I don’t think he went on casino business.”

“That’s none of YOUR business.”

“That’s correct. As I said, I don’t care. But not everyone is like me.”

“Like you, what?” It sounded silly before she’d gotten it out of her mouth.

“You seem to take an interest in things that don’t concern you. I work for someone and I do what they tell me. I’m just passing on a message because that’s my assignment.” He shrugged feigned innocence.

“You and your company are laying a pipeline from where raw sewage comes into the plant directly to the sea. A year after your plant ramps up, the reef will be dead, sea mammals will be gone, and the water will be unsafe for swimming. Your plant will kill both the ecosystem and the tourist trade.”

“You’re talking about things you know nothing about. You have no understanding of what pipes go where, or how they will be used.”

“I know Caritec wouldn’t have reacted so violently to me asking a few questions if they were simply carrying on as advertised.”

“If classified information gets out to the public, they could lose the plant contract. They are only protecting their interests. Perhaps too vigorously, but that is out of my hands.”

Diego sank into a crouch, ready to spring; his eyes didn’t leave Cameron’s face. “And just what is your part in this?” Kristen asked.

Cameron stepped back, eyeing Diego. “I receive orders from people who also receive orders.”

“Oh lord, the Nuremburg defense.”

Cameron’s brow creased, and she realized that he didn’t understand the allusion. “I’m saying that you and Stimson should stop meddling,” he added, “so my superiors can relax and I can do the job I was hired to do.”

“We’re not meddling.”.

“Stimson made a call to a number in Houston, and it wasn’t Beachcomber headquarters.”

“What are you talking about?” she stammered. *How in God’s name did they know?* *Had someone followed Adam and then obtained the records of the phone he’d used?*

“If he has told your ridiculous tale to the American authorities, my company will have to deal with endless nonsense. It will be expensive, wasteful, and damaging to our reputation.”

“So, what?” she sneered. Clearly, she’d lost control of the conversation, if in fact she’d ever had it. Diego rose and resumed his pacing.

Cameron made as if to walk away. “You have been warned. I’m trying to help you. You and your boyfriend are in danger, and it has reached the point where I myself do not know what will happen, except that you will come to harm.

“That’s quite a threat as circumlocutions go.” Once again, she sounded silly to herself.

“Have it your way,” Cameron growled. Keeping his eye on Diego, he backed away before turning down Mahogany toward the Lonesome Mermaid.

**39.**

Kristen drove out to The Beachcomber unable to remember when she had last felt a sense of peace. Picking up on her mood, Diego turned in a nervous circle and whined, wearing a ring in the passenger seat with his feet. Kristen reached for his front paw and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Thanks for having my back, big guy, but now I need you to settle down.” He acquiesced, sitting down for a couple of minutes, then he returned to circling. When they finally pulled into Adam’s parking space, he leapt out of the truck and ran for the sliders in a burst of joy. Kristen guessed that he’d had enough of her and wanted Adam, who was just getting home himself, so they met on the terrace and sat down under the spotlights.

But Diego scratched at the glass door, and Adam said, “Whoops, looks like someone besides me missed dinner.” He let Diego in, fed him, and returned. “Want to hear how it went in Guatemala City?” he asked.

“Sure, but before you start, I should tell you that Cameron caught up with me tonight. Relax, we were on Mahogany Street surrounded by people. He said that Caritec knows you called someone besides Beachcomber in Houston.”

“Shit. I used a phonebooth at the Post Office, and there was a guy hanging around. I thought he was waiting for the phone and trying to hurry my conversation, but he must have been following me. Maybe he had a device that can pick up a number while you’re punching it in.”

“That would explain it. Cameron threatened us with bodily harm if we tell ‘the authorities’ about the sewage dumping. Who exactly did you call?”

Adam looked devastated, a look she’d rarely seen. She went into the kitchen to give him time to think and selected two bottles of Antigua from the refrigerator.

When she returned, she set a cold bottle in front of him and asked again. “Who did you talk to?”

“I called a number in Houston that bounces to Langley in Virginia. To the CIA agent who Beachcomber is in touch with.”

“Tell me about the conversation.”

“It was long. About twenty minutes, so now I’m wondering if anyone was recording it. I don’t think that’s possible, but Caritec inspires full blown paranoia.”

“No kidding. Go on.”

“I started out by telling Riley (that’s his name, by the way) that we were both done, that we’re getting out. He didn’t say anything, so I kept talking. I told him that we’d both been kidnapped, that you’d been tortured, and that we’re still getting threats. I said I would pass one more chunk of cash to Caritec, but that he needed his agency to put it together, and to mark the bills if they wanted to follow the money and make their case. At that, he squawked about the money laundering being a CIA operation over which I had no authority; and I cut him short with a ‘take it or leave it.’ I said that if he didn’t want to nail Caritec, then fine, you and I would go get my kids and disappear. I have no idea how we’d do that, but it was all I could think to say.”

Kristen was getting antsy. “Did that do it?”

“He said what you’d expect, that the agency would help us if we’d just be a little more patient. I took it as an offer of witness protection. Hearing that, I basically tore him a new one.”

“For good reason. The son of a bitch,”

“He wouldn’t agree to my marked bills idea on the spot, but he did say that he’d get back to me in a couple of days. I’m to buy a disposable phone and call him Thursday morning his time. Hopefully even Caritec can’t catch up with that. At least not soon enough to eavesdrop on the plan.”

“Hopefully not. But what do we do if the agency doesn’t agree to the marked bills?”

Adam shrugged. “Good question.”

A couple of days went by without incident. On the third one, Adam reached Riley again and got the news that the marked bills plan was a go. The problem was that the Riley had contacted the CEO of Beachcomber, which Adam had explicitly asked him not to do. Clearly, the agent wanted Adam’s company to pressure him to sit tight and continue to work their operation for them. Adam promptly used the disposable phone to call Diane and quit. Diane told him to calm down, that the company would back his effort to get out of the “ill-considered arrangement.” The same arrangement they’d so recently agreed to with Riley.

Beachcomber’s strategy was to prevail upon a Washington contact to talk to one of Caritec’s directors who was known to dine with American construction lobbyists when he was in D.C. The message would be that if Caritec wanted to attain its goal, they would have to rein in the criminal element in their Guatemala operation Apparently Caritec wanted visas for Caribbean workers to go to the United States where Caritec would broker them to work in the labor-starved American construction industry. She felt confident that the director in question would carry the message, because the money and prestige earned by providing workers to the United States would do more for Caritec than selling drugs in a poor Central American country. If the scheme worked, the pressure on Adam would disappear.

The relief that this news brought came tainted with new uncertainty. Kristen and Adam had no way of knowing if the Caritec Board of Directors was privy to the sewage dumping scheme, though it seemed unlikely. A more believable scenario was that some other group within the company had hatched the plan, and that it had contrived to deviate some of the bounty that the plant would generate to themselves. This group, whoever they were, would still be after Adam and Kristen, even if the culprits had to lie low for a while, because of stern warnings that would certainly come down their chain of command.

Nevertheless, Kristen and Adam tried to relax while they waited for word of when Adam was to turn over the marked bills installment of laundered cash. Adam’s Caritec contact harassed him, and he answered with promises. It all might have worked out, with the money laundering scheme blowing up in full public view, and Caritec losing the plant contract, if the CIA hadn’t double crossed them.

**40.**

Adam received the phone call that Special Agent Riley had promised, so he picked up the final batch of money with its marked bills and delivered it to his Caritec partner in crime. Then he and Kristen went about their business, thinking that any day the scandal would make front page news, and the government would have no choice but to cancel Caritec’s contract. Adam stopped booking bogus numbers and ignored his contact’s attempts to start another round.

Gram finally went home to Las Vegas, and Kristen and Adam planned an end-of-season sailing vacation to Playa del Carmen. Adam took great pleasure in researching sailboats for hire, showing her pictures and pointing out how each boat was fitted up. There was a Beachcomber Resort in Playa del Carmen, so she voted for calling it a business trip and hiring someone else to captain their rental. Of course, Adam wanted to captain it himself and was already studying maps to learn about reefs and currents.

And then the wheels fell off the cart. One night in November, as Kristen and Diego were driving down to see Adam after closing the shop, a Caritec Security car forced her to the side of the road, and two bulked-up guards yanked her out of her truck, leaving Diego to bark furiously at the window. They threw her into the back seat of their sedan and got into the front. Before the driver could get the car into gear, she threw open the door that he had neglected to lock and ran across the road to the beach. She had just enough of a head start to make it to the water before the guards could catch her. They decided not to wade in, weighted down as they were by their boots and equipment.

They retreated onto the beach and watched, apparently intending to wait her out. But she was a strong swimmer. She knew she could make it to the Beachcomber if she had to, so she wasn’t worried, as long as they didn’t wade in after her. Of course, if one of the guards went for a boat, she was in trouble, but she couldn’t afford to think about that. She began to swim parallel to the beach in the direction of the resort when one of the men headed back to their car.

At the same time, in his fury Diego accidentally stomped on Kristen’s truck’s power window button. The window opened and the dog leapt out and threw himself at the guard who was headed for the Caritec car. The guy drew his gun, but Diego was on him before he could shoot.

“Ayeeee! Aye! Aye!” Kristen heard the man scream. She swam for shore with every ounce of strength she had while the second guard ran to his partner’s rescue.

Diego’s guardian angel must have been watching over him that night, because instead of shooting him, the second guard grabbed his harness and yanked him off the guy, whose shooting arm the dog had effectively mangled. Diego wasn’t trained to fight, but he’d once been shot by a man with a pistol, and he remembered that an extended arm with a gun could end in serious pain.

Standing in water up to her waist Kristen screamed, “My phone is waterproof! The cops are coming!” It wasn’t true, but how were they to know?

The guard holding Diego’s harness picked him up and threw him as far as he could onto the beach. “*Maldito perro!”* he spat. *“Levantate”* get up!” he yelled to his partner.

*“Hijo de puta! Madre de Dios!”* cried the other, grasping his bloodied arm. The two made it to their car before Diego could shake off the impact of landing on the sand to pursue them. Their tires kicked out a burst of sand and they sped down the road toward the construction site. At the same time a drenched Kristen and a trembling Diego jumped into their truck and also sped away. But Kristen was headed for the Beachcomber rather than the plant. She needed to talk to Adam, and her drowned cell phone was dead.

Unbeknownst to her, Cameron had already called Adam to claim that he was holding Kristen at the plant site. He had demanded that Adam get there immediately and that he come alone if he wanted Kristen back in one piece. He had played a recording of Kristen screaming, a recording that the two losers who had tortured her had made and given to Cameron. Adam did as he was ordered, so when Kristen got to his condo, he was gone.

Romulus looked confused. “Adam roared out of here in a company SUV without a word of explanation. What’s happening?”

“Two Caritec guards tried to grab me. I’ve got to catch up to Adam before he gets to the plant! He thinks they’re holding me.” She commandeered her own Beachcomber vehicle, because it was faster and more powerful than her truck. She left Diego with Rom and yelled out the window as she rolled away. “Fill Vargas in. Tell him to send cops to the plant..”

*Dammit*, she thought as she barreled down the approach road to route eighty-five, *that bastard Riley didn’t mark the bills.* The CIA had no intention of going after Caritec yet. Instead, they’d decided to accumulate more evidence so they could build a water-tight case. They also meant to show Kristen and Adam who was boss by forcing Adam to keep laundering money until they told him to stop. What kind of a world was it, when you were better off trusting a profit hungry multi-national like Beachcomber than you were believing in your own government?

A couple of miles ahead of her, Adam also raced southward, his head a snake’s nest of vile thoughts. The clarity that he’d enjoyed only a few days before had deserted him, replaced by ancient grudges that had long since slithered their way into the fabric of his being. Grudges against white- haired men in Washington who carved out a legacy by throwing the young at hopeless conflicts. Men who seduced you with patriotic slogans and abandoned you when they’d used you up. Men who droned on about honor and made promises they’d no intention of keeping.

*In extremis*, Adam thought, *you clawed your way out any way you could*. You were alone and you had to forget about the days when brothers used to have your back. Careening down the road in the dark, he reflected that the vehicle he was driving belonged to people who hadn’t hesitated to put him in harm’s way. They’d ordered him to launder money for killers. He was, he thought, a man without a country, an employer, or friends. So, he vowed to save what was left to him, and that meant his sons and Kristen. Already rolling at a hundred and forty kilometers an hour, he crushed the accelerator to the floor. And he swore to himself that come what may, Kristen would walk away from Caritec alive.

**41.**

In his trailer on the construction site, Cameron holstered a .45 mm Sig Sauer that he’d found in his desk drawer that morning, probably left by one of the bosses’ henchmen. Knowing that the magazine held ten rounds, he pocketed the two extra cartridges they’d left him. Then he stepped outside and looked around. He checked the vehicles that workers had left near his trailer until he located a dump truck with keys in the ignition. He drove it to the front gate, where he had left his pickup after metal debris had punctured a tire. He left the dump truck motor running and walked the gate area, his gun drawn and pointing at the ground by his right hip. He didn’t think Stimson could have arrived this soon, but he needed to verify that no one but him would be there to greet the casino man. Satisfied that he was alone, he holstered the gun and slid the gate closed so that Stimson would have to come to a full stop when he arrived.

*Where the hell are the guards?* They should have been back half an hour ago with Kristen, and he hadn’t heard a word. He checked his cell phone and took a deep breath to suppress his impatience. Balled up in his chest, resentment burned at his being forced to play out tonight’s scenario. It wasn’t enough that they’d made him kill to keep his job. In addition, they’d had him hire those two slime bags to kidnap the girl, and then they’d turned on Stimson. Maybe he was too skillful at being a bad guy, maybe he should screw up, so they’d get somebody else to do their dirty work. He looked at his watch. Where were the damn guards? *I’m not cut out for this shit,* he thought.

He leaned against a metal fence post and watched the slowly darkening sky. The breathless air carried the scent of ozone and the promise of a downpour. He went to the reception trailer to retrieve a rain jacket and transferred the extra magazines to its pockets. “How complicated could it be to pick up a woman who drove a dilapidated truck?” he demanded of no one. He checked his phone again, and the cretins still hadn’t called. Finally, he pressed in Nick’s number, Nick being the less simpleminded of the two.

When he answered, the guy screeched into the phone like a panicky monkey. “*Maldito perro* chew Tomas’s arm! I chase girl into water but have to help Tomas!”  
 “You what?” Cameron yelled. “You let an unarmed girl get away because her dog bit your faggot of a side-kick?” He listened for a moment and then bellowed, “So, shoot the bastard if he won’t shut up! Just get that girl, and I mean now!”

Nick replied that Kristen was headed for the site in a white car. Beside himself, Cameron threw the phone to the ground and crushed it under his heel. Why couldn’t anything go right?

Ever since the order to grab Adam, he had felt his life sliding off the rails. Temperamentally allergic to disorder, he had feverishly searched for a way to escape the bosses’ clutches, but he hadn’t found one. For days, rage had alternated with fear in his increasingly chaotic mind. His only hope had been that the casino manager and his girlfriend might knuckle under before the order to kill them came. When they didn’t bend, Cameron sank into barely controlled desperation, knowing that sooner or later the bosses would detonate a bomb that would blow away the cosseted existence he’d witnessed at Felix’s, the existence he craved.

But despite his despair, Cameron could not give up, for he was a man who equated acceptance with weakness. Rather than face the inevitable, he decided to embark on a course of action that would undo years of determined patience, because he couldn’t dial down either his drive to impose order or his need to act. The security guards’ ineptitude unraveled him, not just because it was the last straw, but because it underlined the mercurial nature of control.

He decided on a plan of his own. He would frighten the casino manager and his girlfriend into submission. He would convince them that they were about to die, and then he would drop them at the airport, their passports and tickets in hand, and send them off to Miami before they could recover their wits. It wouldn’t be hard to get their papers. He could leave them bound and gagged in a trailer, while he broke into their homes under the cover of darkness. And once they arrived back in the States, free of Cahuita’s insanity, the two Americans would be too relieved to pursue Caritec. He would be able to get on with his job. The sooner he finished this project, the better.

In the meantime, both Stimson and his girlfriend were on their way to the site, and he needed to figure out how to deal with them. Before he could come up with anything, a truck engine roared its way up the hill. It was Stimson in an SUV. Cameron stepped into the road to flag him down but was forced to leap aside when the truck barreled ahead, crashing headlong into the gate. The reinforced steel fence held, but Stimson’s radiator burst open in an explosion of boiling water.

Stimson jumped out and raced toward Cameron. Seeing a huge pistol in Stimson’s hand and an ammunition belt strapped to his chest, Cameron ran for the dump truck rather than risk a shootout. He leapt into the driver’s seat, jammed the gearshift into first, and stomped on the gas, stabbing the gate’s remote control at the same time. He wanted the advantage of driving a motor vehicle with Stimson on foot, because so far, the latter wasn’t shooting, and if that continued to be the case, maybe he could corner him somewhere. The twisted gate jammed, but he roared through the hole that it managed to open before failing He intended to lead Stimson deep into the site where he could corral him.

As he predicted, Stimson followed the truck at a dead run. *Got him!*  Cameron thought. He let him almost catch up to the truck before circling around behind him to herd him toward the aeration basins where the workers had left for the day and the excavations and piles of building materials would make for tricky footing. If Stimson tried to hide, so much the better, because Cameron knew the lay of the land and Adam didn’t.

But Adam wasn’t about to be corralled. He turned around and danced sideways to avoid running toward the dicey-looking landscape behind him and raised his gun. “Not, so fast*,*” Cameron muttered. He jammed the dump truck into low gear and headed straight for his quarry, certain he could scare him into running. It had started to pour, and through the sparkling radiance of his headlight beams, he made out the gun in Stimson’s hand. It looked deadly. The stupid bastard didn’t move out of the way of the advancing truck. Instead, he stood firm, feet planted, the gun aimed at the truck. As Cameron got closer, he saw that it was indeed a powerful Glock. He had no sooner reached that conclusion than a torrent of ordnance spider-webbed the dump truck’s windshield.

“Crazy *gringo!*” Cameron shouted, ducking to avoid the bullets that continued to send cracks across his windshield. Then Stimson’s machine pistol added holes to the cracks and Cameron went beside himself with rage. *What’s wrong with this mierdo*? He didn’t stand a chance on foot. Yet, if Cameron took him down, he would have to do the same to his *puta,* since she’d just appeared on the site too, and she could see them from the white SUV she was driving. She careened toward them, all but out of control in the glistening mud.

Cameron had no desire to kill the casino manager or his girlfriend. Violence was only useful if you availed yourself of it with careful deliberation. Besides, killing Bautista had cost him enough. He was determined to take control, not to let the *gringo* force his hand. But what Cameron didn’t understand was that, haunted as he was by chronic self-doubt, Adam could not back down. When Cameron saw him run toward the dump truck instead of away from it, he mistakenly thought that he could scare th*e* American into veering away. After all, Stimson was just trying to prove himself, to show that he could protect his girlfriend. A pair of *ladrone* freaks had roughed her up, and Cameron had threatened more himself,

Camron kept the dump truck’s gear shift in low for maximum traction and headed through the pouring rain straight at his quarry. He figured that Adam would bob and weave his way around the clumsy vehicle and then make for the car where his girlfriend was screaming out the open window at him to stop. Instead, to Cameron’s amazement, Adam stopped running, checked to see that his Glock hadn’t jammed, and resumed firing at the windshield of the truck.

*Imbecil!* Cameron swerved and lowered his head to avoid the bullets that now bypassed the sections of glass that clung to the frame of the windshield. But Adam only ran at him, placing himself in the dump truck’s path again and again. *“Hijo de puta!* *This dickhead, he has dealt the play,* *and now I must finish the game*. He slammed the gear shift into third, stomped on the gas, and headed straight for the white shirt. Still firing, Adam tried to leap aside at the last second, but he slipped in the mud, and the truck’s bumper thwacked against his pelvis. He seemed to take flight as his scream bounced off the sheets of water falling from the sky. When he hit the ground, Cameron jammed on the brakes and, his heart pounding, backed up to finish the job. It wouldn’t be hard to explain an accident on a rainy night. A guy without reflective gear who had no business being on the site?

Suddenly Cameron realized that the screams he was hearing were coming from the girlfriend, and not from Adam. Between the darkness and his shattered windshield, he couldn’t see clearly, but she was still in the white car, and was headed toward her boyfriend’s body. It looked like her hand was sticking out of the window holding a gun that was aimed straight at Cameron. Fuck it, he thought, time to get out before this turned into a cluster fuck. Killing the *gringo* was one thing, he had it coming. But the prospect of having to crush the girl and her SUV up against an earth mover, that was something else again.

He circled to head for the site’s back gate and tore through the mud, splattering everything in his way. When he got through the gate, he jumped out of the dump truck and let it roll into the trees, limbs exploding in its path. He deftly hotwired someone’s Camaro and raced down the back road into town, headlights off, hoping to round up his family and flee before the police could figure out what had happened.

**42.**

In the years that followed the slow-motion film that spooled before Kristen’s eyes that night at the construction site, she would never be able to recall feeling anything. She watched Adam’s body arc crazily into the air, his white shirt gleaming wetly in the truck’s headlights. A gash in his hip flung a geyser of blood into the rain. She threw open her car door and raced toward him as his legs splashed down into the treacherous mud. Yet when the police questioned her, she couldn’t say what had happened. The spool took up residence in her head. *That* she couldn’t prevent. But to describe the pictures? No; description would give them a foothold in reality, a foothold that she could not concede.

So, the images lacked a narrative. And without a narrative there were no feelings. There was just a persistent hum and the endless spooling of the film. The police asked question after question and nothing that she answered made sense. Later, from the written reports, she learned that she had repeatedly told them that she intended to “kill the fuckhead,” instead of responding to their questions.

When she regained her senses, she realized that her life had been upended, but the only specific that she was able to remember about that night, was the blood at Cahuita Clinic. It had been everywhere. On the floor, soaking the sheets covering Adam, and, worst of all, on him. The sight made her retch, but there was nothing in her stomach. Besides, she was gripped by a sense of urgency that overrode everything else. Later, the police told her that as Adam lay unconscious, she had removed stacks of towels from a cabinet to sop up the blood. An orderly pulled her away from Adam, fearing that she would compound his injuries. Finally, a doctor sedated her. And then they had to sedate Diego too, because he kept trying to lick Adam’s face and he snarled at the men who pushed him away. Kristen did recall hearing a woman’s voice say, “First time I’ve had to tranquilize a dog.”

One of the events that Kristen didn’t remember about the clinic was the arrival of a thick-bodied doctor dressed in full surgical gear, with tufts of black hair curling out of the v- neck of his scrubs. As he leaned over Adam he whispered, “C’mon, man, breathe.” A nurse ripped open a package of plastic intubation equipment to keep Kristen’s poor, broken sweetheart alive.

But she saw only the blood.

After the clinic and the police’s questions, life seemed to come to a halt.. Adam was transported by helicopter to Guatemala City, where he lapsed into a coma during surgery. No one could give her a prognosis. Her own life became cadaver-like: week after week of sludge-like misery. She thought about ending it, except that she didn’t have the energy to make a plan. And there was Diego to consider. She rented a room near the hospital in Guatemala City and she and Diego shuttled from there to Adam’s room and back every day.

Months went by. As with most memories from that time, she wasn’t sure whether scenes that played out in her head actually took place, but she seemed to remember that one time when she had fallen asleep in her chair next to Adam’s bed, Gram had appeared.

Surprised, Kristen asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I can only stay a little,” Gram replied. “I came to tell you somethin’.”

“What?”

“I came to tell you, you was never a quitter, and now’s not the time to start.”

Then Gram disappeared.

Kristen’s misery prevailed over everything. She existed tenuously in a surreal world: muted gibberish on the intercom, snacks that crinkled in their packets, and unearthly walks in a litter-strewn park. Diego plodded along, head down, tail drooping.

One unexpected day, at one-twenty on a Wednesday afternoon, life sputtered, wheezed, and started up again, coughing its way back like a rusty generator after a season of neglect. Without warning, as Diego and Kristen sat forlornly watching a TV quiz show in Adam’s room, the patient turned his head. His eyes fluttered, opened, closed, then fluttered again.

Kristen watched, dumbfounded. Adam’s hand moved. The beeping machines to which he was tethered changed tones and suddenly, doctors of all sizes, shapes, and colors poured into the room, snatching up IV lines, logging into computers, checking plastic tubes, and placing sensors. They seemed to swarm Adam’s pale body. Unable to get close, Kristen wrapped her arms around Diego and gulped down sobs. But Diego squirmed away from her embrace and climbed past the doctors onto Adam’s bed growling at anyone who tried to stop him. To dissipate the brouhaha caused by Diego’s tenacity, the neurologist in charge admonished the assembled company to leave the goddamn dog alone.

“That mutt’s got more medicine in one paw than most of you have in your frantic little brains,” he said as he issued an order for a PET scan.

Adam’s faltering gaze drifted downward, apparently trying to make out the furry head that lay against his bare arm.

His whisper was barely audible. “Go.”

Kristen shoved a doctor aside. “Yes, Diego,” she replied, tears rolling down her face. Slowly, Adam raised his gaze in the direction of her voice. The doctors kept working.

“Ad?”

“Not bad, good.” she told him. “Do you want to know anything?”

“Aye er,” he replied, closing his eyes and drifting away again. Her heartbeat quickened as the head neurologist scanned various screens.

“It’s okay,” he assured her, “he’s just sleeping. We need some tests to confirm it, but it looks like he’s coming out of it. Don’t worry about his speech, he’s probably just too tired to form consonants.”

A nurse and two hospital transport aids hung equipment on various protuberances that poked out from the bed frame. It was only a couple of minutes before they wheeled Adam out the door, Diego and all. Doctors encircled them like an armed escort.

“Where are you taking him?” Kristen cried.

“Intensive Care. Tell the dog to stay with you,” the neurologist called over his shoulder. Kristen noticed that his nameplate read “*Enrique Santiago, DM, Hefe de Neurologia.*” She vaguely remembered hearing him explain things that made no sense at the time, on that surreal night when they’d helicoptered Adam from Cahuita to the Guatemala City Hospital. *That was another era*, she thought, *more an excerpt from a history book than a life*. She trotted into the hall after Adam’s retreating bed to get Diego. The dog would know from her demeanor that now they had a chance.

**Epilogue**

Adam, Kristen, Adrian, Marita, Luc Vargas, the Chief of the Guatemala City Police, and even the American government poured out a torrent of evidence. Adam testified via video, and Kristen made three separate trips to Guatemala City from Houston, where Adam was in rehab. Yet Caritec escaped with just the loss of their wastewater treatment plant contract and a slap on the wrist.

The Guatemala prosecutor succeeded in getting the murder and assault cases heard in the Guatemala City Circuit Court. Likewise, for the environmental case. This was all good news, because Guatemala’s circuit courts were like federal courts in the U.S., and they ranked second only to the Supreme Court. Normally circuit courts heard appeals, but the circuit judge, the *colegiado de circuito,* chose to interpret the case as a *caso de amparo*, a matter involving protection.

In Guatemala, judges decided whether they would hear a case, at least at the *Circuito* level. And, Kristen learned, they had been known to define protection as anything from complaints by those who hadn’t obtained the protection of the law, to criminal activity by people who ran protection rackets.

As luck would have it, the judge of the Guatemala City Circuit Court interpreted the sewage dumping matter as the prosecutor petitioning the court to protect the environment. But he refused to separate the pollution charge from Raoul Bautista’s disappearance, Cameron’s attempt to kill Adam, or Kristen’s kidnapping and torture. He ruled that they were all part of the same case. Kristen didn’t know what his reasoning was, because by the time they found out who would hear the case, she and Adam were struggling to rebuild their lives, and she was sick of the whole business.

In Caritec’s favor was the fact that, for all intents and purposes, juries didn’t exist in Guatemala. There were just judges, and the only ones empaneled were those on the Supreme Court. So, the case against Caritec depended on just one man, and it was bound to be a man.

As Luc Vargas pointed out when he updated Kristen on the phone, no one was immune to bribery. If the price was high enough, judges could be bought. And of course, the one assigned to the Caritec matter had been. He rendered his decision in a hundred pages of mumbo jumbo and obfuscation. The meaning of the evidence was unclear, he ruled. For example, it was a dark rainy night when Cameron tried to kill Adam, so no one could be sure who was driving the dump truck. He did order Cameron deported to Trinidad on the grounds that he knew about the plan to dump raw sewage.

As for the Caritec employees who had pressured Adam into laundering money, they were convicted of interfering with a foreign enterprise and fined. Supposedly, the people who had authored the plan to dump sewage could not be identified with any certainty; so, the Caritec Executive Committee was censured for incidences of mismanagement that threatened Guatemala’s natural resources, and Caritec was banned from doing business in there. Caritec’s Board of Directors was never brought into the picture.

The construction of the waste water treatment plant was turned back to the Guatemala government which contracted it out again. The judge had made no specific provision for ripping out the completed portion of the pipeline that was to bypass the purification process.

In a separate case that was heard in a local Izobal court, despite the circuit court judge’s refusal to separate it from the pollution charge, the thugs who abducted Kristen were convicted of kidnapping and aggravated assault and went to prison for five years each. As Vargas had predicted, they kept quiet about who had hired them. The Caritec supervisors who had been in charge of building the illicit sewage pipes were fined under environmental protection laws.

Adrian Petters was again unemployed and blackballed for testifying against Caritec, as was Marita, although Puma’s Auto Shop did eventually hire her. The problem was that Caritec had provided jobs, and with its banishment, Cahuitans were forced to apply to a different company with no guarantee of success. The new company brought in its own people, most of them cheap labor from Honduras. So, people in town were angry. Adrian and Marita lived in fear, not of their neighbors, but because Caritec had a history of making examples of employees who betrayed them.

Kristen and Adam were less afraid. They lived mostly in Houston. When Kristen traveled to Cahuita to tend to her shop, Caritec appeared to have little interest in her, having lost the waste water treatment plant contract.

Beachcomber continued to employ Adam, though someone else managed their Cahuita casino. Romulus called Houston periodically to fill Adam in and just to chat. Gram was fighting mad and writing letters of protest because the *colegiado de circuito* wouldn’t hear her testimony, even though she flew all the way to Guatemala to appear before him, which she did with full-height crutches jammed into her arm pits, so she could use her hands to gesticulate.

Kristen and Adam struggled to negotiate a less than harmonious relationship, largely because of their incompatible ways of dealing with what had befallen them, and in particular because of Adam’s prolonged, painful, and largely idle recovery. But then, that’s a story for another time.