Latitude 24
Native Tan (Chapters 1 – 11) & 2 Short Stories

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# Table of Contents

Native Tan (Chapters 1 – 11) 1  
Philosopher’s Stone 79  
How Baby Bare Came to Ride a Cadillac Car to Fame 88
Chapter 1

April 2004

Rosemary and Caruso Jones pedaled their fat-tired bicycles home in the fading light of a tropical day. Caruso towed a makeshift carryall, stacks of unsold dresses and shirts flopping about as the narrow wheeled cart bounced along the uneven shoulder of Route 1. Every so often Caruso would stand on the pedals of his cruiser to keep pace with Rosemary riding circles around him.

“No, I think we make just the right amount of ceviche,” Rosemary said as she stopped pedaling, stretched her legs to the side, like outriggers, and drifted behind.

For thirty years they had been selling Rosemary’s silk screened clothes and Caruso’s ceviche on Mallory Square, where tourists and locals gathered to celebrate sunset. The cups of spicy homemade ceviche included a thick slice of banana bread, to cool your mouth, and sold out to street performers and other locals who ate on the run.

Rosemary crossed behind the carryall then pedaled up on Caruso’s right, made a comment about him picking up the pace as she circled in front, put her feet out, and began another loop just as a white Cadillac Escalade, with oversized tires and chrome wheels, sped by.

“I just don’t like those gas guzzlers,” she said. “I got stuck behind one the other day on a narrow street in old-town and couldn’t see a thing in front.” Pulling up abreast of Caruso, she added, “I don’t think the people who drive them ever use their blinkers. You can’t see around them and have no idea where they’re going!”
“The thing is,” said Caruso, “the people who drive them pretty much all wear baseball caps.”

“And, what’s your point?” she asked, crossing in front, her legs becoming outriggers again.

“Well, the thing to do is watch the brim of the cap, if the brim is pointing to the right then it’s a good bet they’ll be heading that way. Just follow the cap, Rosie, just follow the cap.”

***

Kamen, already drunk and sullen, passed the all-too-familiar hippie couple pedaling along the old highway, and his fists tightened on the steering wheel of the Escalade. Angel, in the passenger seat, pulled at the fabric of her shirt, “Hey, I know them, I bought this from them. All the girls at the club buy their clothes.” She watched them fading in the side-view. “I hear they have a son July, and he’s s’posed to be as hot as the month he’s named for, at least that’s what the girls say.” She snorted a mix bag of drugs from a small brown jeweler’s envelope, then turned the envelope inside out, licking both sides clean. “You know,” she said, “I don’t plan on swinging from a pole my whole life, but the money’s so good, it’s not like I could do something else for that kind of money, I mean, what, I’m going be a chambermaid or a bartender or something.”

Kamen, not hearing a word of her non-stop prattle glowered at the hippie couple in the rearview; the veins in his neck and across his forehead pulsed. With arms locked at the elbows, and shoulders pushed flush to the seatback, he released an agonizing long breath, hit the brakes hard while spinning the wheel sharply left
to cross the grass divide. Angel fumbled for the hand-hold in the armrest, leaned against the force of the skid, the sideways slide tunneling out grass and dirt, the wild fishtailing as the screeching tires caught the southbound pavement. Without saying a word, Kamen sped south, glancing through the Escalade’s tinted windows as he passed the couple pedaling north on their rusty bicycles. He slowed, almost to a stop, swinging left again, the divide now a rutted hollow. The SUV bounced hard. Lu Lu, passed out, sprawled across the back seat moaned. Angel’s head banged the roof so hard her eyes watered.

Rosemary and Caruso must have sensed him coming. They had stopped peddling, stood side-by-side straddling their bicycles, looking over their shoulders.

The hum from the oversized tires accelerated into high-pitched crying, then an eerie hum as the Cadillac rocked and swayed across the rumble strips. Caruso threw himself at rosemary desperate to save her. Their terrified screams of disbelief were drowned by the shriek of metal ripping metal, the sickening repetitive thump as they were dragged through the pulverizing crushed coral shoulder. Their mangled bicycles banged and scraped along the undercarriage before breaking free and cart-wheeling down the highway.

Sickened by the blood streaking the windshield Angel squirmed out of her seatbelt, turned, hugged the headrest and dry heaved. Vomit

Lu Lu never stirred, spread-eagled across the rear seat, mouth open, snoring.

Kamen swallowed deep breaths through wet lips, unaffected by the gore, the smell of blood, Angel’s deep throated retches. He turned into the private drive that led gulf-side, slowing as he round the carriage circle at the entranceway to Shark
Point. Angel grabbed Lu Lu’s oversized bag, her backpack, pulled at the door latch, Kamen grabbed a handful of her shirt as fumbled with the lock, but lost his grip as opened the door and fell from the slow moving Cadillac her backpack cushioned the fall. She stumbled across the highway and waded into the red mangrove on the far side of the northbound lanes.

Kamen drove around the circle, nosed back towards Route 1.

Angel watched the driver’s door open, saw Kamen on the roadway. She moved deeper into the mangrove, arranged the thick pliable branches into a cradle above the tide. She rummaged through Lu Lu’s bag, removed the wadded, sticky bills, over a thousand, she guessed. Lu Lu hustled in the darkened lap dance room, had no boundaries, always did well. A small make-up case held several bags of powder and a handful of pills. Angel pocketed some of the money. The rest, along with the drugs, she buried deep in her backpack.

Kamen had crossed the highway. He was close, maybe twenty yards away, calling her name, there was nothing to be afraid of, he could explain. Ten yards, he ducked down, trying to get a view deeper into the jumble of roots and leaves. Five yards, Angel certain he could see the branches shaking. He duck walked through the maze of slippery mangrove roots, she could him breath. He slipped off a root and slid knee deep into the salt water, regained his footing and backed out.

The sirens saved her. He abandoned the search and ran back to the Escalade, scanned the mangrove one last time before he headed to his home on Shark Point.

Angel stayed deep in the mangrove, the night air warm and salty on her skin, the tide lapping at her toes. She could see the white-yellow burn of emergency flares
in the distance. The hours passed, and the frantic dance of pulsing strobes reflecting off the water and sky dwindled, the warm glow of the road flares faded, and traffic began moving. A group of cars, then after a time another, then another, till the backed-up traffic flowed nonstop. Angel moved from the sheltering mangrove to the side of the road, stuck her finger out, and the third car, a couple of college boys who had come to the Island to party for the weekend, picked her up and rode her to the mainland, but she kept on running. Drug-fueled days, a blur of trains and buses, of hard seats and similar faces, until somewhere, along a rural Northway littered with the dirty remnants of plowed snow, she had enough, and rented a small room. She didn’t go out, but she was too wired to sleep. Brightness created distractions which made it hard to hear, so she didn’t turn on the lights. Several times she got up and tested the hollow door with the loose knob and simple button lock. She rummaged a handful of change from the top pouch of her backpack, the corners of her purse, the pockets of her jeans. It was enough to half-fill a red plastic picnic cup, which she balanced on the doorknob before settling into the dimness.

The worn shades filtered gray shadows that played on the walls and ceiling. Acorns dropped and rolled down the asphalt shingles, pin-balled into the cheap tin gutters. Mesmerized, she tracked one after another, and she wanted to, tried to, but was unable to pull her eyes away, then a car door thudded, a metal gate screeched on rusty hinges, footsteps shuffled through the gravel walk, and she stared at the red cup. Her eyes grew heavy. The cup blurred. It was the sound of her own ragged breathing that jolted her awake and she coiled in raw-edged tension between the coarse sheets on the old metal bed. She thought a shower might soothe her frayed
nerves but it felt like a thousand needles and the running water made it impossible
to hear. She languished in drug induced hypersensitivity, a crippling sense of fear.
On the edge of sanity, she managed, with a desperate, deep sigh, to pull the
threadbare sheet over her head, willed her breaths, in and out, then in and out,
again and again in rhythmic monotony. The warm cloud of breath discharged her
tightly wound emotions, hunger surrendered to fatigue, and her weakened body
collapsed into an exhausted sleep.

When she woke, she took a quick shower and brushed her teeth. Her gums
bled and she started to cry. She pulled from her knapsack a cotton shirt, light blue,
silk screened with a repeating pattern of a stilt house and palm trees which she had
bought from that poor couple at a sunset not long ago. She wiped away her tears and
tried to smooth the wrinkled shirt with her moist hand. Bending, pulling on jeans
made her dizzy. She waited out the dizziness, the tears, and stepped out of the
darkness.
Chapter 2

Two Years Later

July Jones polled his skiff over the white coral sand off the eastern edge of an atoll twenty-five miles west of the Island. The late spring afternoon blistering hot, the slack tide dead still. Shallow water flats that shifted at the whim of currents and seasonal storms bounded the dense maze of mangrove roots and towering branches that rimmed the atoll.

The easternmost mangrove sheltered a wide pool of deep water. July wanted to fish the Tarpon he knew would be laid up in the cool depths of the green water. He had spent many solitary hours polling the shoreline, searching for a spot, a cut, where current gouged out bottom deep enough, an opening wide enough, to float the skiff through the mangrove. The last time out he’d found a narrow door in the confusion of matted branches, a shallow path through the tangled nest of red roots. Just a few more inches of water and he’d be able to work the skiff through. Today he had the spring tide.

July removed his sunglasses and squinted into the glare that glanced off the water and the skiff’s deck, his bare feet burned on the gelcoat. He stared at his reflection in the still water, the sweat dripping from his nose and chin rippling his image. Dipping a five gallon bucket into the bathtub-warm seawater, he splashed the deck, wondered if he had remembered to turn off the dock hose or would find it pressure-burst from the heat.

He poured bottled water onto his sunglass lenses, wiped them clean with the t-shirt looped through and tied onto the steering wheel, noticed the sheen of salt
that layered the deck, felt scratchy from the salt that crusted his skin. Thinking a rain cloud would rinse him and the skiff cool and clean, he looked into the sky.

July realized he was stalling, _not today_, he thought.

The still, flat black water mirrored the sky disguised shallows from depths, obscured the tells that guided him. The horizon lost in a mirrored image of clouds and sky.

As the bow slid a slow, graceful arc towards home, July remembered how his father would piggyback his mother home from moonlit walks on the beach. She’d sit high on his back, arms snug around his neck, her sultry voice carrying over the water.

July punched the throttle into the corner, and the skiff jumped onto a plane. He trimmed the outboard and the hull skimmed the surface of the glass lake, a fifty mile per hour double image that bled a wake into the clouds and sky.

The air heavy, wet cotton in his ears, the snap of his wind whipped t-shirt the only sound to break the muted thrum of the outboard, the steady splash of water off the hull.

Keeping the compass needle pointed dead east, one hand on the wheel, the other on the throttle, July fought the sickening feeling that nothing looked or felt familiar. Trusting instincts, he churned the shallow water a coppery blur as he headed home to his stilt house on Finger Key.
Chapter 3

Anyone who’d known Carol when she had been a stripper named Angel would not have recognized her. Her hair was the obvious, easiest, first thing she changed. Learning to live without alcohol or drugs is what took time.

Of all the people squatting at the farmhouse, he was closest to her in age, and she regretted not using that time to say more than hi, or good morning, or how are you. He had narrow shoulders that made his head seem big, movie-star big. And that hair! A matted purple-black laced with yellow hues. Not that long ago he’d greased it into optic-orange spikes, before that wore it shaved close and dyed a shade of green not found in nature. He had a sweet innocence in his manner, his pudgy, childlike face and goofy expressions, which is why everyone at the farmhouse took to calling him Potato Head. Carol hated to remember him as Potato Head, wished she’d known his real name.

The boys talked around him as if he weren’t there, but he knew they weren’t being mean, they just thought nothing clicked with him. Today would be different, he’d show them that he could top off the generator without their help. He’d watched it being done more than once, was sure he could do it.

Without killing the engine, he unscrewed the gas cap and left it dangling, dancing on its chain, against the side of the tank, the sloshing, effervescing fuel drizzling onto the hot engine, the sleeve of his shirt.

_Maybe I should’ve killed the engine, but then, wouldn’t the power go out? I’ll need to work fast._
He reached for the glass jug of siphoned gas, then stooped to see into the dark tank. A mist of fuel sheened his purple-black hair.

*I should kill the engine.* Then he remembered. *I need to get the level. I need to see into the tank. I know, I know,* he told himself, *go slow, see how much and be careful not to spill.*

He moved the glass jug to his left hand and dug into the watch pocket of his jeans with his right. In a practiced move, he flicked open the dented Zippo and sparked it along the edge of his jeans, smiling, *just like that movie star, you know, what’s his name, the one with the ducktail haircut.*

The sudden whoosh of fumes rocked him back, the jug shattered as he fell to the ground soaked by gas in a bubble of blue haze. He wondered why he felt so cold. A memory of his mother and the neighborhood women pressing alcohol-soaked towels on his fevered body flashed through his mind.

*I need to stand up.*

He made it onto his knees, waved his hands through the air, mesmerized by the swirl of yellows, oranges and reds that trailed his fingers, crept up his arms, and crawled over his body. No one heard his scream. The bubble burst in an explosive vacuum of flames searing that agonizing cry in his lungs. He died on his knees, as if praying.

They were squatters, there was no money, they didn’t need the police. The boys buried him out back in the dark loam of a long ago garden. They didn’t say, but they were thankful he burnt balled up on his knees because the hole didn’t need to be that big.
Carol, woke at midnight feeling queasy. A cloying taste burned the back of her throat. Someone had put plastic in the fireplace, the acrid black motes hovered in the air, coated her tongue. Coughing up black phlegm, she walked barefoot in an oversized t-shirt into a swirling snowstorm. Dizzy, silver stars shooting her eyes, sweat beading on her forehead, she scooped up handfuls of snow to wash the chemical taste from her mouth. On unsteady legs she made her way across the fallow field to the barn. The sagging door had frozen on rusty rollers, but the wooden slats were old and soft. She wedged her fingers in the narrow opening, pulling until the door bent and scraped open enough for her to squeeze through. The barn smelled of damp dirt and old hay, and she took deep breaths. Walking up the ramp into the loft, she wrapped herself in old burlap tarps, buried herself deep in the hay and slept until the staccato lights woke her at dawn.

With a tight fist she rubbed a circle through the iced window glass. Across the field, wind-carved waves of snow draped the farmhouse. Blue-white strobes inside the grills and windshields of unmarked police cars stuttered across the frozen surface sparking the icicles hanging from the gutters and porch railings into prisms.

She watched as one of the boys, clothes and boots in hand, wedged himself out a narrow window onto the porch roof, and sliding, arms wind-milling, clothes scattering, tumbled into a backyard drift. Men in black, yellow block letters on the backs of their jackets, pants tucked into steel-shined boots, high stepped through the frozen surface of the knee-deep snow to surround him.

Carol pulled the burlap up under her chin and squirmed deeper into the hay, her fist wiping the fog of breath from the window before it froze.
The police escorted groups of two or three from the farmhouse. A man in a suit walked into the deep drifts between the house and the barn. He lit a cigarette, stared across the snow.

Carol stared back through her fist-sized hole.

\textit{It's too cold, the snow is too deep, that's as far as he's willing to go. But what if he does, what's the worst that can happen? They couldn't be here because of Potato Head, it's too soon. It must be something else.}

She squirmed deeper into the hay, trying to find some warmth, scratched at the icy window with numb fingers and watched the man.

A gust of wind shook the barn. A curtain of flurries swirled down from the roof.

\textit{I know, she thought, if he comes this far, I'll offer a trade. That's what I'll do, give something to get something. I'll give them Kamen. I'll say I know who ran over a husband and wife two years ago in Florida, an unsolved hit and run, a cold-blooded murder.}

\textit{But would he believe me? It'd be the story of a stripper, a nobody, against a rich somebody.}

\textit{Why's he standing there? What's he staring at? Doesn't he feel the cold?}

\textit{He'll want to know it all, everything that happened. He'll want to know why, that'd be important, the why always is. I don't know why.}

She decided she would tell that man standing out there in the cold everything. After all, it's the truth. She'd tell him, then be free of it.
The man flicked his cigarette into the snow and walked back to the house. An hour later they were gone, but by then the cold weakened, tired her. The wind-blown snow between the house and barn so deep it became a struggle to lift her bare legs. She stepped on a section of buried fence, the beam split, a hushed crack that dropped her into a cradle of snow. She drifted off. The cawing of crows woke her, big and black on the splintered fencepost, iridescent against the snow, yellow beaks bright against the blue sky.

Even without heat, the house felt warm to her. She rummaged from room to room, a throwaway phone, heavy socks, underwear, shirts, pants, gloves, boots and a jacket. Room to room, collecting the best of each and everyone’s clothes, then layering it all on, getting warmer and warmer till her skin burned with a thousand needles, and she curled up, waiting out the pain.

She left the farmhouse and set off towards town. After a while, a farmer picked her up, and she made up a story. Playing with the truth had always come easy to her.

She took one bus, then another, getting farther and farther from the snow and cold. She thought of Lu Lu and the Island, thought of being Angel again, getting her old life back. She reminded herself over and over that she hadn’t done anything, didn’t deserve this. She took out the phone, and like magic, the numbers she hadn’t dialed in years followed one after the other.
Chapter 4

Lu Lu flipped the phone shut, tossed it onto the scattered clothes alongside the bed. Fighting wooziness with determined half-blind steps, she staggered into the bathroom, slumped head down over the sink.

*Why would she call? After two years, why now? Scamming to get out of jail? Strung out? It’s snowing here? Where the fuck is it snowing? Where is she? It doesn’t matter, she’s coming, little Angel needs her momma bare.*

Lu Lu filled the sink, gripped its porcelain sides, took a deep breath, and pushed her face under, staying under, punishing herself in the cold water. A minute, two minutes, darkness closing. *The breaking point, where’s my breaking point.* She tightened her grip, pulled herself deeper. Water sloshed onto the floor, trickled into her mouth and nose, her head ached, and her arms began to tremble. Bursting up she sucked a deep, hurtful breath, then another and another.

A whirl of black mascara circled the drain.

*Angel what are you thinking? Why would you come here?*

On her way back to bed she posed naked before the ornate wood-framed mirror fixed to the marbled-top antique dresser. Dispassionate, turning half round right, then left, right, then left, an abstract of a girl she had trouble remembering. She grabbed a nipple between her thumb and forefinger, pulled, then twisted hard, felt nothing, and didn’t care. Leaned into the mirrored web of fine golden cracks, and stroked the perverse Botox injection that bubbled the corner of her upper lip.

Hip-cocked, slow spin, exaggerated sway, she watched herself catwalk from the mirror, fall onto the bed. After a moment she stretched half off the mattress and
wrapped her fingers around the strap of the oversized bag lying on the floor. She dumped the bag, fanned everything out. Half on, half off the bed she collected the bills, smoothed them into a pile, comingling denominations and condition, wet, crumbled, torn. She didn’t count it. Uninterested in the scrawled names and numbers, she pressed the bar napkins, match books, and the torn-off cuff of a shirt into a loose ragged ball and tossed it towards the wastebasket across the room.

I remember torn cuff, he wanted Kayla and I to leave with him, said he buy our nights out, then pay us half to go home with him. He said, it’s half the work if there are two of you, should be half the price. Thought he was being clever, funny, just like my mom’s second husband, but Kayla says all the creepers remind me of him. Kayla wanted no part of it. She had her blond, Brazilian Barbi thing going, had two boys on a string. The creeper got mad, said I looked cheap. I should have dosed him, emptied his credit cards. Creeps like him, they just take it.

Untangling the charging unit and connecting it to her phone, Lu Lu managed, without getting up, to plug it into a wall socket. She dug out a bent, crushed cigarette, which she straightened, tamped, and lit. She tossed the lit match towards the night table where a glass half-filled with gin, tonic, ashes and cigarette butts sat in a puddle of condensation. For a moment Lu Lu relaxed, lying back, blowing smoke at the ceiling fan, flicking ashes in the direction of the glass.

Why the fuck would she call? Why would she think all of a sudden everything’s ok?

Lu Lu had always known something happened that night with Kamen. The local couple, the horrible hit and run, was in all the papers. Angel disappearing like
she did. Kamen never said a word, for a while she thought Angel was dead, but then Clayton, the DEA Kamen had in his pocket, kept asking about her, told Lu Lu it would be worth her while to let him know if she heard anything.

Lu Lu stood up, hurried several deep drags, the glowing, red hot cigarette never left her lips, smoke streamed into the pull of the ceiling fan.

The butt sizzled a slow death in the glass as she walked away.

Lu Lu, a serial bed hopper, lived at any number of houses around the Island. Fragmented nights with convenient friends whose chaotic stories became hers. Here, she had a small section of his closet. She could push him all she wanted, discomforting, nonsensical antics, mean craziness, sometimes coy little girl, play him, toy with him, wear him down. She had him from the moment they met in his squared away, obsessive compulsive office. For a second she wondered how a neurotic therapist could tolerate cluttered minds, then she seduced him on his tidy desk. It’s what she did; she could be anything for anyone.

He should have known better, made it too easy. It’s his fault. It’s on him. He should have seen right through me. He should have recognized me as someone without happy endings. For someone so good at asking the right questions, he doesn’t know shit. I could stick around, wait for him to get home, get passive aggressive, tell him I’m on my way to meet Clayton. He’ll say Clayton. That man is he’s bad news. I shouldn’t let the DEA own me. They’re just using you. He’d tell me, they don’t care about you.

Then I could get hissy, maybe tell him I’ve been hearing that shit my whole life! But it’d be better if I hang my head, look lost, that will pull at his heart strings.
It’s true, he’ll say, they’re playing with your self-esteem. Giving you drugs to self-medicate your problems isn’t helping.

Then I’d get aggressive. I’d tell him for a therapist you don’t know shit. Men, they play with your self-esteem, that’s what they do. At least Clayton keeps me in drugs, and out of jail.

Then I’d let him off the hook, get passive aggressive, therapist love that shit. I’d say, Clayton would make a call. He’d be happy to set-up that creeper from last night, bust him, lock him up. He’d do that for me in a heartbeat, I know he would.

Concerned, he’ll ask, what creeper, what happened last night? Then we’ll get into the whole, boo-hoo working-as-a-stripper-thing.

Yeah, fuck that, I don’t need that today. I gotta get out of here before he gets home.

Lu Lu showered with the curtain open. Afterwards, because of his OCD, she lifted a few strands of her brittle blond hair from the drain and worked them into the soft wetness of the bar soap, ignoring, refusing to think about, the excessive amount of hair in the drain. After brushing with his toothbrush, she left it in the basin, the oozing tube squeezed from the middle on the side of the sink.

At the closet she walked her fingers over Fendi, Gucci, D&G, gifts from men she didn’t remember. She paused to caress a pair of glove-soft black leather pants, her grey eyes widened, unblinking. Her body froze, one arm outstretched, one bent at her side. An involuntary failsafe fought against the blur of agonized memories she refused to confront and shut down her consciousness. The moment lingered. Her
breathing slowed. The ceiling fan marked time with each slow rotation. Her hair
dripped a puddle on the dark varnished floor.

Reanimated, she snapped paisley shirt and a pair of jeans from adjacent
hangers and stomped to the center of the room. She pulled the too-tight jeans over
her long legs, worked them low to flaunt her flat stomach and the rounded points of
her hips. She ran her hands over her body until goose-bumps excited her skin, taut
and alive. She tied the bright blue-green paisley off midriff, left the buttons
unfastened.

In the kitchen she rooted through a small draw-string purse, searched the
pockets of her big bag, found the bars of Xanax in a crumbled cigarette pack. She
crushed the pills with the backside of a spoon, mixed in the remnants of white
powder from the corner of a baggie, then, using a rolled up dollar bill, inhaled the
pile in one loud snort. She tilted her head back and let the drip numb her throat.
Removing a tissue from a small package, she wiped her nose, then squeezed the
tissue in the middle and let it fall to the floor. Lu Lu’s little white flowers.

Lu Lu licked the spoon, ran a finger through the white streaks on the counter
then along her gums. She left the bag, spoon, and cloudy smudge on the counter. She
would have to reload. Clayton would take care of that; after all, she had Angel to
trade.

Clear-headed and feeling alive, she called dispatch, then meowed and purred
until the house cat showed himself. Leaving the door ajar, she went to meet the
soon-to-be-tormented taxi driver at the curb.
Chapter 5

Moonlit shadows swayed on the walls and ceiling of the quiet house. July, rolled out of bed, reached up, pulled the chain dangling from the ceiling fan, heard the click, the whirr of the motor. Sometimes the power would go out and the sudden stillness would wake July, but not tonight, tonight it was something else.

July timed his days by the sun, the tides, and physical exhaustion. His alarm clock was the breeze that stirred at sunrise and the creaking and pinging of his stilt house, as its Dade pine planking and tin roof eased into another day under the tropical sun. The house his father had built, where July had been born. His father loved to complain that the planking, scavenged from the sea and the beach was so hardened by nature that driving nails was more an art than a labor. The tin roof appeared haphazard, doubled up, or a veneer of the thinnest gauge, bowed out, or bowl-like between joists, became a whimsical instrument to be played by the rain. His parents had joked that the distinctive lilt of the locals blended a syrupy Cajun drawl with a sleepy Bahamian inflection, spoken at a beat born from the rhythms of rain falling on a tin roof.

July lay back down, began counting the star-like headlights, rounding the curve onto Channel Bridge. Through the clean night air, over the black moonlit water, the twinkling lights seemed far away. July thought of his mother and father and their friends boarding the old school bus up north and heading out to live in paradise. Along the way they painted over the ‘s’ in school to appease a Georgia State Trooper, then provoked him by adding flowers and peace symbols.
The ‘chool’ bus carried them down the coast and over the old highway that ran the length of the elongated comma of coral islands to the end of the road. As a group they settled on Finger Key. Thirty-six acres of coconut palms, pine trees and mangrove pointing into the ocean, one channel north of the main island, one channel south of the commercial docks.

Over the years, the group dwindled. Most headed back home, a few deeper into the tropics, until it was just July and his parents. His mother silk-screened cotton shirts and dresses in the ‘chool’ bus, a workshop now, sheltered from the sun between the pilings of their stilt house. His father fished the morning tides, haggled prices at the fish house, sweated nails in the midday heat. In late afternoon they would work together making conch ceviche and coconut or banana bread to sell alongside the painted clothes.

Now, it was just July, listening for sounds in the dark.

And then, for a moment, he heard it.

He tried to reconcile the sound with a lifetime of sounds. Sometimes drunks from Ana and Eduardo’s bar would wander down the crushed coral drive to swim and smoke dope, always tourists, always loud with drunken laughter. July hated those confrontations.

Cubans, he thought, refugees, generations of a family dragging a stricken boat ashore. It wasn’t unusual for a raft, a boat, or a miraculous floating car, to wash up on his beach. July would hand out bottled water, then run up to the bar on the highway and get Ana. But there were no loud voices tonight, no celebration.
July pulled on a pair of shorts. At the bottom of the stairs he took the beach path that wound through a darkened tunnel of sea grape. Counting footsteps he reached the soft carpet of needles beneath the Australian pines. He thought the moonlight was playing tricks, but no, there was no mistaking the black upper and white lower body of a killer whale. Arched, almost touching the sand, the lifeless dorsal fin had to be six or seven feet long. July moved along the whale's flank running his hand over the smooth, still warm body. He knelt in front of its massive head, and using a drift board, wedged its mouth open, stared at the pairs of teeth. There had to be fifty, each three to four inches long, thick at the base, curving to a rounded point. These he would keep. These he could sell.

July loaded a carryall - an oversize wooden box on large bicycle wheels - with water, gas and the small chainsaw he used to keep the tropics at bay. First, he cut out the jaws and threw them up onto the sand. Then, with the tide turning, he began carving the whale into smaller, then smaller, pieces. The saw bogged down, stalled and he wrestled it free, restarted it, only to have it bind up again. The bloody, oily, cast-off stung his eyes, causing him to stop often and douse himself with fresh water from a gallon container. For the first time in a long while he had purpose, and he stayed with it.
Chapter 6

Billy Boy’s shift was over and he slowly worked his way home, unwinding from the night he often stretched it out till sunrise. He cruised by the coral drive that twisted and turned to his doublewide and July’s stilt house on Finger Key, then continued on the old highway to the commercial docks. Pulling into a lot near one of the abandoned fish houses he parked and locked the patrol. Using the handheld, he radioed in to dispatch.

It wasn’t that long ago the docks were home to commercial fishing boats from all over the Gulf. It wasn’t unusual for boats to be rafted three or more deep along the seawall. Now the handful of boats that put up here were sinking under the weight of fuel prices and government regulations. The fish houses that bought and sold the shrinking catch teetered, a step ahead of the bill collectors, a month or two from taking the cash dangled by developers and their silent partners on the zoning board.

Billy Boy worked his way through the mounds of rotting shrimp nets and took a seat on the crumbling cement headwall where his father long ago tied-up the *Ginger Lynn*. The 40 footer, named for his mother, had been built locally at the once thriving Brothers Boat Yard. Roomy in the bilge with oversized fuel tanks the 40 footers were durable, fast, and became the choice of smugglers as well as fishermen. The brothers were long gone; their fiberglass molds lay half-buried in the overgrown brush alongside a sagging, rusted, chain link fence. The scavenged Brother’s sign hung in a downtown bar that advertised itself as the last bit of old Island life.
The *Ginger Lynn* rested on stands next to Billy Boy’s doublewide. It was all that his father had at the end. Billy Boy was restoring it, the name on its stern a daily reminder of his father’s anguish and the futility of trying to drink emotional torment into oblivion.

Billy Boy froze in the predawn light. The passing headlights of a distant car caused a momentary metallic flash up ahead. On the docks everything, everybody, wore a weathered patina of rust and age, nothing shiny and new. He walked in between the shoulder-high stacks of traps, waiting, watching, till a second car passed and he zeroed in on the shiny front end of a new Cadillac. He dropped into a catcher’s squat, arms over his knees, hands out in front.

The breeze picked up and he thought he heard a chainsaw working off to the west on Finger Key. He smiled, picturing July, a six foot two, broad shouldered, madman from a late-night chiller, chasing drunken tourists off the Finger.

Through the darkened windshield of the Cadillac, cigarettes glowed, one, then another, *at least two of them*, Billy Boy thought.

The chainsaw sputtered and stopped, after a few seconds restarted.

Billy Boy thought about fronting the car, his curiosity giving way to restlessness, but the sound of an approaching boat kept him rooted. A diesel had entered the channel, the unmistakable sound of its un-muffled exhaust reverberating off the seawall and through the derelict buildings as it made its way through the no-wake zone. When the docks were his playground, Billy Boy could name a working boat by its sound long before seeing it.
The doors to the Cadillac opened. There were just the two of them. One tall, over six feet with hair cut so short Billy Boy couldn’t be certain of the color. Sideburns of the same length curved along his jaw, sharp cut to a point at his chin. The shorter one, the driver, had a full head of jet black hair and the stocky build of gym rat. They were both Latino.

The tall one leaned over the car’s hood, dragging on his cigarette tracking the sound of the boat’s diesel engine. He wore a fancy suit and his shoes gleamed wet in the moonlight. The beefier one wore a cheap Hawaiian shirt, its fabric pulled at the buttons, jeans tight in the thighs, scuffed cowboy boots. As the boat drew nearer, they moved side-by-side to the seawall. The tall man careful to avoid the puddles of stagnant water, the other rolled his shoulders, forward and back, neck, side-to-side. The tall one flicked his cigarette, bouncing it, sparking off the cement wall into the bight. The other one flicked his easily into the water and smirked.

Everything a pissing contest, thought Billy Boy.

Billy Boy recognized the diesel as the Flyer III, Captain Bryant’s forty-five footer. The Captain had been Billy Boys’ varsity baseball coach. He and his wife had taken an interest in him after his father drank himself to death.

_He shouldn’t be here, not with these two_, he thought.

The Captain idled the old boat to the seawall. Stepping from behind the wheel, he tossed the bow line to the tall one, who instinctively grabbed it while uncoiling, unleashing a shower of dried salt and weed. Stepping back, holding the line at arm’s length, he brushed off his jacket, then knelt, and wetting a finger worked the toe of a shoe before taking a wrap on a dock cleat. The Captain moved to
the stern and tossed a second line to the other who caught it smartly to the side, avoiding the spray.

Slow and deliberate, the Captain shut down the engine and flicked off the electronics breaker by breaker. In that moment of hard silence the faint drone of the chainsaw drifted across the still water.

The Captain put a foot up on the gunwale, draped an arm across his knee as if he were on the top step of the dugout watching his team. He glanced over his shoulder, following the sound of the chainsaw into the breeze and a smile passed over his face.

The two men shuffled along the headwall, unsure how to close the distance in height and gap, dock to boat. As the boat settled, the tide stretched the lines, the gap widened, but the Captain made no move to shorten the distance.

After a beat the tall man broke into a grin, grew animated.

Billy Boy couldn’t hear, couldn’t decipher the man’s gestures but he saw the Captain had little to say, just a nod now and then.

Backing away to the Cadillac, the taller man put his hand up to his ear, thumb and pinky extended, and Billy Boy heard, “Wednesday night, Thursday morning.” The Captain, foot up on the gunwale, arm across his knee, continued to stare at a spot somewhere in the middle distance.

Billy Boy retreated towards his patrol car, but by then the headlights of the Cadillac were disappeared down Shrimp Road, headed towards the highway. It didn’t matter, he knew when they’d be back. Wednesday, the Captain would get a call with GPS numbers. No doubt a pickup, Billy Boy figured dope, what else. If it
went well, the Captain would walk away with a more than enough to buy a few years’ grace, keep his business running, his family together. Billy Boy understood the box he lived in, they all lived in. The well-to-do, attracted by the Island’s quirkiness, were quick to forsake uniqueness for accustomed amenities. Escalating land values and developers’ greed undermined livelihoods. One by one the castaways, the artists and the adventurous that had shared an affinity with the Island and the surrounding water were forced out. Billy Boy understood the Captain’s frustration.

He needed to think on this a bit, he had until Wednesday.

Steering across the Channel Bridge Billy Boy radioed in, called it a night as he turned onto Finger Key. He short-yelped the siren, got the attention of the old Cuban men who sat at the large spool table outside Maria’s. They waved indifferently, went right back to the morning papers, their routine of politics, con leches, and gossip. Slow and careful, Billy Boy negotiated the maze of scrub bush, coconut palms and mahogany trees that dictated the path of the unimproved road. Several good-sized potholes filled with an opaque milky mix of rainwater and coral forced him to slow to a stop and then inch forward. At the foot of the giant Banyan tree the drive forked left to July’s stilt house, right to Billy Boy’s doublewide. He pulled under the carport and went inside just long enough to remove his shoes, socks, shirt, and load a small cooler with freeze packs and beers before heading to the beach.

Hundreds of Egrets, Herons, Cormorants, Pelicans, and a dozen more species of sea birds swooped the beach. Staggered stacks of whale meat lined the shoreline leeching an oily, bloody run-off through the sand and filming the water’s surface
with a slick that reached the horizon. It seemed as if the rising sun had leaked a red river to the beach. A dorsal fin, a black tip or lemon, broke the surface and took aim towards July. Billy Boy’s shout disappeared into the blare of the chainsaw. The shark’s rapid turn created an explosion of water just a few yards from July. It wasn't alone. The telltale whirlpools created by large fish feeding just below the surface dotted the slick. July fought the torque of the saw and the pull of the current. The muscles and veins along his arms, legs and chest bulged from the strain, blood stained his shorts and darkened his tanned body. Chunks from the castoff clung to strands of his sun-bleached hair that had worked free from the rubber band gathering it into a ponytail.

Billy Boy took a seat in one of the beach chairs well away from the chaos and smell. He put his service weapon on the arm of the chair, opened a beer, and watched his friend at work, shaking his head, amazed and amused.
Chapter 7

The whale lay in pieces at the water’s edge.

July stood with a slight stoop, ears buzzing, arms tingling, in knee deep water at just about full tide. The warm morning breeze tickled his neck hair and he looked into the cloudless sky of another blistering hot day.

Exhausted, aching, he needed to bring the skiff around and start ferrying the chunks of whale, not far, to about seventy-five feet of water. He’d mark the spot. At dusk he’d fish the feeding frenzy it would create.

Turning to gather up his tools, he saw Billy Boy. He walked towards him, stopping every few feet admire his work. Smirking, he collapsed into one of the beach chairs, asked, “And, how was your night?”

Billy Boy reached into the cooler, grabbed July a beer, “How long you been at this?”

July dribbled a long, thirsty, drink, “About five or six hours, I guess. The tide dead low, turning, when I started,” he wiped his chin with a blood-stained hand, guzzled another long drink.

Billy Boy pointed his brown bottle towards the river of red running to the horizon.

July saw the sharks swirling in the greasy slick, the school fish so thick the water boiled. “In the moonlight with all the noise, I never noticed.” He looked at his shorts, his chest, ran a hand over the top of his head and rebound his hair, “You’d have to be a jerk to stand out there in that. Just look at all those toothy critters.”
“Jesus, July, what a fucking mess. I expect the gray boat people will be here soon, find some law you’ve broken, write you up. Hell, you know that had to be protected, endangered, or something.”

“What, you think I went out in the dark and harpooned it? Shit, it just came up in here on its own, must have thought it was somewhere safe, maybe it came here to die.”

“It stinks already.”

“Wait till the sun gets a little higher.” July pointed at a light tackle boat rounding the point. “Look what the birds brought in.”

With outboards tilted, the light tackle boat wound its way slowly through the cut in the sandy flat. The Captain motored in close enough to be heard, “What the hell was that, a whale? Ain’t never seen or heard of a whale being captured down here.”

“No sir,” July hollered. “Me either. It seems to attract a lot of fish though, looks like it could be good chum or bait.”

“You looking to get rid-a-it?”

“Help yourself. Put it on the radio, save me a lot of trouble.”

The Captain pointed the bow into the sand and his charter jumped onto the beach and began filling laundry baskets with the oily, bloody chunks. July and Billy Boy could hear the intermittent static and voices from the Captain’s VHF. Within minutes a half dozen light tackle guides were nosing their bows into the beach.

Billy Boy reached for another couple of beers and broke into a grin, nodded down the beach.
Buddy Love had decided to join the party. Running along, snout pointing left, hind legs crabbing right, slowing to straighten out his drift he glanced towards July for encouragement, then charged into the birds. The birds flew up hovering just out of reach till he passed then landed, got the measure of Buddy Love's awkwardness, his slow turn, the deliberate lining up for a second charge, then again, in unison, they hovered. Buddy Love made a pass and they came down. On and on, up and down, bizarre, morning calisthenics. The light tackle guides yelled and laughed. Their charters scrambled back and forth balancing overfilled baskets and coolers of whale meat while they waved away whirling birds and nervously looked for sharks. It was quite the scene, the liveliest the beach had been for years.

Then everything stopped, the birds hovered, the fisherman quieted.

Buddy Love had caught a tern.

He turned towards July, bird in mouth.

“Now what?” wondered July.

Buddy Love dropped the tern, stared at it, pawed at it. The bird fluttered and squawked while backing away, fluttered again, walked a few more feet, before taking off. Buddy Love followed it in the air for a moment, then lowered his head, trotted up the beach and sat between July and Billy Boy’s chairs.

Buddy Love. July had found him one night while out walking the old highway. Saw him lying along the shoulder of the road, dead, he thought, started to look away, but noticed an eye blink, a shudder. July squatted, laid his hand on the dog’s side and felt a trembling deep inside, but the dog quiet, not even a whimper.
It took forever, a long 30 miles to the 24 hour animal hospital, bumping along in the old truck July borrowed from Eduardo. July talked to the dog the entire way. The dog stared with wet, red, eyes.

The vet asked, “What happened to him?”

“Don’t know, found him on the side of the road, looks like he got hit.”

“Yours?”

“No, never seen him before.”

“You’re July Jones from out on Finger Key.” The vet looked up, shaking his head at the cruelty, “Looks like he got thrown out of a moving car,”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Well, July, he’s pretty broken up probably should be put down. I guess you know that. I guess you want me fix him, else you wouldn’t have made the trip up here.”

“Yes, Sir, I would.”

“The cuts and scrapes are no problem. It’s his legs, the bones in his legs, both legs, here and here will no doubt have to be screwed. Then there’s his ribs, can’t do nothing but tape them and try to keep him immobile. It’s gonna cost you and it’ll be a lot of time minding and caring. Hell, he’s not even your dog.”

“I have the money.” July advised, not insulted, just as a matter of fact.

“I’m not saying you don’t, I’m asking if you’re sure you want to spend it on a dog that isn’t even yours.”

“We’re wasting time,” urged July. “You want something up front?”

The vet shook his head. “I know where you live.”
July didn’t name him Buddy Love, just got in the habit of calling him Buddy. Shea was responsible for the Love. She would say, “Who loves you Buddy, who loves you, Buddy Boy,” things like that.

Buddy Love made his home with July on Finger Key, but for the last month or so he’d been staying out all night and sleeping the days away in Billy Boy’s double wide. Air Conditioned Buddy Love.

July and Billy Boy sat soaking up beer and the morning sun watching the birds and fishing guides clear the beach. “I almost forgot,” July pulled out a few glossy pages folded over a couple of times, flattened and curved into the shape of his back pocket. “The old men at the Cubans’ saw this in the Sunday society supplement. They don’t miss much, those boys.”

“It’s hard to miss anything when you spend hours reading the papers front to back then back to front, wired on high octane coladas,” said Billy Boy, unfolding the pages. He ran the pages over the edge of the chair’s arm to smooth out the creases, then stared at the photograph, read the caption, then stared at the photo again. The couple stood in an orchid garden alongside a bronze sculpted water fixture. The man wore a tuxedo, his wife a white dress that sparkled in the sunlight streaming through the fine spray of water.

Billy Boy’s mother had been one the Islands prettiest girls. Queen of the big parade upstate, most imagined she would become a model or an actress. Everyone agreed she wasn’t long for the Island. But their hopes and her dreams ended with promises and undone jeans on Chica Road. She married and had the baby, Billy Boy.
Things changed when Billy Boy entered high school. His mother took a job as a concierge in one of the new hotels that catered the wealthy. She met the doctor, a famous plastic surgeon, there. He came to town to offshore fish on weekends, and the two of them managed to sneak some time alone. It wasn’t long before she began to disappear for day then two. Then a week, and her nose would be a bit different, her cheeks higher. Subtle changes at first.

Billy Boy’s father started to drink pretty hard around that time and one thing fed on the other. Her disappearances became longer, the changes more exaggerated, then his mother had gone for good.

Billy Boy looked at the photo. “It says it’s her but I don’t see it, don’t recognize her at all.”

“Know what I did?” encouraged July, leaning over, “is cover up everything but her eyes.”

Billy Boy did, “Yeah, I can see her now. I guess it’s hard to change the eyes.”

“You know, we could drive up there, better yet, we could take Kingfish Eddie’s 27 footer and fish our way up there. You know, stop in and see her.”

Billy Boy stared at the photo.

“Well, think about it.”

Billy Boy folded the pages, changed the subject. “Saw something last night while walking the old docks after shift.”

July didn’t say anything, waited.

“Saw the old coach meeting with a couple of cowboys from the mainland. Overheard them making plans for Wednesday. I don't think it's people, don't see him
running people, it has to be dope. He must be hurting for money after all the weather."

"Everyone is."

Billy Boy turned, “You know, you really need to get out more. When’s the last you spoke to anyone besides me? When’s the last time you spoke to anyone in full sentences?"

"Wo, where’s this coming from?"

“No, tell me, when’s the last time?”

“I get my coffee at Maria’s every morning.”

“They see you coming before you wake up and have it ready before you know you even want it. Hell, they don’t even charge you. You just nod and walk away. That’s not a conversation. When’s the last time you interacted, two-way-communicated with someone?”

“I filled the skiff up at the fuel dock the other day, I must’ve interacted and communicated with someone else I wouldn’t of gotten any fuel.”

“No doubt, Dave was working, and he said something like ‘gonna be a hot one,’ you said ‘yup.’ Then you both watched the numbers tick away on the pump.”

“That’s an interaction.”

“Not a conversation.”

“Hey, if I knew you were going to get so pissed I wouldn’t of shown you that picture.”

Billy Boy looked out at the water, took a deep breath. “Why do you suppose she’s the way she is. Why she did what she did?”
“Hell, I don’t know. Shea always thought that maybe your mom just wanted to be left alone. Maybe got tired of always being talked about, figured if she kept changing she’d be invisible, you know, disappear, or at least have a chance of becoming someone else.”

They sat quietly drinking for a few minutes. July wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, noticed how filthy it was, made a disgusted face and spat in the sand, said, “You know, my father used to tell me that when they moved here in the late sixties bales would often wash up on the beach. Pot. They would gather it up, have big parties, barter for different things. Nobody cared, everybody did it. If bales came down a canal on the tide, the neighborhood would pile them on the curb, half to the cops and then divvy the rest up. Everybody made a little, harmless you know, only pot. In the late seventies, early eighties, no more pot. One morning, though, my father found a bale of cocaine on the beach. He went to Kingfish Eddie’s dad, who gave him a fortune for it. My dad didn’t have any pressing use for money but he took it, paid his taxes, bought Mom some new silk screening stuff for her dress and shirt thing. The Judge invested the rest. That bale still pays the taxes and what not. It paid for the sewer lines and laterals after Kamen put the EPA on me.”

“You don’t know that he did that, and you sure as hell don’t know that he was responsible for what happened to your mom and dad. So let’s not do the blame-Kamen-for- everything-bad-that’s-happening thing.”

“Jesus, you’re pissy today. Anyway, a couple of years after that cocaine washed ashore, my father came across another bale floating by. He cut it open and let it dissolve in the water. Said if he had known what a stranglehold that drug could
get on people, all the problems that would follow, he would have done the same to
the first.”

“You got a point?”

“There’s always some good and some bad. Maybe let the captain get a payday
then bust the load a hundred miles up the road. It’s something to think about.”

“Yeah, I got a feeling it’s all I’ll be thinking about.”

“When’s this happening, Wednesday?”

“Yeah, Wednesday night, I guess early Thursday morning”

“Bet that wasn’t the captain’s choice, quiet time of night, which is good, but
still most of the moon. Good and bad again.”

They finished off their beers, gathered up the empties and put them in the
cooler. “Hey, I ran into the Judge, he’s expecting you.”

“Yup, I’ll see him later, that’s if I feel like interacting and communicating.”

Billy Boy ignored him, began walking down the beach, then stopped, turned,
watched July begin to load the carryall. “Wasn’t going to say anything, but you’ll find
out anyway. Kamen’s back in town. Kingfish Eddie saw him yesterday.” He began
walking away again, this time without stopping or turning, yelled, “What’re you
gonna do with the teeth?”

“Sink ‘em under the dock let the baitfish clean them.”
Chapter 8

With arrogant purpose Kamen positioned himself under the overhang of the condominium’s balcony to lessen the glare on his reflection in the sliding glass doors. He adjusted the brass clasps on the blue suspenders embroidered with red ducks and admired the hue and fall of his worsted pinstripe suit pants. He then rolled each sleeve, of the horizontal striped, pinpoint oxford shirt, one full turn below the elbow. Pocketing his left hand, he hooked his right thumb through the suspenders before swiveling a quarter turn left, preening a little taller, flattening the belly that sagged from his thin frame. He felt weightless inside the soft glove-leather Italian loafers.

A gleaming red hard hat rested on his head. He had begun to let his thinning gray brown hair grow long. He had it tied in a short tight ponytail which snaked out of the hardhat, and hung limp over the starched shirt collar.

The blueprints he always carried to building sites were rolled in his hand. It didn’t matter what were on the blueprints or that he had difficulty deciphering them, they were just theatre, a prop he would wave through the air, pausing, pointing at this or that, here or there. With a sideways glance at his reflection he rehearsed pointing at each of the concrete foundation forms that whorled through the site like dominoes. He pulled the brim of the hardhat down to shade his eyes, squared up to the balcony’s rail. Reaching around giving the short ponytail a tug while sucking in his belly, he looked east at Finger Key. In his mind’s eye he saw timeshares, condos, private homes, maybe a four-star resort near the beach and deep water marina on the north-east corner.
“Let it be, leave it pristine,” Kamen’s wife, had chided. “It’s an unhealthy obsession, let it go, it would do your soul good, earn you points in the after-life.” The bitch likened it to the rack of unused surfboards, the bookcase full of unread first editions, the refractor telescope focused on backyard weeds and the litany of expensive things he needed just to have, “arranged,” she said, “to evoke a perception.”

Kamen bounced the rolled blueprints on the balcony’s metal railing. This, he thought, from a woman, who buys her self-esteem on-line, then tracks it to the front door. “Fuck,” he said, slapping the blueprints against the railing. She had been subdued, a regular mouse, when she swallowed a rainbow of pills, then she found something, “ethereal,” she called it. Ethereal apparently comes with opinions about everything, he thought.

They remained together only because they lived apart.

“Fuck,” he said.

Kamen stared across the expanse of shallow water. The late afternoon sun reflected a blinding white target on the pilothouse glass of the dry-docked fishing boat next to Billy Boy’s doublewide. A trailer and a stilt house were the only homes on the Finger. On the highway frontage sat an old concrete block pillbox now the home of Maria and Eduardo’s. The bar-restaurant had been just a few feet from the balcony where he now stood. Pointing the blueprints, he outlined what remained of its footprint. It had cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to buy them out. They had refused offer after offer. The father, Eduardo, always moaned, “It is all we know.”
Maria, the downcast daughter added, “What we would do?” Both throwing their hands up and shaking lowered heads in a well-rehearsed resignation.

“Fuck,” said Kamen. “Fuck them.”

He upped the offer and the second Kamen had signed the inflated contract, their customers picked up the chairs they were sitting in, grabbed a bottle or two from behind the bar, and caravanned down the road the quarter mile to Finger Key. Their business never missed a beat. Kamen found out afterwards that July had given them the land and building for next to nothing, pretty much gave it away.

“That fucking July,” said Kamen.

He stood rigid at the railing, the sun glowed pink on the sand at the tip of Finger Key. My sand, thought Kamen, my sand, his heart started pounding, my sand, that’s my fucking sand. Kamen spent millions every year importing dredged Bahama sand to cover the sharp coral beaches of his properties. Then, every fall, the storm-driven tides stripped the beaches, and the current carried the sand along the curve of the Island right onto the tip of Finger Key. Just steps from July’s stilt home.

My sand, thought Kamen, that’s my sand, that’s my sand, blood thundered in his ears, he crushed the rolled-up blueprints in his fist.

“You look like you’re having a heart attack,” said Clayton, who had walked quietly onto the balcony.

“That’s my sand,” hissed Kamen, exhaling through clenched teeth, fighting to regain some composure, “that’s my sand.”

Clayton followed his gaze, “It’s his now. You could always run the kid over, too.”
Kamen relaxed his grip, “Has the land willed to a conservancy and his girlfriend. I'll never get it if he's dead.”

“I wasn’t being serious.”

“I can't figure where he gets the money to pay the taxes, let alone the improvements.”

Kamen, owed a favor by the EPA, had them look into the septic system on Finger Key. They gave July ninety days to hook up to the city's sewer system or the property would be condemned. Kamen gloated, thought, at last, just one step away from picking up the property for a fraction of its worth. Not only did July make the hookup, he upgraded the electrical and water service.

“I heard he filed preliminary plans for five or six cottages, calls it an old Florida fishing camp,” miffed Kamen. “Where the fuck is he getting this money from? Why don’t you look into that, could be funny business, that’d be right up your alley?”

Clayton leaned against the balcony railing, enjoying the breeze. He'd heard all this before, but it no longer mattered. In a month or so he would put in his papers, take his DEA pension and be far-far away.

Kamen looked Clayton up and down, not even trying to hide his disgust. He worked a finger into the corner of his starched shirt pocket, then broke the seal, corner to corner.

Clayton enjoyed ‘dressing to effect emotion.’ Tonight he looked beyond gawky, blue checked polyester pants, a few inches too short, which drew attention to his sanitary whites and bulky, brown leather, open-toed sandals. He concealed his wiry body, badge, and gun under a loose yellow-green bargain basement woven
pullover, and topped it all off with a narrow-brimmed pork pie hat a la’ Popeye Doyle. The hat exaggerated his large ears, thick, always chapped lips and he wore it with a rakish tilt so he could feel the healing sun burning away the rosacea blooms on his cheeks and chin.

Kamen, disgusted, turned back towards Finger Key. “You know,” he fumed, “I offered his parents millions for that land. The father said, ‘Oh, we could never leave here?’ It’s just a piece of shit stilt house, and he could never leave. I told him to look at it as an investment and like every investment there comes a time to cash it in and reap the return. He laughed at me, said, ‘No place on this Island can be considered an investment if it is your home. Once you sell, you can’t afford to live here anymore. What good is it if you end up having to move somewhere that would never be your hometown, where you don’t know anybody?’”

“I tried to tell him that in a few years this Island wouldn’t be anybody’s hometown. He told me that was the only truthful thing that ever came out of my mouth. Millions, I offered him millions, and he talks to me like that. Who the fuck did he think he was to talk to me like that?” His grip tightened on the blueprints, his face flushed.

Clayton still didn’t bite. He knew better. People like Kamen wore entitlement and lofty self-perception as a birthright.

Clayton adjusted his hat, “Angel called Lu Lu.”

“You’re kidding? Just like that, out of the blue? Did she say where she was?”

“Doesn’t matter, she’s on her way here, she’s coming to see Lu Lu.”

“Why now? What’s she up to? Should we be worried?”
“Don’t know, Lu Lu said something about a snowstorm.”

“What the fuck does that mean? Must be drug talk, right? I bet it’s going to be about money, it’s always about money with people like them.”

Clayton smiled at the irony.

The two of them stood silent at the rail, watched a couple of center consoles follow the red and green channel markers in the shallow cut that separated them from Finger Key.

Clayton re-adjusted his hat.

Kamen tugged his ponytail, “She’s coming back for a payday,” Kamen said.

“What do you think?”

“You think paying her will be the end of it?”

“You deal with these people every day. What do you think?”

‘Me, I’d like to retire with a clean slate. That means not having to worry about any drug addled stripper whores, running off at the mouth to beat a traffic ticket or some shit. I have no idea what they’re up to, but, before I do anything I’ll try to puzzle some kind of truth out of Lu Lu.” Clayton removed the pork-pie, ran his fingers around the brim admiring it.

Kamen frowned, returned his musings eastward, his color darkening, grip on the blueprints tightening.

Clayton held his hat over his heart as he walked away, thinking, that no one could get under Kamen’s skin like that July Jones.
Chapter 9

July woke to the slap of the screen door and the clacking of nails padding across the wooden floor. Buddy Love wandered into the bedroom doorway, head cocked sideways.

“If you’re wondering why I’m still in bed it’s because I’m sore all over,” July told him, “cutting up a whale is harder than you’d think. Hey! You feel like going for a ride in the skiff?”

Buddy Love stretched his paw out, pulled it back, then headed towards the door.

“Whoa, there, give me a minute.” July slid off the bed, onto his feet. Sunlight poured long shadows into the room, five, maybe six o’clock, he thought. Stuffing flip flops into his backpack, he grabbed his favorite hat, his grandfather’s hat, a business man’s hat from a time when steam-shaped crowns and brushed fur felt were a stylish necessity. Over time July had transformed the dashing black Venezia into something sweat-stained, sun bleached, shapeless, but uniquely satisfying.

Under the outdoor shower, the warm water massaged the kinks in his lower back. He thought of his mother, their long ocean swims, reaching out, stretching for every stroke. Eyes open, she’d say, be aware of what’s around you, surprises are for birthdays.

He pulled on a pair of well-worn jeans, tucked a plain white t-shirt into the waistband and set off, bare-chested and bare-footed, along the path of half buried, sand covered, wooden slats that snaked around clumps of sugar palms and led to the foot of a narrow dock and an impatient Buddy Love.
“Billy Boy doesn’t think I interact enough, but I talk to you, don’t I boy?” July pulled up one of the wire mesh traps holding the whale’s teeth. Whenever he caught he large barracuda for bait or chum he’d put its head in a trap and let the crabs and small snappers work on it until only bone, cartilage and teeth were left. An artsy woman, who had known his parents, paid up to fifty dollars for the pointed jaws and savage, sharp teeth. She embedded them in cubes of acrylic Lucite, sold them online.

July took out three of the cleanest whale teeth, let the trap back into the water. “I think these will do just fine,” he said putting them into his back pack. He snugged the skiff to the dock and Buddy Love took one easy step onto the bow casting deck. Untying the single line that ran from a dock cleat to the steering wheel, he pushed off. Unhurried, he let the tide and current carry the skiff. Buddy Love, anticipating the wind, looked forward, snout in the air, then back, forward, then back.

July walked up to the casting deck. He put his hand under Buddy’s snout, looked him in the eye. “Bark and we’ll be up and off. C’mon just one bark. A growl?"

Reticent Buddy Love.

July reached into the console and switched the batteries from ‘off’ to ‘all’ and the electronics woke with a chirp, alerting Buddy Love, who hopped off the forward deck and hunkered down on the cockpit sole. A touch of the key and the powerful 150 horsepower outboard turned over, its power quiet, immediate. They headed southwest, followed the lay of the Island, passing by Kamens latest development-in-progress, and his previous, identical ones. Tracking southwest, past the public beach, the Island curved and the chain hotels with their private beaches flew by.
Then dead west, over hard bottom, they closed in on the broken coral shoreline and the beautifully restored Victorian houses. All but one of the old houses had been converted to a guest house or a restaurant. The exception, of course, was the Judge’s home.

Backing off the throttle, trimming the outboard in the shallow water, July navigated a slow course towards the Judge’s home. Buddy Love returned to the casting deck head up, smelling the air. They angled past the backyard deck of the restaurant adjacent the Judge’s home. The crowd of vacationers sipping martinis and daiquiris, after a day in the sun, crowded the railing.

A loud, heavyset, florid man, trying to hide his girth beneath a bright tropical shirt, explained to everyone in earshot, “That skiff’s been designed for sight fishing in mere inches of water. The flat clear deck’s a casting platform. The polling platform's for quiet stalking.”

July wondered if the fat man had ever fished, or if he had learned the jargon sitting on his couch while watching a fishing show. July was convinced he lived in the age of everybody knowing everything without having any practical knowledge. Just the other day, at the charter boat dock, he overheard a captain regaling a group of tourists with homespun witticisms and fish stories. This particular captain spent his days sitting on the bridge, screaming about improperly set drags, pulled hooks, winding against drag, on and on, and the truth is he had never worked the deck, couldn’t tie a knot, fix a drag, run a pattern, or fight a fish. July figured the captain mirrored words from years of watching and listening; and no doubt realized that after years of running his mouth he would look foolish if he ever tried to learn.
Kingfish Eddie had pigeon-holed the captain as just another loudmouth who had all the answers. Then, beaming his sly, inherited grin, added that people in the know say the captain favored slim, narrow hipped, flat-chested women who resembled boys, and maybe he’s lying to himself about more than fishing.

A woman about July’s age, late 20’s or thereabouts, stood alongside the fat man. A red drink in a long stemmed glass rested on the railing between her forearms. Backlit by the low angle of the sun, her perfect unkempt copper hair was radiant. Her thighs silhouetted within the translucent white cotton dress were tormenting. July’s stare was rewarded with a flirtatious smile, reminding him of the girls he often saw coming and going from Billy Boy’s doublewide. Everyone more than pretty and the few that he’d spoken to seemed nice enough, maybe a little flighty. July thought Billy Boy liked women too much. Shea said that if Billy Boy liked women at all, he wouldn’t be with a different one every night.

Shea and Billy Boy were like cats and dogs, always had been. Now, after all the years, when they went at each other it seemed mechanical, the bitterness so rote, so predictable that either might wave off after one or two caustic digs. July figured in a few years it would become histrionic, a simple frown, a curled lip, a snarl.

July spun the skiff’s stern towards the Judge’s back porch, cut the motor and tilted the outboard to the stops, switched off the electronics. He cast the anchor from the bow, then threw a stern line to the Judge coming down from the porch. Working together, they positioned the skiff in 18 inches of water, deep enough that if waked, the skiff’s hull wouldn’t bounce off the hard bottom.
Buddy Love, teetering, pawing the air, seemed to be thinking of jumping and July used a firm voice, told to cool it more than once. With the skiff hooked, July rolled up his jeans, put on the t-shirt, hat, and shouldered his backpack. Sliding off the bow, he picked up Buddy Love, explaining, as he cradled him to the shoreline, “It’s shallow, uneven, rocky bottom and you don’t need to be popping any screws.”

The Judge hugged July who could feel his frailness and smell the remains of an afternoon whiskey, “You’re a thoughtful boy, I’d knew you’d be here, knew you wouldn’t forget.” The Judge reached down and rubbed Buddy Love’s head, “Hey, big fella, how’re you doing?”

Buddy Love looked up at July, “Go on, I’ll see you later,” July waved toward the street and Buddy Love, head held high, rambled crookedly towards the street.

“That’s a good dog you got there, July,” the Judge watched Buddy Love’s peculiar gait, “How’s his legs holding up?”

“He’s fine, Judge, and he’s not mine or anybody’s dog as far as I can tell. That dog is in his own world.”

The Judge smiled, pointed at the skiff.

“Well,” said July, “Billy Boy mentioned you wanted to see me.”

“Yes I did, but I didn’t mention the skiff, and I see that lucky 12 weight fly rod, rigged and racked, in the gunwale.”

“Yes sir, it’s the right month and the full moon. I hope it happens for you. Either way, I’ll bring it around, on the moon next month for you to try again.”

“I have a feeling it’s going to happen tonight, right there between the orange triangles.” The Judge pointed offshore where several markers were lined up to warn
boaters that dredged coral had been dumped no more than ten feet below the surface.

With practiced eyes the Judge and July scanned the water for any sign that the big fish were gearing up for a feast. July wondered if his friend’s eighty year old body could endure a prolonged fight with a fish that would, without a doubt, outweigh him. The Judge looked fit enough but when they turned and walked to the porch, July noticed bruising, deep red and black blemishes flaring on the Judge’s tanned, bird-like legs. It made July sad, then embarrassed, as though he had seen something that should be private.

Dressed in well-worn comfort clothes, cargo pants under a loose housedress cinched with a beaded Indian belt and fuzzy slippers, Miss Albrey met them on the porch. “July Jones, look at you. You are a sight. Such a beautiful boy. You know, I ran into Shea at the market the other day.”

July got a whiff of the same whiskey and smiled, “No ma’am, I didn’t. We have plans to get together later when she gets off work.”

“What are you two up to out here? What’s got the Judge so worked up that he’s spent most of the day staring at the water?”

“It’s the red worm hatch, Miss Albrey.”

“The Palolo worm hatch,” added the Judge.

July nodded, “Every year, this month or next, and only on the moon they hatch by the thousands and start swimming to the reef. Tarpon eat ‘em like candy, it’s great fun, great fishing.”
She eyed the Judge, who looked everywhere but at her. “So you think you’re going big fish fishing, do you? You know what the doctor said about doing stupid things. Well, this might be just what he had in mind.”

The Judge, not looking at her so much as looking for permission, “That’s why I was hoping you’d come with.”

“I never saw no point in wetting a line, except for catching dinner. Sport fishing is for idle rich folks, and I sure don’t like the idea of going out on the ocean in that little boat at night.”

“We’re only going out to those markers right over there.”

“That’s it? You expect to catch something so close? Well, I suppose I’ll humor you, could pack a cooler with some cherry tea and sandwiches, keep an eye on you.”

She walked backed into the house chuckling, "We’re gonna be a sight. A big old fish attached to a crazy, eighty some year old white man while a perfectly sane ninety year old black woman is holding him in the boat. Yes, sir, wouldn’t be at all surprised if we end up getting towed past the horizon.”

“Well, that seems almost biblical, Miss Albrey, and not a bad way to go out at all!” The Judge yelled after her.

July asked, “Miss Albrey, she’s really ninety?”

“Maybe more July. No telling. It’s my opinion that she looks and acts the same as she did thirty years ago. She’s still watching after everybody, seems to me she’s spent her whole life doing that. Comes by here four or five times a week, cooks and cleans, doesn’t think I’m up to it anymore.” He became contemplative for a moment. “If it wasn’t cooking and cleaning, she’d find another reason. Not that she needs one.
No, not at all. There aren’t many of us left, July.” He leaned back, poked his nose up
exaggerating a deep inhale. “Smell that?”

July did. The air smelled nothing like it did back on Finger Key, not a hint of
jasmine, acacia or spicewood, more of a clinging, overwhelming representation of
smells. “Coconuts and lemons?”

The Judge laughed. “Well, it what somebody thinks coconuts and lemons
should smell like. I’m surrounded by vacationers who oil up with one thing or
another to keep from burning during the day, then something entirely else at night
to ease the pain of what sun got through.”

The Judge glanced towards the neighboring restaurant’s deck, thankful it was
hidden behind a deep hedge of tropical plants and a flowering bougainvillea vine.
“No, July. You don’t see many native tans these days.” He squeezed July’s forearm,
glanced across the surface of the water. “Tell me about the whale.”

“You heard about that, did you?”

“Sure. You and that whale were the number one breakfast and lunch
conversation down at the pharmacy’s counter.”

July reached into his faded red backpack set one of the whale’s teeth upright
on the table.

“For me?”

July nodded.

The Judge hefted the tooth, surprised by its weight. He made an approving
face.
“Well sir, it beached in the moonlight, too big and heavy to tow into deep water. I knew if I waited, the news people would show up, then the tree-huggers with their bullshit, so I went to work on it with a chainsaw, and I tell you it felt good to have a purpose, something to do, something to see through to the finish.”

The Judge parsed July’s words, “Not if that purpose is something stupid.” He squeezed July’s forearm again. “I’ve seen it over and over again when I sat as a Judge and I can tell you revenge is dangerous motivation. It will eat at you, and eat at you, and before you know it your entire life will be poisoned by bitter thoughts. You’ve got to put this behind you somehow.”

July looked down at the table, afraid the Judge knew him too well, “I think about it all the time, you know,” said July, “It’s the knowing, but not knowing for sure. I feel like I have to do something, but I don’t know what. I go around in circles thinking about it.”

“I Googled Kamen,” the Judge laughed, “I’d rather be chooglin’ but at my age not much chooglin’ going on so I settle for Googlin’. You have no idea what I’m talking about do you?”

“Ah Judge, you’re forgetting how much my mom loved singing along with records.”

“And she had a great voice too, not much of a dancer though. Anyway, I found a short biography on Kamen, longer one for his father, who left him the development business. Not much there, most of its fluff. Did find a news story from a few years back that asked a lot of questions about an auction where Kamen won a big piece of waterfront land. It was government-owned property seized during a
drug and money laundering bust. It seems the property came to auction and Kamen was the only bidder. A lot of people thought prime real estate like that should have drawn more interest. Nothing ever came of it, all the proper notifications, time and place and what not, were on the up and up, the rules bent, not broken. The article didn’t come right out and call it fixed, but it left that impression.”

The Judge drank some iced tea, ran his finger down the glass squeegeeing the beads of moisture. “It happened more than once. Seems Kamen is a very active buyer of forfeited property. Remember the Coconut Palms? That art deco motor court used to be out where the old highway ended and the Boulevard began. Kamen bought that a forfeiture auction for a fraction of its worth.”

“I remember. That was a big bust, the guy who owned it lost his business, houses, cars, boats, just about everything.”

“That’s right he’s still in jail and will be for a while. I knew that fellow for years, thought I knew him pretty good too. None of that made sense to me, never added up.”

The Judge got lost in a thought for a moment. “Anyway, I thought maybe if you find out what happened there you’d get some insight into Kamen’s way of doing things. If anyone knows what that fellow owned that place got mixed up in it’d be Rico. He works that fancy booking-booth, the one with the tin roof up on the north side of the street. Says he remembers you. I told him you might stop by for a chat.”

July scanned the water between the markers.

The Judge focused on the whale tooth, rubbing his thumb back and forth along the transition from smooth white ivory tip to its brown bark-like base.
“I'll look for him tonight.”

The judge set the whale tooth aside, “Make sure you give Shea a hug for me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I suppose you'll be seeing Kingfish Eddie too, you tell him he doesn't need an invitation to come visit.”

“Uh-oh, he hasn't been here?”

“Not in weeks.”

Miss Albrey came out onto the patio humming. “Now that’s a lovely hat, Miss Albrey, a real classic ladies’ sunbonnet.”

“That’s the Judge’s polite way of saying its old, July, but you can bet that when the setting sun gets in his eyes he’ll be wishing for a duckbill.”

“Never had any use for a hat. Besides, after all these years I've got polarized eyes.”

“Cataracts is what you got. I fixed us some shrimp sandwiches; figured if we don't eat 'em, well, then they'll be fine bait.”

“Tonight, we'll have better luck using the red threads out of your hat,” teased the Judge.

Miss Albrey shook her head as if she had never heard anything so stupid. “I'm wondering how you suppose we're going to get ourselves into July’s boat? It’s not like stepping off a dock,”

“Hadn’t thought about that, I suppose we’ll look real foolish, give our audience,” he pointed towards the restaurant’s deck, “a laugh. You don’t mind what
those silly people think, do you? You too self-conscious to look foolish in front of people you'll never see again?"

"Judge, if I never looked foolish, I would've never learned a thing and if I cared about what people thought, I'd never gotten a thing."

July thought about offering to help, but recognized a mischievous casualness in their bantering and didn't want to ruin their fun.

"I overheard you saying you were going downtown tonight to see Kingfish Eddie, well you tell my son, if you should run into him, he could stop by and say hello, too."

"Yes, Maam, you know Fish's mom is still away. I bet your son and him have their hands full keeping an eye on her place and his. You know," July suggested with a grin, "there's no reason you two can't stroll on downtown, have a whiskey or two at Fish's bar."

"Ain't nothing sadder or worse for business than two shriveled up old-timers trying to get down from a bar stool after a few drinks. You just tell that Kingfish Eddie and my son to come visit."
Chapter 10

The young man working the booking booth said Rico would be back in a few minutes, then added, “I can beat any price he gave you, what’re you interested in? Fishing? I can set you up with backcountry, light tackle; you wanna try fly fishing like in the TV shows? No, I think you look more like an offshore kind of guy, how about a Marlin trip?”

“Do you know when he’ll be back?” asked July.

“Don’t know, maybe 10 minutes. But, like I was saying, I can beat any price he gave you, lots of stuff to do. How about a Jet Ski tour, maybe parasailing, snorkeling or a scuba trip, you know, you haven’t experienced the Island till you’ve seen it from the water.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that. I’ll back in a bit.”

Undeterred, the young man continued his spiel, “How about a bicycle tour? An old home tour? Maybe a ghost tour or a bi-plane ride?” By now July had turned the corner but the young Barker went right on. “Who wants to go fishing? Have all kinds of fishing trips. Best boats in town.”

July had trouble reconciling his benign water-view of the Island with the stark, cheap reality of downtown and he breathed easier on the quieter side streets. He killed time walking through the old lanes southwest of the booking booth until he came to the wrought iron gate of the Old Lady’s house. Holding onto the bars, he rested his head in the space between. He had a key to the gate but didn’t use it.

These days, when he fished the northeast, he would tie the skiff up in the mangrove and walk through the scrub to visit the Old Lady in the hospital. He would
spend the time reading to her in a soft voice while she slept. Sometimes, after a day in the hot sun, he’d have trouble keeping his eyes open in the dry cold room and he’d nod off.

Years ago Miss Albrey had taken July aside and explained to him how things had become difficult for the Old Lady and asked if he was interested in helping with the burgeoning chores about her property. He agreed, being more curious than scared. Like everyone on the Island he had heard the stories. It was said by people who did not know her at all that she was crazy. “That crazy Old Lady,” they would say, “once cooled her swimming pool with blocks of ice.” The few that knew her a little would tell you it was rare for her to leave her home and hadn’t been off the island in over sixty years. Eccentric, they thought, not crazy. “Guarding a great secret, and if caught on her property you wouldn’t be seen again,” countered the rumormongers.

Creeping her front porch to ring the doorbell had become a rite of passage, a boyhood double-dare. An unanswered challenge, as far as July knew, but he pushed those thoughts aside the day he began doing odd jobs for the Old Lady.

From an early age, July had spent most of his free time pursuing spooky backcountry fish, a solitary effort, requiring honed instincts, and the ability to interpret the nuance of nature. He found working for the Old Lady very similar. He recognized her wariness of people, and followed a few steps behind, interpreted her gestures, and acknowledged her questioning stares, with a nod.

July worked for the Old Lady through high school, and thought about quitting when he became a full time flats guide. This did not sit well, however, with
his mother and father, who believed that decisions in this life had Karmic consequence in future lives. They reasoned that when July needed a job, the Old Lady had been evenhanded and more than generous, and now, frail and vulnerable, she needed familiarity and trust more than ever. After all, it was just part of a day, here and there, and not a job at all because July and the Old Lady had become friends of a sort, comfortable with each other. July’s mother and father convinced him that he should stay on helping her. “Yes,” they were certain, “that would be the right thing to do.”

The Old Lady was well into her nineties when she un-wrapped a story from tattered memory, a request begging a promise, consented to by silence. Sitting with July on her front porch drinking fresh squeezed lemonade in bright painted tumblers while watching a late afternoon rain wash everything cool and clean. “Edward was such a good looking young man,” she began.

“Edward, Ma’am?”

The Old Lady studied July, maybe searching for something she had not seen before, confirming what she already knew.

“You know, July, you and I, we’re both born in the houses we live in. Not many people can say that anymore.” She began to reach for something in the distance, then caught herself, swatting instead an imaginary mosquito. “My daddy loved it here. I remember as a little girl the Island not being attached to the mainland at all, boat or swim, the only way off. What a great time, everything became a big adventure. My daddy made a fortune doing things polite people, people outside of the backrooms he favored, didn’t talk about. Leaning forward,
coyly smiling, "He might have been a real carouser, stayed away a lot, but my mother would never say." The twinkle in her eyes faded as she settled back. "When the big war came, he went off to Europe and was never the same after that. My mother believed he got gassed over there and it killed him real slow from the inside out. She caught the late summer flu and followed him a few years later, dying peacefully in her bed while the great Labor Day hurricane roared ashore just a few miles north.

July had heard it rumored that the Old Lady had taken care of both her father and mother, and that she was self-taught, shrewd, and grew the fortune her father had left. A few felt her guardedness and less than plain appearance, combined with an eerie insight into business matters and fierce independence, made it difficult for her to garner empathy at a time when women were expected to act a certain way. Most believed her arrogant and deliberate.

"I met Edward in late ’39, a Texas boy, tall, wiry, but powerful, with strong, rough hands. He came to the island to mate on the private offshore boats, big fish fishing, a rich man’s sport then, much more than now. One late summer afternoon he ambled down the street, stopping outside the gate. I’m up to my elbows in the garden, and he just starts talking, like we were best friends.” She paused, picturing him, “What a good looking boy, a storm of brown hair, sunburned with a white halo across his forehead from a sweat-stained cowboy hat he always wore. He would tip that hat with a slight nod never losing eye contact, then a light forefinger touch to the underside of the brim.” She traced a finger along her upper lip, “Had a way of phrasing things that made everything interesting, pleasing to the ear, made me want to hear more.” She shook her head in wonder, sighed. "Whew, could he drink. He’d
come back from a full day trip and spend hours in the bar. Late one night after a
session of bragging and lying with the other mates, he came by, banging away on the
front door, so drunk I couldn’t imagine how he made it over the gate.”

The Old Lady sipped her lemonade, stared off at the gate. As the rain let up,
July stretched his hand over the porch railing and caught warm raindrops sliding off
the tin roof. Watched them puddle in his palm.

Letting out a breath, resigned to telling it through, she continued, “He’d be
gone for a while, then there’d be a knock on the door late at night. It became our
secret. The times were different then, even way down here. One night he showed up
drunk with flowers, can you imagine a drunken fisherman with a bouquet of
flowers,” she covered her mouth with the back of her hand, concealing a smile or
grimace, July couldn’t be sure.

“I looked forward to him coming by. I never told him, but I wished he’d visit
more, stay longer. In the winter of ’42 I didn’t see him at all, no word. He’d been up
to the mainland and enlisted, came back to go out with the boys one last time, to say
his goodbyes. He came by drunk and late with only a few hours before he had to be
on a bus. I thought maybe I could convince him to stay. I was afraid for him, afraid
like my mother had been when my father went off.

For a moment the Old Lady appeared drawn, then her fists clenched and her
face screwed in torment as disjointed memories coalesced into painful reality
through the simple act of speaking them out loud. She reached into the pocket of her
sundress, handed July an old church key. “It seems I’m always tired, out of breath. If
something should happen, would you, well, I trust that you’ll know what to do.”
July never mentioned a word about that afternoon’s strange conversation to anyone, not his parents, not Miss Albrey, not even Shea or the Judge. The key he kept in a wooden cigar box. Some days, he figured the Old Lady had gone batty, the key, a prop from a muddled memory and the paperback mysteries she favored. Other times he imagined the treasure chest it would open.

July slowly made his back to the booking booth. An older man, with short, dried-out, brown hair, creased, weathered skin, and lines at the corner of his eyes from squinting into the bright sunlight, stood next to the young barker who was dealing with a customer. The older man was on the phone and scribbling onto a pad. He wore a long sleeved pink shirt and tan twill cargo pants, stitched images of game fish on a leather belt, and dock-siders without socks. July thought he looked like he stepped out of catalogue, a salesman on holiday.

The barker was busy giving his spiel to the customer but July caught the older man’s eye who held up a finger and went on with his phone call. July flipped through the pages of one of the large binders on the counter. On each page, photos of boats, anglers, and catches, bikini-clad women in the background. Subliminal promises of sex came with just about everything in a tourist town.

The barker finished with his customer and noticed July paging through the book. Without a hint of recognition he started right in, “I can set you up with backcountry, light tackle. You look more like an offshore kind of guy, how about a Marlin trip? Whatever you want?”

The older man ended his call and placed his hand flat on the pages of the binder July had been browsing, “There’s nothing for you in there.” His hand had
deep, narrow scars crisscrossing thick fingers and along the edge of a heavily
calloused palm. Not a salesman’s hand at all, a fisherman’s hand.

The man offered it roughly to July, “Rico,” he said.

July shook, “July Jones.”

“I remember you. You and a freckled-faced girl with a whole lot of black hair.
The two of used to ride bicycles up and down Charter Boat Row, always with the
questions, a million questions.”

July smiled, “That’s right. Shea and I used to wash boats for the mates
whenever we could. It’s always been good steady money.”

“Yeah, I worked the deck for years on a whole lot of different boats back
when I was a drinker. Bet you washed a boat for me once or twice.”

“Seems you have a good thing going here?”

“A lot different these days.” Rico looked at the page in the binder July had
been leafing. “Wasn’t that long ago you’d walk the docks when the boats came in.
Look at the catch, talk to the captains. Not so much anymore. Serious fishermen
know who the good captains are, and find their way to them. People who book
through me, well it’s more an amusement ride, something to do just to say they’ve
done it when they get back home. The captains that use me just want bodies in
chairs, a day’s pay and home for drinks on their front porch. They pretty much just
care about catching fish they can mount or sell at market.”

Rico turned to the young barker, “Why don’t you take a break, go get dinner
or something.”

He was gone in a flash.
Rico smiled, “He’s new in town, from Jersey, loves the tittie bars, can’t remember a customer’s name or a face but has every stripper’s tits and tattoos memorized.” He lifted a bar stool over to July and they sat, Rico, hands on the counter, looking across at July sitting sideways, parallel to the booth and the street. They sat like that for a minute, not saying a thing, just watching the crowd building towards another frantic downtown night.

“You really cut up a whale on your beach last night?”

“You heard about that, huh?”

“Oh yeah, first call this morning. Shit, that must’ve been a sight.”

“Something different, all right.”

“The Judge says you need to hear about Raymond.”

July, still unsure why the Judge thought this important, nodded.

Rico rubbed his face with both hands then massaged his eyes with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. “Raymond and I go back a long ways, grew up together, families were from the same bum-fuck town in the middle of nowhere. We went on the road one winter and ended up here because, well, we looked at a road map and pointed to the end of road and decided that’s where we’re going. There were hundreds just like us back then, including your parents. I figure this is about them. Sad thing, that. I didn’t know them except to nod and say hi.” He waited a beat, a respectful moment, “Raymond and I got jobs at the old Coconut Palms. First place you pass coming into town, last place you pass when leaving.”

In no hurry he paused again, maybe thinking about those times, about missed opportunities. “Anyway, twenty years later Raymond owns the place, and
me, I’ve worked in every bar in town and as a mate on just about every boat. I got to the point with my drinking no one would give me any work, not even the shrimpers. And like every drunk, I was the last to know I was a drunk. Didn’t see much of Raymond then, we had gone our separate ways. He got married to Evie, a Brit, a lot of Brits came to the Island back then. Now it seems it’s the Eastern Europeans, blockheads, we call them downtown, you know, eastern bloc, like that,” he smiled.

“About the only time I saw Raymond back then is when I got arrested,” he flicked his thumb down the block, “the Judge would call him and damned if that Raymond wouldn’t always show up with the bail, no questions, no guilt.” He stared off again, looked sad, “Once Raymond was out of town and Evie got the call. I got in the car with her expected an earful. You know, what a loser I was, how I should stop getting Raymond involved in my shit, wasting his time and money. I geared up for a fight, figured to let her have it, tell some secrets, cause some trouble.” He shook his head, a pained, sorrowful, look on his face. “Hell of a way to think, huh?”

“Anyway, Evie, well she never says a bad word, picks me up, takes me back to their place, made dinner then fixed a room for me. Hell, we even shared a beer and a laugh. On the whole, she treated me better than Raymond would have. Man, she weren’t nothing like the conniving monster bitch I had and wanted in my mind, which made me feel even worse.”

He paused, bounced a pencil up and down on the counter, “Evie died of cancer about five years ago; fair skinned people just ain’t for life in this sun. I didn’t make it to the funeral, wanted to, but drank those good intentions right away. My only friends wife and I never did get a chance to know her. That’s the one I’d want
back. Of all of them, and there were some doozies, that’s the one. I read in the papers about Raymond getting busted losing everything and me, being a good drunk, I even made that about me, someone worse off, you know.”

Rico’s cellphone rang and he excused himself. Five minutes and three phone calls later he had a full day booked on an offshore boat.

“Anyway,” he didn’t miss a beat, “I woke up one morning, didn’t know where or how I got there. Had dried blood on my scalp, scraped knees and elbows, I’d become the guy that made everyone else feel good about themselves.” Rico looked at July, chewed on his lower lip, tapped the pencil on the counter. “The Judge got me into a detox, which took a week or so. They wanted me to stay on for a while, figured to teach me some things, but I didn’t need it, I was done. Never went for the meetings, never cared for getting preached at. Not saying those programs are bad or anything, it’s, just, well, I just knew I was done.”

They watched the mimes, street acrobats and musicians work their way to the heart of downtown. The sidewalks filled with unhurried tourists searching out restaurants and bars while teenaged boys and girls, full of anticipation, and needing to be seen, circled in cars blaring loud music.

Rico looked at July, “Sorry if I rambled, a lot to get out I guess, and you’re a good listener.”

July remembered Billy Boy’s rant about interactions and conversations and wanted to say something, but couldn’t think of anything.

“The Judge mentioned you play it close, that you don’t miss much, keep things to yourself.” Rico flipped the pencil in his hand, “Lookit, I go up and visit
Raymond every few weeks. He’d want you to know from the start that he doesn’t blame anybody but himself for what happened to him, feels he’s lucky to be alive. I can guess why the Judge thinks you might be interested, your parents’ accident, some of the same characters.”

July interrupted, “Wasn’t an accident.”

“No,” said Rico, “Not an accident at all.” He swallowed hard before continuing. “After Evie died, Raymond changed, was all alone, lost. Started going out just to get out, couldn’t stay in the house. One night he got drunk in the Pink and Purple. Met this stripper Lu Lu, went home with her, did some blow and the night turned into a week. I guess it helped him get clear of some memories.”

Rico looked at July, turned his palms upward, “Turns out Raymond was one of them with a taste for cocaine and Lu Lu fed him an endless supply. It became all Raymond cared about, nothing else mattered. He didn’t care about money, he just wanted to get high. Didn’t care about being followed or his phone clicking and cutting off, he just wanted more drugs. He hated what he’d become, that he had such a problem. Got so turned around, he flush it away at night, then buy it back in the morning.”

Rico sighed, “Anyway, Lu Lu goes out of town, and before the door even closes on her some downtown bouncer tells Raymond a story about offshore bales. Raymond had money, figured he’d be set for a while, be able to end that, love the cocaine but hate her, thing he had with Lu Lu. So this bouncer comes over with a fat cabbie, a skinny redhead and a small time bookie and they tore it up pretty good for a day or two. And, just when the party’s over, the DEA shows up.”
July looked up, “Got him good, huh?”

“Oh yeah, they did. Raymond swears if he didn’t get busted, he would have stayed at it till he was crawling around on his knees snorting specks, or was dead. Anyway, everything gets confiscated and Kamen ends up with the property for a fraction of what he had offered to pay for it.”

“Kamen was after that property?”

“He’d been making offers for years. When we came here all those years ago we didn’t have shit. Evie and Raymond made that place. No way he would have sold those memories. A month after he’s in jail, a bulldozer levels it. A day later the lot’s scraped clean. Raymond’s big crime was being sad, and alone with a taste for powder and some pretty ugly people went out their way to make sure he stayed that way.”

“The night my parents were killed Kamen got drunk downtown with Lu Lu and another stripper named Angel. Raymond ever mention Angel?”

“Not that I remember but I’ll ask him next time I see him. Shit, strippers call themselves Angel as much any other thing. You got a real name?”

July shook his head.

“Well it’s been about four years since Raymond got popped and strippers don’t have a long shelf life in this town.”

“Except Lu Lu.”

“Except Lu Lu,” agreed Rico. “Just a few months back she sideswiped a dozen cars, mouthed off, resisted, and blew a 1.8 on the breathalyzer. Nothing came of that
or any of her other arrests. She sheds trouble like rain off a roof. It’s pretty obvious somebody’s taking care of her.”

“I’ve never looked past Kamen.”

“Yeah, well listen, I owe Raymond, I owe Evie, and I owe the Judge. About the only thing I’ve ever done well in my life is be a drunk but I can do a lot of things well enough. If you need any help with anything, you let me know.”
Chapter 11

Kingfish Eddie, flat on his back, his upper body under the speed racks and sinks, his legs splayed out on the thick honeycombed flooring that covered the business side of the horseshoe shaped bar. He worked at repairing a leaky drain. A temporary fix, enough to keep the bar open, limp through till closing. Miss Albrey's son, whom the locals called Albrey, sat on a foot stool nearby. A dented, rust-pitted, faded red toolbox was open between his feet. The conversation between them was minimal. Kingfish Eddie knew what had to be done and Albrey, anticipating the next tool, always had it ready. Both were oblivious to the boisterous crowd of cruise ship passengers three deep at the bar, shoulder to shoulder on the dance floor, spilling into the street.

Albrey, tall and slim, stood to stretch and shake out his old legs, his tight afro of gray hair accented the brightness in his eyes, the diamond in his left ear caught the overhead light and sparkled. He didn't know a face in the crowd. It was rare for locals to drink at this end of town these days. Albrey missed the scratch-your-head-believability of a good bar yarn, the witty bantering with unspoken limits, and the clever, devious ways people who sat and drank together day after day, pushed each other's buttons. Those days were memorable in a drunken, disconnected way.

He looked at the crowd in their bright cruise wear, umbrella drinks and beers held high, and realized the need to drink hadn't really pulled at him for a while, but he remained vigilant. He had twenty-one years sober, twenty-two on Kingfish Eddie’s next birthday, which wasn’t a coincidence.
Back in the day The Kingfish, Kingfish Eddie’s father, would, from time to time, drink with Albrey on the business side of the bar. The Kingfish was someone who could stretch a story with the best of them. In his day Kingfish had been a bigger than life character, but memories and history are short, selective, and very convenient in a transient tourist town. Kingfish had won the bar in a poker game from an old timer whom couldn’t stand the thought of sweating under a raging sun for another year. People say the old timer folded a winning hand because he liked the symmetry of losing the bar to Kingfish, whom he recognized as himself, at an age when being a drunken womanizer and degenerate gambler wasn’t old man’s folly.

Back then, the bar and the building had no real value, and Kingfish saw no reason for improvements. He believed if the regulars were complaining, things were status quo. No grumbling would be worrisome. On the flat rooftop he had built a replica of an old Bahamian eyebrow cottage. The porch looked over the harbor. During construction the crowd became quiet, disgusted. Forced to action, Kingfish hung a large parachute above the bar to catch the bits of ceiling plaster getting knocked loose and landing in drinks. The parachute, as an aesthetic, persists. He often toyed with the idea of changing the bar’s name and for inspiration leafed the references leaning against the tarnished brass cash register: *The Seaman’s Book of Knots, A Baseball Encyclopedia* several seasons old, *The Complete Book of Game Fish and Class Records* (yearly updates tucked between the pages), and an *Almanac* with a torn cover which fell open to the beer-stained charts that predicted the tides. Nothing ever jumped out, and being more pragmatic than creative, Kingfish kept the
original name, Sullivan’s Wreck. Sullivan remained a mystery man, woman, ship, or state-of-mind.

Still itchy to add a personal touch, Kingfish added himself, a simple head shot with three days of stubble to the coasters, match books, posters, t-shirts and every other thing around the bar. One side of his business cards featured the simple headshot while on the reverse, printed in large white capitals, H.I.M., on a deep black background. Angry, loving, wistful women of all sorts were known to point, “That’s HIM,” they would say. The regulars expressed their distaste loudly and often at seeing his likeness on everything.

His luck extended beyond cards because somehow the very smart and beautiful Editha, who the locals knew as Eddie, chose him to be the father of her child. How this last bit of good fortune came to the Kingfish was hot local gossip before getting lost in transient memory. The truth, it seems, was that Eddie decided the time had come to have the baby boy she always foresaw and with limited knowledge of inherent or inherited traits, it seemed best to start with a manly man’s man, then let nature take its course. So on a night dictated by cycle and temperature, she left her thriving inn, restaurant, and nightclub complex with a single-minded determinedness. She marched unwavering the half mile from the sophisticated end of the street to the beer and whiskey-soaked end. Her entire stay in the Wreck lasted just long enough to get Kingfish upstairs to his roof top house, mount him, without removing her little black dress, take care of business and depart. The entire unpleasant ordeal took her ten minutes at most.
Eddie and the Kingfish didn’t cross paths often, but he did show up sober, and sharp dressed, on the night she went into labor. The birth certificate read:
Father’s name: Kingfish; Mother’s name: Eddie; Baby’s name: Kingfish Eddie.

Eddie avoided squabbling over custody or visitation by agreeing to let Kingfish spend time with his son whenever he wished, as long as he acted as a responsible grown-up. He never did get the chance to spend much quality time with little Kingfish Eddie though. A rooftop soliloquy, fueled by cocaine and alcohol, and backlit by a fast-moving lightning storm, ended his reckless life in a sudden, and very bright moment. The Kingfish died in his own key light.

He left the bar to four year old Kingfish Eddie.

Kingfish Eddie crabbed on his back, squirming from beneath the sinks, propped himself on his elbows, and blew out a breath, “Think I got it, just need to tighten it down.”

While wiping down the tools, Albrey glanced at their to-do list, “We got that cracked hinge on walk-in number two next. What's this I keep hearing about July and a whale?”

“I only know what you’ve heard. I went out to Finger Key to see him earlier. Took a swim, read the paper on his porch, slammed the door, even shook him, but he was out cold. He’ll be in tonight, I’d bet on it.” Kingfish Eddie cocked his head, listened to a set of distinctive voices at the bar, questioned a look at Albrey.

Albrey nodded, “It’s them, it’s the Deans.”

“I thought those boys were ’sposed to be helping Aunt B run my mom’s place while she's away?”
“Change of plans. Tonight, Aunt B dragged Rendall along to help.”

Kingfish Eddie waved his open palm from Albrey to himself, coaxing, “and ...”

Albrey held up a finger and leaned in, “I asked them Dean boys to spot the shift, they're clever fellas they are, maybe we'll find out once and for all who's stealing what and how.”

“They kind of stand out, Albrey. Don’t you think as spotters they'll get spotted.”

“Hell no, those boys ain’t never been in a heterosexual bar in their lives. I bet the only time they been down this end of town is for a parade.”

“They're sure a couple of odd ducks.”

“I don’t believe they're a couple,” countered Albrey.

“It’s just a figure of speech.”

“I think their real deal, is, what’s that called when you got no interest in sex, amorphous?”

“Asexuality, I think. But amorphous might work for them too, might be part of their shtick. Hand me the big red pipe wrench.” Kingfish squirmed back under the sinks and Albrey handed him the wrench. “Amorphous,” he heard Kingfish Eddie say to no one in particular, followed by a loud clunk. “Shit!” Kingfish Eddie hollered loud enough that Albrey arched his eyebrows.

“You slid off the pipe, didn't you. Banged your fingers cause you didn’t get a good bite.”

“Don’t say a thing, Albrey, don’t start. Shit, that hurt.”

Albrey smiled.
Kingfish Eddie started working in his bar the same day the Judge had been named as the trustee. Every Saturday, and for many years after, the Judge would pick up Kingfish Eddie at his mother's and the two of them would stroll from the ocean to the harbor. They window shopped, talked with locals, and got matching haircuts at Curly's Barber Shop and Pistol Range. At the bar the Judge would play cards, the weekly big game, and Kingfish Eddie worked alongside the waitresses, the bouncers, and the bar backs. He would sit for hours and listen to the fishermen, the sailors and the drunks. In no time he could talk the pros and cons of boats and tackle with world-class guides and tell stories with world-class drunks. He memorized jokes he didn’t understand and learned not to repeat. He grew up around a whole lot of funny business.

It was the night before his eighth birthday, when he first met Albrey. It was a hot night, much too hot for a young boy, antsy with birthday anticipation, to go quietly to sleep. Using the trellis as a flowery ladder, he climbed over the second floor porch railing. Skirting his mother's restaurant, the patio and then the deck bar, he poked his head through the sidewalk hedge and down the street towards her nightclub. Big Thomas pirouetted out front, working the crowd. He wore ruby red spiked heels, a tight, sequined, green glittering mini skirt, and a t-shirt, with a picture of someone named Dorothy, a dog, and a place called Kansas. Kingfish Eddie knew he could outrun Thomas in that skirt but he waited for the right moment before he slipped through the hedge unnoticed.

He wandered along the narrow streets and alleys, ran his fingers along slat fences, and came upon a burned house at the end of a dark, narrow, dead end. The
roof had burned through, leaving charred framing pointing into the sky. The windows were blackened and cracked, and the front porch sagged heavily. Kingfish Eddie wondered what kept it standing, if it was too far gone, if it be left to rot.

“What’re you, lost?” another voice cackled.

“Hey, come over here,” a voice commanded from behind.

“Come over here,” the first voice again.

“He’s too scared to come closer,” a third voice choked a phlegm-filled laugh.

Kingfish Eddie wasn’t afraid of anything. He turned from the burned house and faced the three voices huddled on a weathered sheet of cardboard in a cave-like opening within the overgrowth of tropical plants.

One was the blackest man he had ever seen, with an explosion of thick, matted strands of hair, his eyes pink slits, teeth bright white and gold. The second man, more brown than black, had shorter, curlier, but as unkempt, hair. There were painful looking bumps erupting in the thick stubble on his face and neck, and he was barefoot with long, yellowed toenails. The last man was shirtless, wearing cut-off, frayed, blue jean shorts. His sunken chest was pasty white, and the tattoo of a cross on his arm was rimmed with red pustules that spread across his shoulders and back. The sides and back of his head were shaved, but the hair on top was long, brown and shiny, as if it had been polished.

“What have you got in your pockets, boy?” demanded the black man.

“Let’s see,” the pale man got up on his knees and grabbed at Kingfish Eddie’s pocket.
Kingfish Eddie tried to step back but the pale man’s fingers found the inside of his pocket, ripping it open and forcing him backwards off balance. Coins clattered to the ground, along with his favorite piece of smooth coral, his lucky shell and the barracuda teeth he always carried. Cat quick the three were up and surrounding him. They grabbed at his other pockets.

"You get away from him right now, he’s just a boy,” came a voice from the burned house.

“Mind your own business!” the black man threatened.

“You get away from him now.” The voice, moving from the darkness commanded.

The white man chided, “How ’bout you, you old drunk, maybe you got money.” The three of them turned their attention to the tall, skinny voice.

The black man grabbed the skinny voice from behind as the other two closed in.

“Boy, get out of here, run now, get going!” The skinny voice warned Kingfish Eddie.

And Kingfish Eddie ran. He ran right up the back of the white man and grabbed two fistfuls of his greasy hair, causing him to topple over. Kingfish Eddie rode him to the ground. The man yelped, swung wildly, and Kingfish Eddie tumbled backs towards the broken fence. He picked up a piece of the fence and charged right back, taking a full swing at the brown man’s gut, but missed, got him full on between the legs, forced the air out of him, and he buckled onto the ground, heaving.
Kingfish Eddie then started swatting at both the black man and white man who clumsily exchanged punches with the skinny voice. He was like a mosquito stinging the men with his picket, getting swatted away, jumping back in, relentless, right up until the lights and sirens closed in.

At headquarters, the officers gave Kingfish Eddie a soda and let him wait for his mother in the Chief’s brown leather chair with brass nail-heads.

For most of the walk home that night his mother didn’t call him Kingfish Eddie, which she did when she was mad, not even Fish, which she called him most of the time. She didn’t say anything, just squeezed his hand and half carried him over the cracked and crooked sidewalk. Kingfish Eddie thought maybe she’d been crying. He had never seen her cry.

She walked Kingfish Eddie through the trellised brick path to their home and then right into the bathroom. She filled the sink with water, sat on the toilet, and stood him in front her. Starting at the top of his head, she separated his thick black hair and scrubbed his scalp with a sponge, upended a brown bottle into a cotton ball, dabbed here and there. Kingfish Eddie didn’t let on that it stung. He hardly squirmed at all. She stripped off his shirt and inspected his chest, back and arms. Then off with his ripped trousers, which followed his shirt into the wastebasket. When she saw the red imprint of fingers on his thigh and both knees that were scraped raw, she came close to crying again.

Kingfish tried to reassure her, “That old drunk and I gave as good as we got.” It was an expression he picked up in the bar and, judging by the way she looked at him one of those he should have kept to himself.
“His name is Albrey, and stop repeating things you don’t understand.”

“What were you and Albrey talking about?”

“I thanked him for watching over you and asked him about maybe wanting to get back to work. The Judge told me he was a good man once, a real good carpenter that had lost his way.”

“I could work with him?”

“I don’t see why not, just don’t get underfoot.”

Eddie dabbed at the last of the cuts and turned him around, then around again. Satisfied, she walked him into his room, unfolded his favorite nightshirt and pulled it over his head. Again, tearing up, seeing the nightshirt no longer even reached his knees. The shirt had been a gift from Rosemary, July’s mother. She had taken a fish, a Kingfish, and brushed paint along one side of it, then pressed it against the fabric, leaving an imprint. He never slept in anything else. Just a couple of years ago it had reached his ankles.

Eddie lay down beside him, “You mind if I rest here for a while?”

“I’m not going to sneak out again.”

“I hope not.”

“I think I’m going to have a real black eye.”

“Yes, I think you are. You have more and more of your father in you every day.”

“But everybody tells me I have your good looks,” he smiled crookedly.

“You even have his smirk.”
“What’s a smirk?” But he knew, he had studied the picture of his father on everything in the bar and had stood in front of the mirror practicing for hours.

“That half-grin half-smile of yours is right off your father’s face.” She laid her hand on his chest and closed her eyes.

Kingfish Eddie lay there with a thousand questions. But before he could ask the first one, he heard his mother’s steady, even breathing and knew he would have to wait. He decided he wait, ask his new friend Albrey in the morning.
Philosopher’s Stone

She sat in the dirt drinking blue martinis with a poodle named Greta, outside an art-deco filling station, just off a crumbling, unlined, two-lane, that ran straight through the high-desert scrub and disappeared into an empty sky. Some nights the horizon seemed barely a breath away, but these dreams, like her doctors, lacked perspective. Live in a bubble, they said, you’ll have a good year, maybe more, continue down the road you’re on, half that, probably less.

It didn’t surprise me that she decided to free-wheel the remnants of her time. She flushed most of the prescribed pills. The spin-a-rama of side effects - bloated, drowsiness, heart palpitations, vertigo, nausea - the list seemed longer than the days she had left, and that, she decided, was no way to die. She began to self-medicate with the occasional line or two, said it numbed the pain and made her think she’d live forever. It also veiled her inhibitions about sex, so she broke her cardinal rule and let customers, the men and woman she found interesting, buy her drinks and take her home. I wonder what they thought when they saw her scarred body, those empty gallons of transplant drugs that lined her kitchen counter. She once told me her God-given kidneys were left in place, had dried to raisins. Not something she’d tell a lover. She didn’t want pity, guilt, or any emotion tainted by sorrow and the loneliness of late night. There wasn’t enough time for truth.

She started smoking unfiltered Luckies on a rainy Monday, said she liked the nested irony. Not long after began sipping an endless vodka martini, blue, of course, because she saw it in her dreams, or to match her mood, or smoking made her drink, or drinking made her smoke. She’d laugh, throw up her hands, confess she couldn’t
tell you why, and honestly, does it matter? It’s just conversation. One night she lay on the bar raptly blowing streams of smoke rings into the shredding downdraft of a ceiling fan and resolved that budgeting is a fool’s overture when you’re inked on this year’s calendar, so she let herself become an easy mark for the handful of regulars who seemed always down on their luck. A day or so later she put on her last dress, went downtown to a big national bank and mortgaged her home and bar. Said, lawyers, wills, debts, and taxes are for people with tomorrows. She preferred to disappear her money, her way.

We met the night I walked into her bar, got to talking about this and that, eventually zeroed in on a postage stamp of a town ten states away. Holy shit, she said, holy shit, what are the chances?

She was ten years younger, ten years old, when I left our hometown. Our paths never crossed, but we knew people. Hy, who owned the supermarket, where every kid got his first job; Mr. and Mrs. Feigl at the five and dime, where we spent what we earned on gum and comics and baseball cards; Viv, who managed the picture show that changed movies every Wednesday showed double features all weekend.

I admitted to having a mad crush on her sister Eileen, who was a year or two ahead of me in school.

She said every boy had a crush on Eileen. She didn’t wink or raise an eyebrow, there wasn’t a hint of pride, her voice distant, detached. I’d touched a nerve.
I told her that her brother Francis and I were in the same grade at St. Aloysius Parochial School. It hardly seemed like thirty-five years and a thousand miles away.

Showing no emotion, she said, you know, Francis, he’s gay.

I didn’t know. I thought back to the long afternoons at CCD. The priests marched us from school to church, solemnly up the center aisle where we genuflected in ordered pairs, boy on the right, girl on the left. We were dizzy with remorse after hours on hard kneelers, surrounded by props of damnation, breathing warm, incense-sweetened air while reciting prayers that begged forgiveness. Every one of us learned to avoid eye contact with Sister Margaret Mary and the righteous, black and white apparitions, whispering the aisles, hunting answers. What is redemption? What is mortal sin? Does a person in hell ever get out? We were maybe ten or eleven. I wondered if Francis knew he was gay. He must have known he was different. He must have felt damned.

Francis flew in to spend some time with her towards the end. I met him at the airport, took him to her bar. We talked about the priests, nuns, our time in Catholic school, but she put an end to that. Reminded us that this was about her, and she didn’t want to waste words on religion. Said all the prayers in the world weren’t going to save her. So we drank vodka martinis, blue, of course, and she told us about her dreams.

I left her and Francis to get reacquainted, not at all surprised when she called a few hours later. They needed a body to plug the gaping hole in their fractured family, to bridge their lost years. Who better than someone who knew the shortcut
through old lady Helfrick’s woods, who had daydreamed in the same classrooms, staring out at the fields that, like our small town, only changed with the seasons. So I sat with them, helped them understand who they had become, what they meant to each other. Empathy was the best they could hope for. There wasn’t enough time for love.

We drank martinis and watched the red sun melt into water. Francis believed his dreams would come true if that final, flash of day turned green. She didn’t wish on mythical light. Said only desperate people put their faith in superstition. She was like that in those last months. Cut to the heart of everything.

Her father died around the time I left town, her mother a year or so later. I’d heard she’d been sent off to live with her sister Eileen, twenty-two, at the time, just out of college. That night, drinking blue martinis, a tornado of guilt whirled around her. Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe it was the clock echoing through her body. She needed to know why her parents had her so late in life, why they drank, why they separated, why they died, how she, Francis, and Eileen let themselves become strangers to each other.

We were close friends for her last five years and I never saw her cry, never heard her petition any higher power with sorrows or missed opportunities. She had always been able to bury misgivings, wistful remembrances in a private place. I never realized she blamed herself, the diabetes she’d been born with, for her parents’ separation, their drinking and death, the dysfunction between her, her brother, and sister.
Francis told her their parents drank themselves to death because they were unhappy people. That drinking and unhappiness was what they knew. He said they had her because they thought a baby would be a distraction that might save them from themselves, and that her illness was the thread that bound the family for years, but there were just too many tears. He said his leaving had nothing to do with her. He just wanted to be able to live his life, and he didn’t have the nerve to be gay in our small hometown.

That night we sat in brightly painted chairs in the sunset’s cooling breeze and Francis put his arm around her shoulder, pulled her towards him. In the eight years you lived with Eileen, he said, she started a career, got married, had three kids. You were a lot of responsibility, and sure, there were times Eileen felt put upon, that you shouldn’t have been her cross to bear, but she always did her best. She used to say that Cinderella had nothing on you. Man, he said, both of you were so tough, so incredibly resilient, everything you’d been through, going through. My god, he said, Eileen gave you a kidney, but neither of you ever learned to give an inch.

She never told me how it felt living off her sister’s kidney or the pancreas from who knows where, but she did have fun thinking she was given a man’s eye view through the transplanted cornea in her right eye. Every so often she’d nudge me, close her left eye, and begin a conversation by wagging her finger between us, and say, tell me, man-to-man.

A graph, *Life Years from Transplant*, was hung from her refrigerator with magnetic letters, ‘OH MY’ mostly, ‘OH NO’ sometimes, ‘HMMM’ the day we left on her last road trip to Gowen Memorial Hospital.
Along the way she wanted to stop at a Super Walmart built on the wasteland where three highways intersected. She took an electric cart and motored slowly up and down every aisle, rubbing cotton towels on her cheek, spraying perfume in the air, steering the cart through the mist. She bought a pair of yellowish-brown fuzzy slippers, a five layer chocolate pudding cake and a half gallon of whole milk. She wore the fuzzy slippers, left her flip-flops neatly, side-by-side, on the white line of the parking space.

When we got back on the road, she asked me to drive slow, ratcheted her seat back, opened the window, leaned into the warm breeze, began eating the chocolate cake with a clear plastic fork.

After a bit, without turning her face from the sun, she said, it’s heavenly. A moment or two later she asked if I thought heaven would be like a big-box store.  Said Pete, the gray haired greeter, seemed so innocent and good, and the store went on forever, wasn’t too hot or cold, and the walls, ceiling, and floor, were all cloud-white. She asked if I’d seen the boys playing catch in aisle 22, or the father helping his daughter pick out her first bicycle in 28, or the older couple watching a Matlock rerun on a TV in electronics. Said best of all were the aisles near the bakery and wondered if she was being hypocritical not having faith but wanting to believe in a heaven that smelled like freshly baked bread and cookies.

The signpost said we had twenty miles to go. She asked me to drive slower still, put the cake on the floor and opened her purse on her lap. I never knew her to wear makeup and was surprised by the number of tubes and compacts. She uncapped and rolled out each lipstick, reached over and had me taste the
applicators for an orange and a mint lip gloss, blew the dust from a compact into the wind, then tossed them all, one by one, out the window. She dialed the 800 number on the back of a credit card, pressed a few buttons, said cancel, was put on hold, lost patience, disconnected the call, skimmed the card into the wind. Every other card followed. After lighting a Lucky she littered the highway with the pack, a lighter, a tampon, a pen, a pad, a nail file, and a bird’s nest of bobby and safety pins held together by a fine silver chain. Hair scrunchies, a one inch Ziploc with what looked like an assortment of earring backs, and a second tampon which she pointed at me. No one gives away her last tampon. That’s something Eileen taught me, always carry two. Then she confessed she would like to have those years with Eileen to do over, and over again, until she got them right. She was quiet for a mile or two, finally said, I need to see her, it wouldn’t be right to leave my guilt hanging over her after I’m gone.

She was asleep when we pulled into the hospital. I lifted her into a wheelchair and the nurse pushed her to the elevator that took us to a six-bed, glass-enclosed ward behind double doors that hissed open as we approached. I worried that I’d made a mistake not waking her, but after she settled in she smiled, said there were a lot of lasts looming. Last ward, last bed, last TV show, and she asked for a laptop for one more Netflix binge. Last magazine, last book, she arched her eyebrows, smiled, maybe The Lonely Silver Rain, isn’t that Travis McGee’s last adventure? She made me promise to keep an eye on the weather and if a big front was forecast she wanted me to drive her into it. Thought maybe we’d find the philosopher’s stone hidden deep in the heart of a late summer storm. That’s when I think she realized she would never
again sit on her front porch and feel the thunder and rain, see the fireworks on the fourth of July, or that damn stupid cat that let the squeaky brakes on the mail truck drive him under the porch every day at noon. When she pushed the corner of her mouth upwards with a nervous finger and said, last smile, it broke my heart.

Eileen flew in, stayed the day, then through the night on a bed they set up next to hers. I let them be, don't know what was said, but one of the nurses told me they slept curled up side-by-side. That was the last thing that mattered, the last bit of unfinished life.

The day after I read to her on and off but she mostly slept. She was so swollen, her dry skin that sickly yellow on the downside of a watermelon. I rubbed moisturizer on her arms and stomach. She felt hard, hollow.

When she woke she asked to have the head of the bed raised, wanted to look at the people in the ward. She wondered if they had ever been in love, were mothers or fathers, compassionate and honest. Said I don't even know their names, we're strangers dying together.

From a very young age she had a good idea how and when she would die. Still, she lived with kindness, grace and courage. I don't remember her ever being petty, hurtful, using her infirmities to garner favor or deflecting her insecurities onto others. I tried to be as brave, to mimic her patience with people who only know the weather, fruit that rots too soon, the line at the coffee shop. I overheard someone say I'd become a contrary person, argumentative, not a team player, a broken cog. I once cared about perceptions, needed to belong, but death made me
selfish, detached from people’s feelings. Political correctness, social niceties seemed as important as the weight of air.

The nurses behind my bed are fussing with one of the IV’s. They just noticed the propofol drip, the bag, maybe the intravenous tubing, one or both have been leaking. It’s why I’m clear-headed, feel fingers tenderly squeeze my shoulder. I hear plastic burettes and spikes being snapped into a new line and want to rip the tubes from my throat, tell them no more drugs. I want to see the human kindness on wicker porch swings in that small town a million miles away, hear the unhurried conversations with a passerby, feel the thrill of calling strikes for the neighborhood kids playing ball in the street. The room is cold, but I taste the pure pleasure of a dripping, lopsided, ice cream cone, on a hot summer’s day. Machines stacked on floor-to-ceiling poles whirr and count time with the maddening monotony of a metronome. I fight the straps that hold my arms, will my eyes to stay open, but the milky white propofol flows through the clear tube, it burns into a vein and I remember she told me, we all die anonymous, we all die alone, and never to name the dead.
How Baby Bare Came to Ride a Cadillac Car to Fame

The Tattoo Rose sizzles, in the throes of neon death, above the door I walk through at the end of a long hot day. It’s Sojourner’s joint, The Tattoo Rose, and Sojo, being the professional he is, has seen me coming before I knew I was thirsty, saw me coming before the sun cracked the eastern sky. There’s a loosely corked bottle of El Toroso and a water-spotted glass set up in the bar gutter. In twelve-step-speak Sojo would be my enabler.

I take the end seat, the seat against the wall, the seat I’ve sat in hundreds of times and roll four fingernails, tap, tap, tap, tap, against the glass which Sojo half-fills. He leaves the bottle on the bar and goes right back to re-stocking the speed rack without saying a word. The four finger gibe is just one of the snarky greetings he’s come to expect from me. Sojo, you see, is missing a couple of the outside fingers on his measuring hand. The steppers tell me this kind of haughty, offhanded humor is a device I use to mask low self-esteem, insecurity and a boatload of other neuroses. They also tell me to keep coming back. I do. Periodically. AA meetings are a great way to meet women.

Exactly how Sojo lost those fingers is a mystery. Some say power tools, others the winch on his fishing boat. I like to think a wench in the kitchen, but whether horrible accident, or tempestuous pursuit, if he wanted me to know, he’d have told me, but he hasn’t, and I don’t ask. Interrogating the bartender is never a good move. Hell, even acknowledging the fellow on the next stool is conversational foreplay which always leads to pesky personal questions. If I ask, they get to ask,
and I've learned that being a loose-mouthed drunk can be a weighty social burden. I maintain a silent solidarity.

Charlie, Sojo’s bar-back, is man-handling a green, fifty-five gallon plastic garbage can of ice through the vape cloud a tatted-up y-millennial couple is exhaling while they thwack balls around the pool table. Sojo keeps a close eye on him, ready to help, but that Charlie, well, his physical deformities may suggest simple mindedness, but trust me, he’s a sly one. He’d get you to paint the fence for him, and you’d feel good about doing it.

And yes, that is an authentic free-standing, optic orange and red, neon-tubed Wurlitzer against the far wall. It’s an audiophile’s Frankenstein of MP3 clarity and worn vinyl LPs that hiss and pop. Right now the guttural, melancholic cries of Joplin at Winterland echo my ennui, stirring a wealth of emotions, and I bet Sojo has Cohen, Patti Smith, and bluesy Van Morrison in the queue. Most nights, between midnight and 4 am the dancers from the strip club across the street trickle in and the joint will thump with EDM until late, late, night.

Every so often those sexy young ladies fueled on cocaine, Red Bull, and vodka, seduce Sojo into dimming the lights, pulling the shades, and locking the crowd in, the world out. Blurred babbling, swear-to-god promises, and heartfelt confessions swirl in the smoke until the dayshift soberly passes around the wicker basket of cheap sunglasses, and then three, two, one, the shades lift. The vacuum of silence in the sunlit revelation of a new day is slowly filled by the aged, boiler-maker, breakfast club crowd hobbling in. This comingling of disparate generations, shooting drinks, and swapping stories under a well-worn blanket of sounds by Patsy
Cline and Nina Simone is something to see. I once asked Baby Bare if a shared
desperation prompted these late-night early-morning hook-ups between strange
bedfellows. Her rote answer, “What is syzygy?”

Seeing my puzzled expression, she tucked a handful of tightly curled red hair
behind an ear, and took a moment to channel the silky patter of an ersatz Trebek,
“Category is astronomy; the nearly straight-line configuration of three celestial
bodies in a gravitational system,” then turned and smugly skipped away.

I had forgotten. A while back the ladies across the street used their innate
sexuality to scheme a satellite for their dressing room from a smitten TV installer.
Jeopardy, it seems, was broadcast on the dish a half hour before the cable in the bar.
The regulars, wise to the scam, never say a word. Passersbys, though, are quick to
take the odds, forty dollars against a lap dance, figuring no way a stripper could
know anything about the Age of Faith, 18th Century poetry, Astronomy, or any other
category. I wouldn’t call what they’re doing cheating. It’s more of a hedge,
capitalizing judgmental customers against poor tippers and slow nights.

Sojo tilts Charlie’s can into the sink, smooths out the ice, then plants a garden
of green and brown bottles. I pour a few more fingers of tequila, swing my feet up on
a stool.

Joplin first big show was Winterland in ’67, and she skipped off that stage.
Two or three lives ago I enrolled in a community college lit class, which by the way,
is another great place to meet women. The professor, whose clothes were dusted
with saltine cracker crumbs and smelled like mothballs, insisted the image of
skipping women represented innocence. Joplin was young then, maybe she even
was innocent, but Baby Bare skips when she’s happy and is definitely not. I like that Baby Bare skips; that someone I know doesn’t seem to have a care in the world. It’s unfortunate that Baby Bare’s skipping often leads to a toe-jam and boom! face-plant. Being a dancer I’d expect her to be a bit more nimble.

Uh-oh, Charlie is staring me down, giving me the evil-evil eye.

Here’s the thing about Charlie. Because of a complication at birth the doctor grabbed Charlies arm and leg to hasten him from his mother. As a consequence his left leg is shorter than his right by at least three inches which he compensates for by leaning forward and shuffling on the balls of his feet. His misshapen left arm is permanently flexed at the elbow, his fingers balled into a tight fist, except for the middle finger, which sticks straight up. It’s Charlie’s beautiful fuck-you to the world. Really, Charlie is beautiful. Thick, brown-black hair, luxurious eyebrows, wolf-gray eyes, a chiseled face softened by a permanent five o’clock shadow and punctuated with a cleft chin. Above the shoulders Charlie’s a Greek war god.

Sojo notices Charlie staring me down, “He thinks you’re the reason Baby left town, and man, he is big-time pissed off at you. Ain’t that right, Charlie?”

“You miss Baby, do you Charlie?” I add fuel to the fire. Conflict gives drinking purpose.

“S-she’s my girl, likes m-me more’n y-you. I even got a p-post card from her today.”

“Yes he did,” said Sojo, “addressed to Charlie himself, delivered right here to the bar.”

“Oh yeah, where’s she at, Charlie?” Truth is, I miss her.
“I’m not t-telling you anything, s-she’s my girl, not y-yours. If it w-wasn’t for me you two would never m-met.” Charlie wags his chin defiantly, his crippled arm firing off rapid-fire fuck-you’s.

Yes, I did meet Baby here. She was helping Charlie drag that damn ice-can across the floor. Electric silver slippers, cut-off jean shorts, the tiniest satin camisole, and she caught me staring. “Yes,” she said, wiping down the bar, “they’re pierced.”

“Ah.”

“I’m Baby Bare.” Her hand was damp.

“As in Yogi, Boo Boo and Goldilocks?”

“B-A-R-E, as in naked. You know I’ve heard all this before.”

“What’s your real name?”

“No way I’m telling you. Charlie says to stay away from you.”

She didn’t though, it’s my boyish charm. About fifteen minutes later Baby hip-swayed down the business side of the bar, sat on the cooler opposite me, then one leg at a time, rolled slowly up onto the drinking side. She lingered on the rail, legs spread, back arched, seductively sliding between me and the bar, pausing to stare me in the eye, letting, with obvious intention, the camisole slip off a shoulder ...

About a month later, at her place early on New Year’s Eve, I watched as she tamed her curls into a tight Protestant bun, “You should leave it be, let it loose, you’re so beautiful, your hair’s so wild and pretty.”

“Really?” she said, pulling on a handful of her red storm. “You really think so?”

“Yes,” I said, “Beautiful.”
She raked her fingers through her hair, whipped her head side-to-side, stared into the mirror. I watched her studying herself, realized she’d no longer, maybe never had thought of herself as beautiful. She must hear ‘beautiful’ hundreds of times a night, it had lost all meaning, became just another line.

“Beautiful,” I said again, because she was and needed to know it.

We went our separate ways the first half of New Year's Eve. I was ankle deep in the beer-and-whiskey-soaked end of town. Baby preferred to sip Champagne on the sophisticated end of the street, watch a transgender Marilyn lookalike ride the clock down to zero in a canoe-sized, ruby red slipper. We ended the night sitting side-by-side at Sojo’s, Baby's hair threaded with gold, a black strapless gown, freckles that had popped in the sun.

Next morning, I stepped out of the shower and lingered, air-drying under the ceiling fan. Heavy raindrops walloped the tin roof, pushed a wet breeze through the balcony doors. Baby was doing yoga, the pelvic clock position, on the hardwood floor. I glided up between her legs. She softly tittered a warm, completely natural, “tee-hee-hee.”

I’m thinking how she insists she’d come close, but never … when this joke about climaxing pops into my head. It’s a very funny throw-away witticism from a late night monologue, but bursting into unexplained laughter during sex is a sure fire way to prick self-esteem, bring out self-pity and the drama queen, so I look her in the eyes, slowly screw on a goofy comic’s facial expression and time my delivery like a professional in the key-light. She’s startled. Baby’s one of those gals who find casual conversation during sex odd, but after a beat, she smiles, giggles, then her
giggles build into an uncontrollable laugh fit. I mean she’s close to having a gelastic seizure, catching short breaths, arms spastic, fingers clawing, trampoline abs bucking like a bronco, her long dancer’s legs tightening and convulsing, tightening and convulsing.

Whew! We lie back, sweating. Every few seconds her entire body shudders, so naturally I ask about that elusive orgasm. Baby rests her lovely red head on a yellow and pink flowered throw pillow, leans over and kisses my cheek. “No one tells jokes during sex. That work for you? You do that a lot?”

Too many questions, none that have a right answer, so I expertly deflect, ask for the hundredth time what her real name is, which I already know, but it signal’s her that the conversation has reached a dead end.

Baby whispered her real name a couple weeks back. I’m not sure why. I like to think I earned her trust by being transparent. I am the way I seem and don’t make excuses. It’s also possible that she wanted me to know that she considered me a trusted friend and that it might lessen the sting when she dumped me. Apparently she had a thing for some helicopter pilot she’d met down on the sophisticated end of the street.

So, I ask for her real name, and she wags a finger, then half-jokingly threatens, “You better keep that name tidbit to yourself, Tiger, you know, I know people, who know people.”

A sad love story? No. Baby and I are inherently tragic souls. I’m past my prime, lucid moments are becoming rare. I’m beginning to think I like being alone, that I find comfort in sadness. Cowardly isn’t it? Baby, well, she’s looking for her
gentleman, not asking for the world, just the simple things that everyone deserves: respect, honesty, quiet comfort, moderate sobriety, but neither of us is what I would call mainstream, what she would call civilians. The chance that either of us would ever blend in with conventional society is a very long shot.

So Charlie can give me his evil-evil eye, think what he wants, but Baby leaving town had nothing to do with me. We were still friends, getting together now and then, but the romance if that’s what it was, ended more than a few weeks ago. I’m back to being the shameless flirt, while Baby began dating that helicopter pilot, a man with bona fides, who paid taxes, could say I love you, someone who should have been safe.

Fool’s gold.

Her desperate call came at three am. A whispered whimper, “Please, please, you have to come get me.”

Lighting forked the sky.

“I’m your man,” I said, rolling off the bed, grabbing jeans and a t-shirt.

Thunder boomed.

“Hurry, please, please, hurry, mile marker 22, pull over at mile marker 22.”

Sheets of rain flooded the street.

“Ten minutes, I’m on my way.” I could hardly see through the downpour, went back in, filled the big flask with Barbancourt for comfort, grabbed a towel, some sweats for warmth, or maybe the other way around.

Outside of a few hurricanes, I had never seen such fierce, wind-lashed bands of rain. Halfway up the road I pulled in behind a state trooper, followed his emergency
flashers, became so mesmerized by the storm and the reflective glare of the prowler's lights it took me a moment to realize we were stopped, that he'd given up, pulled onto the shoulder to ride it out. I took a long swig of rum, white-knuckled the wheel, continued up the road counting off the miles. The wipers slapped, slapped, slapped, but for long moments I lost sight of the white line, sometimes the road altogether.

The air hummed with raw electricity at mile marker 22, hackled the hair on my arms, the back of my neck. In the staccato flashes of strobe lightning I saw Baby running along the grassy incline. A titanic thunderclap boomed. Baby knelt on the ground covering her head. I ran to her. Torrents of rain beat down on us, she struggled, slipping, sliding in the river of mud streaming down the embankment. A second deafening thunderclap dropped her to her knees. I picked Baby up, cradled her to the car, just as a yellowish-white flash arced a utility pole exploding a transformer, dropping a live wire that bounced, sprayed sparks, then melted into the roadway setting the tar on fire. Then every light to the horizon went dark.

Baby laid her head in my lap, deep sobs racking her body.

I sat behind the wheel, watched the roadway burn.

She struggled out of her shirt and jeans, pulled on the sweats, wrapped her hair in a towel, lay back down. “He's a helicopter pilot, you know.”

“Yes,” I said, “you’ve mentioned that.”

“Has a locked room off the bedroom, a small office, he told me. I never thought much about it. When the storm woke me I went to a window, watched the rain flood the yard, the palms fronds stretching out in the wind.” She wiped away
tears with the tips of her fingers. “There was an explosion of thunder that rattled the house, shook the office key from the ledge on top of the window. It landed right at my feet.”

“The storm didn’t wake him?”

“He has sleep apathy, wears a mask, noise-proof headphones. He’s dead to the world.”

“It’s apnea.”

“What’d I say?”

“Apathy.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“Sleep-fucking-apnea. I got nosy so I unlocked the door. Only a small wooden classroom chair in the center of the room.” Baby choked up, tears streamed down her cheeks. “The walls were covered with pictures and posters of me. My first tour in Canada when I was eighteen, others from when I posed for magazines in LA, one after another, places I don’t even remember being. He had my whole life as a dancer on those walls. And that chair! How creepy is that?”

“Yes,” I agreed, “that’s pretty fucking creepy.”

Baby and I stayed right there at mile marker 22 until the worst of the storm blew out to sea.

When we got back to town, we pulled into Sojo’s. Candles flickered inside. Baby knocked, Charlie lifted a blind, opened the door. You always knew where you
stood with Charlie. There was no lying in him. He looked at Baby, smiled, let her in, then tried to close the door on me, saying, “Were c-c-closed.”

I elbowed my way past him.

I asked Baby if she wanted me to have a talk with the helicopter pilot. She thought that was cute, but said no, she didn’t need me stumbling around in her affairs. That hurt. She went behind the bar, used the bar phone. We pushed two bar stools close, she leaned over rested her head on shoulder. We could hear Charlie rolling kegs in the walk-in. We quietly shared a beer in the candlelit bar. After a few minutes our eyes met in a square of uncluttered mirror to the right of the cash register. Staring at my reflection she said, “Every time I try to be someone I’m not my life turns to shit. A tight-ass shrink once told me I’m self-destructive. We might have that in common you know.”

A car pulled up outside. She hugged me hard, kissed my ear, my cheek, lips, said, “I really do know people, who know people.” Then she was gone.

Charlie came out of the backroom, asked where she went. I said “pfffft,” and he wasted no time sweeping me out the door with his push broom.

I left my car in the lot. Rain is safe, like being surrounded by walls. Nothing gets to you in the rain.

Baby packed up and left town the next morning. Dancing the east-west circuit was her plan. The day after I read in the paper a cottage at mile marker 22 had burned to the ground. The owner, a helicopter pilot, left the electric stove on after the power went out, then must have forgot and stacked a pizza box and some newspapers on the burner. When the power was restored it caught fire. The paper
said the pilot was not home at the time, and the police have not been able to locate him.

I went to pour a few more fingers of tequila but Sojo snatched, recorked and put the bottle up. “You've had enough, I don't know what you’re thinking about but you appear to be getting dangerously close to maudlin. I called the yellow cab and they're sending your bubba Bunkey to ride you home.” He leaned over the bar, began doing the stupid slight-of-hand coaster flip he finally mastered.

“Maudlin?”

“It's in the crosswords, tearfully sentimental.”

“I can’t pay you, don’t have no money.”

“You never do.”

“Could you lend me a twenty for the cab.”

“It's less than a five dollar ride for chrissakes!”

“You want me to tell Bunkey that he ain't getting tipped because you're cheap.”

“You're a piece of work.”

“I'll square things up tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I'm not worried. I know where you live.”

“Rough night, Sailor,” Bunkey guided me into the passenger seat.

“You ever call anyone by their God-given name?”
“Nah, I see people as circumstances, must be a form of Tourette’s or something. Earlier tonight I dropped a Crusty Burger on that older waitress at Sonnies.”

“I don’t even know what that means, Bunkey.”

“Me either, she seemed offended though.”

I aided the market economy of our small town by re-distributing Sojo’s twenty. Bunkey was thankful, “Need any help getting in?”

“No, I’m good, the door’s unlocked.”

“How is it you lock your door when you’re home, leave it unlocked when you’re out?”

The truth is I got tired of trying to fit the damn key in the lock, and having to touch-up all the gouges I’d scratched into the paint. But, I lied, “I suppose it has something to do with the crazy women I let into my life. Don’t care if they make themselves at home if I’m not there, but I hate being surprised when I am. They can be a troublesome lot.”

“But they keep you on your toes.” Bunkey fired off a sharp salute. “Be seeing you, Handsome.”

A bubble pack mailer hung half-out the mail slot. The return address a child’s ink stamp of a cuddly teddy bear, the postmark Vegas. Baby had come up for air.

I put the USB in the slot, fumbled with two remotes, got it queued on the fifty-two inch Samsung, stretched out on the couch.
House lights dimmed to a single spotlight on a slowly opening curtain.

Center stage, like a trophy on a mound of plum silk, sat a child's replica of a '59 Cadillac, no windshield, no roof, gleaming pink, sparkling chrome, achingly sensual Baby, bare-naked behind the wheel. The Cadillac's shiny purple train unfurled as the car slowly began to rise. Baby lifted her arm into a princess wave, and with an exotic, snakelike grace, stood. The audience, catcalling, whistling, stood with her.  NIN's Closer, louder and louder. Baby, feeding off the applause, the music, raised both her arms, beat the air. The car rose higher, pin lights spinning, iridescent sequins flickering in her long curly hair. The car began a slow turn. Baby arched her back, arms pumping out the rhythm, head banging side-to-side. The crowd surged the stage, the car turning, Baby bent over, knees locked, hips swaying, staring over her shoulder inciting the audience while her fists pounded the beat on the hood of the Cadillac. A thousand frenzied arms pistoned the air. Confetti flew. Smoke swirled the stage. Caught up in the spectacle, I stood, clapping, whistling with the hyper energy of the scene. The third time around, Baby, skin glistening, stood hip cocked, arms raised, fingers extended. Aphrodite in a Cadillac car.

I paused the CD on a close-up of Baby's face, more alive and glowing than I remembered. I lay on the couch, the scent of dollar store herbal shampoo wafting from the yellow and pink flowered pillow. Goddamn, Shirley, just look at you!