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Chapter One

A cockatoo's screech pierced the dead man's silence.

I scanned the home across the canal, its second-story porch, then checked the morning sky. A high-coasting turkey vulture had spooked the caged bird. Moments later a yachtsman eighty yards to windward began dock-testing his unmuffled outboards. An oily blue cloud drifted down to shroud the suspended corpse. I knew that the body deserved more respect, that Ramrod Key should go quiet until the medical examiner lowered it from the boat lift davit. On a deeper level, I hoped that people would treat my death with brief dignity if they learned that I had died, even if I'd been strung to a winch before dawn and hung like

fresh-caught fish in a waterside market.

The cockatoo screeched again.

I switched lenses and went back to photographing the victim. In contrast to the late-June warmth, he looked trapped in mid-winter with his blue, frostbitten hands.

Bobbi Lewis raised her voice to beat the outboards. "What the hell happened to his left shoe?"

"He wore out the toe fighting for altitude," I said. "The killer dangled him just high enough to offer hope."

"But no chance to survive." She sipped from a lidded Styrofoam cup. "Are you done here? Someone on the forensic squad said you might be dawdling."

"You should fire me," I said.

"Talk to Sheriff Liska. He might create a part-timers' retirement program. Meanwhile, I like the way you work."

"My long career of evidence jobs?"

"Don't belittle yourself. You've got a mind for this game. But I really meant two mornings ago with sunlight sneaking between the miniblinds."

Once in a while she softened her hard-cop demeanor.

"This early sun is screwing me up right now," I said. "I need to take some insurance shots with fill flash."

"You're right, Alex. This is not the place for romantic chatter."

"We have our jobs to do."

"Darling, that's wonderful and insightful. The scene techs want to do theirs today."

When my phone rang at 6:40 that morning, I knew that one of the overlapping jurisdictions—either Monroe County or the City of Key West—needed help. The rude wake-up was my own damned fault. Several years back, after fifteen years of freelance ad-agency and magazine work, I had started accepting crime scene gigs for extra cash. But I kept stepping into crap that I couldn't scrape off my shoes, and I had come to dread the sight of my own camera. I'd never wanted to be a cop, yet every time I saw a victim up close, I wanted justice.

That's not exactly true. My job wasn't justice. I wanted revenge in the spirit of decency, contradictory or not. I had invented a few versions and barely survived. Revenge almost always claims two victims.

Dawn calls were never a good sign. I let it ring through to the answering machine.

One minute after the ringing stopped, my cell phone buzzed. I was awake enough to be curious, so I reached for the nightstand. No surprise: the window identified Detective Lewis of the Monroe County Sheriff's Department, my lover for the past four months. Somehow, on our amorous roller-coaster ride, we had managed not to mix our personal lives and our jobs. Now she had broken a rule, had dialed my unlisted cell number to hire me for work she knew I wanted to avoid. In spite of a long list of reasons to ignore it, I took the call. It summoned me to a hanging next to a canal. I found it tough to decline, especially since Lewis's persuasive manner didn't invoke whining.

I consoled myself with ten minutes in my outdoor shower before I left the house.

Lewis moved to shade under the victim's elevated house. She wore crisp khaki slacks, clean sneakers, a star-logo-emblazoned white polo shirt and, clipped to her belt, the Monroe County badge. At five-eight, with the shoulders of a competitive swimmer, she looked capable but not powerful. I wished I had a dollar for every man—criminal or not, and including other deputies—who had made the mistake of thinking he could bully or belittle her.

She studied the dead man, glanced over, and caught me staring. "What?" she said.

"Are you zoned out?" I said.

She shook her head. "You know what I see?"

There would be no correct answer. "What do you see?"

"A prehistoric praying mantis that spit out a one-string marionette."

"Very creative," I said.

"Can you top that?"

I looked at the stanchion, the swing arm and the cranelike davit's on-off switch, well out of the victim's reach. I considered the noose and restraints and, as if part of the man's punishment, the spectacle. "To me, it's a professional hit," I said. "Thought out, drawn out for cruelty, and foolproof."

"Good start," said Lewis. "Go farther."

On what scale of analysis? I took a stab at animal simile. "I see an iguana with a hemp neck-lace."

"Where's your action verb?"

"An iguana dancing on air for his breakfast."

"That's what you see?" she said. "An air dance iguana?"

"It beats an upchucked marionette."

"Now you've twisted my creativity."

The neighbor up the canal revved and shut down his twin outboards. A last thick cloud of fumes drifted toward us.

"Have you put a name to this guy?" I said.

"Plumb Bob."

"What did you smoke this morning?"

Lewis lowered her voice. "His name was Jack Mason. People called him Kansas Jack. With your new escape from downtown, Alex, you'd have been his neighbor. You could have bonded with him, shared a few beers."

"That's the third time you've called it an escape, Bobbi. You make it sound like I'm running away from you, and I'm not. I'll be one island up, a mile from here. What does that do, put our

homes eighteen minutes apart instead of fifteen?”

She shrugged. The phone on her belt buzzed. She unclipped it, suppressed a grin, and strode away.

The cockatoo screeched again.

We ought not reveal this weapon to the Third World.

Morning sunlight sparkled on the canal's surface. Cool yellows enveloped Kansas Jack Mason's drooping body. His eyes bulged—hence my iguana impulse. He wore shorts and black socks. His shoes were utility specials, the black oxfords I had sworn off on leaving the military. His lean face and muscular arms suggested a man who might have shoveled coal in his youth, or snow, or manure. His belly bulk supported Bobbi's assumption that he was a drinker. He'd probably done little labor of late beyond bending his elbow.

The breeze finally offered me a favor, turned the corpse so that my camera caught reflections in the duct tape over his mouth. I tapped the shutter button six times, at different angles, then zoomed and focused on the rope around his neck. In my childhood I'd seen a diagram of the correct way to structure the knot. A person today would be investigated, hounded out of town and state for showing a youth how to tie a noose. As if the skill might lead one to a hellish career. My knowledge hadn't inspired me to hang anyone.

In two days I would start nine weeks of house-sitting on Little Torch Key. After almost thirty years in Key West, I would learn about life twenty-seven miles from the big island, among fish and birds and people who had elected to live closer to open water. Kansas Jack had existed at the bottom end of Lower Keys style. In contrast to nearby homes with their clean pea rock, proper trees, shaped shrubs, and slick watercraft, his place was a dump. He had arranged empty buckets under a homemade lean-to with a weedy thatched roof. Each five-gallon plastic bucket had its own category: plumber's trash, wood scraps, parched aloe clusters, boat-motor parts. A row of pineapples along his home's east wall had sprouted and wilted, been wasted. A veteran center-console Mako named Swizzle Rod rested sun-bleached and engine-free on a boat trailer with two flat tires. Its blue Bimini top had frayed to pale pennants, and its name had faded to a pink swirl on the transom. If the man's demise hadn't been so evil, his hands hadn't been bound by monofilament fishing line, I could have suspected murder-suicide. Kansas Jack had killed his environment, then took himself out. But this scene spoke only of murder, at the ugly end of a sad spectrum.

I heard a distant helicopter, then a go-fast boat out in Newfound Harbor Channel. With the exhaust fumes dissipated, the smell of sour plankton captured my nose. I framed a shot of the yard, the expanse between the davit and house.

“Take your time, Rutledge.”

I knew the voice.

“Gaze about and soak up paradise,” he said. “We got all fucking week.”

I had known Sheriff Fred “Chicken Neck” Liska since the early nineties. Before his recent Monroe County campaign and election, during his tenure as a city police detective, he had prided himself on his disco-era outfits. For the past year or so, I'd been surprised each time I'd seen him in khakis and the badge-embroidered polo shirt. I asked one time if he missed his old image, the Nik-Nik shirts, and he shrugged and mumbled something about “protective coloration.”

I knew only two tactics to counter Liska's sarcastic banter. Remain silent or speak in homilies.

“Everyone's in a hurry,” I said. “We came to the Keys to slow down our lives, but we speed up after we're here a while.”

“We got a rain issue,” he said, sticking his thumb to the northwest. “The print people want a shot at that davit. Plus, we got a situation up the road. I need you there for an hour or so.”

“Should I have my booking agent review my contract?”

Liska ignored me. His mouth formed an odd smile as he peered at the corpse. I could almost hear his brain shift from its management hemisphere to its true detective side. “That tan, his forearms?” he said. “That's his lifestyle in a jiffy. He never wore a watch.”

"I thought about that. The man was barely scraping by. He might have been one of the last old-time Keys dwellers not pushed out by all the incoming wealth."

"Think he got to see himself die?"

"It was dark, no moon," I said. "Or do we know that?"

"He was found at first light."

"Somebody hooked him up and turned on the davit winch," I said. "He heard pulleys, motor whine, and the twang of the cable adjusting itself on the take-up reel. He felt himself going away slowly. Probably smelled himself, too, while his murderer got in his car and drove home. From the surroundings and the stand-still drama, we might assume it wasn't a robbery."

"Don't ever assume slobs don't have money," said Liska.

"Who found him?"

"Woman down the canal, going out for smokes at daybreak. She idled by and spotted him swinging."

"She runs for cigarettes in her boat?"

"Florida snatched her license after four DUIs. She commutes to the store in her Boston Whaler. Happens a lot in the Lower Keys. She even drives it to church. What's that fucking noise?"

I pointed to the cockatoo. "Bird."

"If it wakes the dead, maybe our jobs will be easier."

"I just saw two more shots I want."

"I have a crime scene crew waiting on your ass. You've got ninety seconds."

"Where's your regular photo ace? That schmuck from Marathon."

"I fired him."

Bobbi Lewis watched me snap my lens covers into place, stuff gear into my canvas shoulder bag. "Did you shoot any digital?"

"If the courts require film, why double up?" I said.

"I just thought, if you had two or three, you could e-mail them to me. Might help me write my scene report."

I pulled my eight-megapixel Olympus from the bottom of my bag, then walked a semicircle to capture the surroundings. "Regarding my alleged escape," I said, "you've got an open invitation. Aren't you looking forward to a few days in the boondocks?"

"I have a full-time job, Alex. I used this year's vacation time when we were naked in Grand Cayman."

"Weekends, maybe?"

"Weekends, yes," she said without smiling. "Thank you."

"There's another photo I want when you cut this one down," I said. "The sticky side of that duct tape on his mouth."

"We've tried that before," she said. "No one can read fingerprints on top of duct tape threads. It'll get tossed out as inconclusive, so why bother?"

"Can't hurt to take a couple shots. Let's at least preserve the evidence."

"I'll try to arrange something." She pointed. "The sheriff is waiting in his car."

"One last thing?" I said.

"Probably not."

"You called me out of bed before seven. You owe me one."

"Maybe so," she said. "Tell me what."

"Forget you're in a hurry long enough for a smile."

"With this kind of shit going down, I save smiles for the weekends, too."

"You're tough."

She raised her hand, pretended to scratch her forehead, and slid me a quick half-grin.