

Camille Spa

By Gregory Huffstutter

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White ships
full of slaves
Of blue sea
sand and sun
packed in tenders
no oars
no whips
no cries

Harsh nasal voices
My how nice!
Chewing voices
drift over the blue
Boats filled
with tourists
draw nearer
and bump
against the pier

From "Tourists" by the Caribbean poet Wycliffe Smith, 1976

WHITE SHIPS

Fall, 1994

“So... is anybody here ready to paaar-tay?”

The crowd, as usual, screamed back “YEEAAHHHHHH!” From the stage, the sound assaulted Mickey D. and his band.

“So...” Mickey D. continued, “is anybody here ready to have a goood time?”

“YEEAAHHHHHH!”

The singer paused — comfortable in his status as the Reigning Rock God — allowing the crowd to catch its breath. He flipped back his chest-length black hair and glanced down to the strip of masking tape stuck on the base of his microphone stand. There, written in red ink, was one word: Toronto.

“So... TORONTO... are you ready to *ROCK?!*” he bellowed to the faceless masses. Pan-de-mo-ni-um.

Mickey D.’s drummer, “Scarecrow” Collins, ripped into a snare roll and followed with a **BUNDA-BUNDA-BUNDA-BUNDA** of double-bass drums. Almost tripping over his floor amp, “Grouper” Gibbs — the band’s lead guitarist, who had put away nearly a fifth of Southern Comfort before the show — laid into the opening chords of the Mickey D. classic, “Grass In The Infield.”

And they were off. Mickey D. turned on the auto-pilot and closed his eyes behind wrap-around Gargoyle shades. He started into the lyrics:

*You tell me she’s much too young,
But I know how to have some fun,
With a whipper-snapper just tha’ high.
You tell me how she’s my niece,
But I know how to take me a piece
of tha’ pie-pie-pie...*

“You can play connect the dots all night long. Nice clean skin too. Loofa bar, lots of moisturizer. You can tell.” Zane was paid handsomely to be sensitive to his employer’s tastes. On the payroll books, he was listed as the tour’s “Companionship Director.”

“So we’re cool?”

“Yeah, Jeremy patted her down himself,” Zane said, referring to the head of Mickey D.’s security detail.

“Any more news on your pet project?”

It was meant to sound casual, but Zane could hear the prickling anxiety in the man’s voice. “I’ve got some feelers out on it. Talked to a few travel agents. Had them make some inquiries.”

“Remember, I don’t give two shits what it costs. I’m counting on you to find something so secluded that Nostradamus himself couldn’t fuck it up.”

“Yeah, yeah, got it.”

“And the girl?”

If he’s this much of a basket case in October, Zane thought, I can’t wait to see him in April. “She’s already lined up. Marcella, the chick from Houston, just like you asked. She’s cleared her schedule for the whole month, in case the plans have to change.”

“Marcella, that’s right. Marcella.”

“Don’t worry, chief, I’ll find the right spot. I talked to Larry over at A&M, and he told me Sting has some favorite spa he visits in the Caribbean. Swears by it, from what I hear. But I’m checking out some places in the South Pacific as well.”

“I know I can count on you, Zane. So what’s freckles’ name?”

“Freckles? Oh yeah.... Suzi. With an ‘i.’” Zane never understood why Mickey D. didn’t stick to “honey” and “babe” when addressing the birds. Given the singer’s limited attention span, it would’ve made things easier.

Sure enough, as Zane closed the limousine door, he could hear Rock & Roll’s great Don Juan say, “So, you must be Sherri.”

* * *

When Mickey D. purchased his first house, two years after he signed with Elecktra Records, he brought in the interior design consultant from Holiday Inn to handle the decorating. Calls were made for “Jungle Green” carpet #B-43, “Flying Ducks” wallpaper

#3046-S, a case of “Firecrackers in Abstract” framed lithographs, and a dozen industrial-grade steel towel racks.

Only after all the TV remote controls had been bolted to the nightstands (which also came complete with black Gideon Bibles and copies of the Indianapolis Yellow Pages inside each sliding drawer) did Mickey D. feel truly at home.

The phone rang. Mickey D. did not jump up in surprise. The view outside the beige polyester bedroom curtains always changed, along with the color of the tussled hair on the pillow next to him, but the 10:00 a.m. phone ring was a constant. The Holiday Inn wake-up call was his rooster.

He was not hung over. Unlike the rest of his band, the reports of Mickey D.’s wild alcohol abuse were generally fictitious. Nowadays he rarely drank more than one or two beers before a show. It was too dehydrating, and to be honest, he really didn’t like the taste. When he chose to get drunk, it was usually on bourbon. He would down five shots like cough syrup and that would be that. But that happened more often in the earlier days of his career. Now he preferred to save his energy for his conquests, in both the female and financial arenas.

He hung up the phone, swung his ostrich legs down to the waiting slippers, and put on a robe. The morning paper was waiting outside: *USA Today*. No point in getting the local paper; too much trouble finding the comics, stocks, and Dear Abby. He was thankful you could find the *USA Today* in Canada. This was Canada, wasn’t it?

Putting down the paper, he went over to the dresser to get his journal. The book was in the second drawer, under two pairs of boxer shorts. It was always easier to fill out in the morning, while the girl was asleep and the smell of the previous night’s activities still filled the room.

*“10/15 — Toronto. RH, fcls. BOT>34D, ps. Lthr vst, t-jns, nb, tng, kl stngs. 5m-bj, 10m-bott, * ds. Mnr. 6. Ncb,”* he wrote.

He put the journal back under the boxers, and took a long drink of water before dialing a number in New York.

“Good morning, Raymond and Associates.”

“Hiya, Meg, put me through to Vic.”

“Why Mickey D., for you... anything.”

The phone clicked, and then Vic’s familiar baritone came on the line, “Hey champ.”

“What’s my punishment today?”

“Let’s see... you’ve got a phoner with the *Detroit News* this morning. Only one this morning. I thought your voice could use the rest. Howz it feeling, by the way?”

“Hangin’ in there. Anything higher than a ‘C’ still sounds like Dylan doing ‘Evita.’ At least I’m making the sound guys earn their big bucks.”

“Well, keep drinking that lemon tea. I’ll be sure to tell the Detroit reporter to keep it under ten minutes. In fact, she’s on hold with us right now.”

“She?”

“Yeah, remember the *News* used to have that guy Tony D’Luca. He’s the one who wrote: ‘I see Mickey D. has scheduled a Christmas show in our fine city. Would it be too much to ask Santa to have Alice Cooper, Iggy Pop, and the MC5 get together and kick that puerile punk’s ass out of Detroit and all the way back to whatever filth-ridden, feces-choked septic tank he pulled his sorry carcass from?’”

“Oh yeah, that was a good one.”

“I suppose... if you don’t have a hard-on for dangling prepositions.”

“So what happened to Tony? We used to have some fun together.”

“He slammed Bob Seger’s newest box set. Called it: ‘Forty-eight bucks better spent on a weekend’s worth of crack,’ or something like that. Had thousands of letters pour in, readers threatening to cancel their subscriptions if the paper didn’t axe him.”

“Ouch. You don’t speak ill of Seger in the Motor City.”

“Yeah. You would think he of all people would’ve known that. Anyway, their new music critic is named Peggy Dijkmant-Haggenbottom. Quite a mouthful, huh?”

“Know anything about her?”

“Nope. We didn’t have time to pull her old clips, so you’re flying blind. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Is she single?” Mickey D. looked over at the sleeping redhead in his bed. She still hadn’t stirred.

“Hah, listen to you! Always on the prowl. You are going to have to ask her that yourself. Don’t forget this afternoon you’ve got a taping of ‘Face the People’ — it’s like a Canadian version of ‘Nightline.’ You go opposite some priest in Ontario. He says rock music is the instrument of the devil, you act insulted and talk about free expression, cite the First Amendment, blah, blah, blah.”

“Yeah, I know the drill. Does the First Amendment apply in Canada?”

"I don't see why not. I mean, you don't even need a passport to get across the border, for chrissakes. And after the show tonight, you've got to spend a few minutes with the guy who won the 'Mickey D.'s Mosh Pits & Maple Leaves' contest on MTV."

"Oh fuck me. Is that tonight?"

"Just 15 minutes backstage after the show. Give him a guitar pick and a sweaty towel, nod, smile, let him take a few pictures with you and Kurt Loder, then split."

"I don't have to hang out?"

"15 minutes. That's it."

"All right. Why don't you put on that Piggely Dikkenbottom, or whatever her name is."

* * *

"Hello?"

"Hello?"

"Is this Mickey D.?"

"Is this Pigger Dickenbottom?"

"Ah, that's Peggy Dijkmant-Haggenbottom — four 'g's, three 't's, and a 'j' thrown in just to really screw with you — with the *Detroit News*. Would you prefer I call you Mr. D?"

"Nope. Reminds me too much of the A-Team. Why don't you call me Mickey."

"Mickey... great. So how are you doing this morning, Mickey?"

"Swell. I'm just sitting here on my bed — naked, wet, and thinking of you."

"Uh... you're kidding, right?"

"Sort of. I'm not actually wet."

"Mr. Raymond warned me you might say something completely offensive right off the bat."

"Damn that Vic! Always spoiling my fun. When we're done, remind me to fire him."

"Okay... well, I do want to start by thanking you for taking the time to talk with me. I know you must be a busy man."

"Well, Patty, it's always a pleasure for me to talk with the press." After 11 years in the business, he could finally say that line and make it sound sincere.

He liked her voice, though. She sounded like she was a brunette, mid-twenties. A natural, throaty voice. He guessed that she wore funky shoes to the office and didn't like

putting on make-up. It was the kind of voice that would drive you wild if she was panting or demanding more, as you buried your nose into the sweaty part of her neck—

“I must confess that I haven’t been an avid fan of your music,” she said, breaking his reverie.

“That’s OK. I’m not an avid fan of the *Detroit News*.”

“No, no, I didn’t mean it to come out like that,” she backpedaled, laughing nervously. “Personally, I’m just more into jazz and blues, you know? But I do respect what you’ve done for the music industry in respect to censorship and artistic freedom. And I am honestly looking forward to seeing your concert next Monday. I must confess, I’m one of the few people in the world who have never been to a Mickey D. concert.”

“Ah, a virgin. My favorite.”

“Yes, well,” she flustered. “I think the first thing I’d like to clear up is your age. I have a pile of stories in front of me all written about you during the past six months, and each one has a different age — some have you as young as 27, others have 29, 34, one even has you listed at 38.”

“My God, the next thing you know I’ll be touring with Canned Heat and Jefferson Airplane.”

“Do you have some kind of explanation for this discrepancy?”

“Pam, I’ll make a confession. Sometimes I tell reporters how old I’m feeling that particular day. Today, for example, I’m feeling about 33. Kind of Vince Neil-ish.”

“So what is your actual age?”

“Oh, around thereabouts. I don’t pay a lot of attention to stuff like that.”

“Why don’t I come back to that later.”

“Sure.”

The redhead finally rolled over and stumbled off to the bathroom. From his position on the bed, Mickey D. could see her stand at the bathroom mirror and wash her face. Zane was right, she did take very good care of her skin. It didn’t bother Mickey D. that he couldn’t recall her name exactly. He was pretty sure it started with an ‘S’. If she’d scored above a seven, he would’ve gone through her purse before she woke and copied her name and address into his journal.

He wasn’t worried about any of his nighttime visitors accidentally finding and reading his journal. His script was nearly illegible, and the entire book was written in Mickey D.’s personal shorthand. Today’s entry, for example, read: “Feb 15: Toronto. Red hair and

freckles. Big ol' titties, at least a 34D after plastic surgery. She wore a leather vest, torn jeans, no bra, thong underwear, knee-high stockings — performed fellatio for five minutes, then rode on top for ten. I went doggie style and came right away. She was a moaner and rated a six out of ten. Not worth a call back.”

Eighty-two percent of homeowners, when asked to name the one thing they would save during a fire, choose their photo albums. Mickey D. did not keep a lot of photos from his life, but he was proud of having a written account of every sexual encounter he could remember. All 4,287 of them.

“Now, your battles with conservative organizations like the PMRC and the Christian Coalition are legendary,” the reporter continued. “I was wondering if you could comment on how these groups have affected your career.”

“I’ll make another confession — see, I’ve never been able to lie to women reporters with cute phone voices. You wouldn’t happen to be a brunette, would you? No? Anyway, here’s my confession: I really owe my first big career break to those weasely cocksuckers.”

Mickey D. cradled the receiver as he stretched out on the empty bed. “For years, you know, we were little more than a bar band. Our best gig had been an opening slot for The Phlegms. Ever heard of them? Probably not, but they were pretty big in the Midwest back then. So finally we scraped up enough money to record an EP.

“Two months later, ‘60 Minutes’ does an interview with that bitch Tipper Gore and she’s going on and on about how obscene and subversive lyrics are threatening the core of America. Then, like a gift from Allah, she pulls out our little home-produced EP and reads the lyrics. **BOOM!** That next week we get signed to a major label, do our first MTV video; our first album goes gold in a month — then platinum six months later. I felt like I owed Tipper so much, I even named my first yacht after her.”

“You named your yacht ‘Tipper Gore’?”

“Close. It’s actually called: ‘Tipper? I Hardly Know ‘Er!’”

“I see. So you don’t hold a grudge against these conservative groups? What about the song, ‘Here Piggy Piggy’ you dedicated to Jesse Helms? And I quote:

*Gonna need more than the Secret Service
To keep back the men in black
Hey, Senator, what’s your purpose?
Buy the votes to send you back?*

*I've got an idea we can try
Gonna find the highest cliff in the state
Gag the mouth, wrap him in tape
And we'll finally see if pigs can fly."*

"Actually, that was really more of a love song than anything else," he said. The redhead finished with her morning bathroom ritual and silently walked over to the bed. Still naked, she smiled and laid her head in Mickey D.'s lap. "I think Senator Helms is a fine fellow. I love his eyebrows. By the same token, I'm sure the FBI and Secret Service have quite a thick file on me by now."

"If you don't mind, I'd now like to ask you a few questions about your personal life."

"Fire away."

The redhead loosened the sash of his robe and playfully began stroking him with her other hand.

"I've read what others have written about your childhood; growing up in a small town in Indiana, feeling like an outcast, taking first place in your high school's air band competition — but what really interests me is the amount of ink spent on your paramour adventures. It seems you have been linked with just about everything with two X chromosomes."

Mickey D. chuckled. He hoped she included that phrase in her article. "Are you a single music journalist, or an unhappily-married music journalist by any chance?"

"Let's not get off track here. Many of the articles include rumors of your being romantically involved with various Hollywood starlets, record company executives, Elite models, the granddaughter of Billie Holiday, a pair of European porn stars, the American Gladiator that calls herself 'Pyro,' one of the British royal duchesses, the lead singer of the Bangles, a 19-year-old pre-med student at Bryn Mawr, and a menagerie of barnyard animals."

"I'd like to point out that all the record company executives were female. I'm no Keanu Reeves."

"So you don't dispute these rumors?"

"That depends. Do you consider a gnu a barnyard animal?" Due to the redhead's coaxing, he was finding it difficult to stay focused on the conversation. He felt the blood in his upper head surging to the one down south.

“What did you think of Pamela Des Barres’ book ‘I’m With The Band: Confessions of a Groupie’?”

“Didn’t read it.”

“Are you serious? She dedicated a whole chapter to you, and at the time you were just a college drop-out working behind the desk at Murray’s Record Shack. She seemed to find you irresistible — and this coming from a groupie who has been with Robert Plant, Mick Jagger, Keith Moon, and Don Johnson, to name a few.”

“Ohhh, *that* Pamela,” he gasped. He started to consider raising the redhead’s score to a six-and-a-half.

* * *

Zane arrived just after noon for his sweep. He was wearing his customary combination of black jeans, cream t-shirt, and burgundy cotton blazer. The outfit was complemented by black alligator-skin cowboy boots — a Christmas present from a grateful Travis Tritt, no less — and a simple choker necklace that went nicely with the pair of silver hoops dangling from his left earlobe. His appearance was a studied mixture of professionalism, flair, power, style, and just the right amount of “Bad Boy.” He was dressed far too casually to be mistaken for the tour’s accountant, but with his short black hair slicked back to a three-inch ponytail, he was clearly higher on the food chain than Mickey D.’s shaggy roadies.

Zane moved slowly, his eyes scanning the room in tight quadrants. Nothing was left to chance. He lifted up the mattress, poked through the pile of wet Holiday Inn towels on the bathroom floor, shook out the pillowcases, checked inside the toilet’s reserve tank, looked behind the TV stand, dumped out the wastebaskets, and patted down all the pockets of Mickey D.’s clothes — even the ones still pressed and folded inside the dresser drawers.

When he first joined the tour two years ago, Zane actually enjoyed this part of the job. It was like a grown-up version of an Easter egg hunt. Now, however, his face betrayed the boredom with which he performed this daily chore. But his pale gray eyes stayed alert, squinting in the flat, northern-latitude sunlight illuminating the room through the open window.

Using a latex-gloved hand, Zane removed a neon green, sticky prophylactic from the bathroom countertop and placed it into a small plastic trash sack. He found the torn wrapper (Glow-In-The-Dark UFO Condom: For The Alien Invader In Your Trousers!) behind the shower curtain, and stuffed that into the trash bag as well.

What a nice surprise. How many times had he done his room sweep, smelled the heavy musk of sex, wrapped up the stained sheets and discarded lingerie, and not found any trace of protection or birth control? Only God and Mickey D.'s urologist knew what diseases have worked their way through that man's self-described "Tower d' Amour."

Zane had the impression that Mickey D. put a helmet on his carnal cavalry only when it suited him. Maybe he just waited to see whether his evening's companion would insist on it. Or maybe they flipped a coin. Heads: you put on the bullet-proof vest and quit your bitching, corporal. Tails: you get to attack the bunker without any covering trail of friendly fire.

To be honest, Zane never actually saw his employer's schwantz face-to-face, but he had cleaned up enough Polaroids from vacated hotel rooms to know the star's dick still appeared normal, and didn't look anything like, say, a dehydrated zucchini.

That was fine with Zane. He knew the day that Mickey D.'s member finally falls off, he will be out of a job. And despite the routine that had been creeping into Zane's duties, there were still many perks that made it all worthwhile; a generous food per diem, dental plan, afternoons off, and a 401K plan.

It now only took Zane thirty minutes to sweep Mickey D.'s empty room for any potential fodder for prying tabloid reporters or greedy housekeepers. He knew what to look for: discarded pills, leather masks, anal plugs, canisters of nitrous oxide, homemade videotapes, double-shaft dildos, dead rodents, nipple clamps, and the like.

As Vic Raymond, the head of Mickey D.'s public relations department, liked to point out: Wild Rumors = Record Sales. Satyric sexual exploits, illegal drug use, and excessive drinking are indispensable to a proper mega-star's image.

But when heresay and innuendo are supported by physical evidence, you are forced to deal with unwanted elements — namely lawyers, cops, self-righteous politicians, and worse, the media.

So Zane would Rob Lowe the singer's room before anyone else was allowed to clean or pack his belongings, then he would be off-duty until five o'clock in the evening. When he arrived at the evening's venue, Zane liked to walk through the parking lot and get a

feel for the faces in the crowd. After checking to see if there were any familiar groupies having trouble getting into the show, he'd go back to the tour buses and see the man.

Mickey D. would generally be reading comics, playing Nintendo, talking on the phone with his accountants, or strumming an unplugged electric guitar. "I'm feeling like a brunette. Under 110 pounds, big hair, red lips, trampy clothes. Make sure she isn't wearing any underwear," he might say. Or maybe: "I'd like to go Chinese tonight. Make sure she has a pretty face and long, black hair. Under 5'6", please."

Sometimes it would be more than one girl. Sometimes he'd want them younger than 18, which made Zane nervous about a vice squad raid. Once he just wanted somebody named 'Angie' — "Make sure it's on her driver's license because I'm going to check" — no matter how old she was or what she looked like. If they were in a familiar city, sometimes Mickey D. would consult his journal and come up with a name, but not always a corresponding phone number or address.

They were always female. For someone who appeared to try everything, the musician never asked him to pick out a guy for his nightly entertainment. The closest Mickey D. ever got to swinging in that direction was an order for a girl who has a "K.D. Lang look."

If Zane could not fill the order with any of the groupies hanging around the tour buses, he would stroll up and down the lines of fans waiting to enter the gates. If he still hadn't hit pay dirt, he'd walk out to the soundboard in the middle of the arena and scan the incoming crowd with the same diligence he brought to his motel searches.

On a more demanding job, such as the time Mickey D. requested identical twins like the blondes in the Doublemint Gum commercials, Zane would enlist the help of the tour cameramen. He'd put up a \$50 finders-fee, then sit in the broadcast truck and watch the monitors as the cameramen panned row-by-row through the audience.

In a worse case scenario, if Zane was unable to fill the order from the inventory on-hand — or if, God forbid, the bird didn't want to "hang out" with Mickey D. after the show — he would consult his personal phone list of reliable escort services and start making calls. Once, in a pinch, he had to fly a bald, Hindu belly-dancer on a chartered jet from New York to Akron, Ohio.

Zane rarely questioned the morality of his occupation. It was just a job — and one that paid considerably better than selling socket wrenches in Sears' hardware department, something his father did for over forty years, the poor bastard.

* * *

Eight days later, after stops in Montréal, Albany, Syracuse, and Cleveland, the tour was in Detroit. Tomorrow it would be Ft. Wayne, Indiana, for two nights at the fairgrounds. Mickey D. still had a soft spot in his heart for the Midwest, and insisted on multiple tour dates, even though profitable venues were hard to come by.

But tonight it was a solo date in the Motor City's Pontiac Silverdome. Zane found a spot on a concrete embankment with a view of the Will-Call ticket line. He was looking for a single woman resembling that lady who does those Sprint phone service commercials. That Murphy Brown chick. Late thirties, or a face-lifted early forties, with well-styled hair and good cheekbones. As Zane scanned the line, he tried to block all clothing from his mind, and just concentrate on finding a mature face, clean skin, and taut neck. If she wasn't dressed the part, Zane could always send a grunt to the nearest mall and pick up an Anne Taylor business suit or something.

Zane was not having a lot of luck this particular evening. Detroit took pride in its blue-collar roots, and whatever single, Lexus-driving, career-ladder-climbing, female Yuppies there were in this town had evidently decided to make dinner reservations at L'Auberge instead of coming out to see Rock & Roll's poster child for misogyny.

This is not going to be an easy assignment, he thought, trying to recall which escort service he'd last used in Detroit. Zane disliked using his operating budget to fill his employer's nightly order. It felt like Bill Cosby having to pay for his own Jello pudding.

Deciding to head to the valet parking area, Zane was intercepted by the G-Man, who jogged over with all the grace of a pregnant sea lion.

"Man here ta see ya," he said between bites of a fried chicken leg. In all the years that Giovanni "G-Man" Vesuvio had been Mickey D.'s tour manager, nobody could remember seeing him without a half-eaten piece of food clutched in his swollen fingers. It was said that his Lay-Z-Boy chair on the tour bus had to be reinforced with ACDelco shocks.

"I'm busy."

"Dude said wuz important," the G-Man huffed. The sweat ran a slalom course through his hair plugs. "Said he flew up from some island ta see ya, an' gotta split again

right away.” Giovanni didn’t feel the need to mention the source of his unusual concern and helpfulness. The island man said it was worth a \$100 bill to talk to Zane right away.

A hundred bucks bought a lot of corn dogs.

“An island?”

“Yeah, I didn’t catch th’ name. C’mon, just take a minute or two.”

“Can’t do it right now. Tough order tonight.”

“I got n’idea,” Giovanni said, brightening suddenly. “Ya go see the dude, an’ I’ll help ya look. Who ya want’n me ta look for?”

“No, thanks.” He knew better than to have the G-man spot for him. All the women he’d pointed out before tended to have the sex appeal of a cashier on the graveyard-shift at an Exxon snack shack. “Aw, hell,” Zane said with a shrug. “This one’s going to be on the expense account, anyway. So where is this guy?”

“Berta,” Giovanni said, motioning in the direction of the parked tour buses. ‘Berta’ was one of the five customized buses on the North American leg of this tour. It housed the G-Man, Xavier the accountant, Karl the lighting director, Tex the lead electrician, and Laurie, Mickey D.’s personal dietitian. As far as Zane could tell, Laurie did little else than make sure the star didn’t run out of Cheese Puffs and Twizzlers.

Zane strode off towards the buses. Giovanni took three steps to follow, then thought better of it. There was a concession stand on this side of the arena just inside Gate 14 that sold a mean super nacho platter.

Walking into Berta, Zane caught a whiff of seabreeze, coconut oil, and flowers — a sharp contrast to the gasoline Detroit air.

“Ah, you must be Mr. Wahlberg,” a voice said. Stepping forward into the gloom, Zane could only make out his visitor’s woven sandals in the floor’s track lighting.

“Yeah. So what of it?”

“It’s my understanding that you wished to speak with me, Mister Wahlberg. How may I be of assistance?” The voice had a sing-song accent that sounded like a mix between Bob Marley and the Queen Mother.

Zane caught another breath of tropical flowers. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, partner. But you better state your business quick. I’m on a tight schedule.”

“My apologies, Mister Walhberg,” the voice continued. “You have made inquiries into the location of a certain Caribbean spa on behalf of a Mister Michael Dershowitz. My

name is Felix, and I am a representative of the Camille Spa on the island of Camille Cay, at your humble service.”

As Zane’s eyes adjusted, he could now make out a brilliant white smile suspended over a tan linen suit. “Right, gotcha. You must be the guys that Sting was raving about.”

“Sting? I don’t... oh, yes! You must mean Mister Gordon Sumner. Also a musician like your Mister Dershowitz. Yes, he has been a visitor of Camille Spa on three occasions. A very respectful man, that Mister Sumner.”

Personally, Zane found Sting to be an insufferable prick, but he didn’t press the issue. With another step forward into the bus, Zane could finally see the ebony face around those flashing teeth. It was framed by a short cropped Afro and a necklace of seashells. Felix wore an expensive, muted Hawaiian shirt under his linen jacket.

“How did you hear I was looking for you?” Zane asked. “Larry over at A&M Records couldn’t remember your name, and none of the travel agents I called had any idea what I was talking about.”

“I’m afraid that, due to the nature of our guests, Camille Spa is not listed with any of your travel agencies. Our resort is quite exclusive, and we like to keep a low profile. Be that as it may, our ears are many. You asked about us, and I’ve come to take your reservation. Now, which weeks were you looking to book?”

“Woah! Hang on there, Tonto. I haven’t even cleared this with Mickey D. yet. He’s going to want to know more about your little spa.”

Looking at his watch, Felix said, “I have another appointment later this evening in Manhattan. But I can answer a few questions.”

“OK, first of all, Mickey D. is looking for a place that has a minimum of, ah, distractions. Somewhere he can bring a lady friend and be guaranteed not to have anything go wrong, if you know what I mean.”

“I understand, Mister Wahlberg. And I can assure you that your employer will receive a maximum of privacy at Camille Spa. Our accommodations include private cabañas, so he will be totally out-of-sight of the other guests. If your employer is looking for a unique, secluded, and romantic experience in the U.S. Virgin Islands, I can guarantee he will find it at Camille Spa.”

“Now I heard that the head of Virgin Records, some dude named Branson, has a place out in the Caribbean as well.”

“You are referring to Necker Island. Yes, Richard Branson’s island has been the subject of a few TV programs. As I said, we prefer to keep a low profile — that way we can offer services that Branson would never attempt.” Felix reached inside his jacket and pulled out a deep brown, leather appointment book. “Tell me again, which two weeks were you looking to book?”

“Well, it’s got to include April 19th, that’s the thing. We finish this tour after the first week of April, so if he came out a few days after that—”

“No, not possible,” Felix interrupted. “All reservations must be in two week blocks, starting the first or the fifteenth of the month.” He flipped through his appointment book with a frown. “Hmmm... the Sultan of Brunei has the entire spa rented out during the first half of the month. But we do have a bungalow available from the fifteenth to the twenty-ninth of April. You’re very lucky there. Some weeks we are booked up a year and a half in advance. Shall I pencil you in?”

“I’m going to have to run this by Mickey D. first.”

“Most certainly.” A business card appeared in Felix’s hand. It was on expensive stock, with gold embossed lettering that read:

CAMILLE SPA

The finest accommodations on Camille Cay

“You can reach me at that phone number during the next two days,” Felix said. “That is my message service. After that, I will be out of the country and unreachable. Please speak with your employer and give me your decision when you phone. At that time, our service will instruct you on making your deposit.”

“What sort of deposit?” As a fellow salesman, Zane was instantly suspicious of any negotiating pressure.

“We simply require a deposit of two days’ stay to secure a reservation — the balance to be paid ten days prior to arrival. If Mister Dershowitz will be travelling with a companion, his deposit would come to three-hundred thousand dollars.”

“Excuse me? You sure you’re not thinking of pesos?”

“That is U.S. dollars — or the equivalent in Japanese yen, if that would be more convenient. At Camille Spa, for a double-occupancy cabaña the daily rate is one-hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

“The daily rate? That’s more than I make all year, pal.”

Felix’s smile didn’t blink for a second. “I can sympathize, Mister Wahlberg. However, it is my understanding that this reservation is for Mister Dershowitz, and not for you. And you may tell your employer that the flat rate of one-point-oh-five million dollars per person per two week stay does include lodging, food, spa treatments, and all applicable Virgin Island taxes.”

“He’ll be so relieved.”

“Camille Spa is not a Carnival Cruise, Mister Wahlberg. We cater to a very small group of significant and prestigious individuals who are looking for a special retreat from the pressures of their daily lives. Believe me, if our research had indicated that our services were, how shall I put it, beyond the scope of your employer, I would not be speaking with you right now.”

“Look, man, I don’t handle Mickey D.’s money. He’s got managers, agents, and a team of bean-counters to do that. I’ve just been assigned the shitty job of making sure he gets laid on April 19th.” Zane was starting to get steamed at this grinning, smart-talking, Jimmy Buffet-dressed banana picker.

It also irked him that his employer — a scrawny, big-nosed, gravelly-voiced sexual deviant with little talent and fewer grooming habits — could easily afford to drop a few million bucks to take mud baths in the Caribbean with some Hispanic hoochie mama.

Felix looked down at his watch again. “I’m sorry I cannot spend more time discussing this with you, Mister Wahlberg, but I do have a plane waiting for me. You have my card. Please speak with your employer and let me know your decision before I leave the country. Good day.”

* * *

Her mother answered the phone with a suspicious, “Jes?”

“Marcella there?”

“¿Quien es?”

“Tell her Zane, Mickey D.’s personal assistant.”

The phone clunked down, and Zane could hear the mother cry out: “¡Marcella Graciana Elena Luciana Rodrigues! ¡Teléfono!” To Zane it sounded like the intro of a De La Hoya fight at Caesar’s Palace.

An extension was picked up. "Yes?"

"Marcella, this is Zane. I've finalized the dates for your upcoming vacation." He still hadn't heard her mother hang up the other phone.

"Zane? Oh, hi!"

"You need to be packed by ten a.m. on Monday, April thirteenth. A limo will be by to pick you up and take you to Mickey D.'s chartered plane at the Houston airport. From there you will fly directly to the Virgin Islands and spend two nights at the St. Croix Hilton. The spa will make arrangements to take you to Camille Cay on the fifteenth. You will stay two weeks at the spa, then return to the St. Thomas Holiday Inn on the twenty-ninth of April. Mickey D.'s jet will take you back to Houston that next day. You should be home on Friday, the thirtieth, by mid afternoon. Do you have all that?" Zane's voice was sharp and abrupt. He was tired of playing travel agent.

"Um, Zane?"

"What?"

"I don't know what to pack. I've never been to the Caribbean."

"Aren't you Puerto Rican?"

"My parents are from there. But I was born right here in Texas and haven't gone back to visit." Even with the slight twang, her voice was delicate and as curvy as her Miss Big A Auto Parts 1994 calendar cover-girl figure.

"I don't know... just pack girly stuff. Bikinis, massage lotion, crotchless underwear; whatever you think will get Mickey D. hard. He is, after all, spending a good seven figures to let you shack up with him for two weeks."

"Should I pack my snorkel?"

"For as much money as Mickey D. is paying for this little excursion, I would hope this spa has their own mini-submarines."

"Oh, do you think so?"

"How should I know? This ain't part of my job description."

"But Zane," she pouted. "I thought you were in charge of planning this trip."

"Look, sugar lips, I'll make you a deal. You don't tell me what is and what isn't my business, and I won't come to your job and tell you which cocks to swallow."

Zane could hear two sets of gasps over the phone line. His head was starting to feel like a trash compactor and he didn't mind sharing the pain.

"Hey, I'm no whore. I'm a dancer!"

“Yeah, whatever. Just be ready by ten o’clock on the thirteenth, and don’t forget how much money Mickey D. is paying for your lambada, darling.”

SAND AND SUN

Chad sat alone in his private bungalow at Camille Spa and had to laugh. It was either that or he was going to start crying. And he didn't want his wife, Sandy, to see him in that state.

He didn't move from his spot on the bed when Sandy returned from her morning swim. She had her hair up in a towel, and Chad noticed that her tan was steadily improving.

"Lucia's giving manicures this afternoon. I'm going back down for one," she said.

"Fine. Whatever."

"Don't forget about dinner tonight. What were you thinking of doing?"

"I've got no idea," Chad admitted.

"Well, don't wait too long. You know what time everybody else likes to eat."

He watched her leave with a greater appreciation of his wife's resiliency. She sure was being a trooper about this whole thing. He wished he could do the same. If only he could shake the feeling that his father, the late oil-magnate Sam Wisenault, had reached out from the grave to ruin his fun.

His daddy had gone to the big black geyser in the sky when Chad was nine — leaving Chad and his brothers healthy trust funds that should have allowed them to all live comfortably for the rest of their lives.

Once Chad hit puberty, he set out to prove that his trust fund wasn't going to be nearly large enough.

His fund manager, Lew Miller, warned him about this trip. You're starting to really cut into the principal, Lew told him. Go stuff it, Chad replied, we're going. It's going to be the most far-out vacation ever.

Running a hand through his thinning hair, Chad saw how prophetic he'd been. Camille Spa was certainly far-out. So ridiculously, insanely, incomprehensibly far-out that he and Sandy would've have been better off booking a vacation to Pluto.

Thank God she had talked him out of bringing the kids.

By all rights, he should be able to bring legal action against Camille Spa. If he did, however, everyone back home would know that Chad Wisenault was an even bigger fool than they'd previously suspected.

Lew would give him the evil 'I told you so' stare. His brothers — the smug, superior, boring cowards — would just laugh from the safety of their gated enclaves.

It went against Chad's nature to hold his tongue when he felt wronged, but in this case it seemed to be the best option. He'd have to come up with a cover story and make sure that Sandy corroborated it. That shouldn't be too hard. His wife may be making the most of things now, but she certainly didn't want to risk losing her place in Houston's high society.

They would have to keep the details of Camille Spa's 'relaxation program' a complete secret. Besides, who would believe them if they told the truth anyway?

HARSH NASAL VOICES

Katya won both sets 6-2, 6-2, but she knew the games had just begun.

They sat under a wide canvas umbrella, sheltered from the sun. It was a typical gorgeous November afternoon in Brentwood with an expected high of 78 degrees.

Since Katya had triumphed on the tennis court, it was her turn to serve during cocktails on the veranda. “So, how is Henri’s new Bentley handling?” she asked, taking a long pull off her high-octane Bloody Mary.

“Majestically, darling,” the countess volleyed. “You know how much Henri loves to tinker. Well, in just days he had that car — which as you know he bought from the McNeeley’s for peanuts — purring like an Abyssinian. And since there were only a dozen of those models ever made, with almost none of them still running, the Automotive Historical Society in New York gave us a jingle last Friday and offered Henri nearly half a mil for it.”

“That’s fabulous.” Katya countered with a drop shot of her own. “It’s funny you should mention the Automotive Historical Society. You know that Jackson has been intimately involved in their Model T exhibit. Well, yesterday he got a call from the president of their board. They don’t have any openings right now, but the president said that if Jackson could find the time, he would personally change the bylaws to create a new spot just for him!”

The countess grimaced. “Really, darling?”

“It’s a shame that Jackson is so busy with his company right now, I honestly don’t know if he will be able to accept. Maybe if he wasn’t already on the Symphony’s board, the Governor’s development panel, and so on and so forth. Really, I don’t know how he keeps up with it all.” That made it 1-0 for Katya. She dabbed her cheek and smiled behind the napkin. It was always good to score first against the countess.

Now it was the countess’ turn. “So, darling, have you finished redoing that parlor of yours? I am so looking forward to having our bridge game there next week.”

The serve had good spin, and Katya could only manage this weak return: “It’s coming along quite well. Jackson and I have contacted Martha Stewart’s people, and she has signed on for the project. Unfortunately, Martha won’t be available until December to come out and handle the conceptualizing. So we’ve had to move the schedule back a month.”

That left an opening for the countess and she pounced without hesitation. “Tish, a whole month, darling? Who does that bobbie-haired bitch think she is? In that case, why don’t we move next Thursday’s game to my drawing room. We just had Susan Weinburg in from Atlas Florists to do the season’s arrangements. The woman is simply a genius with orchids.”

“Sounds fabulous.” Katya wanted to bite the inside of her cheek, but kept up her smile. “I’ll ring Meredith and Jill and tell them about the change of plans.”

That tied things up at one apiece. Katya reared back, and was about to unleash a hot one when the countess — who was notorious for creating mid-point distractions — snapped her fingers twice and called: “Alfredo!”

Immediately, a diminutive man with peppered gray hair and heavy-lidded eyes approached the table.

“Yes, countess?” Alfredo forced himself to repeat his mantra: Cornell, Cornell, Cornell. His eldest daughter, Julie, was a senior. He only had to pay for three more semesters of tuition and books before she would graduate with her MBA.

“Another Bloody Mary. This time don’t skimp on the horseradish.”

“But of course.” Alfredo wrinkled his nose, which was about an inch off-center thanks to an ill-tempered Otay Mesa border guard back in his youth. “And for you, madam?”

“I’ll have a vodka collins this time, hold the club soda,” Katya answered.

“And I’m feeling a teeny peckish,” the countess cut in. “I want something eggie, like a Spanish omelette, but not with all those vegetables in the way. None of those green and red things, understand? Just eggs, a dash of nonfat milk, and some of your spices.”

“My spices?”

“You know, jalepeños, chilis — that stuff you people put in enchiladas.”

Alfredo pulled out his note pad. He didn’t really need to write down the order, but he thought it a good idea to occupy his hands. That way they wouldn’t go off and do something foolish, like throttle a prominent club member in broad daylight.

Katya said, “That sounds good, make it two.” It was her habit to order the same thing as her lunch partners. A notoriously finicky eater, Katya would seldom find the meal to her taste. That way she could just pick at the edge of her plate and smoke two or three menthols.

This unorthodox diet plan had served Katya well over the years. She could still fit into the same pair of size-4 jeans she wore for her eleventh-grade yearbook pictures.

“I tell you what, those immigrants know their spices,” the countess said loud enough for everyone on the veranda to hear. Then, conspiratorially, to Katya: “Have you noticed they are even named after them? If you take the ‘e’ off the end of ‘spice’ you get ‘Spic’. Coincidence, darling? I think not.”

It was certainly no coincidence that Countess Waverly had the cultural sensitivity of a major league baseball owner. She came to it as honestly as the thin wrinkles on the corners of her eyes that two surgeries, five collagen injections, an experimental Botox treatment, and a small fortune in moisturizers couldn’t completely eradicate.

Countess Waverly, née Victoria Snellbill, was the third child of Earl Snellbill, who owned two shopping malls in Long Beach. She grew up in a tree-lined white neighborhood, with lots of monied white friends. There was never an emphasis on formal education. Whatever for? To go out and get a job?

Instead, her training was in small-talk and style. She was proud of being high-maintenance. It was never a question of whether or not she would be well-provided for. It was just a matter of which of daddy’s acquaintances would do the honors.

She got her start with an elderly V.P. at Mutual of Omaha, who claimed to be as healthy as a water buffalo, but actually had a good dozen years on Marlon Perkins. “His fortune means nothing to me,” she told a reporter for *Parade* magazine’s ‘People In the News’ after the ten-minute ceremony by the lap pool at the Tropicana Hotel. “I’m so in love with Roger. I just want to share every moment with him for the rest of our lives.”

Six weeks later, she married the heart specialist who signed the ‘Do Not Resuscitate’ order on her late-husband’s chart.

After her seventh husband — the noted industrialist Henri Waverly — purchased a parcel of land outside of Liverpool, the now middle-aged Victoria “stumbled” across documentation that the land was formerly royal property. Wanting a title to go along with her considerable personal wealth, she adopted an accent like an anglo Tina Turner and insisted on being addressed as “the countess.”

Katya never made issue of the countess’ title, since she herself had a suspect upbringing. They had an unspoken ban on all talk about each other’s past, which was as close to friendship as each one cared to get.

After the delay, Katya started the next round carefully. “Have you and Henri decided on your vacation plans yet?”

“We have some ideas.”

“Such as?”

“Oh, I suggested a few weeks at Le Manor in the Isles d’Hyeres, but Henri is looking for something new, different. He’s thinking about the Outer Hebrides, but I can’t honestly see the night life being très chic.” The countess was proud of the few words she could say in French, and used them as often as possible. “How about you and Jackson?”

“You know how hard it is to make that man take a vacation. So I’ve been trying to talk him into joining Mar-a-Largo.”

“The Trump’s new spa in Palm Beach? How pedestrian of you.”

“I spoke with Marla last week and she told me they are capping the membership at 500, and there are only five spots left.” As much as the countess loved her French, Katya enjoyed dropping famous people’s first names to imply familiarity. “I figure it’s close enough to take the SPX over for a long weekend, with or without Jackson. They’ve already secured Rodney for the yoga program, and the aromatherapy will—”

“Rodney Yee? That quack. They call him the greatest Iyengar master that ever lived. Hah! I paid the man ten thousand dollars last year to align my spine, and my chakra is still off-kilter. I haven’t been able to properly channel my spirit guide since. So, what are they asking for membership?”

“Seventy-five to join, then a five-thousand annual fee.”

“An outrage! The damn thing is in the flight path to West Palm Beach. I’ve heard you’ve got jets flying overhead every twenty-two minutes. Voom! Voom! What’s that five grand get you anyway?”

“Well, as a member, you can come and go as you please. But Marla told me the annual fee does not include food, lodging, or personal services.”

The countess snorted. “Figures, darling. It’s become so tiresome finding a good spa nowadays. Do you know I heard of one in the Virgin Islands that’s supposed to be the Chanel of all spas, and they can charge more than poor old Trump’s initiation fee just for a single day.”

“Really?” Katya knew you could never tell what was a truth, half-truth, or feckless rumor with the countess. “How do you suppose they get away with that?”

“Well, from what I heard, they offer everything you could ever dream of — and some services you can’t get anywhere else in the world. How much is the best of the best worth, sweetie? You tell me.”

“I don’t know.” But what Katya thought was: *It’s not how much it’s worth; it’s how much I can get Jackson to pay.* “Lingee Tong acupuncture?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Parabolic hydrotherapy? Anti-oxidant colonic irrigation?”

“They must, for what it costs to stay there.”

“Sudanese macrobiotic cucumber facials?”

“The best of the best, my dear Katya. Intriguing, isn’t it?”

Just then, Alfredo glided through the open veranda door with their lunches and fresh drinks. He knew better than to ask the two to sign for their drinks. They expected everything to be automatically added to their monthly tab, and would pitch a fit if the club added more than the 10% minimum gratuity.

Alfredo was not a vindictive man, but when he picked up their drinks at the bar — and smelled the horseradish in the countess’ Bloody Mary — he welcomed the sneezes that followed. Leaning over the tray, Alfredo made no attempt to turn his head or cover his nose. Let those putas enjoy the same viral head cold that was plaguing half the “spics” on the kitchen staff.

Katya waited for Alfredo to leave before asking, “So, what’s it called?”

“An omelette. Don’t be such a Naomi — eat up.”

“No, not the omelette. The spa.”

“Ah, they keep that very hush-hush.” The countess would never admit to Katya that she had been calling dozens of pig-headed travel consultants during the past month to answer that very question. “I’ve heard it sounds something like Caneel Bay, but I’ve checked and that isn’t it. Caneel Bay is the name of some resort on St. John. Runs about \$500 a night — and evidently has a quaint little beach, but they’ll let absolutely anyone make a reservation. This mysterious spa is super-duper exclusive, and is supposedly in a totally different league than Caneel Bay. So, how’s that new personal trainer of yours working out? Sheri told me he does his sessions in biker shorts, and there are bulges popping out in all the right places.”

Katya laughed and began to describe her last visit with Jean Claude. But her brain was already working on this new challenge. Maybe she would need to sneak out for a tuck and breast lift before talking Jackson into taking an extravagant spa vacation. He was getting to be such a pooper about money, and God knows, she wasn’t getting any younger.

* * *

Sleep was for the weak. The minnows.

Jackson Holmsley was no minnow. His idea of fun was to find the biggest fishes in the biggest ponds, then eat the fuckers for a midday snack, he was fond of saying.

Like clockwork, he started his day at 4:15 a.m. with a quarter-mile swim and a ten-minute rubdown to get the blood flowing. Then it was time for a ninety-second shower while his valet, Arne, chose and laid out his clothes. No reason to waste valuable minutes standing in front of his dresser just to find the right socks to match his damn tie.

After a three-minute manicure (he timed Arne on this as well), Jackson clipped his babies — two XP-90 Audiovox cellular phones, each with call waiting — to his belt and marched down for breakfast.

The phones were seldom idle, even at five in the morning, and Jackson was used to juggling three or four conversations at the same time. His phone bill arrived each month in a three-ring binder and typically ran more than a hundred pages. AT&T considered his business so valuable, they had three operators dedicated to servicing his account: Theodore (6:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.), Wanda (2:00 p.m.-10:00 p.m.), and Keiko (10:00 p.m.-6:00 a.m.).

Today's breakfast consisted of two English muffins with non-fat cream cheese, a grapefruit, and a cup of cut-off-my-balls-whydontcha herbal tea. Jackson decided that it was a conspiracy between his scumbag physician, that gutless personal nutritionist, and the lackeys in the kitchen.

Even Katya, who certainly had nothing to gain with his longevity, was going along with the turncoats. High blood pressure? Everybody has a little job stress now and then. Cholesterol around 320? That was still lower than Ted Williams' lifetime batting average.

The situation would be completely unacceptable if not for Gunther, his head mechanic. Aside from tuning all fifty-five cars in Jackson's garage, Gunther performed one even more valuable service. Each morning, the mechanic stocked the glove compartment of Jackson's Jaguar with pastries, Snickers bars, and a thermos of real goddamned coffee.

He left the house without giving his wife a goodbye kiss. Even assuming he could figure out which guest room she'd slept in last night, Jackson knew Katya wouldn't wake up for another four or five hours.

Pulling up to his security gates, Jackson took a bite of a frosted bear claw and turned on his radio for KNX's morning news. Katya always asked why he didn't hire a driver, but she didn't understand the pleasure he received from sitting behind the wheel of his Jag. Even in the predictable morning traffic ("No traffic, no business," his old mentor Donovan would say), Jackson found the dawn commute from his Brentwood estate to Los Angeles' financial district peaceful.

Making his way down Olympic Boulevard, Jackson pulled up behind a black Taurus and checked his mirrors. A red VW Bug was challenging him on his right flank, closing fast and cutting down his passing options.

On his left, a beat-up gardening truck was even with his back tire. The Taurus in front of him slowed as their lane backed up behind the upcoming traffic signal. The VW to his right gunned its engine and took a two-car lead before stopping behind an outdated Beemer. He longed to challenge that pissant, 4-cylinder VW on the open road.

Jackson put on a lightweight headset and punched the auto dial button on his dashboard. He was immediately connected to his office.

"Get me Phillipe."

The light changed and Jackson got a break as the traffic to his left opened up quickly. He cut behind the gardening truck without signaling and rode its bumper until he could drift back to the center lane right in front of a motorcyclist who waved a gloved fist and beeped pathetically.

"Loser!" Jackson called out over his shoulder.

"Sir?" the voice in his ear said.

"Not you, Phillipe. Now give me the latest rundown on the Fox proposal. I assume Jameson finished the draft last night."

That last cut-back brought him even with the red VW again — and then he saw it. A LADOT commuter bus had stopped in the right lane about three-quarters of the block ahead, causing gridlock behind it.

The VW driver saw it too and frantically tried to get out of his lane before losing speed. Jackson sped up to match his adversary stride for stride. The VW tried to nose

into his Jag, but Jackson didn't back down. "No you don't, asshole!" he shouted as the VW ran out of room and was forced to brake behind the unloading transit bus.

Jackson cackled with glee as he veered toward the on-ramp to Highway 10.

"Sir? You wanted to know about the proposal?"

"Yeah. Fax me what Jameson's got right now." His second phone line buzzed. "Hold on, Phillippe." Without taking his eyes off the road, Jackson used his customized keypad to flip between the phone lines. "Yeah?"

"Good morning, Mister Holmsley. You wanted a construction update on the San Francisco research facility."

"I'm glad you called, Dooley. I've been hearing that Mayor Brown has a beef about the signage. I want you to tell that jackass that if he didn't want Jackson Holmsley The Third in big letters on the front of the building, he should've finished it without my money. I tell you what, this charity thing isn't worth the tax break."

Jackson took a sip of his coffee and was thinking about starting into a cheese danish when the fax machine mounted in the back seat began to spool out paper. He switched back to the other phone line. "Phillippe, don't patch me through to Jameson until I—" he said while reaching back for the fax — when the collision ripped the rest of the sentence from his lungs.

Three things happened almost instantaneously: his shoulder and lap belt threatened to cut Jackson into thirds; his state-of-the-art headset flew forward and exploded against the windshield; and Brazilian roast coffee geysered over the car's tan leather interior, spraying Jackson's side with scalding, vanilla-flavored rivulets.

He could hear the screech of brakes. Then a foggy silence cut only by the drone of the financial report over his Jaguar's seven Bose speakers — "On the Nasdaq line, Lattice Semiconductor closed at 25 3/8, down 8 7/8 under heavy trading, but a spokesperson for Lattice cautioned investors not to panic, citing last quarter's restructuring..."

Jackson fumbled for the door handle and staggered from his vehicle. A white Acura was stalled in front of him. It still had its factory plates, but now looked to be missing both taillights, several coats of paint, and about two feet of its trunk space.

The Acura's owner got out, saying, "Holy Hell, you drive worse than James Brown on crank."

The driver looked to be one of the innumerable actor/waiters that haunted L.A.: short, bleached-blond hair, wrap-around sunglasses, baggy shirt, and a scruffy goatee that resembled a taxidermied chipmunk.

“My Jaguar,” was all Jackson could think to say. He tried to blink away the spots that danced across his field of vision.

“Screw your Jaguar. That was my brand new Acura you hit, dude. It’s a good thing I wasn’t that attached to it yet.”

Just then, Darryl sprinted up, panting, his gun drawn. “Are you all right, sir?” After seventeen years with the LAPD and three with Top Flight Security, Darryl Derkins was loosing the war of the waistline. The thousands of hours spent behind the wheel of his Chevy Cavalier had given his belly a good five-inch head start over his belt.

Ignoring Darryl’s question, Jackson began examining his bumper. It had taken the brunt of the collision and was now bent at a 45-degree downwards angle, hanging off the Jag like crêpe paper.

“That was the original bumper,” Jackson said to the Acura driver. “Do you have any idea how much it will cost to replace?”

“Screw your bumper. Damn, my neck hurts.”

Darryl stepped forward and holstered his gun. “I’ll take care of this, sir.”

Jackson looked up, as if noticing him for the first time. “About time you got here, Darryl. With that kind of response time, it’s a wonder I haven’t been carjacked already.”

Since Jackson refused to let himself ‘be driven around like some blasted invalid,’ Top Flight Security was forced to use a chase car during his daily commute. This was hardly an ideal security situation, as Jackson had a thing about being passed on the freeway and switched lanes faster than his telephone lines.

Even with his considerable driving skills, Darryl was seldom able to stay one car length behind Jackson’s silver Jaguar. This morning, Darryl got sandwiched between a pair of trucks from ‘2 Broke & Starving Grads Will Move U’ and was at least a dozen cars behind when he saw the accident.

“I apologize for the delay, sir,” he began. “But when you took Overland instead of Robertson, I got a little caught up—”

A flurry of honks rang out from the cars backed up on the on-ramp behind the Jaguar. The driver of the closest car, a beat-up Toyota Corolla, rolled down his window and shouted, “Get a move on, willya?!”

“Do you have any idea who I am?” Jackson asked all the minnows circling him.

“Yeah, you’re the guy who just bought me another new car. I hope your insurance is paid up, pal,” answered the Acura driver, pulling off his sunglasses. Jackson and Darryl would both later testify that his pupils were dilated — the punk was probably doped up on weed or meth or uppers or something.

Jackson took a step forward and accidentally splashed through a puddle of green coolant. The anti-freeze mixed with the coffee stains to form a crude version of “Starry Night” on his Bruno Magli wing-tips.

The Toyota driver honked one last time for good measure, then jerked his wheel to the left, drove over the garden of plastic taillight fragments, skipped over a low curb, and plowed across the corner of the ivy embankment before cutting back onto the freeway entrance. The bottlenecked line of cars slowly followed.

“Look, sir, I’ve already radioed for backup,” Darryl said. “We’ll get a tow truck out here right away, and I’ll take care of matters with this gentleman.”

Jackson wanted to teach the punk some manners, but the throbbing behind his eyeballs returned with a vengeance. “I’ll wait in the car. Call Phillipe; have him cancel my appointments. And I’ll need to see my chiropractor immediately. Have him also call Donovan — today, one o’clock at the club. Tell him it’s urgent.”

Darryl whipped out a pad of paper and took furious notes. He was too worried about his future employment status to question being treated like a common secretary.

“You’ll be hearing from my lawyers by noon,” Jackson called over his shoulder as he walked back to the Jaguar.

The Acura owner said, “Yeah, well I hope you’ve got your own Dream Team. Hey, I don’t suppose you’ve got a phone in there so I can call the real cops instead of this rent-a-clown.”

“No phone. Just a piece of advice. Fuck with the bull, you get the horns. Done. End of conversation.”

* * *

“How long has it been since you’ve taken some time off?” Donovan’s voice echoed from wall to wall inside the climate-controlled handball court.

“I don’t remember.” Jackson crouched down behind the service line. Thanks to a neck realignment and an hour on the massage table, his headache had receded to a dull tightness around his temples. “The score is 17-4.”

“Wait. I call a timeout.” The old man pulled off his protective eyewear.

“You took your last timeout at 14-3.”

“Jackson, listen to yourself. You would deny a timeout to a man almost eighteen years your senior, and up by 13 points no less. How would you feel if I dropped dead right here? You would have to call the paramedics and there would be a big to-do. Where’s your compassion?”

“Compassion is an obsolete human emotion. You taught me that, remember?” Jackson was not about to let Donovan get away with this feeble attempt at stalling. He knew the old man was just trying to break his rhythm. He repeated the score and bent down with the blue handball in his outstretched left hand, planning on serving to the deep left corner, where he knew Donovan really hated them.

“Jack, stop the game.”

Holmsley cocked his right arm and, ignoring the sweat dripping off his nose onto the hardwood floor, smashed a drive serve off the center part of his gloved palm. The pain felt good, and for a second he rode above it, conquered it, like a bull rider going the full seven seconds before dropping to the dirt.

The handball skipped crazily off the back corner of the court, untouched. Donovan hadn’t made a move for the ball and was just standing there, hands on his hips.

Jackson said, “That’s 18-4.”

“Do you remember when our weekly games used to be fun?” Now 63, Donovan had come to resemble an albino flamingo. His forearms were still knotted with muscle, but the old man’s once-thick neck and shoulders had shriveled away, further emphasizing his hooked nose. The fluorescent lights inside the court picked up every blue vein in his skinny, hairless legs.

“I don’t know what you mean. Kicking your ass is always fun.”

Donovan moved closer, to cut down on the echo. “Jack, I’ve known you since you bought your first bushel of soy beans, and I’ve never seen you this uptight. How many hours you working a day now?”

What the hell kind of question is that? Jackson wondered. He remembered when Donovan used to have rows of cots set up in a storage room and his assistants were

expected to sleep at least three days a week at the office. “You know, the usual twelve or so,” Jackson lied.

“I think you may be pushing yourself a little hard, son. Everybody needs a break from the battle once in a while. A couple of weeks off, let those VP’s of yours hold the reins for a spell, what could that hurt?”

Jackson bounced the handball testily. “You’re starting to sound like Katya.”

“Oh, and how is that lovely wife of yours?”

“She’s got some bug up her ass about a vacation. Brings it up every chance she gets. ‘Isn’t that jockey wearing a pretty green uniform? It looks just like those facial masks I’ve heard they use at this special Caribbean spa,’ she’ll say.”

“A spa? What a wonderful idea!”

“She thinks she’s being incredibly clever about it. And last night she tried to make me a carrot cake — this from a woman who can barely spell ‘flour’ — which means whatever she’s got in mind costs a pretty penny.”

“Or maybe she just knows how much you like carrot cake. Now it’s not like you don’t have the money for a vacation, Jack. Beauty is a special thing. Time spent with it — be it flowers, art, or the love of a beautiful woman — is more precious in the end than all of one’s gold or stock options.”

“Are we going to finish this game or what?” It was obvious to Jackson why Donovan had slipped to the tail end of the Fortune 500. The old man was getting more senile by the day. Jackson hoped that if he ever started to babble such nonsense, someone would have the sense to put a bullet in his head and put him out of his misery.

* * *

Something was blocking Katya’s inner peace. It felt as though she had a five-pound dumbbell lodged in her lower back.

Katya tried everything to correct the situation: weeks of vigorous training with Jean Claude, stretching sessions with Xiong, whole afternoons spent in her basement sauna, phone calls at 3 a.m. to her private therapist, two days of non-stop chanting, regression therapy to one of her past lives as a trench-digger in the War of 1812, meditation in her iso-flotation tank, four separate palm readings, Chinese herbal wraps, Vitamin B6 loading, gravity boots, shiatsu massage, acupuncture, craniosacral manipulation,

tanning sessions, a program of seaweed douches, and even a diet consisting of nothing but tomato juice and four tic-tacs a day.

Nothing was working.

Katya had the entire household staff on edge. She would alternately press the intercom and surround herself with maids, secretaries, porters, stylists, gardeners, flunkies, stable hands, and the like — then shriek for everybody to leave her alone and start firing people at random.

She didn't know why she was so locked up, but Katya knew the cure. Just a week or so at the world's greatest spa would get her physical and spiritual body back in total harmony, she was sure of it.

Her bedroom was empty. It had been at least fifteen minutes since Katya had cleared out her attendants, firing her manicurist and the delivery boy from her linen service (whom she knew technically didn't work for her, but it made her feel better anyway).

The room was modeled after Ivana's old suite at the Taj Mahal. It had the same majestic arched entryway, twenty-five-foot high ceilings, gold-fringed wall rugs, antique walnut dressing tables, and a mammoth four-poster bed draped with several bolts of blue silk.

There were no photographs in the master bedroom itself, only an oil painting of Katya and Jackson standing in poses more wooden than the six-inch scalloped picture frame. The painting hung over the marble fireplace, and Katya had never liked it because she believed the painter — some frog named Zinfendel or Zarniwenkel — intentionally set out to make her look fat.

Some nights she couldn't stand being in the same room with the portrait and would curl up in one of the guest rooms in the west wing. Jackson hadn't noticed, of course, because he rarely slept in the bedroom anymore. He usually nodded off in the den with his feet up on an ottoman, *Barron's* tucked under one arm, the only light coming from C-Span on the TV.

She walked across the bedroom and into the walk-in closet. It resembled the front counter of a dry cleaners' shop, complete with a computerized, belt-driven series of racks. After clicking on the overhead spots, she booted up the computer. Typing in "Shoes/Eveningwear/3 in heel/Black/Suede/Versace," she waited as the conveyor silently rotated. When the tenth shelf of shoes swung past, the rack glided to a halt.

Katya reached into the top cubbyhole, moved the Versace pumps aside, and found what she'd been looking for... the Runes.

The Runes had been a wedding present from one of her old cheerleading partners. Inside the cover of the guidebook read an inscription: "These have always given me insight in times of need. I hope they do the same for you, ya' lucky devil. Big huggies and lotsa kisses, Bernadette."

The Runes themselves were in a blue velvet bag, tied off with a thin strand of rope. Katya opened the bag and stirred the ivory tiles by hand. Each tile was roughly the same oblong shape and weighed slightly less than a domino.

Katya closed her eyes and let her fingers wander through the tiles until they closed over one that felt just right. She turned the tile over in her palm and examined the Viking symbol. It looked like a diamond with an upside-down V underneath.

Sitting cross-legged on the shag carpet, Katya flipped through the guidebook until she found the matching sign. The page was titled "Othila: Separation / Retreat / Inheritance."

"Now is a time of separating paths. Old skins must be shed, outmoded relationships discarded. When this Rune appears in a spread, a peeling away is called for. Included in the Cycle of Initiation, Othila is a Rune of radical severance.

"The proper action here is submission and, quite probably, retreat — knowing how and when to retreat and possessing the firmness of will to carry it out.

"Real property is associated with Othila, for it is the Rune of acquisition and benefits. However, the benefits you receive, the 'inheritance,' may be derived from something you must give up. Such a surrender can be particularly difficult when that which you are called upon to give up or abandon is an aspect of your behavior, or some part of your cultural inheritance. For then you must look closely at what, until now, you have proudly claimed as your birthright. Whether it is your attachment to your position in society, to the work you do, or even to your beliefs about your own nature, the separation called for now will free you to become more truly who you are."

Katya slammed the guide shut. The Rune was right on the money. Retreat — the Rune said she needed a retreat. A spa would be considered a retreat, wouldn't it? The "peeling away" obviously referred to facial masks. Even the ancient Norse Gods knew she needed that vacation!

But what else could she do? Then a name popped into her head. Of course...
Salvadore!

* * *

“Conflict! My God, look at you! You’re positively shimmering with conflict!” he screeched the moment she walked into his shop.

“Nice to see you too, Salvadore.”

“Forgive me, girlfriend. But your aura is screaming for attention.”

Katya first met Salvadore Santeria three years ago at a transcendental meditation seminar. He ran his own curio shop in Venice that specialized in ‘Aura Readings.’

“How long has it been? Sure, ignore poor Salvadore until you are desperate, is that it?”

“I’m sorry about not staying in touch. But I really need your help.” Katya teased Salvadore’s post-Haight-Ashbury ponytail, then cuddled up next to him on his double-wide beanbag.

The smell of Rain-Forest incense filled the shaded room. The gentle sea breeze rattled through the strands of beads hanging from every window, door, and hallway.

“Don’t say any more. Salvadore needs no assistance.” He reached out and began waving his sun-freckled hands inches away from Katya’s skin.

“Don’t you want to keep your eyes open?”

“Hush, child. My third eye sees all. I’m getting tension here — your chi feels like a coiled spring. I’m also getting... a great unfulfilled need.”

“Yes, yes, tell me more!”

“First, I must ask, am I working off my normal fee here?”

“Salvadore!”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” His hands continued to trace the outline of Katya’s upper torso.

“I’ve been looking for this special spa to take Jackson for a vacation. That must be what you are seeing.”

“No, there is something else. The great Salvadore has looked deep into your aura, and under all that conflict my third eye saw traces of green.”

“Green?”

“It’s the sign of the Earth Mother — your nurturing side.”

Katya froze. Suddenly, she extricated herself from the beanbag and walked over to a display cabinet full of quartz crystals.

“Did I say something wrong?” Salvadore tried to rise as well, but failed to get his legs to work properly. Instead, he reached for his roach clip. The weed was still burning nicely.

Katya did not turn around. “I haven’t told this to anybody.”

“You are with child then?” Salvadore exhaled a puff of smoke.

“No, no, but I have been thinking about it... Jackson is totally against the idea. But I don’t know, it doesn’t seem like such a bad thing now. All my friends get to shop at the Baby Gap — I can’t tell you how many baby showers I’ve been to in the last year. Do you have kids, Salvadore?”

“Three of them, can you believe that? They live with their mother in Fresno.”

“What’s it like?”

“Having kids? Now there’s a real trip.”

* * *

Katya had thirty seconds under the dryer before her nails were done. Then she could light another fire under Janice’s ass.

Janice was supposed to be calling every travel agent on the West Coast. But a week had passed and Katya didn’t have anything to show for it, even though Janice was almost on the R’s. Maybe it was time to offer these travel agents a thousand-dollar reward. It could also be time to find a new personal assistant.

As if on cue, Janice peeked her rat-like nose through the bedroom door.

“I... I know you told me that you didn’t want to be disturbed, Mrs. Holmsley, but... well...” Janice’s frizzy hair stuck out at right angles from her scalp. The rest of her face was hidden behind a pair of thick reading glasses that were clipped to an unfashionable gold chain.

“Spit it out, Janice.”

“A man... there is a man here to see you. He said it is very important, and well, I thought...”

“I’m not expecting anybody. Get out, unless you don’t want a job come Monday.”

“I know you are not expecting anybody, Mrs. Holmsley, but... well, he said to give you this.” Janice handed over a business card with embossed lettering.

CAMILLE SPA

The finest accommodations on Camille Cay

Camille Cay? Could this be the spa? The countess said it sounded like Caneel Bay. Katya turned off the nail dryer, pushed her way past Janice, and continued down a long hall. Cutting through the outdoor pool area, Katya bypassed the kitchen, and came up on the foyer. Directly under the hanging chandelier (a special order from Harrod’s) stood a Negro flanked by two Top Flight guards. The entranceway seemed to glow with the scent of flowers, as if the tropical shirt under the man’s tan linen suit had come to life.

“He’s clean,” one of the guards said.

Sweeping a hand through her hair, Katya stepped forward to face the smiling man.

“It’s my understanding that you wanted to speak to me, Mrs. Holmsley,” he said with a sing-song accent. “My name is Felix. How may I be of assistance?”

* * *

Felix sipped his mint tea and consulted his appointment book. “The first opening we have available for you and your husband would be in April.”

“Don’t you have anything sooner?” Katya crossed her legs and leaned back against the camel-hair cushion of her sitting room’s sofa.

“To be honest, you are lucky to find something before next winter. The next two-week block we have open is next December. Would that be more to your liking?”

“No, no. April will do just fine. I assume you have a brochure and a list of all your spa treatments.” Katya wanted to have visuals to show off to the countess at their next tennis match.

“I’m afraid we do not. We operate entirely by word of mouth and carefully guard the details of our program.” As though sensing her disappointment, Felix added, “I could arrange for you to speak to one of our former guests.”

“Anyone I’ve ever heard of?”

“How about Cher?”

“You had Cher at your spa?”

“With her daughter, Chastity, for two weeks last June. Afterwards, she couldn’t stop raving about our program. Shall I have her give you a call?”

As much as she wanted to chat with Cher, Katya didn’t want the word to somehow get back to the countess before she was ready to spring the news. “That won’t be necessary. If your spa is good enough for Cher, then sign us up.”

“Before I confirm this reservation, Mrs. Holmsley, I am going to need to ask you some questions about your husband’s finances.”

“My husband’s finances?”

“A few red flags came up during the background check on you and your husband. Part of my reason for coming to see you today was to see if you could explain some of these, shall we say, irregularities.”

Katya’s eyes narrowed. “You did a background check on me and my husband?”

“I’m afraid that due to our spa’s exclusivity and not insubstantial cost, we do background checks on all potential visitors.” Felix reached for another cucumber sandwich.

“I see. And what exactly is the cost?”

“For you and your husband to stay with us for two weeks, the flat rate would be two-point-one million dollars U.S.”

Katya gulped. For that kind of money, they could probably buy a pretty good sized house in the Caribbean. With a 180-degree ocean view. It would take some big-time work to have Jackson sign off on a spa vacation this expensive. But she remembered the Rune’s prediction of a retreat and felt that dumbbell twist again in her lower back.

“Now according to our research, your husband took out a second mortgage on this house six months ago.”

“Yes, Jackson found some property in Palm Springs that was about to be developed and he needed the cash to buy it right away. Once the subdivision is finished, Jackson will be able to pay off that mortgage.”

“Were you aware that your husband filed for bankruptcy eight years ago?”

Katya didn’t need to be reminded of that dark period of their lives, when Jackson’s temporary business troubles were grist for the tabloids and financial trades. “Are you aware that my husband is still one of the richest and most respected men in America?”

And if you think we can't afford to visit your spa with his pocket change, you're sadly mistaken."

"That may be true, Mrs. Holmsley, but we do have the luxury of being very choosy about who books time at our resort. I'm afraid that right now, we cannot extend an invitation for you to visit Camille Spa." Felix brushed the crumbs off his linen trousers and stood.

"This is about me, isn't it? Is it because I didn't come from the right family? Because I didn't graduate from the right schools? Look, just because my daddy didn't come from money, that shouldn't keep us from getting into your damn spa!"

Pocketing his leather book, Felix turned to the angry blonde. "It may be hard for you to believe, but this isn't about who you were. Right now it has everything to do with who you are. Good day."

"No, wait! I was a bit rash, but I didn't mean any of it. I've just had a stressful day, that's all. You don't understand, I've been searching for your spa for weeks and weeks. Please give me another chance." Katya flashed her best Raiderette cheerleader smile.

Seeing him hesitate, Katya tilted her shoulders forward to best accentuate her chest. "It's okay now. Please, why don't you sit down. I'll have Janice get you some more tea. I'm sure we can work out this little misunderstanding, can't we?"

Felix took out his reservation book again and silently reached for another sandwich.

* * *

They sat at their usual table and moved their chairs to the sun. Katya was not sweating, since her tennis game with the countess lasted just forty-five minutes.

"I knew it was only a matter of time before my backhand came back to me." The countess was positively shimmering with joy after trouncing Katya 6-0, 6-1. She couldn't remember the last time Katya hit so many returns into the net.

Taking a sip of her first Bloody Mary, the countess lobbed in her first serve. "Tell me, how did that parlor of yours turn out?"

"I think it's finally ready for our next bridge game. Martha did a fabulous job with the new color scheme. It's modeled after a Swiss ski chateau, and Martha did a centerpiece with gilded pine cones that really brings the room together." Katya couldn't wait any

longer. This was better than Jackson's book deal from Bantam. "So, are you and Henri still on for that trip to the Outer Hebrides?"

"Actually, we had a little change of plans." The countess smiling into her drink. "Henri and I talked it over, and we've decided to join the Trump's Mar-A-Lago."

"You're kidding."

"I hope you are not too disappointed, darling, but when I talked to Marla there was only one spot left. So I thought I'd give Rodney one more chance to fix my chakra." The countess popped open a compact mirror and began to reapply her lipstick.

"That's just as well," Katya said. "I've talked with Jackson and we've decided not to join Mar-A-Lago anyway. You were right, it really is too pedestrian. However, do you remember that Caribbean spa you were having such a hard time finding? Well, guess who managed to secure a two-week reservation for next April?"

The countess' face dropped so quickly, she sprained a muscle in her plasticine jawline. She would be forced to soak her head in ice water for two weeks to keep down the swelling.

Game, set, and match, Katya thought.

One by one
they cue out
on the pier
Eyes behind shades
chains glittering
from red wrinkled necks
How nice and green!
Chewing voices
A pandemonium of colours
and combinations

— Wycliffe Smith

ONE BY ONE

APRIL 15, 1995

The helicopter banked left and Katya couldn't tell if she was over-excited or just air sick. Either way, she felt like puking.

"We're just clearing Jersey Bay, on St. Thomas' eastern face," the pilot said.

Katya rummaged around her seat for a barf bag.

They were all wearing snug-fitting flight headphones that muffled out all other noise except the pilot's intercom.

Her stomach lurched again, and Katya wished she hadn't picked a seat in the one row that faced backwards. Her intention had been to check out her fellow vacationers. But now she really needed some Dramamine, a Valium, and a toilet. This was worse than that "Zipper" ride at the Meeker County Fair she always hated as a child.

She sat in the middle of the row, her back to the cockpit, with Jackson to her left and an empty seat to her right. Despite the nausea, she couldn't help but notice the man sitting across the row from her. It was enough to make her swallow back the bile. Katya refused to let herself be sick in front of *the* Mickey D. Not after reading that big article about him in *People* magazine. She wondered if he'd really done it with the entire cast of "A Chorus Line" in a single night.

Katya reminded herself to get a photo with Mickey D. before the two weeks were over. That would be an even better coup than the snapshot Katya had of her and Liza (Minnelli) arm-in-arm, standing with Michael (Douglass) at a Democratic National Committee fund-raising party. She'd framed that photo and kept it in her favorite guest room.

Jackson, a Republican since he was old enough to say "Gee-Oh-Pee!" had refused to come to that party with her.

"But the Democrats have all the good celebs," Katya insisted.

"Hey, we've got Chuck Heston. Done. End of conversation."

Jackson, who thought anything recorded after Sinatra was toneless prattle, was also staring across the row at the rock musician. But he was wondering why the pool cleaners got to ride along with the paying customers. *And now the dirt bag had the nerve to put his feet up on the empty seat next to Katya!* he fumed.

Jackson could smell the mix of alcohol and sweat reeking off the man. Where were the security people on this flight? *No, fuck security, I'll toss this bum out of the cabin mid-flight myself.*

“You want to move those feet?” Jackson shouted across the row. The dirtbag’s red-splotched face was almost totally obscured behind the flight headset, tousled hair, frilly scarves, beaded necklaces, scruffy black sideburns, and mirrored aviator sunglasses.

“Yeah, I’m talking to you, buddy! You got a problem with that?”

Katya stiffened next to him, but the bum gave no indication he could hear Jackson over the helicopter noise.

“That’s Mickey D.” she mouthed to her husband.

“Exactly. Fucking pool cleaners,” Jackson muttered. Without a word, the dirtbag pulled his leather boots off the seat next to Katya. The man’s face betrayed no hint of whether he was following Jackson’s request or just felt the need to change positions.

Jackson took a deep breath, and let his gaze settle on the luscious babe sitting next to the pool cleaner. He’d heard her speaking Spanish to the pilot while they were loading everyone’s luggage.

Jackson did not notice that her carefully-sculpted obsidian hair barely moved out of place despite the rocking of the cabin. He did not notice that her 1-1/2 inch fingernails had been painted like mini American flags and polished to a star-spangled sheen. Instead, his eyes locked on a spot approximately five inches below her chin, where her bulging golden curves began their twin descent into the scoop neck of her lacy sundress.

This magnificent view was much preferable to the one directly in front of him. That passenger was a dowdy woman in her mid-thirties. She had shoulder-length, greasy brown hair, freckles across her nose, and wore a baggy white jumper.

There were three more seats in the rear of the cabin. The middle one was empty, but Jackson had recognized the passenger directly behind the plain-faced woman — Han Dickson, the founder of SuperNova Microsystems. Dickson still owned a staggering 65% of the company’s stock and had a personal net worth of over \$1.3 billion. Like Jackson, he was wearing a navy blue suit. *You could take the man out of the business, but you can’t take the business out of the man*, Jackson mused.

The two had met nearly a decade earlier at a Washington dinner for the nephew of the Japanese emperor. However, in the few minutes they spent together before boarding the converted military helicopter with the C² stenciled on the tail section, Dickson seemed to not remember toasting sake with Jackson, the Undersecretary of the Interior, and that sniveling wimp Yen Chu.

Well, Jackson certainly wasn't about to re-introduce himself. If Han Dickson was going to shine him off, then so be it. After all, Dickson wasn't the man the *New York Times* said would "be the helmsman through the next decade's sea of financial change" in 1990. He wasn't the one President Bush had called for advice on formulating the government's economic policies, until that lightweight hick from Arkansas took office two-and-a-half years ago.

But there have been rumors of a potential merger between SuperNova and WebScape. Even with his eyes still delineating the young señorita's décolletage, Jackson was calculating the potential profit from that piece of information. Maybe he could corner Dickson during a steam bath. Pump him for details while the man was relaxed, off-guard.

The final seat in the back row was occupied by that awful foreigner; a sweaty Eastern European wearing military fatigues. The entire time they waited on the tarmac, the man had a noisy bird perched on his shoulder — some kind of parrot, with long green, yellow, and orange feathers. As the pilot attempted to stuff the bird into a small travel cage, it became agitated and started squawking out phrases like "Work the head" and "Money shot."

The pilot's voice came over the headset: "And now, out the left windows, you should be able to see your first glimpse of Camille Cay."

Jackson looked out over his shoulder but could only make out the expanse of deep blue water rushing beneath the helicopter. Then his eye caught sight of something in the distance, little more than a shadow. It was so tiny it could've been a speck of dust on the lens of his \$1,200 Bausch & Lomb sunglasses.

One of Jackson's three beach houses was on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. He loved the sight of the Na Pali coast — the way the cliffs rise up above the clouds. Camille Cay, on the other hand, seemed to retreat even as they drew closer. Eventually, the water below started to lighten in color. The helicopter was flying under a thousand feet, and provided a birds-eye view of the tangled plains of coral just below the water's surface.

"Isn't it darling?" was Katya's first reaction. Then, as they closed to within a mile, "Where's all the buildings?"

Indeed, Jackson could not make out any signs of human habitation. No roofs, no roads, no beach-front hotels, no sailboats. It was as if God had accidentally dropped a

few chunks of stone and sand out of his pocket on his way to building an archipelago somewhere else and hadn't bothered to pick up after Himself.

They roared over a rocky, barren beach, dipped over a ridge, then followed the tree line to the south-west side of the island. There, Jackson caught sight of a sparkling beach before the helicopter banked one last time and hovered over a grassy clearing.

A dark-skinned man wearing a pink short-sleeved shirt jogged over, head ducked low against the prop wash. The blades began to slow, and the man yanked open the cabin door. He positioned a footstool, looked into the cabin and shouted, "Jus' step down dere."

As Jackson exited the cabin, he had a sudden craving to call somebody and put them on hold. But first he would need to get his messages. Jackson refused to believe that business would go on as usual in his absence. Something would come up. There would be a crisis and he would not be there to solve it; and next year he'd be stuck five places out of *Fortune* magazine's list of the Top 100 wealthiest Americans again.

* * *

The lean man in the pink shirt led the group up a path that connected with a flower-rimmed courtyard. No one spoke, except to make short ahhh's of relief as a series of whitewashed cottages came into view. The sparkling villas had been invisible from the air, as they were set into the side of the hill and overshadowed by a grove of lush palms. Individual stone walkways connected each cabaña to the central area.

When the drone of the departing helicopter faded, the soft sound of the islands greeted the visitors: rustling wind, swaying leaves, and the metronome of ankle-high waves rolling into the beach below.

A symphony of birds sang their welcome. *Prio-Tero-Chee! Zee-e-e-swees-ee! Prio-Tero-Chee!* The parrot — now back on the shoulder of its owner — perked up immediately. "Hände hoch!" it called. "*Squaaawk*. Get the C-4!"

"Shush," said the man in military fatigues. The bird obeyed reluctantly.

A voice called, "Ah, there you are now!"

Four circular picnic tables ringed the grass clearing. Beyond the tables was a brick outdoor grill and a wooden hut. From the doorway of the hut stepped a group of three people, all dressed in matching pink shirts. The man in the lead was olive

complexioned, freckled, and wiry. His hair was also the lightest of the three, close to a brownish rust color.

“Yes yes, welcome to Camille Spa. Welcome to Paradise!” he exclaimed. His English was crisp, but carried the rhythm of the islands. “I am Skip the Spa Director, but you can just call me plain Skip, yes? Welcome, I have said before. Before we get started, I goin’ to introduce you to our staff. This here Bomba, and next to him Virginia.”

Skip gestured to the couple standing a few paces behind him. Bomba nodded mutely. He was taller than Skip by more than a head, and had a double-wide chest, flat nose, downcast eyes, and dreadlocks the size of rolled newspapers. One of his thick arms draped fondly over Virginia’s shoulder. It was an intimate gesture. Bomba appeared older, but with Virginia’s ageless beauty, it was equally possible for her to be his wife, sister, or daughter.

Virginia’s skin sparkled in the tropical sun. The sweet wind frolicked around her translucent white skirt, happily caressing her trim thighs with crushed silk. Loosely-braided black hair swept away from her high cheekbones and continued all the way down her curvaceous backside.

“Now you have already met Aye-Aye,” Skip continued. The man who had met the group at the helicopter now waved his hand.

“Big big day, sahs,” he said with a smile.

“Aye-Aye is in charge of the stables and the pigs,” The spa director was suddenly interrupted by an explosion of yelps, snarls, and flying fur. “Ah yes, the boys.”

Three dogs launched out of the hut and tumbled their way across the courtyard, nipping at each other’s tails. “This here’s River.” Skip pointed to a young chocolate Labrador who took to gnawing at one of the picnic table legs. “And those two,” he motioned to the pair of identical German Shepherds, “named Fountain and Valley.”

“Look man, I just want to check in if you don’t mind,” Mickey D. said. The previous evening, to get things rolling with Marcella, he’d indulged in several shots of a 148-proof island brew called “St. Vincent Very Strong Rum.”

“Oh, no need to check in.” Skip said. “Virginia will direct you appropriately.”

Jackson blinked at the pool-cleaner. Could that dirt bag actually be a fellow spa guest? How could **he** afford to stay here? Holmsley recovered enough to ask the spa director about their keys.

“No need for keys either,” the spa director answered.

Jackson took that to mean the villas were secured by some sort of hand print, voice, or retinal scanning system. Clever.

Katya's mouth was still sharp with bile, but she fought through it. "Where are the shops? I need a new handbag. You must have a Charles David outlet here, right?"

Skip's amusement shook his sleek frame. "Yes yes, the tour. I'll be very happy to show you our beautiful island. But first let Virginia show you to your lodging, then Bomba and Aye-Aye bring up your luggage. Now where is that Lucia? Must still be picking things up for dinner. No matter. So, to your rooms, yes?"

* * *

If Sister Glory had been in costume — with the piled-high silver wig, pancake makeup, and matching cubic zirconium tiara and necklace — she would've called for "a spiritual cleansing"... Yes, sir! ... "An immersion!" ... Praise be! ... "into the crystal water of life" ... Keep it going, sister! ... "To call up the holy spirit" ... Hal-lelujah! "and have it rise up, yea, RISE UP!" ... Praise God! ... "to baptize me in the sweet liquid of love"... LOR-DY!

But the plain, brown-haired woman in the white jumper was on vacation now, so she could cut the "praise-be's." All Gloria wanted was a simple bath. No hal-lelujahs. Just hot water, a little jasmine oil, and a back scrubber. Maybe some bubble jets too.

She'd been craving this bath ever since those miserable two hours shopping in Charlotte Amalie. It seemed like an eternity ago, yet it was just that morning. That damn helicopter flight had her all disoriented.

She'd flown into St. Thomas a day early, thinking that she'd rent a car, drive around to a few beaches, do some snorkeling, and pick up some duty-free perfume. But during all her trip planning, she never thought to check which side of the road they drive on here. Since it was the U.S. Virgin Islands, of course it would be on the right... right? Wrong. For some reason, the U.S. Virgin Islands did the same as the British Virgin Islands and drove on the left.

After picking up her Suzuki Samurai from the airport — despite the warnings by the rental agent and the reminder sign on the dashboard — Gloria pulled into the wrong lane of traffic and narrowly avoided smacking head-on into a moving van. After ten minutes

parked at the curb, her hands finally stopped shaking. She returned the car, took a \$20 cab to her hotel, and ordered her first of many large drinks at the patio bar.

The air in St. Thomas reminded her of New Orleans in June. It was the same temperature and humidity, but was fortunately tempered with a breeze that was so often missing in the South. She loved hearing the rustling palms from her balcony of the Marriott Morning Star Resort, so that night she left the sliding door wide open.

At 3:00 a.m., Gloria had been rudely awakened by the crowing of a rooster that sounded so close, she was surprised it wasn't hanging from her ceiling fan. The Caaah-caaaah-caaaaaah cries of the solo fowl was joined by a faint chorus of other roosters in the hills, which served to wake up all the dogs on their end of the island. Trying to ward off a hang-over of Biblical proportions, she staggered to the screen door and closed it tight, wondering aloud what kind of retarded rooster couldn't tell that sunrise was still hours off.

In the morning, she shook off her grogginess to take a local taxi into town, riding in the back of a converted Toyota truck, crushed against 13 fellow passengers underneath a raised plastic camper shell. Unfortunately, five cruise ships were docked in Charlotte Amalie that day, and the shops were overflowing with yellow-shirted tourists from Minnesota, or some other lily-white state.

Barkers in front of jewelry shops called out their wares and tried to guess the hometowns of the passersby, reminding her of Tijuana, Mexico. Trying to escape the crowds, she found a side-street that rose away from the shopping zone. As she wandered up the hill, Gloria stumbled across a game of kick-the-can played by a group of black children, none older than ten. A few of the kids didn't have shoes, which brought a fresh reminder of the \$400 pair of new earrings in her purse.

She'd already done her part, right? Fed the lepers, clothed the hungry. This was not her problem. This was her *vacation*, damn it. No reason to feel guilty at all. Her ministry was making big strides in Somalia, wasn't it?

But now, a few hours later, as she walked up the stone path to her private cabaña at Camille Spa, Gloria was finding it hard to block these rebel thoughts. *How many of those shoeless children in St. Thomas could you have helped with the cost of just one day at this spa?* She refused to do the simple arithmetic. *Better yet, how many of those kids could you have sent to college?*

This unwanted self-recrimination was made all the worse by her lack of faith in God's will.

Gloria had learned her trade as an intern with Jim Bakker's ministry in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. At first, she was mostly interested in the eight units of credit from Louisiana State, but she quickly came to see the power — and potential profit — of faith. She marveled at the way Rev. Bakker was able to justify his and Tammy Faye's extravagant lifestyle to the elders in the church. His belief in his own destiny and God's will were unshakable.

Oh yes, Rev. Bakker honestly believed that it was God's plan to own a mansion in Orlando. He honestly believed that Jesus died so he could be the principal shareholder of a Fundamentalist theme park with a "Faith Falls" water slide and 4,000 square-foot gift shop (where he took five points off all T-shirt and concession sales).

Gloria didn't have this gift of immutable faith. She'd lost that years before her internship with the Rev. Bakker. Still, she turned her internship into a full-time position as a production assistant and began learning the industry from the inside. She studied the Pentecostal language of "tongues," laying on of hands, camera angles, direct mail campaigns, audience plants, tax evasions, and how to best fleece one's flock.

She learned her lessons so well that within two years of graduation from LSU, she had her own one-hour program on the PTL network. "The Sister Glory Hour Of Faith And Power" quickly gained a respectable following — and in the absence of any major improprieties, won many defectors following the Swaggart, Gorman, and Bakker scandals. Soon, her ministry was rivaling Oral Roberts' in respect to TV affiliates and annual donations.

And though she preached the gospel every afternoon at three o'clock, Gloria never did regain her own belief in God's will. Early in her career, she secretly enjoyed this faithlessness. It made her feel superior; a fox in the henhouse. It was her buffer against her followers, and leverage against her competitors.

But lately, she'd been looking at it differently. Since it wasn't God's will that she invest \$15 million from the ministry's coffers into a ski resort in Jackson Hole, whose will was it?

The answer was obvious. It was her will. "Sister" Gloria Lynn Gortner's will. She had given herself a \$1,700,000 bonus for Christmas last year because she wanted it, not God.

She was about to walk into her \$75,000/night Caribbean villa because she wanted it, not God. And Sister Glory didn't care, did she? (*What about those shoeless kids playing kick-the-can?*) That made her a bad person, right? (*And where do bad people go when they die?*)

Gloria had deflected this line of self-recrimination for years. She knew these thoughts were only coming out because she was tired, jet-lagged, and generally out-of-sorts. All she needed was a good hot bath. To wash away her sins.

As she reached the door, Gloria suddenly realized why they didn't need keys. The door didn't have a lock, just a simple wooden handle. *I'd better find a good hiding spot for my jewelry*, she thought.

The creaking of the rusty door hinges was no match for Sister Glory's gasp of surprise as she stepped inside.

The room appeared reasonably large, but that could've been an illusion caused by the lack of furniture. It was definitely well-ventilated — large, unscreened windows centered each wall and carried in the sweet Caribbean air. There were no curtains above the openings, only panes of glass propped up with iron hinges. In the far corner of the room stood a wooden chest of drawers and a knee-high bed platform covered with a green duvet. A clay cistern was bolted into the wall above a tiny basin. And that was absolutely it.

The white carpet was short and clean. No, that couldn't be...

The sight was so incomprehensible it didn't register until she had walked to the middle of the room, looked backwards, and saw the outline of her footsteps.

The floor wasn't carpet, it was sand.

The entire room had been swept and carefully leveled, which must've been why she didn't notice it right away. Gloria bent down and gathered a handful of her "floor." The fine, white grains slipped through her fingers without sticking.

She suddenly felt nauseous. Taking a deep breath, Gloria started to look for the bathroom. She crossed the room again, looked out the windows, and realized that there were no connecting rooms. Four white-stucco walls, open windows, a pitched ceiling, and a sandy floor. No basement, no second level, no master bedroom... no bathroom. *Okay, forget the tub for a minute*, she thought, *where's the toilet?*

The room began to spin. Gloria stumbled to the bed and started to sit down until she saw that it wasn't a green comforter resting atop the wooden frame. It was a mattress made of crisscrossed palm fronds.

"That's it," she said aloud and stormed from the room. It looked like Sister Glory was going to need to threaten Skip with the prospect of burning in a lake of fire until Kingdom Come in order to get a new room.

* * *

She was halfway down the stone walkway when a shadow loomed up over her. Gloria yelped in surprise.

It was Bomba, loaded down with her three suitcases and garment bag.

"No, stop! There must be some kind of mistake. This can't be my room."

He stared back mutely. Bomba's head was the size of a beach ball, further emphasized by the crown of dreadlocks. The tip of each tangled braid was a shade lighter than the roots, presumably bleached by the sun.

Bomba's forehead alone appeared large enough to do the rhumba on. It unnerved Gloria to stand so close to something that big and quiet, reminding her of the time she'd peered over the edge of a dormant volcano in Ecuador during one of her church missions. Her tour guide pointed out that nobody could be 100% sure that the magma flow had stopped for good.

"I'm Gloria Gortner. And that's my luggage, but I know this isn't my room."

"Natürlich. Frau Gortner. Was ist los?" the giant finally said.

"What? Lost? I don't understand..."

"Ich möchte etwas für meine Frau. Ein Armband oder vielleicht einen goldenen Ring. Ich nehme den Schmuck. Aber ich bezahle nicht!"

Now Bomba was looking down at her suitcases and smiling.

"Wait... What are you saying?" Her brain flummoxed. "English, you must speak English, right?"

But he was already pushing his way past her. "Sehr gut. Haben Sie auch Briefmarken?"

"No, I don't want you to put those in there! Don't you understand? That can't be my room, I have a reservation for a suite!"

She was about to follow him back up the path when shouts erupted below. Deciding to suspend the one-sided argument about her luggage, Gloria continued down the stone walkway. As she reached the courtyard, the words began to take shape: "... got to be fucking kidding me! I didn't pay this kind of money to sleep in a hovel!"

It was one of the men who wore a blue suit. The red-faced one who ignored his blonde trophy wife and spent the entire flight ogling that Hispanic girl's tits.

"I wouldn't even ask my gardeners to live in something that barbaric!" He was inches from Skip's face. "A dirt floor!? And you call that... thing... you call that bed thing..."

The spa director, in contrast, stood his ground serenely, arms crossed in front of his chest. The blonde paced several feet behind the two, her expression as nervous and impatient as a boxer's cut-man.

Now the other vacationers were making their way to the courtyard. Mickey D. was the next to arrive, his girlfriend in tow. Gloria had no trouble recognizing the rock idol and could hardly believe that he was a fellow guest at Camille Spa.

"What's up with the john?" the singer said. "I can't find the shitter, man."

Jackson seemed distracted by Mickey D.'s appearance. Gloria seized the opportunity. "There's also a mistake with my room. What I'd really like is for you to find me a room with a bathtub—"

"Ohmigod, I just realized our room didn't have any outlets," Katya gasped, speaking for the first time. "Where am I going to plug in my hair dryer?"

Jackson looked like he was about to go Chernobyl. "We demand new accommodations. This... this is absolutely intolerable!"

The foreigner with the parrot on his shoulder strode into the fray. "My luggage? What take you people so long?"

The calmer of the two businessmen arrived and turned to the European, "Have you seen your room yet, pal?"

"Yeah, sure. Seen worse." The bird tittered and picked at the corner of the man's Trotsky mustache. Gloria desperately asked the European if his room had a bath.

The spa director held up his hands like a home plate umpire calling a balk. "Please, please, I know you people have questions of me, yes? Perhaps now would be good time for the spa tour."

"We don't need no damn tour," Jackson growled. "Just get us a new room."

Mickey D. said, "Ditto that, man."

“I think we would all like different rooms,” Gloria said.

Skip appeared unruffled. “I’m afraid that would not be possible.”

Katya looked as though she was about to cry. “Why not?”

“Well, for one Mrs. Helmsley—”

“That’s HOLM-sley, you idiot!”

“Of course, my apologies, Mrs. Holmsley. What I meant to say is that it is very impossible to give you all new rooms, since you already occupy all available guest cabañas at Camille Spa. Unless you feel like switching of course.”

“Wait a minute,” Dickson said, “are you saying there are no other rooms?”

“Yes yes, so you see.”

This made Katya stop her furious pacing. “That can’t be right. There can’t only be one... two... seven of us — where’s everybody else?”

“Please, honored guests, I understand you are confused, yes? If you’ll be patient now, I’d be happy to explain. As you know, this Camille Spa an extremely exclusive resort. You won’t ov been here if it were not so. We cater to persons of big big importance, like yourselves.”

His soothing words were received like a single pitcher of O’Douls at a table full of thirsty rugby players.

“We do this on personal scale,” Skip continued, undaunted, “which explains how our reservations get so very limited. Think of Camille Spa as an escape from the harshness of the outside world. We are modeled after the Caribbean of old, where communities lived in harmony with nature and each other. Here you will find simpler time; no TVs, no fax machines. Instead, only home-cooked meals, refreshing swims, and beautiful stars. In short, the experience of the true Caribbean.”

The vacationers lapsed into a shocked silence until Jackson said, “This is total bullshit. Where are your phones?”

“No phones on island,” Skip answered with remarkable good cheer. “No electricity.”

“Well then, you’d better get your rolodex and find me the number of that helicopter company,” Jackson said. “I’m going to call them on my cellular and get their asses out here right now. I’ll be goat-fucked if I’ll pay a hundred-and-fifty grand a night to sleep on some leaves. Done. End of conversation.”

Skip pulled out a pen and a slip of paper from his shorts and scribbled down a number. "Be my guest. But I doubt your phone be working from way out here. I'm afraid the nearest cellular tower is on St. John, more than 30 kilometers away."

Jackson snapped the paper out of Skip's hand. "We'll see about that."

"Look, I really need a bathroom. I gotta go pronto." said the woman with Mickey D. She appeared to be doing a Latina version of a rain dance, with special emphasis on the skip-hop with tightly crossed legs.

"In keeping with traditional Caribbean living, we have a community sanitation facility located at the far end of plaza. Cisterns in your cabañas store pumped-in rainwater. That water for general drinking, hand washing, and such."

Dickson asked the spa director what exactly a 'community sanitation facility' entailed.

"You are mostly Americans, yes? I believe you would call it an 'outhouse'."

Katya's eyes bugged. "An outhouse?!"

Marcella didn't argue but silently skip-hopped her way across the courtyard.

"SON-OF-A... Static!" Jackson shook his two Audiovox XP-90s as though they were busted Christmas toys. "Why won't they connect? AT&T told me they would work anywhere on the Virgin Islands!"

That's when Gloria suddenly exploded with hyena-bursts of laughter. *Oh, isn't this precious?* She had long believed that God didn't have a plan, but He did have a sick sense of humor.

"Don't you see?" she asked between gulps for air.

Her fellow travelers stared back as though she'd stripped off her white jumper and begun playing naked Twister on the lawn.

"Don't you see we've been had? There ARE no other rooms. No indoor plumbing. No way to call for help. And I don't know about y'all, but I've already paid in advance for my vacation, hah HAH!"

From the collective glum silence, Gloria could tell she was not the only one who'd made a sizable bank transfer to the Caymans.

"This can't be happening." Katya's indignation beginning to crumble into humiliation. "What I am going to tell the others at the club? Do you have any idea what the countess is going to say about this? You promised us that this spa had the finest accommodations in the Caribbean!"

"Yeah, that's right. It was even on your salesman's card," Dickson added.

“No, our card say Camille Spa has finest accommodations on Camille Cay, yes? This island — Camille Cay — totally owned by Camille Spa, y’see? Nothing else here. Your five cabañas only lodging on the entire island — except for staff quarters, of course. And our rooms dem is slightly smaller.”

Gloria hooted. For some reason she still found this hysterically funny. Out over a million bucks to stay in something that was closer to the Hanoi Hilton than Club Med. What would the headline be in the *National Enquirer*? Something along the lines of: “*Popular Female Televangelist Picks The Wallets Of God-Fearing Americans To Finance Extravagant Caribbean Vacation — Only To Get Scammed In Return!*”

Dickson asked, “So what are we going to do now?”

“I know what I’m doing... finding that damn shitter,” Mickey D. offered before taking off in Marcella’s tracks.

“A boat. All we need is a boat. Where’ve you got one stashed on this godforsaken island?” Jackson continued to shake his phones.

“No boats. Just rafts for snorkeling. No good for boats anyway. Very bad reefs all around island. Rip big big hole in your hull like that.” Skip snapped his fingers for emphasis. The noise startled the parrot and it flew up into the trees squawking “Cover! Cover!”

The fragrance of cooked meat wafted through the courtyard. Gloria felt her stomach twist. She looked down at her watch: 5:14 pm, not even close to dusk. She marveled at how fresh air can stimulate a primal hunger even in the darkest situations.

“Ah, that Lucia be very busy,” said the spa director. “Smell the roti, yes? Dinner must be nearly ready.”

“What I am going to tell my bridge club?” Katya asked no one in particular.

“Early dinner very good idea. Come, please, sit. Roti the specialty of the house, as they say. Let Camille Spa show you true Caribbean hospitality. Also gives Bomba and Aye-Aye time to finish unloading your belongings.”

“That reminds me,” Gloria said, “what language does Bomba speak? It sounded like German or something.”

“Oh, that Bomba,” Skip laughed.

* * *

The roti — a mixture of meat, potatoes, and curry spices wrapped together like an Indian version of a burrito — was fabulous, Dickson thought. It was followed by a medley of papayas and mangoes served in the shell of a halved coconut.

He noticed that everyone eagerly devoured their dinners, but nobody spoke up to compliment the meal. It didn't surprise him. He guessed that right now his fellow guests were probably doing the math. If everyone was paying \$75,000 a day, and meals accounted for approximately 20% of each day's fee, then this roti was \$5,000 a plate. That figure didn't concern him. He'd paid well more than that for political fundraisers in the past.

Han Dickson sipped his iced tea and took stock of his situation. He had his laptop, but only one spare nickle-cadium battery. The battery would last maybe two more hours before needing to be recharged — something he couldn't do without an electrical outlet. Approximately 150 minutes until his Powerbook would only be useful as a doormat to his cabaña. No e-mail. No newsgroups. No MUDs. Not for two whole weeks.

Instead of asking himself if he really had it in him to go that long without his beloved technology, he turned his attention to his dining companion. The thin, pale-faced woman with a string of freckles on her nose had introduced herself as "Gloria," but hadn't said another word during the entree.

Both sets of couples were seated at their own tables on the west side of the courtyard. That smelly man with the bird had his own table closest to the small outdoor kitchen. All three dogs frolicked around the man's military boots and battled for the scraps of meat he periodically dropped to them.

With only four tables in the courtyard, Han had little choice but to offer this Gloria woman a seat at his table. Not that he minded. She seemed pleasant enough, if only slightly preoccupied with bathing.

"You must think me mad," she finally said as Virginia cleared their dirty dishes. It took Han several seconds to realize Gloria was actually speaking to him.

"Excuse me?"

"Nuts. Wacko. You must really think I'm cuckoo for having a laughing fit back there. I don't blame you. I'd think the same thing."

"To be honest, I found it refreshing."

“I don’t know what came over me. I suppose I should be furious — maybe it just hasn’t sunk in yet. Is it just my cabaña or do you have a bunch of green leaves on your bed?”

“No, it’s not just yours. But I’ve actually slept on palm mats before. During a three-month excursion in Bali. They’re surprisingly comfortable. Good for the back, you know.”

“I don’t suppose our rooms have air conditioners, do they?”

“You heard the man. No electricity. Looks like we’re going to miss the next two episodes of ‘Frasier’.”

“I guess that truly makes this a faux spa.”

Han laughed at her double entendre. *Faux spa*, he’d have to remember that one for later. “So what line of work are you in, Gloria?”

“I’m in the, ah, ministry business.”

“Really? I guess they pay nuns a whole lot more than when I went to Catholic school.”

She put on her most serene smile. “Sometimes the Lord provides in mysterious ways. And what is it that you do?”

“As little as possible.” Han stroked his chin, where the unkempt hairs of his beard were beginning to show a hint of gray.

“That must be nice.”

“Not a bad gig if you can get it. Don’t get me wrong, though, I used to be a productive bastard when I first started my business. Worked twenty hours a day for a solid year.”

“And what kind of business was that?” She liked his smile, but the rest of the package wasn’t her type. She was attracted to working men — blue jeans instead of blue suits. Furthermore, his features were too soft and fleshy for her tastes. The seams of his dress shirt hit in all the wrong places.

“Bits. Bytes. Computer-type stuff. I got in at the right time. Made so much money I have a hard time spending it all.”

“I see you’re still trying.”

“Everyone should have a hobby, don’t you think?”

Sister Glory wrinkled her nose, causing her freckles to pool together. “So how did you get suckered into this trip?”

“I’m not sure I’d call it suckered, but I heard about Camille Spa from the CEO of Oracle. He told me the spa helped him clear his mind and unleash the Samurai within.”

“Sounds like your friend needs to cool it on the Bruce Lee movies.”

“You are undoubtedly right about that. And what about you, how did you hear about this place?”

Laughing, she said, “From my hairdresser, of all people. He used to work on Tammy Faye Bakker, and had overheard her talking about this super-secret spa that Jim had promised to take her to.”

“Did they ever make it to Camille Spa?”

“I don’t think so. The roof fell in on them pretty quickly after that. But if you find your palm mattress is streaked with dried mascara, let me know.”

* * *

“It’s about time you got here,” Katya said to the hulking figure in her villa’s doorway. “I expected my luggage to be unpacked by now. You are going to have to bring in another dresser or some racks. If you don’t get my Lacoit gown out of that garment bag right away, it’s going to wrinkle.”

Bomba stared back dumbly. His massive chest strained the fabric of his collared pink spa shirt.

“Furthermore, how do you expect us to call for room service? Are we supposed to ring a bell or something?”

“Pustanhan tayo hindi ka marunong masgslita ng pilipino,” the giant said.

“What was that?”

“Nagrabaho ka na ba sa loob ng inyong buhay?”

“Jackson, tell him to speak English!”

Her husband did not respond. He sat on the edge of the wooden bedframe shrouded in distemper, pieces of his Audiovox XP-90s spread out in concentric circles from his feet. The cellular phones may have been designed for optimal speed dialing, but they were woefully inadequate as mini-trampolines.

“Look, you need to unpack these bags right now. Do you understand that? Un... Pack... The... Bags.”

“Bakit ka pilay? Bakit hindi mo sunugin ang mga damit na yan,” Bomba answered and stepped back through the door.

“Hey, you can’t go! Jackson, was that French? Wait, I’ve learned some words in French from the countess! Crepes! Haute couture! You come back here!”

Bomba’s considerable outline quickly disappeared into the dusk. Katya swore under her breath. Where was a good maid when you really needed one? She couldn’t remember the last time she had unpacked her own bags, but the alternative was sitting down and talking with Jackson, so she unzipped the smallest of the seven bags and started pulling out bikinis by the handful.

Katya had packed enough beachwear to outfit the entire Allied invasion force at Normandy — though the chiffon wraps and sequined thongs probably would’ve clashed with the color scheme of the barbed wire and land mines.

She pulled open the top drawer of the one measly dresser. It contained a simple one-piece swimsuit, two pairs of men’s swimming trunks, two T-shirts, two cotton pullovers, and three towels. All ten items were the same shade of pink and had the words “Camille Spa” embroidered in white stitching.

Katya yanked open the other two drawers: empty. She focused on keeping her voice from quavering. “Do you want the middle one or the bottom?”

“Two weeks,” he mumbled. “I can’t even get my messages for two weeks. I can’t believe how fucking stupid you are.”

“I’m clearing everything out of this top one except for the towels,” she said.

“Phillipe is expecting me to call by nine tomorrow morning so we can close the Fox Network thing. And I’ve got three more deals coming down the pipe — I can’t afford to be stuck here without a phone. This is going to ruin me.”

“Do you remember which one of these bags is yours? Is this the one with your dress slacks?”

“The house — gone. The Aspen lodge — gone. Your sweaty cheesedick of a personal trainer — gone. That’s what this means, you know. How could you do this to me?”

“Why don’t I give you the left side of both drawers, honey. I’ll just keep most of my stuff in the bags until tomorrow. How does that sound?”

“Why should I be surprised? You get all worked up about this ‘special’ spa, blackmail me into coming here, force me to risk imprisonment by the IRS, and for what? So we

can live in squalor? Now it looks like I'm going to have to declare bankruptcy all over again. Nice going, babe."

A knock came from the door. Before either Holmsley could move, the spa director thrust his head into the room. "Hello, hello. Unpacking I see!"

Jackson's knuckles were white against the edge of the bedframe. "You've got some fucking nerve acting like nothing's the matter."

Katya felt the skin tighten on the back of her neck. She was grateful for the distraction, but still fearful of Jackson's mood. When he got like this, he rarely stopped at a few cuss words. As if this whole mess was her fault!

"I brought lanterns. Be getting very dark soon," the spa director said. "Find the matches under the towels in the top drawer, yes?"

"False advertising. Reckless endangerment. Entrapment. And I'm just getting warmed up. After my lawyers get ahold of you, you're going to feel like you've been given an enema by the business end of Chi Chi Rodriguez's putter."

"Once you light the lanterns, you can hang them from there and there," Skip pointed to two hooks in the center beam above Jackson's head.

"Since you won't allow us to leave under our own free will, I bet we could even tack on a charge of kidnapping. Once I get back to L.A.—"

"Once you get back," the sudden harshness of Skip's voice cut Jackson off mid-threat, "you are welcome to bring our business in front of the American court system. Others have tried and failed. Our spa has never been found guilty of false advertising nor any kind of negligence. In fact, we've successfully counter-sued for defamation and won each time. So keep that in mind before you do anything rash, Mr. Holmsley. In the meantime, I suggest you relax and enjoy the comforts that Camille Spa has to offer."

"Comforts? What comforts do you see here? Is there a leather couch I'm just not seeing? How about a damn TV? What the hell do you expect us to do all evening?"

"I would recommend getting a good night of rest. We've got a full day of activities planned for tomorrow."

"Close the door!" Katya shrieked. "A big mosquito just flew in here!"

"Let me get the door," Skip said.

"Don't just get the door, kill it! Now it's on that window over there!"

"Mosquitoes are a part of nature, I'm afraid. You really would be more comfortable to sleep with the door and all the windows open. This villa has a good exposure to the

northeasterly trade winds, which should keep out most of the bugs. Also, if you happened to bring any Avon Skin-So-Soft with you, that works pretty well.”

“Avon? You’ve got to be kidding me,” Katya replied in disgust. “I use a special program of Calvin Klein moisturizers given to me by Kelly Klein herself.”

“In that case, please allow me to bring over our homemade bug repellent. It’s made from a blend of sheep livers, cayenne pepper, and palm root.”

“Eeeewww!”

Jackson stood up. “That’s it. No more talk about sheep livers. I still don’t think you realize who you’re dealing with here. I demand an immediate flight off this island and a full refund. Or else you won’t even be able to get a job folding sheets at a Motel 6 by the time I get finished with you.”

“Remember, the matches in the top drawer over there. Big big day tomorrow, yes?” Skip placed the two lanterns on the dresser and backed out of the room with a smile.

Jackson stared at his wife. “Now what?”

Katya acted quickly before Jackson got back on his bankruptcy kick. “I’ve got an idea, snuggums. Why don’t you loosen that tie? How long has it been since I’ve showed you one of my special handstands?”

* * *

What to do? He didn’t feel ready to tackle sleeping. All the trouble to get here and he didn’t even get to watch HBO. Cinemax might’ve been better — then he could’ve stayed up late for the titty movies. At this point, Ratko would’ve been happy watching reruns of Austrian soap operas.

For the lack of anything better to do, he started his bedtime ritual: Gums and Guns.

Ratko was a firm believer in proper dental hygiene. He was proud to have survived more than four decades of occupations and armed conflicts without a single cavity.

In leaner times, good toothpaste or baking powder was sometimes impossible to come by. Once he spent a month brushing with wet sand and using shrapnel shavings to floss.

Now he used a portable, battery-powered water pik by Oral-B. It was a marvelous machine. Out, damned plaque! Out, I say!

Ratko spent five quality minutes spraying his periodontal region. Then he attacked the spaces between his molars with mint-flavored floss and gargled with Listerine.

Spitting the mouthwash into the room's tiny sink, Ratko turned his attention to his SIG Sauer semi-automatic pistol. It was a 9mm P220, the same model adopted by the Swiss military in '75 as its official sidearm. You could tell the older P220s because they had a sharp hammer, instead of the rounded version in the newer models.

With his right thumb on the catch lever, Ratko pulled back the long slide. The slide had diagonal grooves and the words "SIGARMS INC" engraved into its black finish. Removing the heel-mounted magazine, he slipped the slide assembly forward off the frame. He finished field-stripping the pistol by pulling out the recoil spring and guide, then cleaning and oiling the barrel.

After reassembling the P220, Ratko made sure to chamber a round before sliding the gun underneath a corner of his palm mattress.

All the components, including a spare clip of bullets, had been specially fitted into the base of Nikki's cage. The effort turned out to be unnecessary as Ratko made it to Camille Spa without being searched once. His journey to St. Thomas was through a series of cargo ships with sketchy passenger logs, and he never went through customs before boarding the spa helicopter.

Turning to a faded black valise, his only other piece of luggage, Ratko took out an even more faded copy of "Madam Bovary." It was in German, his most comfortable language for reading the classics.

The silence in his villa was unnerving. Occasionally a cricket would sing outside, and Ratko automatically tracked the sounds as though they were incoming mortars.

"Hände hoch!" Nikki called happily.

"Yes, yes," Radko said in German. "It is early."

With that, Nikki whistled, flew across the room, and landed on the iron sink.

"Is that it? Do you want a bath?"

Nikki cackled and ducked down to preen his shiny green tail plumage.

"Hah, I didn't think so. How about some chess? I'm not feeling like reading right now."

"Los Schießen! *Squaaawk*."

"Okay, okay, I'll let you be white this time. Pshaw! You're such a baby about being white."

Ratka opened his valise and removed his traveling chess kit. All the hand-carved walnut pieces were carefully nestled within the hinged oak playing board. He'd come across this kit honestly, trading a case of Claymores to a Serb commander for it.

"Money shot," Nikki called from across the room.

"Don't be so impatient. I'm still setting up."

Ratko looked down at his watch. Only 2030 hours. Normally he put off the uncomfortable act of sleeping until 2300 hours at the earliest.

He was anxious to try a new opening gambit against the Fisher swinging-gate defense. That would eat up some of the evening. Then maybe he would oil his holster or wax his moustache. The moist Caribbean air was causing the hair on his upper lip to curl so much that it tickled every time he inhaled through his nose.

Anything to put off the Sandman for another few hours.

His dreams brought back the faces. They would visit him like old friends. Faces without eyes. Faces cracked in two. Faces that forced him to hide in the rubble of his unconscious, crouched in a pool of mud; fighting not to breathe — surely they could hear him, couldn't they? — as he outlived his comrades yet another day.

* * *

He didn't think he could make it. Why didn't Zane just fly her in and out on the 19th? No, that would just be tempting fate again. There would've been engine trouble, a tropical hurricane, something that would delay her arrival on the island. Zane was right. Best to stay together the whole time.

That put Mickey D. in the awkward position of spending more than two whole weeks with this chick.

True, he'd once spent a whole month shackled up with a Russian contortionist from Cirque du Soleil. But it had taken him a fortnight just to limber up enough to keep up with her for a whole night. 'Do you want to see me bring my left knee behind my back to touch my right ear?' she'd ask. Oh, da! Da! My babushka! Would you do that for daddy?

Could this Macarena or Mirabella keep him interested for two whole weeks? He highly doubted it.

However, Mickey D. reminded himself, the 19th was nearly three days away. Surely he could put up with anything that could come out of her mouth for another 72 hours.

The day and a half they'd spent at the St. Thomas Holiday Inn was borderline intolerable. Sure, the sex was exceptional — she had a real talent using those claw-like fingernails — but afterwards, when all he wanted to do was doze off, she would pepper him with questions.

What color house did you grow up in? What's your favorite holiday? Do you think San Antonio has enough perimeter shooting to make it past the first round of the NBA playoffs this year?

It was like she was testing him, or worse, trying to get to know him. Was she deluding herself into thinking she was going to be around after this vacation?

He'd have to put a stop to it. But do it in a nice enough way that she didn't bolt before the 19th.

Why was he having to deal with this? She never talked this much in any of their previous encounters. In fact, that's why he'd thought to invite her on this mission in the first place.

The first time they met, she never even said one word to him. It was maybe two years ago, after a show in Houston. He'd asked Zane to pick him out a sample of the local fruit, and there she was after the show, waiting in his limo.

Her skin was the color of a buckskin jacket and she wore a form-fitting, red cotton dress with spaghetti straps.

He remembered asking her whether she wanted to go anywhere before heading back to his hotel. Perhaps out to a neighborhood bar for a quick drink?

With only a hint of a smile, she silently got on her knees in the back seat and began unbuttoning his leather pants. The limo had barely started to move, and he was already swimming in her mouth. Once he started panting, she drew herself up and pulled down the straps of her dress.

For a second she turned away, just enough time to bend over, slide up her skirt, and peel away her pink G-string. Then she was back on his lap, mounting him, and swaying to an unheard beat.

He came quickly, violently, which was totally unlike him. Sometimes it could take him hours. But this time, he hadn't even made it out of the Astrodome's parking lot.

She pulled away and leaned over the partition — for there hadn't even been time to close the tinted screen — and whispered something to the driver, who had been with Mickey D. long enough to not be shocked by much of anything. As the car slowed to a halt, she used a finger to write her phone number in the condensation that had quickly formed on the limo's rear window.

Then she gave Mickey D. a kiss and got out. He was too weak to give chase.

It was the first perfect 10 he'd given anyone in years.

After Zane tracked her down, Mickey D. always looked her up anytime he was in Texas. Each time they met, she said a little more, and the spell became less powerful.

He should've left well enough alone. It could've been — it was — one magical night. One for the ages. But now the memory of their first encounter was spoiling with each new syllable that passed from her lips. Mickey looked over at the sleeping girl in his bed. She was stretched out on the palm mattress, back still beaded with sweat. Her right leg twitched with the onset of slumber.

Guided by the glow of a single lantern, he got out of bed and shuffled over to the dresser.

He opened the bottom drawer and removed his journal and a pen. Might as well fill out tonight's entry while he was still awake.

"4/15 —" he wrote and stopped. The sex that night had been adequate, as evidenced by his shaking knees. But what was he to write for the rest of the vacation? Soon he would have to resort to ditto marks.

Mickey D. looked down at the date he'd written in his journal. Three more days. Then he was going to finally break the curse of April 19th. Fate could kiss his ass this year.

* * *

After finishing the evening rounds, Skip stepped into his cabaña, cracked his neck with a sharp tilt to the left, and announced: "I'm home."

Lucia looked up from her stitching. "How dey going dere?"

Unlike Skip, Lucia had been schooled entirely on the islands. She did not speak "proper" Continental English, but that fact didn't bother him at all.

“As well as to be expected,” Skip answered. “Tomorrow will be easier. Get them out in the sun, let Virginia give the rub-downs.”

“De roti — you like?”

“Of course, you know it’s my favorite.”

She smiled and resumed her needlework.

Pulling off his shirt, Skip walked over to the basin and washed his face. His cheeks ached from smiling all day.

“Where are the papers?”

Lucia shrugged.

“Oh, so that’s how you are going to play it.” Skip peeked under the sink, glanced at the rafters, checked the cubbyhole under the bed, and eyeballed the sand floor for any sign of irregularities.

Their quarters were as plain as the guest rooms, so there really wasn’t an abundance of hiding places.

Skip noticed that Lucia was slightly unbalanced in her chair, with her needlepoint draped over one hip. He stepped close and ran a hand up her thigh until his fingers came across the folded newspapers.

“Aha. I see you are testing my theory that often the best hiding places—“

“Are in de plain sight,” Lucia finished.

“Right you are, dear.” The spa director snapped open the clippings from the *Boston Herald*. Two weeks of baseball coverage — specifically the daily box scores of his beloved Red Sox — was Skip’s one reward for starting a new session and his only nod to allegiances formed during his scholastic years.

He preferred to read a baseball box score over another glowing Tim Duncan article. The seven-foot center was a St. Croix native, and had single-handedly turned every local into Wake Forest basketball fans.

What Skip liked about baseball, though, was that it was still a simple and relatively pure game. There were strategies and statistics for every category under the sun, but ultimately the game came down to one man trying to throw a ball past another man holding a stick.

“Mo hit any?” Lucia asked. She knew that Mo Vaughn was currently Skip’s favorite player.

“Doesn’t look like he had any jacks against the Mariners. Let’s see how he did against the Yanks.”

“Dem Yanks too bad, right?”

“Exactly. We don’t like them at all, especially that cat Steinbrenner.”

“Steinbrenner bad,” she said.

She really cut a fine figure, Skip thought. Lucia didn’t have the gift of flowering youth like Virginia, of course, though she had entered her thirties gracefully — shoulders still proud, skin clear and opal black. Inside that warm chest of hers beat the heart of a true Carib woman.

It was no secret that she wanted to marry. But Lucia was patient, and she understood her place. If he could just keep the spa at 80% of max occupancy, it will only take another 20 months. Two years at the very most.

Then the UPP will rise again... rise from the ashes... and change the face of the Virgin Islands.

Then he will willingly take Lucia for his bride, and they will welcome the dawn of a new Caribbean.

But first there were guests to service. And tomorrow, as they say, was the start of a brand new day.