

III. 1. Key West, Florida, October, 2000

Jeff

Jeff smiled, closed his eyes, and let the thick, salty Key West air, buoyant music, palm trees, and sunny outdoor cafe bring back memories of carefree days in the Caribbean islands.

“If I never hear another Jimmy Buffett song, it will be too, too soon,” Corin said without moving her lips.

“Sorry this hasn’t been a great honeymoon.” Why did he say that? He wiped sweaty palms on his khaki shorts. When Corin spoke with her mouth closed it was a sign she was annoyed and he needed to tread softly.

“Jeffrey. A Caribbean cruise during hurricane season! Every hour here reminds me of leaving St. Croix in that dreadful hurricane three years ago. We could have been killed. A Windjammer first mate lost his life trying to get back to his boat.” She shook her head. “If that wasn’t bad enough, this cruise ship is filled with Midwestern yokels taking advantage of off-season rates.”

“I’m sorry—”

“I can’t believe you booked this trip because you thought it would be fun. Beginning in Key West. During this Fantasy Fest thing.” She leaned across the small restaurant table. “Nude people covered with paint parading in the streets. Disgusting!”

“Corin, I said I’m sorry.” She seemed set off by the Key West homosexual community. When some lesbians in Boston financial world were good colleagues and friends. He checked his map. “Let’s go see Hemingway’s house.”

She wrinkled her nose.

“Well, how about one of the historical tours?”

“The founding fathers were wreckers. Besides, I’m sweating.” Corin patted her pale cheek with a tissue and re-applied a magenta layer to her lips. Leaning away from blaring speakers, her shoulder brushed the iron fence that separated tables from sidewalk.

Further down Duvall Street, Jeff noticed the back of a woman riding a pink bicycle pulling a two-wheeled cart piled high with painted coconuts. Sun-bleached hair swirled as she swerved around a scooter driven by a bikinied teen.

A Harley’s roar blocked the blare of yet another chorus of ‘Margaritaville.’ A leathered biker leered through the fence and Corin hissed, “That’s it! I’m going back to the ship.” Standing, she smoothed her black silk blouse over unwrinkled black slacks.

In Boston, Corin looked sophisticated in black. Even her wedding dress had been black and Jeff had chosen a black dinner jacket and cummerbund, hoping to disguise his bulging girth.

City life had softened him. Taxis, meetings, and rich restaurant meals. He was proud of their work, but no longer recognized the man whose face looked back at his every morning.

Here, where every building, flower, sign, and tourist was a riot of tropical colors, his wife looked as out of place as a penguin in a rainbow cotton candy factory.

‘A Pirate Looks at Forty’ blasted from the restaurant speakers. Jeff mumbled, “Right, Jimmy. I’m forty and forty pounds too fat.”

He caught up as Corin stepped into the path of a six-foot tall blond woman with a five o’clock shadow. Corin grabbed Jeff’s arm. “The men and women here all wear pink.”

On the corner of Duval and Southard, a salmon-haired girl handed Jeff a folded flyer. He offered the pink sheet to Corin. “Look. You could get a massage.”

Corin pushed the advertisement back at him. “Here? I’m going back to the ship and book a real massage.”

Jeff stared at the logo. Two dolphins and the words ‘Laughing Dolphin Massage Therapy.’ He sputtered, “I drew that.”

“Don’t be silly.” Corin kept walking.

“I did. In art school. Look. My initials JS on the tail of the dolphin on the right. And on the left SS. Sandy Shellborn.”

“Don’t be silly. Though it does resemble that ghastly tattoo you refuse to have removed.” Corin turned away and waved to a stocky couple in billowing Mickey and Minnie t-shirts.

Corin walked off between the two Kansans. Jeff knew he couldn’t follow her back just yet. She was in a pissy mood and he felt... wonderful. He touched the right side of his neck. A sensation like the foam on good beer tickled down to his shoulder. He felt absolutely great.

Jeff unfolded his map and walked down Southard Street away from the crowds and traffic, past the square white Truman Annex buildings, and through formal gates into Fort Zachary Taylor Park. He continued until he reached the old Civil War fort and climbed onto a parapet wondering where, exactly, the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico met.

The walk had been longer, hotter, and more strenuous than he’d expected. Sweating, he stripped off his forest green polo shirt and tucked the damp cotton into the waistband of his Bermudas. The slap of waves against rocks reminded him of that perfect Virgin Gorda beach. He climbed down and hiked out to the breakers. Settled on a rough rock, he allowed his mind to drift as surf lapped rocks and salty mist sprayed his face.

From the moment he got off the cruise ship in Key West, thoughts of Sandy had flashed through his mind. Now, excitement like being a young art student stirred his entire body. From time to time over the last twenty years memories of her had come into his mind, but this was much stronger. He closed his eyes, leaned back, and imagined the smell of oil paints and pizza in their old Boston apartment.

Sandy shared his dreams and passion for art. One night she told him about a trip to Florida with her dad. When she swam with wild dolphins, one had become sexual. While she talked, Jeff drew the two dolphins. They’d made love laughing and vowed the laughing dolphins would be their totems forever.

He shook his head with regret. Ten years ago when he lived in New Hampshire, he’d tried to find her. He discovered that after college she’d married and moved to Cincinnati. Returning from the Caribbean, he had again searched and found she’d divorced and moved to Texas. He searched the Internet and even considered hiring a private detective, then admitted he was obsessing over a lost dream. Telling himself to let it be and go on with his life, he married Corin.

Then, damn it, why did Sandy feel so close right now? This cruise was setting Corin’s temper on edge and his distracted behavior made it worse.

That pesky tingle again. The result of too much sun? He looked down at his red blotchy chest and, bright against his pasty skin, the dolphin tattoo Corin hated. He put on his shirt to cover the spare tire that bulged over too-tight Bermudas.

He’d admired Corin’s financial wizardry that turned his dot-com money into a fortune and built their non-profit foundation. After giving up his computer work and a try at a leisured Caribbean idyll, he settled down and helped her expand her investment business and run their foundation. They were already good friends and partners and he’d proposed after their hurricane scare. Swept up in her dreams, he enjoyed their busy city life. And last month after living together for two years, they married.

But here in Key West, his thoughts were hugger-mugger. Was he crazy enough to consider becoming an artist—again?

He crawled back up the rocks and followed the shady path between the beach and the pine trees. "I'm no college kid," he said aloud. The sooner he got back to the ship, the better.

Sandy

Sandy leaned her pink bicycle against the wooden stockade fence. The Healing Garden sign wobbled as she opened the bamboo gate. She smiled over her shoulder at the dark, handsome man lounging in the classic pink Corvette. "Sorry I'm late." Her best customer was always on time.

"I missed you." Jerome Oberon tilted his sunglasses down as he slid long legs out of the sports car and followed Sandy through the gate into the palm-shaded tropical garden. Red hibiscus, as big as his hand, brushed their arms.

She shrugged, pulling back sun-streaked hair. As he strode behind her, she felt him watching her push the bike and wheeled cart of coconuts. Jerome was different than the laid-back locals. His manners were formal and he often slipped into French, although at times she imagined she heard a hint of a South Boston lilt that reminded her of her college days. He even looked a lot like that Guy from the bar Jeff liked. But she never had the nerve to ask him if he had relatives in Boston. Inhaling the scent of hibiscus and orchid, her body relaxed. "Most locals are on Key West time."

"Not quite a local, *mon cher*." He laughed and raked his fingers through his styled hair. "I have been here on this almost-island only three months setting up my gallery. I love your peaceful style, so refreshing compared to the affected artists who hound me to exhibit their work. Your magnificent talent is wasted painting dolphins on coconuts."

She shrugged off his compliment with a toss of her head as they reached a Bahamian style cottage painted coral, blue, lavender, and lime green. Propping her bicycle and cart against a coconut palm near a pyramid of coconuts, she knew Jerome's words held truth. Three years of painting coconuts was long enough.

Jerome stepped close and swept her into an enthusiastic hug. "I missed you all the time I was in Boston for my sister's wedding and the boring business trip to Paris. Now, Fantasy Fest brings *beaucoup* patrons into my new gallery. And soon you will be crowned Queen." He set her down. "I love you because you lack anger and fear. And are filled with beauty and kindness."

She kissed him lightly and pulled back from his seductive good looks. "Just take off your clothes. Or, would you rather go inside?" She gestured to her bright cottage.

"You know I like it here next to the water. Just you, me, and the birds." With a Gallic shrug, he unselfconsciously removed his Key West business attire: flowered shirt, white shorts, sandals, and sunglasses.

"You don't have to strip naked," she reminded him, taking her bag from the bicycle basket.

"I keep hoping." He grinned. "Everyone thinks we're sleeping together."

"Why would they think that?" Her flirtatious glance was bold, but her gaze didn't drop lower than his dark eyes.

The day Jerome first arrived in Key West, he took one glance at the city's coconut painter and fell madly in love. Sandy enjoyed his company and stories of the art world. He was undeniably charming, sexy, handsome, and lonely. She'd gone enthusiastically to his bed, but soon realized his personal energy, though giving, drenched her creativity. When she ended the intimate side of their relationship, he pressed her to stay friends. Unfortunately, Jerome held hope she'd change her mind.

Sometimes after a swim in the ocean she'd emerge with saline tears as well as salt water on her cheeks, remembering how Samuel carried her into the warm surf to swim together in the crystal clear waters like two fish. His ebony body sliding through the water next to hers. Maybe she was jinxed in love. Losing Barry had

been a shock. Losing gentle Samuel Bahani Merton in the hurricane had been a tragedy. Two men dead. Her ex-husband John was starting a new life. She hoped he'd find happiness. And Jeff, she wished his dreams had come true in the twenty years since she'd walked out of his life.

She felt a flush and then a tingling under her skin on the left side of her neck, from her earlobe down to the dolphin pair tattooed above her heart. She'd never discovered an explanation for this unpredictable sensation like bursting champagne bubbles. For all Jerome's charm, she didn't think he was the stimulus.

"They think we can't resist each other."

"Face down, please. I'll start on your back," she said with a laugh. She liked Jerome and she could see he was still smitten with her. "Try to relax." She slipped off her sandals and padded into the cottage to wash her hands and select oils and music for his massage.

Later that afternoon Sandy leaned forward over Chris. Her friend, who now called himself Christa, lay back in a tube-top and fuchsia capris, one of his more conservative outfits. He had many friends in Key West, but only Sandy knew his history. They looked out for each other like siblings. When Chris worked a split-shift bartending at The Golden Cockatoo, Sandy tied her massage table atop the coconuts and bicycled to massage him in the bar's patio.

"*S'il vous plait*, Sandy. You may even call me Christopher. When I feel your magic fingers massage my neck, I fall in love."

She pushed the tall man's shoulders down away from his head. As requested, she had put Helen Reddy's *I Am Woman* album in the bar's sound system. Now 'Love Song For Jeffrey,' one of her favorites, played.

"Come back to my place and I'll show you my secrets."

"What secrets?" Sandy laughed as she pulled Chris's long bleached platinum hair forward and worked her fingers deeper into his trapezius.

"In a sealed garment bag I keep a charcoal Brooks Brothers suit for emergency trips to the mainland." Looking up, he raised the back of his hand to his forehead. "Now, you know my secret, you must marry me."

Sandy laughed so hard she stopped kneading his neck. Bright, funny, and incredibly loyal, Chris had been her best friend after they fled from a tropical hurricane and landed in Key West. She'd never forgot that Chris and his pilot friend saved her. Pushing his face back into the padded ring, she replied, "I do love you, but you'd wear my clothes."

"Your clothes are *très* conservative." Chris waved long tapered fingers.

"You have to take better care of your neck," Sandy said, working his spinal vertebrae.

"I need to practice." Without raising his head, he pointed behind the bar. An eleven-foot tall object resembling an Eiffel tower covered with feathers leaned in a corner. "*Très phallic! N'est pas?* Boom-Boom promised to wire it with flashing lights."

"*Très* too heavy for you." Sandy shook her head as she performed the final strokes of the massage.

"I must win. It will be so fabulous. You'll be the Fantasy Fest Queen and I'll win the Headdress Ball Contest. And a gig singing at Diva's. I'm more beautiful than those drag queens."

She helped Chris slide off the table. "You are a drag queen. And more."

"Performance mixologist!" Chris moved back behind the bar. "The sexiest bartender on Duval." He grabbed two bottles of rum and struck a pose.

"Pina colada, virgin," Sandy requested.

"No problemo. Jerome and I think you must be the only innocent in town. But regardless of your un-Key Westy ways, you'll be our next Fantasy Fest Queen."

"Jerome Oberon, the gallery owner?"

“You think I don’t know your classy Euro friend? Jerome and *moi* are promoting your campaign. All you need is a few more donations and *voilà!* You are the Queen. Jerome—that cutie.” Chris paused and studied her with a cock-eyed grin. “Are you in love with *Monsieur* Jerome, *petit cher?* You can tell me, *moi* girlfriend.”

“Jerome is wonderful... but—”

“No magic? I sensed it. *Quel dommage.* Were you ever in love?”

“A long time ago. Just a boy in college. But he’s been on my mind the last few days.”

“You wish you could find your soulmate?”

“I had a wise teacher who said that sometimes we experience detours, perhaps until we mature enough to meet our soulmate or twin flame. I believed Seva was my soulmate, but that was not to be. I think I’m one of those souls destined to never feel that kind of love in this lifetime.”

“*Quel quel dommage.*”

She touched the side of her neck, enjoying the champagne bubble sensation. “Tell me about the contributions.”

“Jerome says tonight’s campaigning will put you over the top.”

“I’m only doing this for charity.”

“I know. Show me your publicity picture.”

She handed him a flyer. “Ariel painted me and Jerome took photos. My pores still feel caked with gallons of paint.” She tried not to look at the revealing image.

“Ariel, our good *amie*, the most psychic psychic in town, predicts your success.”

“I trust her predictions and her advice. When I told her my strange tingling feelings returned, she told me to be careful, because there is someone in town I am not ready to meet.”

“Don’t worry about that. You have many, many *amies*. You will win. They all want to see the *massense* with the *magnifique* fingers who paints *quelle bien* coconuts win.” He leaned closer. “Will you go *au naturelle?*”

“Chris! You know I would not.”

He wiggled his hips. “I will lend you one of my G-strings.”

“Ariel painted only my face and torso... with my bikini for the pictures. She’s trying to convince me that a complete body paintjob is necessary to make a good—pardon the pun—showing. I have seen the naked bodies of half the year-round residents of Key West. Perhaps I will take Ariel’s advice.”