

MURDER, MUSIC AND FOOD! OH MY!

Dan Porterfield

with

Kit Kiefer

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Cover design by Brennan Porterfield Casey

This book is dedicated to Christan “Kit” Kiefer

A Note from the Author:

I always thought I would write a book someday. I just didn’t imagine I would become a chicken and goat farmer.

MURDER, MUSIC AND FOOD! OH MY!

A Zany Tale of Murder

An Investigative Reporter and a Bluesman fear for their lives.
Is it Ruthless Russians, an Affable Cartel or a Jealous Husband
that wants them dead?

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A Walden and Mudbone Mystery

CHAPTER ONE

“ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST”

The “*Excelsior*” was once a posh hotel on the beach complete with flowing fountains, a luxury Spa, boutique shops, magnificent pools, and gorgeous suites. The banquet and meeting rooms were set up for high-end clientele and customer service was impeccable. However, after time and a failing economy took its toll, the somewhat antiquated Ponce De Leon Room was set up as beautifully as possible given the resources. What would once have been a lavish buffet of fancy Hors d’Oeuvres set up on a beautifully decorated serpentine table complete with Chateaubriand, Scottish Lochinvar Smoked Salmon, Osetra Caviar Spoons, Chocolate Fountains with Profiteroles, and much more. Four each corner stationed bars with top shelf spirits, imported beers, and brilliant French and California Wines, all turned into this.

The BEO (Banquet Event Order) which used to read “140 guests for Heavy Hors d’Oeuvres” was now for 50 and the Heavy Hors d’Oeuvres now consisted of frozen Egg Rolls and Crab Rangoon (try finding any real Crab in those), Mini Tacos and Pulled Pork Sliders. The two “Action Stations with carved Beef Tenderloin” was now two carving boards with heat lamps, one for a Sysco Ham and the other for a Sysco Turkey, both manned by carefully placed busboys with paper Toques. This was an advantage as it cost much less to pay busboys than “chefs”. Another advantage was that neither spoke English well and consequently only spoke the words “bedy delicious” and “bedy-bedy best” to the guests. The “two corner bars with all top shelf cocktails, beer and wine” was now a single bar with not so top shelf liquors, unless you consider Kentucky Deluxe Bourbon, Inverness Scotch and McCormick Vodka and Gin top shelf, a nondescript White and Red Wine, Coors Light and Budweiser, both in cans, a dance floor stained with bleached-over anything and everything from the late 60’s. There was a pre-eminent indiscernible funk evident but that didn’t matter. The *Miami Herald* used to go all out for retirement parties, especially for their reporters who brought in lots of new subscribers with their award-winning stories that caught the attention of the entire country, not just South Florida. But, alas, like newspapers everywhere, they’ve had to cut the budget with the decline in print readership due to the influx of the internet and social media. Who spends the money on a paper subscription when you can read it on your laptop, tablet, or cellphone?

The guest of honor, one Walden Theroux Fitzpatrick, was preoccupied about an upcoming book he was going to start any day now about an elaborate Russian Call Girl operation he had exposed while investigating faulty plumbing in a sketchy apartment complex in Vero Beach. He was more than a little worried about this book. It was going to further expose the Mendocino Cartel and its link

to the Russians. Previously after one of his stories for the *Herald*, he had served as a witness for the defense and had still not wriggled out of that one completely.

Walden had graduated from Ithaca College with a bachelor's degree in journalism after 6 years of hanging with the best of the college party set. Although he was known to his Professors as Walden, to his journalism classmates he was called "Pond", but only by those truly savvy in the world of literature, a few female classmates, and one female Associate Professor who found it, and him, charming. He went on to write for poetry journals and short crime pubs then eventually got recognized as a serious and even brilliant wordsmith. Eventually he wound up at the *Herald* and grew to make a name for himself as a great investigative journalist with the eloquence of some great figures of highly regarded philosophical and poetic literature. He even published a novel that stayed on the NY Times Bestseller list for 6 months.

Walden was a bit of an odd bird if you asked folks who knew his reputation, but the conundrum was that he delivered an interesting alchemy when it came to his intellect, sartorial decisions, and the way he acted according to his cocktail barometer. He was recognized as a bit of a dichotomy when it came to his literal proficiency and his fashion inadequacy. If you asked him, he'd say, "I dress for comfort, always have!" As a man of no great stature, he stood about 5'11" tall, a choreographed frame of 182 lbs., (Inherited, not earned) and a full head of unruly brown hair typically drawn back in a loose ponytail bouncing off his collar. Soft but sparkly brown eyes rounded out the package that made him a target for many women who appreciated an anomaly of a target.

The *Herald* no longer requested the best. The guest list would usually include everyone from Dade County High Society along with politicians from every angle and would be covered by the local network television stations. However, it was now copy editors and reporters from the paper, a few "retired" journalists from other media, obscure and otherwise, and members of local law enforcement. The FBI (*Florida Bureau of Investigation*) as well as the local Police departments took note of Walden's uncanny ability to unearth the craziest clues that ultimately exposed the most elaborate schemes. Unfortunately, so did the cartels. In particular, the notorious "Mendocino" Cartel.

The banquet servers (just 2 for the whole room), brought out the individual salads and placed bowls of gnocchi, mashed potatoes and sauteed beet greens on the tables. They instructed the guests to visit the carving stations and that the bar would be closing but it could re-open after dinner as a cash bar, no credit or debit cards accepted.

The new Editor in Chief of the *Herald*, Alvin Zaccharias didn't care for Walden. Maybe he was jealous because of Walden's successful novel, or it may have been

that he suspected Walden was having a fling with his younger wife. Silly, since it was only a short fling over several days which Walden didn't even count.

Now the time had come for Alvin Z to get up and make a speech about all the investigative journalism awards the *Herald* had won, many attributed to Walden's contributions. Alvin finished his Bombay Sapphire Martini that he'd of course had brought in from the lobby bar, no McCormick Gin for him, and proceeded to make his way to the front of the room. He reached the podium and turned to face his audience.

Clara Mephisto, fondly known as "Thumper" was Walden's administrative assistant for the last 17 years and was seated to his left at the head dinner table. She received her nickname shortly after she started with the *Herald* as she had an affair with the then Editor in Chief. He was 25 years her senior, had an unknown heart condition and collapsed spasmodically on top of Clara after re-enacting a scene from a movie (with some personalized embellishments) they'd both agreed upon.

Clara was distraught. Walden was leaving, the paper was in decline, and she wasn't sure if she would still have a job. Twenty years she'd been there, worked for Walden for seventeen, now what was she going to do? She still owed on her Condo, and she probably shouldn't have splurged on that BMW Roadster, but hell, she was on the backside of 50 and if she didn't splurge occasionally.

She'd always had a slight crush on Walden, but they both knew better, especially after her affair with the former editor so she thought best to keep a low profile. There was that one time when she and Walden were both in-between relationships and they ran into each other in the bar at the Hilton after a press conference with the new Mayor and they both hit Martini's pretty hard. Walden rented a room, and they couldn't keep their hands off each other in the elevator. But, when they got to the door of the room he dropped the key on the floor, bent over to pick it up, fell and passed out. It was clear to her that it wasn't meant to be, so she drug him into the room, gave him one more kiss and left him there on the floor.

The bartender at the banquet was in his late 20's, but kinda' cute if you liked the scruffy look, so Clara thought, why not. She had him fix her another Tito's Martini, her third in the last 40 minutes, and this time he winked at her. Things were looking up or maybe down, depending on your perspective. She told him she'd be back as soon as the speeches were over and to keep a glass chilled for her, and maybe one for him too.

She made her way to the head table and plopped down in her chair next to Walden. She put her hand on his knee and gave it a squeeze and then looked at him, but he was in another world, definitely pre-occupied. She nodded to the

others at the table and forced a smile but could really give a shit. Martini number three was doing the trick.

The salads were served, and the guests were told to help themselves to the “carving stations”. Walden got up and headed for ham first. Clara decided she didn’t want any meat so made a plate for herself of gnocchi and mashed potatoes. She knew how funny Walden was about eating from someone else’s plate, so just to mess with him, she decided to switch their salads after she had taken a bite or two of hers and then tell him later what she had done. After she made the switch, she finished his salad (now hers) and sat back waiting for his return. He soon sat back down with a plate full of ham, turkey and some kind of gelatinous sauce over both. Clara smiled and said to him the salad is really good, you’ll like the dressing, it has a certain mysterious flavor to it. Walden began shoveling the salad into his face, and with a mouthful of dressing lathered leafy greens, he mumbled “you’re right, delicious”. As she dug into the rubbery gnocchi and cold mashed potatoes, she confessed to him that she’d traded salads with him after she had taken a couple of bites. Rolls, where are the rolls?

Suddenly she didn’t feel so good, she knew she really shouldn’t have had that third Martini but that wasn’t usually the case. It had to be stress and damn, it was hot in there. *Oh well, tough it out kid*, she thought to herself.

Alvin Z got up to make his speech. Alvin struggled all his life with a latent yet somehow overwhelming Napolean complex. Big job, small frame. He tried to compensate for his short stature by making expensive sartorial decisions and pumping his tiny chest out as he walked. He also tried to compensate by being a top-rated asshole. Consequently, he got pissed off when the hotel staff brought his riser to the podium with great pomp and circumstance, alerting everyone in the audience to his physical challenges. When the steward offered to help him up to it, he lost it. Wheels up! After an embarrassing 40 seconds trying to compose himself, he focused on thinking about his D’Angelo tailored Italian suit and his spit polished wing tips, (left one scuffed by the guy trying to help him with his riser) and made himself believe the poorly orchestrated entry would all be forgiven thanks to the fact he was a “Fashion Plate”.

Suddenly the room started spinning and her stomach and bowels started to erupt and then Clara began coughing, subtly at first and then she managed to turn blue, red and then grey and was spewing green variegated mashed potatoes, gnocchi and what looked like salad puree all over the other guests directly across the table. She lost all control and plop; face planted in her veggie plate.

“Clara, Clara are you ok? How many of those cheap Martini’s did you have?” Walden was concerned as he patted Clara on the back and tried to pull her head

out of the plate of food. "Come on Clara. Try to sit up and we'll get you cleaned up. Clara?"

"Goddammit Thumper, I just got this dress out of the cleaners, and you had to puke all over it, yuk. I'm definitely sending you the cleaning bill or you may be buying me a new dress!"

"Guys, somethings wrong, she's not responding!"

"Try that Heimlich thing, see if that works."

"You idiot, she obviously doesn't have anything stuck in her throat!"

"Give her mouth to mouth, maybe that will work."

"I'm not touching that after what she just did!"

Walden was now panicking, "Someone call 911" and tell them to hurry, this isn't good."

Seven phones came out; one called 911 and six were frantically snapping photos and taking videos.

Then she abruptly died. Head in the plate. Truly an incredible performance.

CHAPTER TWO

“KING OF THE ROAD”

Sonny woke up “freaking out” on a dismal Sunday in Kansas City, after playing a somewhat raucous gig at an industrial amphitheater in a sketchy part of town. After an obnoxious belch that sounded like an asthmatic duck, he rolled over to face a “4-minus” female with stringy, pink and gray hair, pork rinds and bourbon breath, and weighing-in at about 90 lbs.

“Oh Shit”, he muttered under his breath, but she’d already woken up with his gastric eruption.

“What the fuck,” she said. “That smelled like a plastic bag of dog shit set on fire in a mailbox.”

“You takin’ a whiff of yourself lately?” he replied, rolling his eyes at the juvenile prank she referenced.

Sonny “Mudbone” Humphries had graduated *Magna Cum Barely* in Fine Arts from Ithaca College. He was a semi-decent guitarist and vocalist and fell right into the music scene, somewhat successfully. He was a one hit wonder when “lower case” records launched his “Blue Crab Blues” on the cult circuit, and it rose to #45 on the obscure charts.

Gaining momentum after his semi-hit on the charts with “Blue Crab Blues”, he wrote “Probation Blues”. It was a song written after introspective reflection of spending several semesters on academic and/or social probation while attending College. Finally, after 6 years, his academic advisor insisted he declare a major, so he chose one that allowed him to finish as quickly as possible. “Existential Media”. An undergraduate degree allowed for only one semester and oddly enough, only one graduate. Clearly innocuous!

His current band, “Mudbone and the Mudcats” featuring Sonny “Mudbone” Humphries was booked until the end of the year all around the U.S. at small, second and third-tier venues throughout the country as long as they were in bus touring distance. His promoter, marketing agent, and tour bus operator, “Magical Mystery Music”, had intimated they may renew his contract for next year if there were enough demand.

Sonny was kind of stuck with the MMM agency because Cosmo Clifton who owned the whole operation consisting of a 1989 Greyhound bus that had been “re-fitted” to accommodate “VIP” touring acts, one signed band (Mudbone’s), and no worthwhile goodwill, was a high school buddy and former lousy drummer from way back. In addition, Sonny’s dad co-signed for Cosmo to buy the bus in an effort to get rid of both of them. After all, growing up in Horsehead, in upstate

New York as a retro-Hippie in the early 70's was weird and a little tough. Worse, if you were a parent.

"You don't even remember my name, do you?" said the meth-addict, nympho, chick groupie.

"Did I ever know it?" replied Mudbone.

"You're an asshole," she said. "I'm out a" here"! The door to the fleabag motel slammed rattling the jalousie windows.

His cellphone rang and the caller ID read "MM Marketing & Star Makers". Mudbone figured Cosmo was trying to upgrade the agency. He answered politely with "What the fuck Cosmo"?

"Dude.....pause..... Dude!" the caller said.

"What?"

"I got you a great gig in New Orleans. You gotta' gear the show to the blues but it's high payin' and its high expose'!" said Cosmo.

"You mean exposure" replied Mudbone.

"Yeah, that too. Your cut is \$375.00 an hour after my charge. Incredible, right?"

"Sure Cosmo, how many sets are we doing?" asked Sonny.

"Well, I'm working on more, but the contract now is for a 40-minute set (pro-rated of course) on an alternate stage during equipment changes on the main stage. I am pumped!"

So, plans were re-adjusted, the bus got a new alternator, and the band was informed.

The drummer quit and went home.

Two days later, pulling into New Orleans, Sonny and his erstwhile manager Cosmo had broadcast many requests for a simple 1-4-5 blues drummer to fill in. Of course, none were interested at the price offered so Sonny had to give up another \$100 of his pay to secure a drug addict, Hispanic drummer who agreed only because he happened to be in the area to finalize a cartel delivery.

Pinto "TocaBongos" Mentidoso was well known in southwest Columbia although not necessarily for his musical ability. He was, in fact, a low-level associate of the Mendocino Cartel. Planted in the South of the United States because he could cause little harm there and was essentially a benign pawn! However, he could pound out a simple 1-4-5 rhythm which worked for Mudbone. Especially at the price.

The venue turned out to be a semi-dump in the Marigny—a part of town most NOLA residents avoided—but at least he was getting paid. Just outside the French quarter on the sleazy side of town, “The NOLA HOUSE OF BOOZE” Blues bar was New Orleans shot at “The HOUSE OF BLUES”, born in Chicago. They did boast a nice stage with good lighting and a stellar sound system most patrons never appreciated. Probably because they were crammed into a tight, odorous, old theater venue turned into a second-class Gin Mill. The brilliant light show the stage offered was nice but it was no competition for the sparkler type effect throughout the place thanks to non-compliance electrical connections gifted by the city electrical inspector in exchange for a lifetime open tab at the bar. Of course, the patrons were non-tipping transients who could care less about music but enjoyed the cheap beer and liquor. Pinto turned out to be okay and immediately informed the rest of the band at the sound check that he was a high-level member of the Mendocino Cartel and could provide them with anything they wanted to ensure the gig went well.

Mudbone figured he might be able to score a crazy, horny groupie, but was careful, and all candidates failed the visual physical exam. Oh Well!

The Marigny gig proved successful as a promoter for “Blue Skyes” records heard them and offered Mudbone a position as the lead guitarist and front man for a major tour starting in May for significant money if he would ditch the current band and come on as the headliner for “Mudbone Blue and the Swamp Queens”. Newly signed recording artists for “Blue Skyes” Records. The promoter also needed a ringer front man for the French Quarter Festival next week. One of the headliners lost their star in a major cocaine bust at the last minute. Mudbone agreed to do the French Quarter gig but with his current band because of the short notice.

Mudbone, sat back, lit a joint and reflected on his illustrious career as an accomplished blues, old rock and roll, and sometimes folk guitarist. His brief kiss with fame, his college mates, and the many, many, missed opportunities due to phenomenal mushrooms, great weed, and a few too many cold ones.

“What the Fuck,” he said to himself. “It’s been a great ride, and I wouldn’t change it for anything. What a long, strange trip it’s been.”

The following Saturday was a typical fun, outlandish afternoon at the French Quarter Festival. Cantaloupes were being thrown off balconies. Women’s bare chests being flashed, beads, masks, etc. just like Mardi Gras! Floats with bands and dancers. Obnoxious drunks shouting obscenities, and liquor flowing like Fleur De Lis! Mudbone ripped off a great performance despite his misfit band and the crowds loved him.

Walden, feeling a bit squeamish after the Thumper incident at his retirement party suggested to his current girl Tessie, they take a quick trip for a getaway before he started seriously concentrating on his new book. At first, Walden couldn't really figure Tessie out. Understand that Walden was a bit of a romantic. After all, he fully intended to major in English Literature before he figured out, he'd make more money and have a better career in media communications. However, he maintained and respected his love for the brilliant prose, outstanding vernacular and love that was shared when Shakespeare, Keats, and others, who wrote their stories of love. Although he'd seen his share, his heart skipped a beat when he met Tessie. It certainly frightened him a bit, but he grew to recognize the peace, love, and kindness they shared, and he became very comfortable with their co-existence. After a few times going out with Tessie he recognized she was different. A beautiful woman, no doubt, hailing from northern Maine and educated at the prestigious Radcliff and McGill Universities, she was a strong reporter and TV News journalist with ratings that soared. Born to a mother from Scandinavia and a father who was the descendant of a well-respected and historically significant Mohican warrior. She emanated the physical beauty, natural intellect, and the somewhat caustic wit derived from both. Clearly, she'd never been inclined to land on a boyfriend or husband without knowing it was right. Walden soon learned and totally respected this. Ultimately, he learned to appreciate it. She was the perfect partner for him.

"How about New Orleans?" she asked. "I've always wanted to go there."

"Sounds great," replied Walden, remembering it was a cheap flight.

They stayed in the French Quarter at a former colleagues run down but clean walk-up two blocks off Canal Street. As it turned out, the pre-Mardi Gras French Quarter Festival was in full swing with good, mostly local bands and they had a blast! Walking down Bourbon Street the second afternoon tipsy on Hurricane's, Walden heard a familiar tune and recognized the vocalist.

"Oh, my gawd," he spewed. "That's Sonny singing Probation Blues".

"What are you talking about?" said Tessie.

"I helped write that song with my college roommate Sonny "Mudbone" Humphries, a world-famous blues singer. We've gotta' go find him. Right now!"

"I think I've got to find another drink," muttered Tessie.

CHAPTER THREE

“LAISSEZ LES BONS TEMPS ROULER!”

Walden practically dragged Tessie down Bourbon Street until they arrived at the bandstand where Sonny “Mudbone” was featured. A small but appreciative crowd was gathered, and Walden barreled his way to the front of the stage with Tessie in tow. Jumping and waving frantically to get Sonny’s attention, he finally did just as Sonny launched into “Blue Crab Blues”, his first solo hit while still trying to graduate from college.

“Oh my god,” said Tessie. “I listened to that record over and over when my dad used to play it! He was a huge fan of “Mudbone and the Howlers”.

“Shit, I helped him write that song too when we were in college,” Walden replied.

“No fuckin way,” said Tessie. “Wait until I tell my dad I know Mudbone”.

“How about, you’re dating the guy that helped him write it?”

When the song ground to a halt, Sonny “Mudbone” barked into the microphone “Thanks so much, and it’s great to see you, Pond! Stick around after the set and we’ll get a cold one!”

Mudbone always figured that if he wanted to ever make it big as a blues man, he needed to be an incredible musician, have huge marketing money to invest in his brand, and look remarkable all the time. Since he was a very good musician (but not incredible), and had no big marketing budget behind him, he dressed “to the nine’s” in his own style. He would appear anywhere in everything from seersucker suits to designer overalls complete with French-cuff shirts and exotic bow ties. A nice-looking guy with fine Auburn hair falling just below his collar, he stood 6’1” tall with a confident but not cocky stride and a gold standard smile that just mesmerized. Likeable, fun-loving, and gregarious, he had few, if any enemies.

Of course, Walden was ecstatic. He emphatically air fist- pumped Sonny and told Tessie they’d be hanging around.

As they were switching the stage for the next act, Walden felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning around, he and Sonny embraced like long lost brothers. Walden introduced Tessie to Mudbone and they too embraced.

“Oh my god,” Tessie said. “I grew up listening to your music, my dad was a huge fan of yours. Especially Probation Blues. Walden said he helped you write that one and Blue Crab Blues.”

“Huh”, said Mudbone. “He didn’t help me write anything”!

"Damn sure did," replied Walden. "Remember you had 'mother fucker' in the song lyrics, and I talked you out of it cause James Taylor had already used it in Steamroller Blues?"

"Oh yeah, I vaguely remember that. Whatever".

"Let's just do a bar crawl like the old days," said Mudbone.

"Fine with me," replied Walden.

"Me too," said Tessie. "By the way, how'd you get the name Mudbone?"

"Oh shit," replied Mudbone. "It's a long and crazy story 'bout a gnarly girl I met in college."

"Bullshit," said Walden. "You had that nickname when we were freshman roommates. It came with you brother! What's the real story?"

"Okay, okay. When I was knee high to a grasshopper I liked to play in the creek bed mud. One time I found a large animal leg bone and ran home to tell all my family and friends I found a dinosaur bone in the mud by the creek. Soon, the whole town knew about my discovery. I became the laughingstock of the community since it turned out it was a cow femur, and I was tagged with the name "Mudbone". Not a glamorous story, but that's the truth."

So, they headed down Bourbon Street and started at "Heidi's Blues Bar" where live blues was always good and the bartenders free poured. They were having a great time, sharing stories with Tessie, downing cold beers and an occasional shot when Tessie's phone buzzed. Glancing at her phone, she announced, "Scuse me guys, I have to take this, it's work."

She stepped outside to take the call and Mudbone asked Walden what she did for a living.

"She's a prime-time newscaster and reporter for *WFLX TV* in Miami," said Walden.

"Oh, that's big time". Mudbone replied. "Wonder what that call is about?"

"Who knows, could be anything. When she comes back, let's head over to the Napoleon House bar where it's a little quieter and we can talk and catch up."

Tessie returned and announced she needed to go immediately to the airport and get the first flight back to Miami or Lauderdale. Apparently, there was some urgent breaking news story the station chief wanted her on. She'd already called a cab, so they said their goodbyes and Tessie left.

Walden picked up the tab and he and Mudbone semi-staggered over to the Napoleon House and luckily found a secluded two-top in the bar.

Owned and operated by the Impastato family since 1914 and Ralph Brennan since May of 2015, Napoleon House suspends you in time. Listen to Beethoven's Eroica, which he composed for Napoleon, and the music of other classical masters, while sipping a Pimm's Cup, and basking in an ambiance that could only be New Orleans. At 500 Chartres Street, it's been a fortress of survival for many NOLA characters, both alive and departed. However, the stories still abound, embellished or not, they are a delightful pleasure for those who dwell in that arena of brilliant prose, storytelling, poetry, and lore.

Uncle Joe Impastato, the visionary founder of Napoleon House, had a discerning palate that leaned away from potent alcoholic beverages. Acquainted with Pimm's Cup during his travels in England, a refreshing, low-alcohol libation perfect for summer, he introduced it to Napoleon House. As a trailblazer, Napoleon House proudly became the first establishment in America to offer Pimm's Cups, surpassing global sales records, second only to the historic London bar that birthed this iconic drink. Although it may have been a little more potent at that point.

The food (although one may have thought not) was delightful. A brilliant combination of classic New Orleans specialties and old-world formulae, it would be tough not to find something on the menu that didn't work. From Boudin Sausages to Alligator Tail, A Charcuterie Board featuring Alligator, French Pate, Irish Cheeses, Creole Mustard, Cornichons, and so much more. A Shrimp and Remoulade Stuffed Avocado, Seafood Gumbo, and a Muffaletta Salad. They employed only the best of Chef's. It's no wonder, even in the heart of the French Quarter they remained a strong local's joint, even though the locals were hesitant to tip the hat to wayfaring tourists and troubadours.

"Let's catch up," tell me about life on the road, how you've been, and all that".

"Sure, this gig today was my last job with this band. I got a great offer from Blue Sky records to tour but I have to do it as a headliner with a band we collaboratively put together. Not this one. Probably time anyway. So, I had to tell these guys after the show today that they were being let go cause I was doing my own thing."

"How'd they take the news?"

"Not so well, really. Pinto, the new drummer, seemed particularly pissed as this was his first gig with us. And my guitar tech, Oliver, was angry that I couldn't bring him on the new tour. But oh well, that's the music business!"

Mudbone went on to explain life on the road as a bottom bill, B-side band in a run-down tour bus with a half-assed promoter and renegade roadies hired as temps for each show. He relayed stories of great gigs with green rooms lavished

with buffets consisting of imported charcuterie, pastries, and full bars. Then he described most of the green rooms or welcome receptions as what they were. Goldfish crackers, a three or four beer or well drink tab per band member, if you were lucky, some cut up Slim Jims, and plastic-laden cheese chunks in assorted colors. Sometimes in the back room of a local dive-bar, sometimes a bowling alley, and an occasional old VFW hall. He also told Walden he was looking very forward to the new tour and gig which looked like it was going to be much better.

“Wow, sounds like quite a life. Remember when we were in the student union building playing chess and pontificating about where life would take us? I had lots of changes in direction, but you seemed to always stay with the touring musician idea, hoping to make it big. Maybe this is it Mudbone.”

“Well, we’ll see,” answered Mudbone. “But what about you Walden?”

Walden went on to tell Mudbone about his previous book, the new book deal, early retirement from the *Herald* and so forth. He included stories about some women he’d been with and proudly explained the significance and importance of a few awards he’d won for his writing. He talked about some investigative reporting he had done, exposing all kinds of fraud, theft, and even violence along the way. In short, it was a braggadocious account of his life since Ithaca.

“Boy, you’ve really made a name for yourself, Walden. I always knew you were destined for success, no matter what you did for a living. I only wish I could have been half as successful in the music business!”

“Wait a minute,” said Walden. “See that guy in the dark sunglasses leaning in the alcove? He’s been looking at us, and I noticed him doing the same back at Heidi’s. Kinda spooky.”

“Shit,” said Mudbone. “That’s Pinto, the ‘fuckin drummer I picked up for this gig then fired. He’s a drug dealer from somewhere down in Mexico or Latin America. You sure you saw him lurking around Heidi’s as well?”

“Absolutely MUD-BONE! I am a credentialed investigative journalist! I know what I saw.”

“Hmmmm,” said Mudbone.

CHAPTER FOUR

“AMAZING GRACE AND SUSPICIOUS MINDS”

Sasha was awakened by a needle jammed in her arm. She tried to scream but as the Heroin combined with a lethal amount of Fentanyl coursed through her veins, it gave her a very temporary warm glow. As she was fading into death, she heard a voice say “you talked too much to that reporter, my dear, and you were my favorite *Kartoshka*. We’ll get him soon enough and you two can talk all you want in hell!”

Groggy, and feeling like he’d have to get better to die, Walden rolled over, sweaty, and sullen in his bed at 3:00p.m. because of the faint beeping of his iPhone. He glanced over at the snoring and gurgling figure under the sheet on the couch and realized he and Mudbone partied a little too hard yesterday. Yikes!

Finally, listening to his voicemails, he was taken aback when Tessie had called three times saying, “Walden, I’m worried, I can’t reach you and you must get back to Miami by tomorrow at 3:00 p.m. It’s Clara’s Funeral.”

Walden was perplexed because she’d said nothing about the huge breaking news she was called back for. Understanding he was not clear-headed because of the improprieties he engaged in during his outrageous behavior with his old college chum yesterday, he decided not to call her back. Instead, he focused on finding a flight back ASAP.

He was able to secure a direct flight into Miami on the first Delta flight out in the morning. He tried and tried to convince the agent that he should get a bereavement fare but to no avail. It would have him landing in Miami at 10:00 a.m. and Tessie said she’d pick him up because she had to talk with him privately anyway.

“Oh shit,” thought Walden. “What in the world does she need to talk to me about?”

The ride to Walden’s condo from the airport turned out to be unnerving. Tessie did most of the talking, relaying information that had not been revealed publicly at this point.

“I talked to my liaison at the Miami PD, and she told me that the medical examiner said that Clara’s death was not, in fact, from natural causes. She wouldn’t say much more than that, but the way she said it, I got the feeling that maybe she was saying Clara was murdered! Why would anyone want to murder Clara? She was such a sweetheart!”

Walden was staring out the patio window of his condo and all sorts of thoughts were running through his mind. Why would someone want Clara dead? And the

terrible way she died, face down in her plate of food. Clara was a very meticulous woman, always well dressed and she took great care in her appearance. Dying with food all over her face and clothes would not be the way she would want to leave this world.

Why did she die so suddenly? If it wasn't natural causes like a heart attack or a stroke, what else could have happened? Did Tessie say murder? Did someone stick a knife in her back when no one was watching? Did someone shoot her with a poisoned dart from a blow gun? Was she poisoned? We all ate the same thing. Oh damn, she switched salads with me! Maybe, maybe, no, that's not possible. That couldn't be what happened. I don't have anyone after me. Or do I?

"Walden, Walden are you even listening to me? We must get going, the funeral starts soon and we can't be late"

The funeral proved to be a solemn affair as is the case with most funerals. Held in the actual funeral parlor rather than a church or chapel, the event proved to be the equivalent of a Vegas Chapel Wedding but on the other side of life. Mundane, if you will, boring, monotonous, tedious, but thankfully short and sweet. Clearly, the faux preacher had no idea who the dead person was, forget gender, race, creed, or anything else that may have mattered to anybody who may have cared. There may have been 37 people in attendance, excluding the poorly situated mural of a huge crowd, depicted as mourners painted on a somewhat cracked and lined sheetrock wall in the back. The funeral parlor itself sported dingy, gray and black gothic style rugs and runners that had been worn with the stench of death for the last 30 years. Thanks to whomever or whatever, the body had been cremated so no open casket was presented. However, the Urn was positioned on a glorious riser (Styrofoam) decorated nicely with plastic flowers with a kneeling bench in front if one wanted to kiss the ashes goodbye. Of course, both the "Charming Floral Pedestal" and the "Universal Church Kneeler" were a small upcharge of \$1200.00.

There were the proper folks in proper funeral attire and then there were the not so proper wearing their Sunday best jeans, untucked shirts, too short skirts and of course tennis shoes! Thankfully no one was in shorts and flip flops.

Walden saw Clara's daughter, "Credence" and her most recent boyfriend. Walden and Tessie made their way over to Credence to offer their condolences. Walden hugged Credence and the boyfriend just glared at Walden. Credence had to be about 25 now Walden thought. He had known her for years and remembered some of the trials and tribulations Clara went through as a single mom. He always thought Credence had terrible taste when it came to boyfriends. They were always on the rough side and seemed to be demanding and demeaning and this one was no different. Credence, typically a "Hippie Chick", usually dressed in

flowing and flowering attire reflecting her patient, peaceful, and soul enriching attitude was now in a black dress and heels, but the boyfriend, the surly SOB, was one of the “not so proper”. Bad and cheap, side of the road swap meet Harley Davidson shirt and ragged jeans. He brought with him a distinguishing swagger usually associated with folks struggling with self-confidence issues trying to overcome their incompetence (unbeknownst to them). His right hand flung behind his back every time he took an elongated step with his left leg. He looked like a discombobulated Circus Clown but was convinced he appeared powerful, confident, and bad ass! Credence was a bit put off by this attitude but chose to ignore it due to the occasion.

That was when Walden decided to return the asshole’s glare with a grimace, followed by a frown, followed by a silent *“don’t you dare fuck with her”* Got it?

Credence asked Walden to say a few words about her mom at the funeral, and he agreed.

The funeral was finally over and those close to Clara joined the procession to the urn-site. It was a sunny day, not a cloud in the sky unlike funerals in the movies where it’s always raining, and everyone had a black umbrella.

Having agreed to brief comments when Credence asked, Walden commenced with his unplanned, unrehearsed remarks that may have turned a bit south depending on who was listening. “Thumper loved whipped cream. Clara loved to experience the best of the best and her second favorite electrical appliance, referring to a coffee grinder were a few of the somewhat borderline comments Walden made during his faux epilogue. When he glanced at Credence in the back of the crowd frantically waving her arms in an accentuated cross like motion, essentially begging him to stop, he put the brakes on with “There you have it. Thumpers life in a nutshell. Just ask her daughter Credence”.

The Urn, complete with the “Elegant Floral Pedestal”: and “Universal Church Kneeling Bench”, were transported with embellished care to the actual cemetery, where Garvin, the longtime cemetery guard dog greeted the funeral director with his typical yawn and allowed them in the main gate. Garvin was an aging Basset Hound (adopted because of his calm demeanor) had no guardian instincts but served a purpose. After an exaggerated effort to take great care of these valuable pieces, transporting them to the post hole Clara’s ashes were destined for, the funeral squad settled in. They were set to endure any further funeral rhetoric to come. To their great fortune, the Preacher (or whomever) was clearly tired and ready for a cold beer, so it only lasted about 3.25 minutes before dispersing with a grand “REST IN PEACE DEAR SARA”. WTF?

Walden and Tessie stood a little outside of the small crowd so that family and close friends could be up front. Walden’s former boss, Editor in Chief Alvin Z,

approached Walden quietly and whispered in Walden's ear, "You know, it should have been you. You're a philandering son of a bitch," and then quickly walked away.

Walden was startled by Alvin's remarks and shook his head in wonderment. "Why would he say that? He surely doesn't know anything about the little fling I had with his wife. Unless she said something to make him pay more attention to her. I forgot he bought her a new car shortly after our little tryst. Women!"

"Walden," whispered Tessie. "What's going on? Did Alvin Z say something about Clara?"

Walden looked around to see if Alvin Z had left. He didn't spot him, but he did see a very attractive lady standing all by herself a short distance from the gravesite and she seemed to be watching the whole event. She was well dressed in a black suit and wearing dark sunglasses and plain flat shoes, which he found a little odd as most of the "proper" women in attendance were wearing heels. Dark skinned, hair pulled back, looked to be in her 30's. *Exotic*, he told himself. He turned back to Tessie and muttered something about Alvin was an asshole and I don't work for him anymore. He looked back to where the woman in black was standing, but she had vanished.

Although "somber" was dictated, it just didn't happen. Clara was a fun-loving girl and none of her true friends, including Walden, wanted to take that away from her, even upon her death. Suddenly, (thanks to a track provided by Mudbone), a brilliant version of CSN's "*Love the one you're with*" broke out on a beautifully mixed sound system with deep bass notes. Friends of Clara's, slowly, but confidently began to dance. As it got louder, the vibe grew and everyone remaining was up and clapping, jumping, dancing. It was a beautiful and artistic delivery. After 30 minutes of wild but lovingly shared peace and harmony, the music faded to Bob Marley's incredible anthem— "*Three little birds*". At that point, everyone who cared knew, "*Every little thing is gonna' be alright.*"

When the funeral was finally over, Walden and Tessie headed back to Walden's condo and tried to make up for the some of the intimate time they didn't have in New Orleans because Tessie got called back to Miami.

Walden's condo, originally set up as a bachelor pad, replete with the necessary espresso machine, world class sound system, monster TV, electronically drawn curtains, and mood lighting served Tessie well as she enjoyed the luxury.

But Walden's mind was still elsewhere as he couldn't get the idea out of his head that Clara may have been murdered. Finally, Tessie gave up, climbed out of bed and strutted naked but with a pronounced "Cissy Strut" across the room and into the kitchen. She opened the fridge, grabbed an un-opened bottle of Chardonnay,

a corkscrew and two glasses and proceeded back to the bed and said to Walden, "Well at least we can toast Clara with a bottle of wine and how about I order a Pizza as you have nothing to eat here?" Walden grabbed the wine, opened it, poured two glasses and raised his to toast. "To Clara, may you rest in peace". He chugged his glass, put it on the nightstand, took Tessie in his arms and said, "Let's have dessert first and then order a Pizza". After an hour or so of frolicking and finishing the bottle of wine, they ordered Pizza and began to talk about all that had happened in the past 72 hours and what they should do next, if anything. Tessie suggested that Walden go visit one of his detective sources at the Miami PD, maybe he could get more information than she was able to from her source.

Tessie didn't leave until about 11 the following morning, as they decided to shower and then one thing led to another and finally, she had to go so she could get to work. Walden called Samatha Hart, a detective that he had worked with on several of his exposes. "Sammy" was a seasoned vet with a teasing feminine side. Appearing hardened at times, her soft blue eyes and endearing smile drew Walden in, even though he was committed to Tessie. As much as he had tried, she always kept the relationship on a professional level, even though he felt deep down that she really wanted to misbehave, maybe a little. Sammy agreed to meet him at Versailles in Little Havana for a Cuban Coffee at 3 that afternoon. The normally long line was short at that time of day, and they both ordered coffee and "*pastelitos*."

Versailles Restaurant, known as the *World's Most Famous Cuban Restaurant*, has been serving Cuban cuisine and culture to the local and international community for over five decades. Soon after it opened its doors in 1971, Versailles became the gathering place and unofficial town square for Miami's Cuban exiles. With its uniquely French inspired aesthetic, the iconic establishment is a landmark to the community and remains the unrelenting gauge of the city's diversifying pulse.

After they exchanged a few pleasantries, Walden got right to the point and asked her if she had any information about Clara's cause of death as he knew that the ME said it wasn't from natural causes. As expected, Sammy said, "I can't tell you much as it's an ongoing investigation." He then proceeded to tell her about Clara switching salads and wondered if maybe he was the target and should he be worried; after all she knew a lot about the people he investigated for his stories. He, of course, neglected to tell her about Alvin's Z's comments to him as he still held out hope that maybe Sammy would give in, and he wouldn't want her to think that he really was a philandering SOB. She sipped her Cuban Coffee, took another bite of her pastry, looked around and then said, "The ME's report doesn't say that she was murdered, but he's not releasing any more information until he has a better understanding of what killed her. It wasn't anything to do with her health status, apparently, she was very fit, and her vitals were all great. As soon

as I hear anything that may be of concern, I'll let you know. But as always, keep this between us, even though I understand that you are not working for the paper any longer and have retired to write another book. I'll miss working with you on your stories, it's always been something I looked forward to. Maybe I can still be of some assistance if you're needing some consulting on Police procedures. As for your safety, I'd say watch your back, I wouldn't want anything to happen to you." She gave him a warm smile and winked.

Now, not only was he totally confused about his relationship with her, and he wondered if it had changed from a 'maybe' to 'there's definitely a possibility', but he was also afraid. The salads, his editor's comment, and of course some of the people that were either in jail or got in legal trouble because of his reporting. All of this weighed heavily on his conscience.

CHAPTER FIVE

“PARANOIA STRIKES DEEP, INTO YOUR HEART IT WILL CREEP”

Sonny was going to have quite a bit of free time as his new tour didn't start for another month, so he decided to get reacquainted with New Orleans. He was up somewhat early, a little before 11 am. That's early for someone that is usually up most of the night, so breakfast was in order. He was staying in the Quarter and Brennan's was close by, but he really wanted something down home and greasy like Chicken Fried Steak and Eggs, so he headed to the Clover Grill and found a seat at the counter. The Clover Grill is a New Orleans staple, quirky, cozy, unique diner, and such a vignette of nostalgia it was even featured in the movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* starring Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett. The Chicken Fried Steak, gravy, and biscuits were calling his name, but he was good and only ordered a half order of the biscuits and gravy to go along with the Chicken Fried Steak and sunny side up eggs. The steak was breaded perfectly, the breading worked into the meat by the heal of the cook's hand so that when it was fried, the breading didn't "pillow" but stayed adhered to the meat. The biscuits (2 on a half order) were soft on the inside and slightly crunchy on the outside. The gravy was served on the side so that he could butter the biscuits before smothering them with the sausage gravy. He slid the eggs on to a side plate, added the biscuits to the platter next to the Chicken Fried Steak, poured the gravy over the buttered biscuits and then slid the eggs on top of everything. The result was one huge platter of carbohydrate laden food with a little protein in there somewhere. How Sonny could eat all of that and keep his lanky frame was an amazing thing.

He then decided to just wander the Quarter, like a tourist, and ended up at Pat O'Brien's of all places. Never a fan of the Hurricane, he ordered a simple Sazerac and sat and listened as the piano player fielded requests, mainly stuff from the 60's and early 70's, from the very touristy crowd. After about an hour and 2 more cocktails he decided to walk over to Frenchmen's Street even though it was still early afternoon. Surely one of the bars would have some good music going. He wound up at the Spotted Cat, found a table in the corner and enjoyed a cold Abita. The waitress was nice looking and friendly; she was dressed in a complete old fashioned Nurse's uniform claiming "I'll cure what Ail's ya!" and she kept giving him a questioning look. Finally, she said, "Aren't you a musician? I think I saw you play the other night during the French Quarter thing, Mudhen or Bonehead, something like that". He just laughed and said, Mudbone, at your service Mademoiselle." She told him her shift ended at 6, he said, "Should I stay, or should I go", and he stayed until 6.

Mudbone's cell phone began ringing around 7 am and he grabbed it and almost threw it across the room, but the display read Pond, so he decided to answer. "Why the fuck are you calling so goddamn early. Don't you know that some of us like to sleep in since we don't have to be anywhere special today!" he whispered into the phone. Christy, at least he thought that was her name, stirred slightly and then immediately went back to sleep. Mudbone was a little confused as to the noises erupting from "what's her name's" mouth, nose, whatever. When Walden called, he told him they were "Murp's" ???

Walden quickly apologized and told him that he was headed back to New Orleans and would arrive early that afternoon and could Mudbone pick him up.

Mudbone said, "No, take a goddamn Uber and call when you get here." He pressed disconnect and then threw the phone across the room. Christy (?) stirred again, and he decided that if he was awake, she should be awake too. They both decided to take advantage of the situation, and they did and they did. Afterwards' Mudbone told Chrissy (he now knew her name was Chrissy, thanks to a glance at a text message from a girlfriend) that she snored a bit this morning. "I've never snored" in my life," said Chrissy. "Though I've been known to "Purr" a time or two."

When Walden arrived later that day, he called Mudbone, but there was no answer, and he just left a message. "Hey, I'm here and in an Uber, call me and we'll hook up." Walden had the driver head to the Quarter and drop him off at Café Du Monde. Chicory Coffee and a Beignet sounded good, and the scenery was always nice as well. Local kids with coke bottle caps stuck to the bottom of their tennis shoes danced crazy jigs to Dixieland type jazz tunes coming from a NOLA based Tuba, Trombone, and Horn Band. Tourists were mesmerized by the entertainment and pleased with the somewhat sticky, but dry weather.

After he placed his order with a waiter he started thinking about yesterday and having a Cuban Coffee with Sammy and wondering if she would enjoy a coffee with him here in the French Quarter and then he thought about his latest romp with Tessie and then suddenly he saw the good-looking, dark-skinned woman from Clara's funeral at a nearby table. He decided that this was too much of a coincidence and he was going to approach her. He asked for his check, paid and got up to go to her table, but once again, she was gone. He left Café Du Monde and decided to walk towards the flea market area. He spotted the woman again as she was going into one of the gallery shops near Jackson Square. The shop boasted all the usual NOLA kitschy chachkas including hot pepper sauces, Gumbo spices, and blackening seasoning. He entered, looked around and didn't see her. Suddenly, in a far corner of the shop near the hats and T-shirt section he felt a light tap on his shoulder and heard a female voice tell him not to turn around, but to just listen. She told him her name was Monique Adams and

that she was with the FBI (feds, not Florida) and that she was there following a couple of the Russians that he exposed in his last big story. Walden picked up a shot glass with NOLA JazzFest emblazoned on it (wishing it was full of something potent) and feigned interest. She asked him if he knew Sasha, one of the call girls. He said, "Yes, she was one of his sources for the piece about the sham operation." She proceeded to tell him that Sasha's body was found, dumped in an alley, and that it appeared she died from an overdose. He muttered to himself, oh fuck, I'm to blame, again. He tried not to turn around, but he really wanted to see her up close. She quickly reminded him to pretend he was shopping. He sighed and told her that he knew from conversations with Sasha that she wasn't a user. Monique stated that this was the FBI's take too, as Sasha didn't have any other needle marks on her body. She discreetly handed him a business card and said, "That's my direct number. Call if you think you're in danger or if you think you're being followed." Walden began to sweat, his head was spinning, he stuttered a little as he said to her, "I was hoping we could maybe have a drink together?" She responded, "Take this seriously, those guys don't play around, and I don't believe it's a coincidence that both you and they happen to be in New Orleans at the same time. And anyway, we shouldn't be seen together, you never know who's watching." and she walked off. His paranoia grew by leaps and bounds.

Sonny finally returned Walden's call, and they decided to meet back at the Napolean Bar in a couple of hours because Sonny had a little something to take care of. Chrissy didn't have to be at work until about that same time.

Walden began to head to his hotel and as he walked, he kept looking into store windows trying to see if that reflection trick really worked on determining if he was being followed. He read it somewhere in a spy novel or maybe it was in an old black and white movie. He was confused and turned around, almost lost. "Get a grip," he muttered to himself, saw a bar and decided a shot of Whiskey would calm his nerves.

Walden arrived at Napolean's and didn't see Sonny anywhere. It was now early evening, and the tables were starting to fill. He asked the hostess for a table in the back courtyard and told her that Mudbone would be joining him. She said OK and wondered to herself, "who the hell is Mudbone." Sonny finally arrived and was in a great mood, all smiles, not a care in the world. Walden gave him a look and said, "Well it looks like someone is feeling rather chipper, is it really good weed or did you just get laid?" Sonny just smiled and said, "Both!"

"What's up Bro' and why the long face?"

Walden proceeded to enlighten Sonny about his trip once he got back in Miami and what a Shit-Show it was. The funeral, the ME's report, Tessie thinking Clara may have been murdered, what Alvin Z whispered in his ear, what detective

Samantha said. Then, he told him about the FBI agent and the Russians. And of course, he had to mention how attractive and exotic he thought Monique was. "Do you really think that someone could be after me?"

Sonny just grinned and asked, "And who else have you been philandering with? You never could resist the temptation. Hey, that might be a great line for a new Blues tune, "he couldn't resist the temptations, and he went down, down, down". What do you think?"

Walden just stared at Sonny and said, "Are you through? This is serious and yes there have been others. Oh shit, I almost forgot, I was playing around with Rosalinda, but she started it."

"Who's Rosalinda?"

"Just the daughter of Felix, The Fish, one of the top thugs in the Mendocino Cartel." replied a sheepish Walden.

Sonny just shook his head and said, "They really call him 'The Fish'?"

Meanwhile at another Coffee Shop in little Havana, Miami, three members of the Mendocino Cartel were meeting to discuss on-going business and to enjoy the Coffee and some contraband Cuban Cigars. They talked about many things and eventually one of them made a comment about Rosalinda, the Fish's daughter and how she was a "real looker", but he heard that she played around and then another one said, "Yeah, I heard that she had a thing with some reporter for the *Miami Herald* and the Fish knew nothing about it. I wouldn't want to be that guy if the Fish finds out."

The other said, "I have a guy in New Orleans, a real dumb ass that works for me and does some more stuff. I told him if he didn't start producing real soon that we were going to have a conversation. The guy started sputtering saying 'give me a little more time, I just got fired from the band because some guy named Waldo or Walrus showed up and he's some kind of good friend of the band leader'. He was supposedly some hot shot reporter from Miami. So maybe, I will keep this idiot around just a little while more and have him follow this Waldo guy. He might be that reporter you were just talking about. If Rosalinda suddenly shows up in New Orleans, I could be sitting on some very useful information that I could maybe use if the Fish gets in my face about anything."

Sonny and Walden decided to call it an early night and meet for breakfast the next morning around 10, and then they could further discuss what to do about Walden's predicament. Sonny seemed to be in a hurry as Chrissy just sent him a text saying it was a slow night, and she just got cut, and if he wasn't up to anything she'd take care of that. So, they were meeting at his hotel in less than 30 minutes.

Walden felt a little relieved after his conversation with Sonny. It was nice to get some of that off his chest and Sonny was always a good listener and always offered moral support, be it good or bad. He headed back through the darkened streets of the Quarter towards his hotel. This time he didn't bother looking in all the windows to see if anyone was following him. He should have as Pinto, the "dumb ass", was trailing him at a not so far distance.

CHAPTER SIX

“EVERYBODY’S GOT A COUSIN IN MIAMI”

Walden and Sonny met for breakfast at a well-known Inn in the Garden District and opted for a front porch table since the weather was cooperating. Walden asked Sonny about his night and Sonny just grinned.

“Here I couldn’t sleep,” said Walden. “Because I think someone is trying to kill me and you’re out having a good time with who knows who”.

“I think her name is Chrissy and yes it was a very good time. I’m starved, worked up an appetite this morning”, replied Sonny with a quick wink and a smirk.

Walden just looked at him and said, “Fuck you”.

Since the “Columns” was known for exquisite cuisine, Sonny ordered the “Soft Shell Crab Benedict” with “Triple Cheese Grits and Boudin Sausage” while Walden simply chose the Hot Cakes with Jowl Bacon. They ordered and just as the waiter put their food in front of them, Walden noticed a rattletrap mid-90’s, Faded Black, Chevy Camaro drive by with Bondo all over two quarter panels and one yellow door, and he said to Sonny, “Hey isn’t that Pinto, your ex-drummer in that piece of shit car? Wonder what he’s doing down here in the Garden District”.

“Yeah, piece of shit drummer too!”, snapped Sonny.

Randy Warzinski was a disgruntled underwear salesman for Hanes, working from their manufacturing plant in Kenosha, Wisconsin. He and his wife, Phyllis, were in New Orleans as Randy had won the prestigious Salesperson of the Year award which included a round trip for two, plus accommodations at the Royal Sonesta Hotel for 4 days and 3 nights, plus a \$200 per day per diem. They and their Pomeranian, Thor, were sitting at a table adjacent to Walden and Sonny. Randy was overweight and overstressed, pissed off because he auditioned for a part in a previous commercial for the “Fruit of the Loom” company as a set of grapes on a cruise ship and was not selected. Plus, he was very hungover from last night’s romp up and down Bourbon Street. He hadn’t told Phyllis, but he didn’t pack his heart medication, thinking he could do without for a few days and after all he was sure it contributed to his ED issues. But so far, he had been too drunk to attempt any sort of sex play, plus Thor seemed to be especially defensive of his sleeping spot on Phyllis’s rather large and obtrusive mid-section.

Randy had ordered a hearty breakfast of sausage, bacon, ham, 3 eggs sunny side up, hash browns (no grits for this Midwesterner), white toast and a side of biscuits and gravy. He also thought one of those Mimosas sounded good but had asked for it in a tall glass with “some of that stuff you put in a Tequila Sunrise, you know, make it a Mimosa Sunrise”. He had eaten about half of his platter of indulgence and had just taken a large gulp of his Mimosa Sunrise, when he felt a

tightness in his chest. He had a hard time breathing and a lot of pain shot through his arm and up into his chest.

Pinto had driven by the restaurant when he spotted Walden and Sonny sitting at a table on the porch. He drove around the block and when he pulled in front of the Columns he slowed down and saw Walden looking at him. So being the smartass he was, he made his hand into a gun and pointed it at Walden and grinned. As he slowed his piece of shit and Bondo- laden Camaro down even further, it suddenly lurched forward and backfired.

Randy's chest pain had become very intense, and he decided he'd had a full-blown heart attack. His mouth had fallen open; his eyes had fluttered in his head. The tall glass containing his Mimosa Sunrise had slipped from his hand and shattered on the concrete floor about a second after Pinto's car did its backfire. Randy's head fell first onto the edge of the table, bounced off and then his whole body fell out of the chair and onto the floor and he landed face up on his back. His plate of biscuits and gravy slid off the table landed on top of his head and face. Phyllis looked up and screamed. Thor jumped out of Phyllis's arms and onto the floor and started licking the gravy off Randy's face. A waiter rushed over and bent down to see if Randy was breathing but Thor growled at him and then snapped at him when the waiter tried to move the plate away from Randy's face.

Walden said, "Oh shit, that guy, he's been shot and damn if he didn't do a Clara into his breakfast! Come on Sonny let's get out of here in case that idiot Pinto comes back." Sonny looked at his Crab Benedict and wondered if he could get it to go, but Walden was grabbing his arm and pulling him out of the place.

As soon as they were a block or two away, a panicked Walden pulled out Monique Adam's business card and called her. She miraculously answered, and he told her that he thought someone just tried to shoot him. His breathing was irregular, so she told him to calm down, take a deep breath, asked if he was wounded and where he was. He told her and she instructed him to meet her in the lobby of the Westin on Canal Street in two hours.

Walden was too afraid to walk to the Westin as he thought Pinto may come back so he took out his phone and tried to get an Uber, but Sonny just waved down a cab and off they went. Sonny really wanted something to eat and convinced Walden that food and drink would help in calming him down, so they headed to the Parkway Tavern for Po-Boys. Not the same as Soft Shell Crab Benedict, but Sonny believed they would probably have a Soft-Shell Crab Po-Boy on the menu and that would be an excellent substitute. Oooh, and a spicy Bloody Mary with a Crayfish Tail and Andouille sausage garnish would be great with that as well and damn if it didn't look like Walden was going to need at least two!

Walden and Sonny made it to the Westin with full bellies, and they each had slight buzz. They arrived about 15 minutes early as Walden was somewhat anxious to visit with Monique. He said to himself, "In all my time as an Investigative Reporter, I have never been shot at (and he still hadn't been). Sure, there were implied threats, but nothing like this. Shit, shit, shit, this is really going to screw up my plans of taking it easy for a while. Damn it all!"

As they were standing in the center of the lobby, Monique tapped Walden on the back. He jumped slightly, turned around and was face to face with Monique. He tried to give her a big smile, but it came across as a goofy, nervous grin. Monique just raised an eyebrow, looked away and introduced herself to Sonny. She suggested they find a quiet table in the bar as it usually wasn't busy at that time of day. They ordered, Iced Tea for Monique, just water, no lemon for Walden and another Bloody Mary for Sonny.

Monique was a well-respected FBI Special agent, analyst, and researcher, but her love had always been grounded in field work. Her mother was a Jamaican writer who wrote for news journals throughout the Caribbean. Her dad, an Irish immigrant from County Cork in Ireland, wound up pursuing his education in the United States and ultimately got his PhD from Princeton University in Sociology and proudly held an endowed chair at the prestigious Ivy league Cornell University in upstate New York. Both were published authors. When Good Morning America did their research after Monique solved the complex "Spaghetti Midnight Murders" case in Little Italy in New York City, they recognized the family background and invited her to the morning newscast. She was humble, yet informative, and won the viewer's hearts with her professional and sincere explanations.

Monique said, "So tell me again what happened." Walden gave her the details of the morning, she made a few notes and asked, "Did you see a gun pointing out of the car as it drove by. Was there blood on the man that was supposedly shot. How many other patrons were in the café at the time this happened, and who the hell was Pinto". Walden re-constructed the events of the morning for her, complete with what they had ordered. Sonny was charming and had Monique smiling and laughing as he explained about Pinto, his band and the new gig. He then proceeded to ask her if she knew that Walden was having an affair with Rosalinda and told her who Rosalinda's father was. Walden gave Sonny a look that said, "*I can't believe you're telling her this.*" Monique just shook her head in dismay.

Walden thought, *well so much for meeting her for a drink sometime, goddamn Sonny how many times has done that to me? Always with someone that I told him about and then he just snatches them from underneath my nose, like I'm not even there.*

Monique asked a few more questions, said she'd investigate the shooting and would talk to the New Orleans PD for more information. As she got up to leave, she stated that she would be in town for a couple more days and should something else come up, to let her know. She shook both of their hands, Walden believed she kept hold of Sonny's a little longer than his, and she left. Walden turned to Sonny and said "Someone is trying to kill me and you're not only telling an FBI agent about my love life, but you're hitting on her too. Here, take her card, I'm sure she'd like to hear some more of your funny stories about life on the road." Sonny just grinned and said, "Thanks, I'll give her a call later, maybe tell her I have some more information for her and then when she asks about you, I'll just say that you have to call Tessie and report in."

Walden just said, "Fuck you."

Walden and Sonny sat back down, ordered a couple of drinks, Vodka Tonic for Walden and a Tequila and 7 Up with a lime for Sonny.

Walden then said, "I think we should go back to Miami and investigate Clara's death, because that's going to lead us in finding out who's trying to kill me."

"Whoa there pardner, what do you mean when you said "we need to go to Miami? Why 'we'? Can't you just text me some updates? You know I was just starting to have some real fun here in New Orleans and I also need to start planning the tour and stuff. You know I only have a limited amount of clothes because the New Orleans gig was just to be a short one and my stuff is in back in KC where I now reside. So, you know....,"

But before he could finish, Walden said "I need you man. You and I have always had each other's back and we're just getting back together. And you're still my best friend even if we haven't seen each other in like 20 years. I'll even buy you some new threads. You know Miami has lots of Thrift Stores, you can find some great authentic Guayaberas and a ton of Hawaiian shirts there. You'll be all set, looking like a native."

"What about my guitars, I don't really want to leave them in the hands of Cosmo, he's probably pretty pissed at me right now."

"We'll rent a car or maybe a van and you can bring your stuff with you, you know it will be a road trip, like old times. Plus, we can have some windshield time to further sort all of this out and come up with a plan."

"A plan for what?"

"You know, like I said, we're going to find out who's trying to kill me. I also have a nice Condo that overlooks the water, a spare bedroom with its' own bathroom, so you won't have to sleep on the couch and share my shower. Come on man, I really need your help on this."

Sonny looked at Walden, shook his head and muttered, "What have I got myself into? Ah, shit. Okay, but I insist, when it is time, I gotta' do this new gig as it might be my last big chance at something that could really turn out good for a change."

They finished their cocktails and Walden suggested they go back to their respective hotels. He'd arrange the rental car and give Tessie a call to let her know to expect them sometime tomorrow evening. They also agreed to have a late dinner, Sonny suggested R'evoution at 10 so they would have time to pack, and Sonny could hopefully have some alone time with Chrissy. Plus, they wanted to leave by 9 the following morning.

They met at the bar in R'evolution, Chef John Folse's latest endeavor. Once again, Sonny had a smile on his face and had a very relaxed demeanor, whereas Walden looked like a "tight ass." The bartender was friendly and easy on the eyes, so they decided to have dinner there instead of the dining room. They each ordered a Sazerac and then asked her for menu suggestions. She told them they must get the "Death by Gumbo", which they both ordered and then either the "Grilled Red Fish Bienville" or the "Rack of Elk", so they ordered one of each plus they added the "Bourbon-Cured Bone Marrow" and sides of "Braised Greens" and "Fire Roasted Wild Mushrooms". And another round of drinks. Wow, what a meal.

Finally, around 1 am, after three more rounds of Sazerac's, several toasts of "*our compliments to the chef*," and multiple attempts to convince the bartender that she should go to Miami with them, they decided to call it a night and staggered back to their respective hotels. Neither one was paying much attention, as they didn't see Pinto following them on foot about 30 feet behind. They stopped to go their separate ways and agreed that Walden would pick Sonny up at 9 am. Pinto was confused; which one should he follow. The boss told him to keep an eye on the reporter, but that had been boring, so he decided to follow Mudbone instead.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“JAMBALAYA (on the Bayou)”

Pinto followed Sonny on foot to his hotel, the French Quarter Courtyard. When Sonny went inside, Pinto hung out across the street in a doorway, laid down and pretended he was a homeless person, which didn't take much pretending. He soon fell asleep and was awakened around 2 am by a drunken bum pissing on him and yelling at him, “Hey, this is my doorway, get the fuck out, you bum!”

Pinto got up took a swing at the guy, missed, and slipped in the piss and fell on his ass. The bum just laughed, and Pinto muttered some expletives in Spanish and then collected himself and wandered off to find his piece of shit car.

Pinto was awakened the following morning by someone banging on his door. He never got visitors. His apartment was a real shit hole and any lady friends that he met, he always told them they couldn't go to his place because it was being remodeled. Remodeled by the cockroaches maybe. Pinto was naked as his clothes were soaked in urine from the night before, so he pulled the dirty sheet from the bed, wrapped it around himself and went to the door and yelled, “Who the fuck is it?” Suddenly the door caved in, knocking him to the floor, and there were two muscular, scary guys both with blond, close-cropped hair, dressed in tight fitting, tasteless, Hawaiian shirts, designer jeans and Snakeskin boots. And not just any snake, genuine Florida Python caught and skinned by the two of them. They shoved Pinto to the ground, kicked him in the ribs a couple of times and in broken English with definite Russian accents, told him to “shut the fuck up!”

Borya and Vladislav were brothers. They had migrated to the US through New York, using fake passports supplied to them by Sergei Popov, a gangster they knew in Moscow. They did some work for him in Moscow and when he left for the states, he told them that if they ever got to the US, to look him up. So, they kept in touch, and he arranged their passports and travel, of course for a price. In other words, he had them for life. By the time they reached New York, Sergei had set up shop in Miami, which was great news for the brothers, as they welcomed the sunshine, warm weather and of course the women. A radical change from Moscow.

Vladislav grabbed Pinto by the hair and stood him up. The sheet had fallen off of Pinto and as he stood there naked trying to cover up his manhood with his hands the brothers broke out in laughter and punched him a couple more times in the gut.

Borya asked him where the keys to his car were and Pinto said, “Fuck you, *tu pedazo de mierda*”, which the Russians didn't understand, so they just looked at each other and then pummeled Pinto again in the gut and head with their fists

until he collapsed on the floor. While Pinto was writhing on the floor in pain, they each kicked him in the groin, the ribs, the legs and in the head. Borya then said, "Once again, where are the keys, dipshit" and this time Pinto pointed to the urine-soaked shorts on the floor. Borya grabbed the shorts and reached into a pocket for the keys and came out not only with the keys but also with a wet hand that smelled like piss. He promptly slapped Pinto across the face and then aggressively rubbed his wet hand across Pinto's mouth and nose before he walked to the sink to wash.

They stood Pinto up and Vladislav grabbed the sheet from the floor and told Pinto to wrap himself up. Pinto protested but was punched a couple more times in the gut and across his mouth. Once more they told him to wrap himself up. Pinto hastily pulled the sheet around himself and mumbled through his broken teeth and bleeding mouth, "Ok, now what?" Vladislav said, "Now we go" and they drug him, half naked out the door.

They opened the trunk of a black, Lexus ES 350 and violently threw Pinto inside and slammed the lid shut. The Russians looked at each other nodded, and Borya walked right over to Pinto's car, climbed in and started it up. The "piece of shit" car stuttered as it tried to start, finally did and Borya pulled out of the complex with Vladislav following.

They drove west on I 10 towards Baton Rouge but got off near Laplace and headed south on highway 18 for a few miles. After about 20 minutes more of driving, they both pulled off onto a dirt track that headed towards one of the many Bayous in the area. At the end of the track, deep in the brush, sat a small, abandoned looking shack sitting on a small pier that went out onto the swamp. At the end of the pier was a hoist device that had a crank, a rope and a pulley at the top of the pole and a large hook on the end of the rope. It looked like something one would use to hang a very large fish or probably a Gator.

They stopped the cars, Vladislav got out of the Lexus and Borya slowly drove Pinto's car deep into the brush towards the swamp. Once he stopped, he rolled down all the windows, put Pinto's car in neutral and got out. Both Russians then started pushing the "piece of shit" further into the swampy brush until the Camaro started to slowly sink into the mud. They then walked back to the Lexus, opened the trunk and pulled Pinto out, leaving the sheet behind. They grabbed Pinto by the arms and drug him out onto the pier. They first Zip-tied Pinto's hands in front of him and then secured his ankles together with another Zip tie. They then lowered the hook, secured it to his tied hands and slowly cranked Pinto's naked body up in the air and out over the swamp. Pinto, of course, had been screaming and cursing in Spanish the whole time. Once they had him in place, Pinto yelled, "I'm connected, I've got some great Coke, I'll be glad to share

it with you. I'll even give it to you. What have I done, who are you guys? We can work this out. Come on guys, let me down from here, you can keep my car, if that's what you wanted, where is it anyway, I don't see it. I've got some great powder hidden in it, it's all yours. Please get me down. Let's talk." Vladislav finally said to him, "Alright, talk little man, tell us why you follow this guy Waldo and what he tell you about the book he writing." Pinto said, "Can I have some water? I'm thirsty from being in that trunk and there's blood in my mouth."

Borya said, "Sure little man, you can have some water" and he quickly released the crank and Pinto's entire body crashed into the murky swamp. They left him under the water for about 30 seconds before they pulled him back up. Pinto was sputtering and cursing once again. Borya said to Pinto, "Did you see Putin while you were down there? He's probably very hungry, we haven't fed him anyone for what two, maybe three weeks." Pinto said, "Putin, what the fuck are you idiots talking about, I didn't see shit down there." "Ah", Vladislav said, "I think I see him now, look he's swimming this way." And sure enough something very large and very scaly was swimming towards the pier. Pinto screamed as the Gator broke the surface of the water and rose up towards Pinto's dangling feet. Borya cranked Pinto up just enough to keep the Gator at bay. He then said to Pinto, "Again, why you follow the writer, who told you to do this and what you know about book?"

Pinto was now crying and pleaded with them to let him down and said that he will tell them everything he knows, "Just please for God's sake, please let me down!"

Borya said to him, "We from Russia, you think we believe in God? We let you down. Here you go and look here comes Putin again." He slowly lowered Pinto towards the water as the Gator returned. This time, however, Borya was not as quick with the crank and Putin took off half of Pinto's left foot. Pinto was screaming as Borya cranked him up further away from the water and he said to him, "Now tell me everything you know, or maybe next time Putin gets other foot."

Pinto in his sodden, hysterical voice said, "I swear, I don't know anything about some book. I was just told to follow him and his buddy, the guy from the band, and let my boss know if I saw the writer with anyone, especially a girl from Miami. We never really talked, I just met him once and he never mentioned a book and I never saw the girl from Miami. You've got to believe me, I don't know anything, I'm just a small-time drug runner for the Mendocino Cartel that also plays the drums. Please, let me down, I swear I won't tell anyone about you, I'll just say I was in an accident and lost part of my foot. Please, please."

The Russians looked at Pinto and then at each other and just shook their heads. Vladislav said, "I think he is right, he don't know nothing about the writer. What that they say "he don't know shit". Sergei going to be mad, but we do everything we can, let's go."

Pinto screamed at them, "Are you going to let me down now? Come on guys, take me with you and just drop me off at a hospital, ok? I swear I'll say it was an accident."

"Ok, we let you down now, I think Putin still hungry."

Splash!

CHAPTER EIGHT

“YOU KNOW I LOVE THE LADIES, LOVE TO HAVE MY FUN”

Walden's alarm didn't go off at 8 simply because he didn't set it before he passed out. He woke up at 9:30, only because he had to pee. “Shit, shit, shit, he muttered when he saw the time. Why do I do this to myself, I'm well past the point of knowing better and yet...” He stumbled to the shower, made some coffee from the cheap machine in his hotel room, threw the rest of his clothes in his bags, looked around the room to see if he'd forgotten anything and headed to the lobby to check out.

He tried to call an Uber, but after 15 minutes of trying to figure out the app, he asked the Valet to call a taxi. On the way to the Rental Car Center, the taxi driver detoured through a defunct K-Mart shopping center parking lot where his cousin happened to own a rental car business called “Rent A Heap Cheap”. Casually mentioning this to Walden as a “low cost, no-frills, quick service car rental facility” operated by his cousin (a successful multi-business entrepreneur), he offered Walden his generous “Family Discount”. Walden, of course, took the bait and wound up with a 4-year-old Dodge Mini-Van with bumper stickers and pre-school pick up numbers all over it. “Baby on Board, my daughter is an honor student, Dog-Mom, D.A.R., Soccer Mom”, etc. Though it coughed and sputtered a bit, it seemed semi-reliable and at the discounted price of \$75 a day plus mileage (adjustable), It would work.

Walden pulled up in front of Sonny's hotel 30 minutes later, it was only a 10-minute drive, but he had issues with his Map app and the Mini-Van's faulty power steering. Sonny was not out front. Walden found the Valet and had to give him \$20 to keep the Mini Van out front, while he went in to find Sonny. Sonny was sitting in the lobby, surrounded by his luggage, 3 guitars cases and two cases labeled equipment. Plus, he had a young woman on his lap, hugging him around his neck and giving him an occasional kiss on the cheek and forehead while saying, “Are you sure I can't come with you, I promise I won't be in the way or cause any trouble”. Sonny just shook his head and said to her, “No, I told you this was secret business that I'm not allowed to talk about. The FBI and the CIA both said that it might be pretty dangerous, and I should not put anyone in harm's way. I promise to be careful so that if and when I complete my mission, I can come back, and we can continue what we started. Now, it looks like my driver is here, so kiss me goodbye.”

Walden just looked at him and said, “Sorry I'm late Mr. Bond, but if you gather your belongings, we will load them in the Limousine and be on our way to you know where.”

Sonny had already loaded most of his stuff on a Valet cart, so he told Walden to take that to the Limo while he grabbed the Guitars.

They had just made it to Mini Van when they both heard a woman scream from behind them, "You worthless piece of shit." Both turning, they observed Chrissy jumping up and down and pointing her finger, "That's your fucking limo? Good damn thing I wasn't invited. I don't do trashed soccer mom Mini-Vans. Bon fucking voyage!"

Walden said, "You're still using that old breakup line about being a spy and all? I'm surprised that it still works."

"Well, if you would have showed up on time, I could have left without her knowing. I told her I wasn't leaving until 11 so that I could sneak out and already be gone by the time she woke up, but no, someone decided to sleep in. You know it's going to be a long day in that 'Soccer Mom Limo' you have there. I can't believe you rented that. Knowin' you, you got it really cheap. You know, I drive a 1996 Porsche 911, and I also own a '59 Triumph TR3, British racing green of course. What about you Pond, let me guess, a Buick Regal Sedan, or maybe a Honda SRV or maybe, and it would be a stretch, but a Tesla sedan?"

"Not even close. I have a Jaguar F type, Red of course."

"Touche, now let's get out of here before she changes her mind and tries to go with us. As Marshall Tucker said, *'I don't need no woman tagging along'.*"

Walden and Sonny had to fold down the back passenger seats of the Mini Van to get all of Sonny's "stuff" inside. Walden gave his phone to Sonny and told him to put the Condo's address into the Maps app, and they headed out. Maps said it is about a 13-hour drive, and they should arrive around 1 am.

Sonny decided that Walden should drive first, since Walden slept longer, and he was going to take a short nap. Three hours later, Walden pulled into a truck stop to take a bathroom break and get gas. Sonny woke up and said, "Are we there yet?" and beat Walden to the bathroom. They both decided they were hungry and across the road was a small diner called, "Virgie's Place" with a line underneath that said, "Stuff you face at Virgie's Place". The food was surprisingly good, freshly made, hand patted burgers, homemade onion rings and pie. Plus, very friendly service from Grandma, mom and mom's 12-year-old daughter.

Back on the road again, this time with Sonny behind the wheel. After another 3 hours Sonny suggested that they call it a night, get a motel and pull into Miami tomorrow.

Walden and Sonny finally arrived at Walden's condo around 3 in the afternoon and attempted to get Sonny settled in. Sonny liked the spare bedroom, it had a real bed, not a blow-up on the floor and the guest bathroom had a great shower.

The condo was on the 14th floor and had a great view overlooking the city and if you looked hard, you could see Biscayne Bay in the distance. They had talked with Tessie as they were heading into the city and planned to meet her for dinner in the Wynwood area around 9 pm.

Sonny wasn't very familiar with Miami, so they decided to cruise around a little, with Walden as the tour guide. They hit South Beach, Sonny wanted to walk the beach a little to see the lack of clothing and came away muttering, "They're mostly just kids and the ones that are old enough, most of them shouldn't be showing what they show!" He was clearly disappointed. Walden wasn't much of a tour guide as all he wanted to do was talk more about his troubles and new conspiracy theories. One would have thought they did all of that and strategized during the 15-hour drive from New Orleans. But instead, they took turns sleeping while the other was driving. Listened to a lot of music on Sonny's phone. Stopped numerous times to pee and replenish junk food and of course they had to reminisce about the great times and women they had in Ithaca. Every time Walden brought up his current troubles, Sonny would change the subject.

Once back at Walden's condo after the very brief tour of Miami, Sonny suggested that they leave the car and Uber to the Wynwood area. Sonny wanted to see the murals plus he really wanted to have a cocktail or three as he figured it was going to be a long night of re-telling their escapades from the events in New Orleans to Tessie.

Walden and Sonny met with Tessie at La Fonda Latina, a Spanish Tapas Bar on the North Side. Tessie was dressed in her newscaster's shirt, Walden in his usual jeans and sport coat, and Sonny in a pair of railroad style overalls, black high-top Converse, and a blue denim button down. Over dinner they told her all about what happened in New Orleans after Walden went back. Walden didn't say much about Monique, just that he'd met with an FBI agent. Tessie told them she didn't have any new news about Clara's mysterious death and that the news station now had her working on other stories. Walden declared that Clara's death was still his number one priority because he was sure now, more than ever, that someone was trying to silence him, and Clara just happened to be in the wrong place at the time. Tessie agreed to help as much as she could, but she reminded him that she had a real job and Sonny chimed in, "And don't forget, I have a tour starting in about 3 weeks."

"That's nice, real nice," said Walden.

After dinner, they decided to go to one of the new "hot" nightclubs in Miami where Tessie could get them in, and they would avoid the long line, as she was "a known personality".

They squeezed their way into the throng of beautiful people all in their chic, mostly skimpy and very expensive clothing towards the main bar. Billed as “the runway” the bar boasted a 30-foot length of 3” thick smoothed crystal mirror with beveled edges and artistically positioned little grooves by each stool. This proved convenient for those patrons who chose to indulge in a little “Peruvian Marching Powder” sometimes provided by over-tipped bartenders. The bar was three deep, but Sonny was persistent and wormed his way to the rail (in more ways than one) just as a couple vacated their seats. Sonny stood and offered the seats to Tessie and Walden, who gladly sat. The music thumped, the fancy, hip drinks flowed from bottles held high in the air by the drink master behind the bar and the only way they could talk to each other was by shouting in one another’s ear. Cocktail shakers full of ice and spirits rattled everywhere.

Tessie ordered a *Whatever is your special cocktail of the night is*, Walden ordered a double Blanton’s with one ice cube and Sonny ordered a Budweiser. The Bartender gave Sonny a look and he said to her, “What? I just want a beer, and no glass please” as he gave her a big smile.

Sonny got his beer and turned his back to the bar and surveyed the crowd. Over in one corner he saw a table of three girls and at least five guys hovering. All the guys had their shirts unbuttoned to their navels. On closer examination, Sonny wasn’t sure if it was really three girls or maybe it was... “Oh well, guess I’m getting old” he muttered to himself. As he continued to examine the crowd, he saw a familiar face. He turned to Walden and said, “Hey isn’t that Monique over there at the other end of the bar?” Walden looked and Tessie turned her head too and said, “Who’s Monique?” Walden and Sonny looked at each other and told Tessie they’d explain later. Sonny fought through the crowd and got to Monique, while Walden and Tessie stayed put. Monique was surprised to see Sonny and told him they shouldn’t be seen together and got up from her stool and started to leave. “Whoa, girlfriend, can’t I at least buy you a drink? What am I “chopped liver?” She told him, “First, I’m not your girlfriend, and anyway, I’m engaged. Secondly, I’m only drinking a Club Soda as I’m on the job.”

“I think you really are trying to avoid me. I’m not such a bad guy,” said Sonny and gave her his best, and infamous, Sonny “Mudbone” Blues Master smile. She looked him in the eye and told him that she was in the club because it was supposedly owned by the Russian mob she’d been following. The same guys she followed to New Orleans were now there in Miami and she knew that he and Walden had returned to Miami, and she didn’t believe in coincidences. “Both of you need to be careful.” *They’re mean bastards, aren’t they?*

Sonny was stunned and said to her, "That's a line from Johnny Cash's live album at Folsom Prison, cep't he said "them". I'm really impressed." She gave him a wink and then a quick peck on the cheek and disappeared into the crowd.

Sonny, trying to cover a sheepish blush, made his way back to Walden and Tessie and they both asked him what that was all about. Sonny said, "Let's get out of here, I love music and clubs, but I can't take much more of this. I'll tell you once we get outside in the fresh air."

As they were leaving, Tessie pointed out a private booth in the back of the club and said to Walden, "Aren't those the guys that you did that exposé on about the call girls and the apartments that needed repairs?" Walden looked, quickly looked away, took Tessie by the hand, and hustled her out the door, hoping he wasn't seen.

Sergei did see them and motioned to the two same muscular thugs in bad Hawaiian Shirts, designer jeans and Python Boots, Borya and Vladislav. The same two that fed Pinto to Putin. Sergei, said to them, "That's the guy and his friends that you were supposed to locate for me. Looks like they followed you. You two Siberian Cowboys think you can follow them now or do I have to go hire some druggie from the Mendocino's? I bet Putin's still hungry too. And no rough stuff, just find out where they go and where they live, I need them alive for now to find out about that book."

Walden, Tessie and Sonny left the club and began walking away. Walden seemed to be in a hurry and pulled out his phone to call an Uber before he said anything to Tessie and Sonny. Just as he hung up and informed Tessie and Sonny that their ride would be there in 7 minutes, a Black Mercedes-Maybach S Class Sedan pulled up, the window purred down and someone inside the car with a baritone, and somewhat gurgled mumble told Walden to get in. It was The Fish. Walden was a little concerned, but he knew that Tessie and Sonny were witnesses should something happen to him. He told them not to worry and that he'd see them back at his condo a little later.

The Fish greeted Walden and said he was sorry for intruding on his time, but he was a busy man, and he liked to take care of problems directly. Walden got a little worried and when The Fish said he wanted to talk to Walden about his daughter, Rosalinda, Walden's blood pressure went way up, and he began to perspire despite the air-conditioned leather seats.

He looked The Fish in the eyes and said to him, "Nothing happened between Rosalinda and me. We met during the trial in which I testified positively for you, and we became friendly. We went and had coffee together a couple of times, but that's it. I mean we did a lot of flirting and all, but then I told her we couldn't take it any further than that. I said to her that I was very flattered by her

attention. I also conveyed to her that she was a very lovely lady, but I was probably too old for her. Now we still run into each other from time to time and we still flirt because it's fun for both of us. It's especially enjoyable when we're with people who don't know either her or me, it's fun to see their reaction, but that's it. It hasn't and won't go any further than that." The Fish nodded his head and said he knew all about it because when he asked his daughter about the rumors, she told him that Walden was a true gentleman and not to worry about a thing. Walden was clearly relieved although he allowed a few lascivious notions to creep in his mind.

Walden asked The Fish if Rosalinda was ok and The Fish replied, "Yes of course, I'm just a little concerned because she is not interested in working with me in my business. But if that's what she wants it's ok. Not everyone can do what I do. I understand. But I do need your help. I think you probably know this, but a couple of years ago she decided she wanted to be a Chef and maybe open a restaurant using some of the family recipes. So, she started Culinary School and then once she got there, she discovered that running a restaurant was a lot more than just making some of Abuela's recipes. She found out it involved a lot of long hours and that most of her business was going to be at night and on weekends so that would severely limit her "social" time. And then you did that revealing story about that woman Chef at La Vida who was substituting Stingray meat for Scallops and whatever else, and it really turned her against that line of work. Plus, that was one of my favorite places, I would eat there all the time. I can't even order Scallops now as I'm always worried about "what if". Anyway, now she wants to be a singer. Thinks she can make it in the music business. She does have a good voice, I hear her singing all the time when she's at home, but really a singer for Christ's sake! But she's my baby and if I can give her what she wants, so be it.

Walden looked at The Fish and spoke. "What can I do, I'm just a journalist?". The Fish replied, "But your best friend from college, Sonny Humphries, I believe his stage name is Mudbone, is in that business and it has come to my attention that he has a new contract, and he and his new band are getting ready to go on a big tour. Now I'm sure that you, being the "gentleman" and "friend" to Rosalinda, you could arrange it so Sonny could audition her. Maybe not for his tour, even though I know he needs a female singer, all bands should have a female singer, but at least he could get her a start. See what it's like singing in front of a bunch of strangers. And of course, she's not to know that I had anything to do with this. Let's just keep this between you and me, okay?"

Walden could only nod his head and said, "I'll be glad to do this for Rosalinda."

The Fish replied, "I knew you would."

“Now a couple of other questions for you. We have a guy in New Orleans, a new guy, not too bright, but he played the drums in your friend’s old band, remember him? One of my associates thought it was going to be good for business. Anyway, we haven’t heard from him for a little while and we were wondering if you knew anything or bumped into him at any time? If not, ask your buddy, maybe he knows something. And another thing, I heard a little murmur on the street through some friends that a certain group of Slavic, shall we say gentlemen, although they are definitely not gentlemen; they’re pretty upset with you about your little story that disrupted their operation involving girls of a certain occupation. Maybe you should be a little careful. Maybe I can help if needed.”

The car came to a stop in front of Walden’s condo and The Fish said, “I believe this is where you live. Maybe next time we’ll have a Coffee, and we can talk about your new girlfriend, the newscaster or maybe you can tell me about your new book, and hopefully you’ll be able to tell me how good a singer Rosalinda is. I’ll be in touch.”

Walden climbed out of the car a little shaken. His life as he thought he knew it was upside down and sideways.

Walden called Tessie and told her that he was okay and asked where she was and where Sonny was. She told him that she was at home in her condo and Sonny said he was going back to Walden’s place and going to bed. She asked about his mysterious car ride, and he told her mostly what The Fish said, leaving out the part about flirting with Rosalinda. He said that he’d really like to see her, and could he come over, Sonny would be asleep and with all that’s going on, he could really use a hug and some quiet time with her. She first told him no, said she had an early day tomorrow, then changed her mind and told him okay, but no matter what, she had to be out of there by 7 am, he could stay later, but she had to leave. They made it all work, somehow.

CHAPTER 9

“IT TAKES A WORRIED MAN TO SING A WORRIED SONG”

Tessie kissed Walden on the cheek and gave his chest a quick rub. Walden opened his eyes and smiled at Tessie as she said to him, “Good-bye tiger, see you after work?” and left. His pulsed quickened as he began to recall last night’s events culminating with The Fish beckoning him like he was a choir boy. *Did he really tell The Fish that Sonny would hire Rosalinda as the singer for the new band? Plus, the damn Russians, were they really that vengeful?*

He should probably grab Sonny, and they could discuss last night and what they were going to do next.

He thought he’d rather take a shower at his place, so he hastily put on his clothes, grabbed his shoes, and walked out the door, locking it behind him. He walked barefoot to the elevator and pushed the down arrow. Once inside, he pushed 14. Tessie lived on 17. They had met in the same elevator a year or so ago. He recognized her from TV, and she recognized him from the paper.

When he unlocked the door to his condo, he was surprised to see Sonny up, dressed, and drinking a cup of coffee while sitting on the balcony.

“Well, look who decided to come home to play host for his house guest,” said Sonny. “I thought maybe you had plans for the day with the lovely Tessie or that maybe you were still riding around in the backseat or perhaps in the trunk of that black Mercedes. Nice to see you again Walden, care for a cup of coffee?”

Walden looked at Sonny and smiled. “Yes, I’ll have some coffee my good man and you haven’t changed much in the last 20 years, still a very sarcastic asshole!”

“Fuck you too,” said a smiling Sonny. “One coffee coming right up.”

Walden suggested they go to breakfast, and he would tell Sonny all about his meeting with The Fish. “I’ll take you to ‘Havana Vieja’ in Little Havana.”

It was another beautiful, sunny day in Miami, so they rolled all the windows down in Walden’s Jaguar, convertible top stowed, and drove through the city to Little Havana. A quaint little café, appreciated by locals, serving authentic Cuban specialties. Walden was hungry and ordered ‘The Cuban Breakfast’, that consisted of Lechon asado, chorizo, eggs, potatoes and salad, Sonny said “I’ll have the same”, and they began to talk about the previous evening as they chowed down.

They first re-capped dinner with Tessie and then talked about the fiasco at the night club. Walden questioned Sonny about Monique and as usual Sonny’s face turned into a big grin and he said, “Oh man, she’s something else. She told me she was in there because your Russian friends own the Club! And once again, she

warned us to be careful.” Walden then told Sonny about seeing Sergei, the Russian mobster, and said that he was going to tell him about it once they got outside, but The Fish intervened.

Sonny asked who The Fish was, and Walden reminded him that he was the boss of the Mendocino Cartel and “Remember, I was seeing his daughter.” He then filled him in on his conversation with The Fish about his affair with Rosalinda, letting Sonny know that he lied to The Fish as he really did have more than just coffee with Rosalinda, and “Yes she was young, but over 25!” Sonny just shook his head.

Walden then said to Sonny, “There’s something else. Rosalinda wants to be a singer. The Fish said that she really has a great voice, but of course, he’s, her father. Anyway, he wants you to listen to Rosalinda sing and maybe sign her up for your tour and I told him that I would arrange it.” Sonny almost spit out his coffee and said rather loudly, “You told a Cartel Boss, that I would do what? He wants me to audition her and maybe bring her on my tour?”

“Well, I may have suggested it when he gave me that stare that I took to mean, *it was in our best interest if we want to stay alive*, you know, that look, like the mobsters in the movies. And calm down, she’s probably not very good anyway so you won’t have to worry about it. I’m sure The Fish will see that right away when you audition her. Maybe you could just invite her up to sing one song as a guest at one of your shows”.

“Auditioning her is one thing, but this Fish guy is going to be there along with maybe her mother or a couple of more gangsters and since he’s her father, you know he’s going to think she’s the next Taylor Swift. Plus, you really can’t tell if they can handle an audience or not during an audition. I mean, it’s one thing to sing in the shower or at Christmas with the family, but it’s another to get in front of a bunch of strangers, half who are drunk, and the other half not listening. Jesus Walden, what have you got me into now? A drug Cartel, Russian mobsters, murdered secretaries.

“Walden interrupted with, “Administrative assistants, that’s what they’re called now, administrative assistants, not secretaries.”

“Really Walden?” “Whatever!”

When the server returned, she asked if they cared for anything else. Sonny replied, “Yes please, bring me a shot of bourbon for my coffee and bring him the check” gesturing to Walden.

“What the fuck?” said Walden.

"You're into me for a helluva' lot more than breakfast Bro. I get a serious break on the blues circuit, and you want to throw me into a cesspool of mobsters, dead secretaries, hit men, and floozies".

"I told you, it's administrative assistants," said Walden.

"Either way...She's DEAD!" Sonny snapped.

Walden somehow convinced Sonny to go along with him to the *Miami Herald's* office as he wanted to talk to a few of the folks that were at the Banquet when Clara bit the dust.

As they pulled away from the curb in Walden's Jag, they failed to notice the yellow Mustang that was pulling out of the parking lot across the street at the same time. The Mustang had the top down and the two Russian thugs, Borya and Vladislav, dressed in tight fitting Hawaiian shirts and sporting very dark sunglasses and scowls on their faces, followed Walden and Sonny at a not too discreet distance.

The offices of the paper were quiet. Sonny was expecting to see harried people running around with notebooks in their hands, shouting at each other about deadlines and bylines, talking on the phone and gesturing wildly. But instead, there was just a handful of desks occupied with folks staring at computer screens. Pretty mundane. No Clark Kent, Lois Lane or Jimmy Olsen.

Now it is just manufactured cubicles with flat screen monitors and slide-out keyboard shelves. Typewriter? ...forget it...thing of the past.

Walden was greeted warmly by a few of his former co-workers and there were a few comments made about Clara's untimely death and how it was a real tragedy, someone even chimed in with "*And we didn't even get to finish our dinner afterwards*".

Walden with Sonny in tow, headed to the break room as there was always someone hanging out in there as it was easier to have a casual conversation there as opposed to a cubicle where other people tried to overhear what was being said. After all, they were reporters, and they made their money following up on rumors and hearsay. The break room was a typical breakroom with a few exceptions. The requisite vending machines with everything from Frito's to Payday candy bars were cleverly positioned (by calculating staff members) to obscure certain security camera views. The antique oak dining table, proudly provided by Alvin, was placed at a not so Feng Shui angle so that 1/3 of it was blocked out of camera view. A few other modifications had been made over the years to provide a level of comfort for the newsroom staff.

Walden spied two of the 'administrative assistants', Mary Beth and Ralphy, sitting at a table away from the door and the vending machines. Walden

approached the table and asked if he and Sonny could join them. Walden introduced Sonny as a famous musician and dear friend. Pleasantries were exchanged and then Walden quietly asked some questions about what was being said about Clara's untimely death. Mary Beth and Ralphie looked at each other and then began to tell him that the gossip was she was murdered because she had confidential information about Alvin Z, the Editor. They heard he was playing around and got caught, not necessarily with Clara, but that Clara knew who with and she was going to expose him if he didn't promote her. They also heard that Alvin Z's job was in jeopardy due to the decline in advertising sales and that his big digital splash was more of a digital drip and the paper was losing even more money. They heard too that Alvin Z was still pissed off at Walden about something and he had said that he was glad that Walden was gone, good riddance.

Walden asked about the Banquet, specifically, who oversaw the planning of it. Mary Beth and Ralphie, both said it was Alvin Z as they were both present at the meetings and Alvin Z was the one that insisted on the hotel, the menu and the seating arrangements.

Walden thanked them for being so candid and told them he would stay in touch.

"Let's get a drink and maybe some lunch", said Walden to Sonny. "My head is starting to throb. There's a bar right around the corner that is frequented by reporters and gossipers from all over the city. Maybe we'll get some more information in there." Once again, they paid no attention to the yellow Mustang that was parked close by.

Walden and Sonny made their way into the Pencil Pointe Bar, a dark skinny hole of a place with a long bar against one wall, red vinyl booths opposite and a few 4 top tables in the back towards the toilets. The back bar was nothing special, the usual assortment of liquor and cordials, a few collectible nicknacks, and such. But on the wall above all the clutter was what some would call a masterpiece, others would call it trashy and yet everyone looked as they entered and as they left. It was a painting in the classical style of a reclining nude. She laid on her side with her fine bare derriere facing you while she looked at you over a naked shoulder. It always seemed to Walden that her eyes followed you when you turned your head away.

As their eyes adjusted to the darkness, they secured two stools at the bar as the early lunch crowd had started to leave. Walden asked Sonny if he knew the history of the naked lady behind the bar. Sonny shook his head no, and Walden proceeded to tell him. "So, the story I heard goes that she was from Kansas City, where you're now living. She was a famous madam there by the name of Annie and back in the day this portrait hung on the wall of a restaurant on the Country

Club Plaza named after her, 'Annie's Santa Fe'. I don't know how she ended up here, I'm sure there's a story or two about that, but it is rumored the previous owner of this fine establishment was 'supposedly' connected to the KC mob, but again, that's just one story. But I always try to get a seat here at the bar as just looking at her naked body, and her sexy pose, well, it always takes my mind off my troubles, be it just for a minute or two." Walden paused and stared at Annie with a dreamy look on his face. "The food here is decent if you want some lunch, typical bar menu, I usually get the Reuben as the Corned Beef is homemade from Brisket, not that Top Round stuff and the Duck Fat Fries are good too. So, I guess it's better than decent. Why don't you order a couple of beers I've got to pee."

Walden slid off his bar stool and ambled toward the restrooms in the back nodding at a few faces he recognized on the way. As he was about to pass the last booth, he stopped just short. There sat Alvin Z.

Alvin Z was in a deep conversation with someone that was sitting opposite him, and he didn't see Walden right away. There was no way Walden could sneak by, so he stopped at the booth, cleared his throat and said, "Well hello, Alvin, funny seeing you in here, I didn't think you enjoyed the 'everyman' places, no white tablecloths or Tuxedo dressed waiters."

Alvin Z looked up and muttered out loud, "Well if it isn't the fucking scumbag Poet, always armed with a less than professional greeting. Now that you're finally no longer employed by the *Herald*, I've always wanted to ask you, who did you fuck or give a blow job to in order to get hired at the *Herald*? I know it wasn't your outstanding academic background or sparkling personality".

The person sitting on the other side of the table, the one Alvin Z had been talking to said "What?" and turned around to look and see who it was. She recognized Walden, smiled and said, "Hello Walden, it's good to see you. I'm glad you stopped to say hi."

Alvin Z's face and neck turned into a deep red, almost purple as he said, "Walden, I would introduce you to my wife, Marissa, but I see you already know each other!"

CHAPTER TEN

“GIVE ME THREE STEPS”

Just as Walden slid off his bar stool and headed towards the bathrooms a man sat down on the now unoccupied seat next to Sonny. Sonny said, without looking over, “Sorry, but that seat is taken.” He then turned his head towards the intruder and saw a true mountain of a man now sitting next to him. Sleeveless shirt, biceps bigger than Sonny’s thighs, gold earring in his left ear, but no tattoos on those massive arms. Completely shaved head, moustache and goatee. Sonny gulped, but said, although a little meeker this time, “Sorry, my buddy is sitting there, and he just got up to go take a piss.” The big guy gave Sonny a look and then a big smile, got up and went around to the stool on Sonny’s other side, but someone was sitting there too. The big guy asked that occupant if he wouldn’t mind moving to the vacant stool next to him so he could talk to Sonny. The guy looked up and immediately said, “No problem, I was just finishing anyway.”

Sonny muttered to himself, “Oh shit, what have I done now.” The big guy settled in next to Sonny and held out his hand, really a big paw, and said to him, “Hi, I’m Jerome Moses Feinberg, and you are?”

Sonny gulped and shook hands with the big guy and said, “Sonny Humphries, or professionally I go by Mudbone.”

“Very nice to meet you, Mudbone. Now that’s a strange nickname, I bet there’s a good story behind that. Seems like I remember my parents having a record album by someone called Mudbone, when I was a kid.”

“Well, what do you know. Nice meeting you too,” and he turned back to face the bar and gaze at Annie, the sexy vixen.

Jerome Moses Feinberg tapped Sonny on the shoulder and said, “Mudbone, we need to talk. I have a ‘stage’ name too, it’s Moby and maybe you now recognize me, I’m a Professional Wrestler.”

“Sorry, no, I’m on the road a lot and really don’t know much about that.”

“That’s ok, I really don’t know much about your music, other than what I told you about my parents, but that’s not what I want to talk about with you. I want to talk about Monique.”

Sonny gulped and said to himself, *“I should have ordered a shot with my beer, and I should have known better than to get worked up over some good-looking FBI agent. I need to get back on the road and away from all this shit before I get myself killed or something.”*

Sonny took a big swig of his beer, turned and looked at Moby and said, “I don’t know any Monique, you must have mistaken me for someone else.”

Moby just looked at Sonny, smiled and said, "Don't worry man, she's already told me all about you and your partner and I know there's nothing between you and her. You see, she's my fiancée, or was, I'm not sure where we stand right now, and I need your help in making sure we keep going in the right direction. She didn't tell me much about you and Waldo, is it? But she thinks that you seem to have a pretty good head on your shoulders along with a calm and rational demeanor, so I thought maybe I could talk to you about our situation."

Sonny thought it was best to nod his head in affirmation.

"So, out of the guys in this bar, how did you know it was me?"

"Remember, she's an FBI agent and her description of you was pretty right on, that's one of her strengths."

Moby continued, "We met in law school, she graduated and joined the FBI. I didn't graduate as I got sidetracked with this Wrestling thing."

"Tell me about that."

"Well, I was going to school and had to work part-time and because of my size, I easily got on as a bouncer at one of the top strip clubs in Tampa, Baby Dolls Gentlemen's Cabaret. One night three dudes were starting to walk in the entrance just as I was throwing a pretty big guy out the door for being too handsy with one of the dancers. One of the guys looked at me and said something about how I easily handled that guy and asked where I worked out. I told him, between law school and this job, I didn't really have a gym, just kept in shape at home. Long story short, they invited me to work out with them at their gym. Turned out they were Pro Wrestlers, and I ended up joining them in their practices and soon had a couple of matches of my own lined up. They got me to shave my head, gave me the nickname 'Moby', you know, great white whale. The money was too good to give up, so I quit school and started on tour. Monique and I moved to Miami because of her job and I'm originally from here, so it's all good. I'm taking some online classes so I can finish my law degree, but I don't think Monique is convinced that I'll follow through with it, she thinks the bright lights of show business have gone to my head. But she's the best thing in my life and I can't fuck that up. So, when she told me a little about you, I thought I'd try to find you and maybe get some guidance."

Just as Moby finished his tale, Borya and Vladislav walked into the bar, adjusted their eyes to the dim light but kept their sunglasses on and spotted Walden while he was at Alvin Z's booth. They made their way towards Walden and when they got there, they each grabbed an arm and roughly shoved him towards the bathrooms.

Sonny just happened to look in that direction at the same time and said, "Oh shit, it's the Russians and they've got Walden."

Moby looked up, saw what was happening and made a bee line to the back. He got to Borya, first, grabbed him by the belt loop on the back of his pants and roughly pulled him off Walden, shoved him to the floor, kicked him in the chest and said to him "sit!" Vladislav, turned around he still had Walden by the arm, and said, "Moby?" Moby grabbed Vladislav by the collar and knocked his legs out from under him on and told him to "stay" and then grabbed both he and Borya by their necks and knocked their heads together. Vladislav, a little groggy turned to Borya and said, "That's Moby!" Borya looked up at Moby and said, "Wow, it really is him." Moby looked at both Russians and he was a little taken aback by their conversation. Borya said to Moby, "We big fans of yours, it's real pleasure to meet you. That was some take down you did to both of us, I know why you are now competing for World Title. We have tickets in front row! Wait until we tell our buddies who we met. Do you think you can give us autograph and could we maybe take picture of the three of us together?" He pulled his phone out of his pocket and handed it to Walden and said, "Do you mind and oh, Sergei said we tell you quit writing book about our business, or he mean business. Now take picture and we leave."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“WHEN A MAN LOVES A WOMAN”

During the very brief melee, Alvin Z. and Marissa slipped out of the booth and headed towards the door with Alvin Z in the lead. As Marissa walked by Walden, she gave his right butt cheek a quick squeeze and a gentle rub. Sonny, followed by the bartender, who was holding a baseball bat, made their way to the back and saw a smiling Borya and Vladislav, posing for a picture with Moby. As big as the Russians were, Moby towered over both. As soon as Walden handed the phone back to Borya, Moby said, “Now get the fuck out of here and don’t be bothering this guy again or next time I won’t be so gentle and you won’t be walking out,” and he gave them both a quick shove towards the front. Borya was smiling proudly as he showed Vladislav the picture on his phone as they made their way out the door.

The bartender looked at Walden and said, “What the hell is going on here Walden, you know we don’t tolerate that kind of stuff.”

“You can put the bat back behind the bar now Tony, it was just a little misunderstanding and everything is fine. In fact, I think we will move to this table right here and order lunch. Right guys?”

Tony looked Walden in the eye and said “Okay, but let’s keep it quiet now. If you weren’t one of my better customers, I’d kick your ass out of here. I’ll send your beers over with Doris and she’ll take your orders, but I’m warning you, and that goes for you too, big guy!”

Tony, with bat in hand headed towards the bar, Walden, Sonny and Moby sat down at the table. “Whew,” said Sonny, “I’ve worked up a thirst.”

Walden and Moby just looked at him and Walden said, “Whatever.”

“Walden Fitzpatrick,” said Walden as he extended his hand towards Moby. Moby shook Walden’s hand and said, “Jerome Moses Feinberg or I’m also known as Moby.”

“Thank you”, said Walden, “Those two... I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t shown up. They said they were here to give me a warning, but I believe they were going to get physical in delivering the message. I’d like to buy you lunch, if you can stick around.”

As they sat down Walden said to Moby, “I imagine it was your dad that named you.”

“Dad always said Larry was a distant relative, but it was Mom who was the bigger fan and decided on my name. Most people don’t get it and anyway, I’m used to Moby now and that’s fine.”

"I don't get it," said Sonny, but Doris just happened to walk up at that moment. Before Walden or Moby could explain, she placed the two beers on the table, handed out menus, looked at Moby, gave him her best frown and said, "And what can I get you to drink?"

"Water with lemon will be fine please ma'am."

"Today's special is Fried Grouper Sliders, and it comes with our Duck Fat Fries for \$14.95. Soup today is Plantain Chowder. I'll get your water, you two need another beer?" Walden and Sonny both nodded their heads yes.

Moby leaned in and said "Guys, a little help please. What the fuck is a duck fat fry?" "Fried duck fat?"

Sonny spit a little beer out and clenched his nose when Walden said, in a rather professorial tone, "My dear new friend, duck or goose fat are incredibly flavorful lipids, considered in French Cuisine and among all Epicureans to be an exquisite and luxurious way to lend flavor to anything fried. Here in America, we've discovered that potatoes, especially Idaho Russet's fried in either are the BOMB."

"That's nice," said Moby, under his breath.

"There he goes again," said Sonny. "Just ignore his snobby, know it all delivery Moby, he thinks he's the world expert on everything."

"Moby or Jerome here, is Monique's fiancée," said a smiling Sonny to Walden. "He stopped in to see me as he is in some need for relationship advice, heard I had a rational way about me."

"What? You have a rational way about yourself? I don't think so. Irrational way is more like it and Jerome or Moby, I wouldn't take any relationship advice from someone called Mudbone, if I were you. Just look at me, I listened to him about 20 years ago and all I do is go from one relationship to another, fun while they last, but they don't last."

"That's because you didn't listen plus you only think with the brain that's in your pants, not the one in your head!"

"Good advice from someone whose only long-term relationship has been with a guitar."

"Not just any old guitar you ignoramus, she's a Taylor 714-CE, complete with the original on-board blender system and I had her made just for me."

Doris interrupted with two more beers and a water with lemon, sighed and said, "Are you ready to order?"

"I'll have the Rueben and fries," said Walden.

"Imagine that. Have you ever tried anything else on the menu Walden? Why don't you just say I'll have the usual, it'll be quicker that way." She looked at Sonny and said, "And you?"

"I'll have the special."

"See Walden, simple, and I'm talking about his order, not him, maybe." She looked at Moby and said, "And what for you big fella?"

"I'll have two grilled chicken breasts, plain, two sides of cottage cheese and a tossed salad with just a lemon and some olive oil."

Walden and Sonny gave Moby a look and he said, "What? I've got a big match coming up and I've got to keep in training shape."

Doris smiled as she collected the menus and walked away.

"So, you're engaged to Monique, the same Monique that's an FBI agent?" asked Walden. "And how did you know that Sonny was going to be in here, he didn't even know this place existed until a little while ago?"

"Yes, Monique works for the FBI, and I believe or hope that I'm still engaged to her. And I've been following you two, along with those two Russians, all morning."

"So why Sonny and where did you begin to follow us from?"

Moby related to Walden his tale of uncertainty concerning his upcoming marriage, basically the same thing he told Sonny, and added that he'd been following them since they left Walden's condo this morning.

"How did you know where I live?" asked a perplexed Walden.

"Simple, I looked you up. But tell me about those two Russians and the message they said was from, I believe it was Sergei, saying to stay out of their business."

Sonny chimed in, "Well you see our boy here has got himself in some kind of a pickle with some Russian bad guys and apparently they don't take kindly to his meddling in their business and..."

"Stop right there, Sonny", interrupted Walden. "I'm sure that Moby has better things to do than listen to my problems after all, he came to us for advice about Monique."

"He came to me, and you just happened to be here fixin' to get your ass kicked by a couple of Russian thugs."

"Sorry about that, but Sonny is correct about the Russians and that's how I met Monique and subsequently introduced her to Sonny. It all started when...." And he continued telling Moby everything that had transpired up until now. "So, you

see, we're trying to figure out what our next step should be in identifying just who, exactly, is trying to kill me."

While they were talking, Doris delivered their lunches, and they all got quiet as they began to eat. Sonny's Grouper sliders were lightly breaded and looked like they were pan fried in a skillet instead of deep fried. There were two, each on small brioche buns, topped with an Asian slaw and garnished with a bamboo spear containing a spicy pickle chip and a jalapeno stuffed green olive. And of course, a large handful of crispy Duck Fat fries. Moby's chicken had perfect grill marks and were lightly seasoned with *Japanese Nanami Toga Rishi*, just enough to give it an extra flavor and spice boost. His cottage cheese was served in two mounds with nipples of black olives and sitting on leaf lettuce. His side salad consisted of baby arugula, baby spinach, bibb and romaine lettuce with sliced Roma tomatoes. Walden's Reuben was a masterpiece of thick sliced corned beef brisket, perfectly brined with a little kiss of extra garlic, righteously fermented kraut, baby Swiss and homemade dressing; all perfectly grilled on hand sliced Jewish rye. They ate in silence, enjoying the food. Moby was quietly thinking about Monique and how he planned to convince her that he really was going to finish law school and that she just needed to be a little more patient. Sonny was thinking about Monique as well but thought once again it was "*c'est la vie*" and Walden was dreaming about what Marissa may have meant when she gave his butt a rub and squeeze!

Moby finished his spartan meal and said, "If I may, I have a suggestion. Why don't you start back with the banquet, maybe talk to your admin's family, find out what the coroner said the real cause of her death was and then proceed. If you know what she died from, won't it give you a better understanding about who's trying to kill you? Just from my observations of those two Russian idiots today, I think if they wanted you dead, we wouldn't be here having this conversation, but I wouldn't rule them out completely."

Walden and Sonny just looked at each other and Walden's brief balloon of euphoria just popped.

Walden thanked Moby again and said to him, "We really haven't helped you out with your problems. Tell you what, do you have any plans this evening?" Moby said no, just more studying after his workout and then Walden suggested that Moby join them for dinner.

"My girlfriend will be with us, and she doesn't know Monique, so she will be objective and may be able to offer you some advice from a female angle, in fact I know she will. I know that sounds sexist today, but hey, I've never been one to be politically correct, so why not? You'll like Tessie, she's got a real good head on her shoulders."

“That doesn’t explain why she’s with you,” chimed in Sonny.

“Ignore him. Let’s trade contact information and I’ll let you know, where and what time.”

With that Moby left and Walden and Sonny started walking to where they left Walden’s Jaguar. Once again, neither one of them was paying any attention to their surroundings. In fact, they failed to notice Credence’s boyfriend, Delbert, cigarette dangling from his mouth, sitting in his tricked-out F-150 across the street.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“COME TOGETHER RIGHT NOW, OVER ME”

Later that evening, Walden, Sonny and Moby agreed to meet at a small Italian restaurant in a strip center on Sunset Drive that Moby had suggested. Tessie planned to join them as soon as she could get away from work. Walden and Sonny pulled up to the restaurant, parked the car and walked inside. They had both been a little skeptical as it was a Moby recommendation. However, to their surprise, Vince's Italian Kitchen, a 3rd generation, independent eatery had a brilliant, old school, Tuscan décor and the aromas wafting through the dining room were unbelievable and provoked one's palate. Walden was hungry and made no bones about it.

Sonny said to him, “How can you be hungry again. We had a big breakfast at that Cuban place, a rather large lunch with a couple of beers and now we're going to stuff ourselves on some Italian food. I'm sure you're not going to order just a small salad. Geez Walden, where do you put it all.”

“It's the stress. Whenever I get stressed, like I am right now, I eat. Why am I stressed you ask, because SOMEONE IS OUT TO KILL ME. God, I hope the food is good here.”

Moby was already seated at a four top, and he was having a friendly and somewhat animated discussion with someone who appeared to be the Chef, as she was dressed in a white jacket with the restaurant's logo and her name embroidered across the front. Walden and Sonny spotted the lady Moby was chatting up at the same time and there was a noticeable stutter step in both as they headed to the table. A gorgeous blonde with deep, dark, ice blue eyes, not a hint of makeup, and a shape no decent chef would boast about greeted them with a smile worthy of a Lloyd's of London insurance policy. Walden and Sonny stumbled through smitten riddled greetings that she was clearly used to receiving while Moby chuckled quietly. An open bottle of red wine sat on the table as well as a small plate of assorted olives, cheeses and figs, all beautifully arranged. A loaf of what appeared to be house made bread, butter and bowls of seasoned olive oil were also on the table. Chef Kirsten said “Because I've met some delightful new friends, I am going to sear some Hudson Valley Foie Gras for you. Our pastry chef just opened a jar of Lingonberry preserves he's been coveting for 9 months. I plan to use the preserves with a bit of Sauterne from France, reduce it with select fresh herbs grown hydroponically in our basement and I'll finish it with, you guessed it...A perfect Porto from Portugal. Buttered toast points will serve as the canvas. This *Amuse Bouche* is on the house of course. Sound okay?”

The server, Annalise, appeared and informed them of the fresh seafood available for the evening and made a couple of suggestions as to the preparation. As she walked towards the kitchen, she heard Moby tell Sonny and Walden that "Chef Kristen was a childhood friend." He then looked directly at Sonny and said, "More like a little sister." Sonny kept his mouth shut and just nodded.

Walden turned and looked towards the foyer of the restaurant just as Tessie walked in. He got out of his chair and hustled to her, gave her a big hug and a snuzzle on the neck and whispered in her ear, "Am I glad to see you." Tessie was very pleased by the show of affection, and said to him, "I'm glad to see you too, plus I'm starved and thirsty." Walden walked her over to the table, both Sonny and Moby stood up and Walden said to Tessie, "Tessie, I'd like you to meet Jerome Moses Feinberg or as he is fondly called, Moby."

"Just call me Tessie," she said and smiled. "I bet your mother was a big fan wasn't she, as she wouldn't have let your dad give you such a great name, am I right?"

"You're quick and yes you're correct."

"I still don't get it," said Sonny.

"I've already informed Tessie about our encounter today at the Pencil Pointe, so she's up to date as far as the Russians are concerned (he told her about running into Alvin Z as well, but wisely did not make any mention of Marissa).

"And I went ahead and told Tessie that you may want to ask her for some relationship advice, and although she hasn't met Monique, she does know a little about her," said Walden. "And Sonny and I will let you explain your situation, right Sonny?"

"Of course," replied a slightly sullen Sonny.

Moby poured wine for everyone and then related to Walden and Sonny that when he left the Pencil Pointe Bar, he decided to hang back to see if the two Russians were going to follow them again. Instead of the Russians, he observed an F-150 pickup pull away from the curb right behind Walden's Jag. Moby said that he thought he'd follow, just in case and sure enough, the F-150 followed them all the way to Walden's condo. The driver then parked down the street and sat for about an hour before it left. Walden picked up his wine glass, downed about half of it and said, "Fuck."

Sonny nodded his head and said, "Here we go again."

Moby showed Walden, Sonny and Tessie pictures of the truck from his phone as well as a photo of the driver. The driver's face was hard to make out because he had a ball cap pulled down low over his forehead, plus it was fuzzy as Moby explained he took the pics from a pretty good distance with his cell. "But I did get

one of the license plate and I've already sent it to a buddy of mine who said he'd run it for me, so we should know soon, who owns that truck."

"Thanks. How did you follow him and not get seen?"

"I drive a non-descript Toyota Minivan that I've had since undergrad. As big as I am, it's hard for me to get into a lot of cars, I'd have a hard time getting in and out of your Jaguar for example. But although my van is pretty worn, it's real comfortable and the AC still blows cold."

Tessie looked at Moby and said, "My first bit of relationship advice, as Walden likes to call it, is for you to find yourself a better ride. From the little I have heard about Monique, she's quite the woman, FBI agent and all. And unless the two of you are already hauling kids around to Soccer practice, I'm sure you can find something a little nicer to drive your lady around in. Now, let's order, I'm hungry and those figs aren't going to fill me up."

The server soon appeared with the complimentary *Amuse Bouche* and as they all dug in. The server quickly re-appeared and offered everyone a menu. They all agreed that the fresh seafood Chef Kristen mentioned sounded great, so they asked the server to tell Chef to prepare whatever she wanted to and the four of them would all share. Walden hesitated as he remembered what occurred when he shared a salad with Clara, but he went along with the group. *Can't happen again, right?*

Tessie asked some more questions about the rumors going around the office of the *Herald* and she wanted to know more about Walden's run-in with Alvin Z, (suspecting that Walden was leaving out something). And she also asked if he was sure that it was two of the same Russians that they saw at the night club. Once she was satisfied with his answers, she thanked Moby for saving Walden from being thrashed by the two thugs. Sonny began to say, "Well I was right there", but Tessie cut him off, smiled and said, "And thank you too Mudbone, I'm sure you were going to step in and help out if needed."

Dinner was served, they all started tasting, plates were passed around and the conversation quickly changed to "ooh's and aah's" about the food.

Tessie said, "As wonderful as this food is, we now need to decide what our next steps are in finding out who's trying to kill Walden."

"Can we order dessert first?" asked Sonny.

Tessie gave Sonny a big smile and said, "Of course honey, but make it quick as we're burning daylight. I suggest we start again with the banquet," she continued. "You got some more information today about Alvin Z, so we begin by putting all of that together. Maybe we even make a big wall chart with all the characters and clues, you know, like the detectives do in a movie. Walden, we can

move a few things around in your condo and use the wall where you currently have what you call art on it. The chart will be a big improvement, maybe we should just leave it up when we're finished."

"I thought you liked my art. I've got Mardi Gras posters, some semi-rare Grateful Dead concert tickets, a talking Bass fish, a rabbit foot necklace, Tie-Dyed undies, and all kinda good shit on that wall. What's your problem?"

"Darlin', we'll talk about it later, right now let's concentrate on finding the culprit. Clara's daughter, what's her name, Credence? What was Clara a CCR groupie or something? Anyway, do you have her phone number?"

"Yup, it's right here in my phone", said Walden. "And CCR spelled it with two 'E's, Clara spelled it with just one."

"Ok sweetie, whatever. Just call her right now and ask her if she can meet us tonight. Maybe a bar or someplace comfortable for her, where we can talk. I know, ask her if she knows The Corner Tavern over off Atlantic Ave. I'm pretty sure they don't have music tonight, so it should be quiet inside. And tell her she should come alone. Don't let her bring that creepy boyfriend of hers that we met at the funeral. Friggin' Looser". Tessie looked at Walden who was apparently lost in thought and said to him, "Walden, call her or give me your phone and I will. Sonny, order your dessert and then ask for the bill and give it to Walden, he can buy."

Sonny ordered a three-cheese finish with Taleggio, Warmed Montrachet, and a Triple Crème Camembert first and followed it with the Saffron and Toasted Caramel Crème Brûlée. Just as he was putting the menu down, he saw Tessie give him a glaring look that could have melted an iceberg. He quickly said to Annalise the server, "Better make that a Spumoni with extra spoons, it appears we have some place to be." Tessie gave him a big smile and Walden said to him, "Smart move."

Credence agreed to meet at the Corner Tavern in an hour. Walden paid the bill and Tessie said to the group, "Moby, let's you and I ride together in your "college limo" as I Uber'd here and we can talk about your relationship with your fiancée on the way. Walden, we'll see you and Sonny there. And Walden, when you get there, wait for Credence at the bar. Sonny, you get us quiet table and Moby and I will join you. Once she's there, order her a drink and then tell her that I'm here along with these two and that we're all friends etc. Don't let on that we're going to be asking her a lot of questions. We don't want to intimidate her."

Once they reached their respective cars, Sonny looked at Walden and said, "Is she always so, I don't know, demanding or maybe, so take charge?"

"Oh yes she is, yes she is," said a smiling Walden.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I SEE THE BAD MOON A-RISIN'"

Walden and Sonny arrived at the Corner Tavern. It really was on the corner, but of a strip center. The center was a block long with another strip center across the street. The street was divided by a median, landscaped with small Palm trees and native grasses. There was a small bakery next door, "Hot Buns and Such", a CBD/Health store, "Natural Elements", next to that, another Bar by the name of "Doc's Oysters and Steamers" a "Texas Tacos" food truck in the parking lot and two vacant spaces with "something new coming soon" signs at the other end. When they walked into the foyer, Sonny noticed a white board listing the nightly live music for the week. He commented to Walden, "Open mic night is Wednesday's, do you ever come here to listen?"

"All the time. In fact, I was going to suggest that you come here and play. Tessie and I will invite some friends, and we can all hang out and have a good time."

"Do you really think Tessie is going to let us do that while someone is out to kill you? Jesus, I can't believe she even let us drive here by ourselves."

"You're probably right, but as soon as we get this all figured out and the bad guys are locked up, we can all celebrate here. It's a fun place, especially on open mic night, you never know what or whom you might see on stage. Hell, one night I saw two hot Indian girls in full on Belly Dancing regalia doing an erotic "Aztec Two Step" while an old white dude was switching between a Sitar, Conga Drums, and an Accordion. The instruments were all cleverly perched on a makeshift rack so he could shuffle between them easily. I pitched the girls, but they weren't having it. I think they were a couple, which explained the sexy dance moves."

Walden made his way to the horseshoe-shaped bar, surrounded by retro-looking bar stools. He found a spot with a couple of empty stools and sat, tipping the other stool towards the bar to indicate it was taken. Sonny headed towards the back of the room, where a separate room was designated for the talent.

Essentially, a good sized, communal "Green Room" for those who signed up for open mic night. Some of the staff recognized Mudbone, when he grabbed an unoccupied table, faced towards the door and sat. Within a minute or two, Tessie and Moby walked in, talking and laughing. They went right past Walden without looking at him and continued to the back to join Sonny.

Credence had agreed to meet at 9:30, but at 9:45, she had yet to arrive. Walden finished a Tequila, 7 Up and Lime, and was about to order another, but decided that he should switch to beer as the Tequila and 7 was going down like Kool Aid on a hot day and he wanted to stay coherent throughout the evening. Chelsea, the owner was tending bar, and she asked Walden why Tessie walked past him

with that famous wrestler and who was the cute, good-looking guy they joined at the table?

Walden just said to her, "We'll tell you later, it's a lot to get into right now, no offense."

"Okay, mister mysterious," said Chelsea.

Chelsea was a pleasant and gorgeous British girl from Birmingham, England. She was quite a charmer and mesmerized everyone with her incredible, and somewhat provocative dance moves when she chose to share them on the dance floor. This occurred sporadically and usually after some distinguished patrons may have bought her a few drinks.

Walden ordered a Stella from the tap and began to sip. He continued to sip for another 20 minutes and was just getting up to use the bathroom, when Credence walked in. She looked around, almost like she was lost. He spotted her and waved her over to the bar. When she reached him, he gave her a quick hug and said to her, "Please sit, it's great to see you. What can I get you to drink; you are old enough aren't you?"

"Walden, I'm 22 now. So yes, I'm old enough to drink. I'll have a Maker's on the rocks with a Dr. Pepper back, please."

"22, that can't be."

Stepping back, Walden studied young Credence. *Fetching, in a typical college girl way*, he thought to himself. She was dressed in white overall shorts with a pale blue tank top underneath. A navy and white bandana held her now longish pigtails back and she wore just a little too much makeup.

"Hell, it was only a couple of years ago you graduated high school. I remember attending your graduation party, or at least I think I did. Oh, well. Again, I'm so sorry about your mom, you know how much I really cared about her and about you and I know that everyone tells you that if you need anything to call, but I really mean it, I'm here for you. You have my number, don't hesitate and don't worry about the time, I'm always up late and I will always answer my phone when it's you. Ok? Now let's get that drink and there's a couple of my friends here that I want you to meet. And no, they're not cops or reporters; oh, Tessie is a reporter as you know, but you've already met her, so that doesn't count, oh never mind my inane chatter. 22, Jesus I'm getting old."

"Age is just a number, that's what mom would say whenever someone said that about getting old. Or, she would say, I'm just getting older, I'm not getting old," whispered a tearful Credence.

"Yeah, it's mandatory to get older, but optional to grow up, I always say," Walden replied exuding a brief chuckle.

Walden and Credence got up, grabbed their drinks, and went to meet the others. As soon as they got to the table, Walden ran off to the john as he was about to pee his pants.

Tessie got up, walked around the table and greeted Credence with a big hug, pulled back, looked her in the eyes and said, "It's good to see you again, I hope you remember me, I'm Tessie, Walden's friend. Why don't we go to the ladies' room and freshen up a little, looks like you've been crying. Do you want to take your drink with you, I think I'll grab mine?" And the two of them headed to the restroom, arm in arm, drinks in hand.

In the bathroom, Tessie stood by the sink as Credence splashed some cold water on her face and dabbed it off with a paper hand towel. Tessie looked at her and said, "Who hit you?"

"What?"

"The bruise on your right cheek, the makeup can't cover it all up, who hit you?"

"Oh that, I had a little too much to drink last night and ran into the door frame, clumsy me."

Tessie looked Credence squarely in the eyes and said, "I don't believe you. Who hit you? Was it that guy we met at your mom's funeral, the one that said he was your boyfriend? What is his name, starts with a D doesn't it? It will come to me. I remember people and names; that's part of what makes me very good at my job. And I also ask questions that sometimes make people uncomfortable. But the questions usually need to be asked, and they also need to be answered so we can get to the truth."

Credence just looked at Tessie and then said, "Delbert, his name is Delbert. And yes, he hit me, said I was no good and that I didn't really care for him. He'd been drinking and doing some other stuff. I don't know. He's been in a real funk these past few days, always wanting to argue and just not happy. Quit his job, said they weren't respecting him or his talents. He worked in a paint and body shop, but I think he was just doing the grunt work. He started drinking more and not just at night. I just don't know. He almost got thrown in jail the other day. He got into a fight with someone at a bar, during the day mind you. Said the guy was dissin' his truck or something stupid like that. So, he hit the guy with a pool cue. The Police came, but the guy had left, and the bartender said it was all a misunderstanding, so they let him go with just a warning. I don't know what to do, I mean I think I love him, but then again maybe he's right, I really don't care for him. Shit, I'm a real fuckin' mess, aren't I?"

Tessie pulled her over, gave her another big hug and said, "You'll get through this. Walden and I will make sure that you're ok. But you've got to help us do that by looking out for yourself. First, don't let anyone ever hit you, it doesn't matter if they've been drinking or whatever else, don't let that happen. Never again. Don't put yourself in that position, no one has the right to abuse you. No one. Secondly, call one of us if you need anything or if you just want to talk to someone. My phone is on 24/7 as well as Walden's. Don't hesitate, just call, ok? Now let's go out to the table and you'll get to meet a couple of cool guys that are our friends. You may even recognize one of them, he's hard to miss."

Tessie and Credence joined the others at the table. Sonny and Moby introduced themselves to Credence and she told Moby, "I've heard about you, but no disrespect, I've never been a Wrestling fan. However, I have a girlfriend that has been trying to get me to go to one of the shows."

"Meet" said a smiling and cheerful, Moby. "We call them meets, not shows."

"Okay, meets. Anyway, wait until I tell her who I met, she will be so jealous!"

"How about I get you a couple of front row tickets and backstage passes for our show, I mean meet, the next time we're here in Miami?"

"That would be fantastic," said Credence, now smiling. She turned and looked at Sonny and said, "And what do you do?"

"I perform as well, but in a much more gentile and artistic environment. I'm a musician."

"You call some of those bars and clubs you used to play in, gentile and artistic?" a jovial Walden retorted. "I remember one time some dude tried to hit you over the head with a beer bottle because you were singing that dirty song you wrote about loose women, and he thought you were talking about his wife. Only because you were, as she had just broken off the affair you two were having behind his back."

"That was in the past. I play in more sophisticated establishments now. And it wasn't an affair, I didn't know she was married, well maybe, but we only hooked up a couple of times. And to be a proper affair, it must last at least a month or two."

"Ok boys, enough. Credence has been through a lot lately and we're here to help her, not to hear your tales of conquests," said Tessie. "Credence, we know that this may be difficult, but as I told you earlier, and I speak for all of us, we want to help you and to do so, we need to ask some sensitive questions. Okay? What can you tell us about your mother's death. Has the Medical Examiner or the Police talked to you about what may have happened? Have they led you to believe they know who did this or why?"

"I can talk about it. I'll be fine. I need to get through this, so that I can move on. Yes, I've talked to the Police, and I've called the Coroner's office. But the Coroner's office just says that the Police are in charge, and I must talk to them. Well, so far, the Police have not informed me of anything even though I've asked. Instead, they're the ones who ask all the questions. They've asked about my relationship with her, did we argue a lot, when was the last time I saw her, am I in any kind of financial trouble, do I know if she had any enemies, had she pissed someone off lately, Stupid questions like that. They almost act like I may be a suspect!"

"Who's the detective you spoke to," asked Walden.

"His name is, wait I've got his card here in my bag. It's Theo Sogas."

"Don't know him," replied Walden. He then looked at Tessie and Moby and said, "Do either of you know this guy?"

Tessie shook her head, no but Moby said, "I've heard the name, I'll do a little checking."

A server stopped by the table and asked if anyone needed another drink.

Credence, Tessie and Sonny ordered cocktails, Walden ordered another Stella and Moby ordered a Perrier, which seems to confuse the server and she said to Moby, "I'll have to ask the bartender if she knows how to fix one of those, I've never heard of it, but I'm sure she has."

"Never mind," said a laughing Moby, "I'll just have a Diet Coke."

Tessie said to the group, "Credence has been having a little trouble with her boyfriend too. I won't go into any detail, but we need to be aware in case she needs us to help. Anything else about that situation that you want to share now Credence, while you have us together?"

Credence replied, "No, not that I can think of. Delbert's just being a real dick about stuff since mom passed. He and his sister are always asking me, "what did the Police say, what about the autopsy report. Have they told you they have a suspect?" Things like that. I just want them to back off, leave me alone right now, until I figure all of this out. And I can't thank you guys enough for your support. I promise, I'll reach out to you immediately if something happens or if I just need to talk. Sonny and Moby, can we swap contact information too?"

"Of course," they both replied and the three of them pulled out their phones and began the exchange.

"Who is Delbert's sister and why is she asking you questions?" asked a curious Walden.

"Oh, they're real close, he goes over to her apartment all the time. They sit around and drink, smoke a bunch of weed and do other stuff too. Her little prick of a boyfriend, Stevie, is always there, I think they live together, and I can't stand him. He's cute and all, but a real creep. I don't like the way he looks at me. I always feel like I need a shower after I leave there. I quit going over there with Delbert once they started with all the questions and stuff. It's funny you know, she works at the same hotel where mom died."

"What does she do at the hotel?"

"I think she works in the kitchen, maybe a Chef or something like that. I'm not sure. She's always complaining about this or that and it seems like most of the stuff is about food or customers. I don't know. I usually just tune her out. Can I get a little something to eat, I missed dinner?"

They ordered her a platter of Nachos with extra Jalapenos when the server brought the other round of drinks. They turned the talk away from Credence and Clara, as they did not want to overwhelm her with too much now. Once she felt more comfortable with them, then they could probe more, but not tonight. Moby talked about his upcoming meet, Walden gave them some insight about his new book, Tessie mentioned rumors at the TV station and Sonny told them about his new tour.

After one more round of cocktails and Diet Coke, Tessie said to the group, "I hate to break up a good party, but I have an early day tomorrow."

"As do I," said Moby.

"Yeah, we should be going as well," replied Walden while nodding at Sonny.

"Walden, why don't you and Moby take Credence home, it's probably best that she does not drive tonight, and I'll take Sonny and your car back to the condo."

"I'm okay", said Credence. "Besides, what about my car, I drove mom's sports car? I can't just leave it here."

"We know the owner pretty well", said Tessie. "I saw her earlier and I'll ask her to lock it up in the fenced off area she has in the back. That's where she lets us park overnight when we need to. It'll be safe and one of us can either drive you over here tomorrow or we can bring the car to you. We'll work it out in the morning."

Credence and Tessie gave each other a big hug and Credence started to shake Sonny's hand, but he gave her a big hug as well.

As Credence, Walden and Moby climbed into Moby's van, Credence looked at Moby and said, "I thought professional wrestlers made a lot of money?"

"Not you too," said Moby.

Credence gave directions and soon they pulled into her apartment complex and as they got to her building, Moby saw the same tricked out F-150 that he saw earlier in the day that had been following Walden.

“Do you know whose truck that is?” Moby asked Credence.

“Yeah, that’s Delbert’s, my so- called boyfriend. But he’s not here. He said he was staying at his sister’s tonight and leaving his truck here as they were picking him up. Which is fine with me. I’m about to tell him to move out anyway.”

Moby and Walden exchanged a look and then Moby said, “Maybe we should escort you to the door just to make sure everything is ok?”

“No, I’ll be fine, really. Look I can track him on my phone.” She pulled out her iPhone and clicked on Find My Phone and held it up for Walden and Moby to view. “Yep, he’s over there, see, that’s her address.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“THEY CALL ME MELLOW YELLOW (QUITE RIGHTLY)”

Moby and Walden entered Walden's condo. Tessie was on the sofa, shoes off, typing on her laptop. Sonny had pulled up a dining room chair and was picking out a tune on one of his guitars. They both stopped what they were doing and Tessie asked, “Well, is Credence okay? Did she say much on the drive to her place?”

“We didn't ask any more questions,” said Walden. “Just made some small talk. She was working her phone the whole time. But, when we pulled up to her apartment, Moby, why don't you tell them about it while I make myself a drink. Anyone need anything?”

“I'll have another glass of wine; I opened a bottle of Pinot and it's in the Wine Cooler.”

“I just chewed a Gummy, but do you have any Perrier my good man?” asked Sonny.

“As a matter of fact, I do”, said Walden with a slight English accent. “Would you like one as well Jerome? And can I get you a lime with that?”

Moby told Tessie and Sonny about seeing the truck and finding out that it belonged to Delbert and what Credence said about him not being there tonight.

Tessie then told them about her conversation with Credence in the bathroom at the bar. Walden and Moby looked at each other and then Moby said, “We shouldn't have left her there alone. What if he comes back and attacks her again?”

“Sorry, I didn't feel I could tell you about her getting punched by that lousy SOB while were at the bar. I was afraid she would have clammed up and not trusted us. I guess I should have taken that chance. What should we do now? I feel so bad”.

“Let's all just remain calm and chill for a moment”, said a now very mellow Sonny as he held up his hand, palm facing out.

“I think she felt comfortable talking with us. Why, she even made some off-hand remarks and laughed a little. That's always a good sign that someone has accepted you, don't you agree? She had a good vibe. And if it will make us all feel better, why don't we give her a call. Tessie, maybe you should be the one that calls her, and tell her you're just making sure she's ok. Ask her if she has a chain for the door. Maybe stick a chair up against the door under the handle too so that no one can get in and that she should call one of us, even if she just hears anything that doesn't sound right, and we'll be there as fast as possible.”

Walden, Tessie and Moby looked at Sonny in slight amazement.

“What?”

“It’s just that you’ve been so quiet about this until now. Maybe you should get a shirt made that says, *“I offer sage advice for a Gummy”* or *“Gummies make me say wise things”*, or *“Gummies go in, wisdom comes out”* or *“Gummies not only make me hungry, but they make me wiser”*.”

“Are you finished? Maybe we should all have one and we can solve all the problems that plague mankind. Just think of the possibilities if everyone was less aggressive. Why, I...”

Walden cut him off by saying, “Mudbone, that’s the same line of BS that you spewed when we were in school and you were trying to get lucky with some co-ed,” said a laughing Walden. Sonny just grinned and nodded his head and gave Walden the peace sign.

Tessie made the call to Credence and related everyone’s concern for her safety. Credence agreed to secure the door and promised to call if she needed anything.

The four of them, without extra Gummies, started to recap the conversation they had with Credence at the bar and began to discuss what they should do next. Walden, Tessie and Moby agreed they would reach out to their respective sources at the Police Department, specifically about the detective, Theo Sogas, and they would also try to find more information regarding the cause of Clara’s death.

Walden then asked, “So Moby, was Tessie able to give you some good advice about you and Monique?”

“Yeah, what did she tell you to do besides buy a new car?” chimed in Sonny.

“Guys,” said Tessie, “Moby and I had a good discussion. At least I think so, right Moby? And we should leave it at that. If he wants to confide in you later, so be it, but remember, he just met us today. Now, I’m tired and I really do have a busy day tomorrow so I’m going upstairs to bed. You guys figure out how you’re going to pick up Credence’s car tomorrow, ok?”

Tessie bundled up her laptop and shoes, walked to the door, looked at Walden and said, “Well are you coming?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“WHO’S THAT KNOCKING AT MY DOOR”

Tessie’s alarm went off, way too early for either her or Walden. They both stirred slightly, Walden kissed Tessie on the neck and ear and placed his hand on her stomach, caressing her lightly. Tessie rolled over to face him, gave his manhood and quick rub and whispered in his ear, “Last night was wonderful. Why is that when we’ve had a stressful day, the sex that night is so intense? Don’t answer that, just think about it all day today and maybe we can try to figure it out tonight. But right now, I’ve got to jump in the shower, sorry but alone, and get moving. Why don’t you make us some coffee and see what you can find for a quick breakfast. I know I need some re-fueling.”

As soon as Tessie left, Walden gathered his clothes and made his way down to his condo. Sonny must have been sleeping, as the door to the spare bedroom was closed and the condo was completely quiet.

Walden showered and dressed for the day in pressed black linen slacks, a white, Cuban Guayabera with blue trim, and white, moccasin style slip-ons. He made some more coffee, poured it into a Starbucks thermos and carried it, two cups, and his laptop to the balcony.

It was the beginning of another beautiful, but hot day in Miami. There were a few clouds in the distance, but those would disappear soon, leaving the sky a very picture postcard blue. *Such was life in paradise*, mused Walden.

Walden turned on his laptop and opened Word to a blank page. He began by typing a heading, “WHO’S TRYING TO KILL ME”. Underneath, he started a list with bullet points:

- The Russians

- The Mendocino Cartel

- Alvin Z

- Joseph Buckley (Regina’s husband or maybe ex-husband by now)

- Other former lover’s husbands/boyfriends?

- Tommy Salvatore (still in prison?)

He sipped his coffee and wondered aloud, “who else?”

“Who else, what?” said Sonny as he suddenly appeared on the balcony.

“Oh, just starting a list of enemies. And how are you this fine morning, Mr. Sunshine? Would you like some coffee?”

“No thanks, but do you have the fixin’s for a nice, spicy, dirty Bloody Mary?”

"Of course, MUDBONE, let me prepare this cocktail for you, complete with chilled, steamed, shrimp, pickled okra, garlic stuffed queen olives, served with a bacon straw. My specialty. And why, may I ask, are you choosing to imbibe so early?" said Walden, in the most professorial voice he could muster.

"Well, you won't believe this Walden but guess what?"

"What?"

"I was reading the 'Quarterly Blues Review' magazine on the toilet this morning, and I saw an interesting piece on Cosmo Clifton, remember him? My former agent?"

"Yeah, sure I do. That's that crazy, lunatic of a tour manager/agent/publicist/talent coach, etc. that dragged you around the states in that decrepit old Greyhound bus with some kind of bullshit marketing stuff on the side of it, right?"

"Yup, that's him" replied Sonny. "He's signed a new band called 'The All-Natural Blues Trio'. Apparently, it's these three, semi-hot chicks who perform in thongs and bra tops. Bass, Guitar, and Drums. Likely they suck as musicians but may fill venues due to the unique nature of their show. You know, I need to give old Cosmo a call to congratulate him on his great recruitment skills! You know, we didn't part on such great terms when I signed in for the new tour."

"Yeah, good idea", said Walden., "Here's your spectacular, award-winning, Bloody Mary."

"Award-winning", spat Sonny, with exaggerated belches and choking. "And just who grants this award?"

"The SABC, of course!"

"HUH?"

"The self-appointed bartender's council, who did you think?"

They both burst out in hysterical laughter.

When Sonny got control of himself, he cradled the chilled beer mug Walden used for his "award winning" cocktail, almost fondling it, staring at its towering spear of pickled vegetables, shrimp, and the crisp, bacon straw as if he were falling in love. Took a long, lingering sip, sat back and gave an approving sigh, and said, "That, my friend, is perfection! Oh, and you'll need to go the store today; we're almost out of cream." Sonny sat in the vacant chair, took another sip of his carefully crafted Bloody Mary and said to Walden, "I thought we were supposed to dig into Credence's mom's death and then figure out who the suspects are? At least that's the directions I heard from Miss Tessie."

"You're right, of course. In fact, I'll call my detective friend right now and see if she can meet us for lunch. If you think that's what we should do, or should I first call Tessie and get her permission?"

"Asshole. I'm going to shower and get dressed. Looks like I slept past breakfast, so I'll just have to wait for lunch. Oh, we need Ice Cream too."

Walden called Samantha Hart, and she agreed to meet him for an early lunch. They chose a small café not far from Walden's condo that was also convenient for her as she was working a case near there.

Walden and Sonny arrived at "Pho U" a little early to secure a table. Pho U, a reputable, high-end Vietnamese Restaurant was in the exquisite "Palomar" shopping plaza. Well-appointed with fine art pieces. The authentic cuisine and talented Chef/Owner Thalia had garnered many national and global awards including Zagat, Dirona, James Beard, and recently picked up their first Michelin Star. Thalia Nguyen, a very attractive lady in her early 30's and was a surprisingly gregarious and charming hostess. Tall and lithe with a swimmer's body accentuated by the beautiful and clingy, tailored, Vietnamese dresses she often wore. Her mother came from a very well-known Vietnamese family in fashion design. Her father was a power forward for the Boston Celtics, retired, and now doing commentary for the Miami Heat. Thalia warmly greeted Walden as he and Sonny walked in and asked, "Who's your friend? I don't believe he's been here before. I would have remembered," as she gave Sonny a big smile. Before Walden could say anything, Sonny held out his hand and said to Thalia, "Sonny Humphries, and it's certainly a pleasure to make your acquaintance," with a quick gentlemen's courtesy, and a very European kiss on the hand. "And your name is?"

She replied, "Thalia Nguyen. My friends call me Tali, that's with an 'I,' and I would be pleased if you would do the same. My sister, Rebecca, and I are the owners of this little café."

"You can call him MUDBONE," Walden blurted.

Ignoring Walden's caustic attempt at humor, Tali continued. "As I was saying before your sometimes obnoxious and disrespectful friend interrupted me, our grandparents on our mother's side came from Vietnam, and we proudly honor them by preparing our food the way they taught us when we were children. We of course put our own twists on things."

"I've been after Walden for weeks now to take me to a great Vietnamese restaurant, but he's always had one excuse, or another. But it appears to me the wait has been worth it. I'm anxious to try the food as well."

"Well, well Mr. Humphries I look forward to your comments on the food and I'll be most curious to hear if you still feel the wait was worth it" replied a slightly blushing Thalia.

"Oh, Tali, please call me Sonny. Mr. Humphries is just too formal."

"Sorry to interrupt the two of you and just so you know Sonny, Tali is a dear friend of Tessie and me and yes, she's single. And Tali, Sonny is a dear friend of mine and now Tessie as well, and yes, he's single too. So, the two of you can exchange phone numbers, email addresses or whatever. But we are here on an important matter and Sam should be here any minute. Tali, we have Detective Samantha Hart joining us and we need a little privacy, so could you put us at one of those tables back over there please?"

"Certainly, Mr. 'I'm important'. I apologize for wasting your precious time by conversing with your friend Sonny. Right this way please and as soon as Detective Hart arrives, I'll send her over. Is this table ok, would you like me to put a screen around it, so that no one can see you talking to the police? I'm sure we have an appropriate screen in the back and if I'm not mistaken it has some kind of water birds and flowers on it. But, if she's going to arrest you, will you please ask her to do it quietly so your wails of despair will not disturb my other guests?" said a mocking Tali as she gave Sonny a wink.

"Tali, I apologize, there's lots going on with me right now. I'll explain it all to you later. I'm sorry for being such a.."

"Ass, is that the word you're looking for?" said Tali.

Walden and Sonny sat at the table as Tali made her way to the kitchen.

"Wow, she is something else, don't you think."

Just at that moment Walden's phone beeped telling him he had a text message from Samantha Hart. He read it silently and then said to Sonny, "Detective Hart is not going to join us. She said that something had come up at work and she must be somewhere, right now. That's all she said, no details, nothing! Dammit. I was really hoping she could shed some light on Clara's murder."

"Can we still have lunch?" asked Sonny. "Remember I missed breakfast, and I really want to try some of the food here. And could we not be in a hurry, I might like to converse with one of the owners about the preparation of the various items. You never know, I may learn a thing or two."

"Yeah. The Beef Pho with Fatty Brisket is one of my favorites and the Sugar Cane Shrimp is one of Tessie's. I'm sure Tali will bring you a sampler platter of some kind, she seems to have been quite taken by you. However, I'm certain that will change once she spends a little time with you, like maybe all of 5 minutes."

Walden's phone began to ring, Tessie's name and picture appeared on the screen, and he said, "Hey lover, and how are you? Did you call just to tell me how much you..."

"Walden, just hush for a minute, I don't have much time," said Tessie. "I just got a tip from a very reliable source that the FBI and the Miami PD are getting ready to raid a certain Russian owned Night Club and I'm headed there now with a cameraman. Turn on the TV to our station and if it's big, you'll get to see it live. Don't tell anyone, as I was told we have the exclusive on this. Love you and we'll talk soon. Gotta go". She hung up before he could say anything else.

"Great news Sonny," said an excited Walden. "That was Tessie, and it looks like our Russian friends are going to get busted. Let's go, I really don't want to miss this."

Tali suddenly appeared with a server tray that had three waters, garnished with thinly sliced cucumber and basil, a pot of tea, three teacups, a platter that contained fried spring rolls, fresh Vietnamese summer rolls, grilled, sticky chicken wings, lemon grass shrimp skewers, Nuoc Cham and peanut dipping sauces. "You don't want to miss what?" said Tali to Walden.

"Sorry Tali, but we have to go, something big is happening and I can't miss it, plus Detective Hart cancelled on us anyway."

"Wow, 'you can't miss it'. I take it's another 'life and death matter or 'you've got to go interview a celebrity that's only here for a brief minute'. You're always running off somewhere more important. I don't know how Tessie puts up with you. I know I wouldn't. But what about Sonny," said Tali as she looked over at Sonny and smiled. "Is it something he can miss?"

"Yeah Pond. You go ahead and then you can tell me all about it later. Look at this beautiful food that Tali and her sister prepared for us. I really hate to see it go to waste and besides, Tali wants my opinion as to the delectability of her efforts. Plus, I'm wanting to know some of the finer points of Vietnamese cuisine, so I'm certain, Tali and maybe her sister will join me in sampling these items so they can explain in detail the nuances and history of each item."

Walden hurried to his car, put the name of the night club into Apple CarPlay and the directions quickly appeared. It was lunch time in Miami and as a result, traffic was heavy, and the arrival time showed 40 minutes. "Shit, shit, shit", mumbled Walden, "I hope I'm not going to be too late and miss out on the action. Wait, what am I thinking? I'm not covering this for the paper; I can't offer the FBI any help. I don't want to distract Tessie, as this may turn out to be a big story for her. Fuck, I'm just useless. Just a spectator now or maybe a victim."

Walden shut off the engine, climbed out of his car and slowly walked back to Pho U. The restaurant was beginning to fill up as the lunch crowd gathered. The outstanding food and the two owners made Pho U a very popular establishment, not only for lunch but for dinner as well. Seating was usually at a premium any time of the day or evening. The hostess greeted him and indicated that she'd be right back as she was seating a party of four. Walden saw Sonny sitting at the same table with Tali and they were in what appeared to be an enjoyable conversation, both smiling, laughing and gesturing with their hands. Walden turned around and headed back out the door.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“HAPPINESS IS A WARM GUN”

Walden decided to go back to his condo but stopped on the way at a Whataburger for an indulgent, feel sorry for myself, burger, fries and a chocolate shake. He chose to go through the drive-thru because he wanted to enjoy his delicious, greasy, bit of fast-food indulgence at home, as his last experience inside was less than stellar. He also was looking forward to sitting at his dining room table and watching Tessie's evening report. Before he sat down, he grabbed the remote for the TV and turned on *WFLX*, Tessie's station. A commercial for laundry detergent, and then, dancing, fruity characters cavorting around the bow of a ship advertising Hanes Underwear. Go figure? Followed by the AT&T girl in her tight blue shirt, played. He fetched a beer from the fridge, sat back down and began to eat his food. The burger was less than lukewarm, the fries were cold, and limp and the shake was runny. But the beer was good and at that point he didn't care so he scarfed down the carb laden fast food "meal", before the commercials were over. He immediately regretted his dining decision and asked himself why he didn't just drink a beer or two and find something to munch on from his fridge or pantry?

Tessie suddenly appeared on the TV, standing in front of Tsar's Delights, the Russian Night Club, microphone in hand and began her broadcast. "I'm standing in front of one of the new hot night clubs on the strip here in Miami Beach and it was just raided by the FBI and the Miami-Dade Police. Agents are escorting suspects out now."

The camera zoomed in on six scantily clad women and six disheveled men. All attempted to hide their faces from the camera. Behind them: Borya and Vladislav, deadpan in shades. When they reached Tessie and her cameraman, they both broke out in big smiles for the camera and Borya shouted, "We love you, Miami!" Tessie said into her microphone, "Let's see if we can get closer and find out what's going on." As she and her cameraman moved in, she saw Monique Adams, leading a manacled Sergei towards a Black Maria.

Tessie approached Monique, with her cameraman close behind and said to her, "Can you tell us what this raid is all about and who it is you have here in cuffs?" Monique quickly acknowledged Tessie with a nod of her head and said to her, "I can't give you any information right now, we must first get these people processed. A spokesperson will hold a press conference soon, with further details."

Sergei gave Tessie a snarly look, smiled, stuck out his tongue, licked his lips in a suggestive way towards her and laughed. Just as Sergei turned back around a man jumped in front of him, shouted at him in Russian, "*eto dlya Sasha, ty svin'*"

ya” (this is for Sasha, you pig), pulled a pistol from his waistband and shot Sergei three times in the chest and immediately dropped the gun and held his hands up in the air. Monique had already drawn her gun as Sergei collapsed to the ground. She pointed her pistol at the shooter and yelled, “Get down”. The man dropped to his knees sobbed and said, “She was my sister, the only family I had, we only had each other. That bastard promised us a better life. But instead, he turned her into a whore then he killed her.” The shooter then spit on the dead body of Sergei that lay in front of him and cursed more in Russian. Suddenly he had another pistol in his hand, put it under his chin, Monique yelled, “Don’t”, but he pulled the trigger and blew the top of his head off.

Complete chaos ensued. FBI agents, Policemen, all with guns out were yelling and screaming at each other. Orders to secure the area were being barked out by those who appeared to be in charge.

Tessie kept her composure, looked at her cameraman and whispered, “Roberto do you have it?” He just nodded yes and kept the camera on the scene. He took his eye away from the camera and pointed to Tessie’s shirt. Tessie looked down and saw blood stippled on the pale blue shirt. She knew it was not hers. Tessie calm and steady, pulled up her microphone, faced the camera and said, “We just witnessed a horrific event. As the last person was being led out on to the street and towards the Police Van, a man jumped in front of him, yelled something at him in what sounded like Russian, and then shot him. I believe it was three times before dropping the gun onto the pavement. Before the FBI could detain him, the man pulled out another gun and took his own life. We were right here as this happened, talking to an FBI agent and Roberto our cameraman, recorded the entire incident.”

The live video feed switched to the TV station and one of the newscasters said, “Tessie, are you alright, it appears you have blood on your shirt.”

“Yes, I’m fine Bill. I’m a little shaken by this, but I’m fine. Thanks for asking.” “We’re going to break away from Tessie right now”, said newscaster Bill,” and we’re going to replay for you the events as they occurred. We must warn you; this is real life and death, and this may not be appropriate for the younger audience. These images are very graphic and very disturbing. Please stay tuned to *WFLX* for more updates on this story and we will join the press conference live when it occurs. We’ll be right back live at the scene after this brief commercial break.”

Tessie and Roberto stayed at the scene, Roberto filming and while Tessie conducted interviews.

“Holy shit”, yelled a startled Walden. He resisted the temptation to call Tessie, knowing she wouldn’t answer so he and called Moby instead. Moby answered on the first ring and Walden said, “Hey Moby, it’s Walden.”

"I know. What's up?"

"Did you see what happened in front of the Russian night club, Tsar's Delights?"

"No, I was studying for one of my classes, why, what's going on?"

Walden told Moby what occurred and encouraged him to turn the TV to channel 29. The station had switched to the talking heads in the studio, and they were re-capping Tessie's video once again.

Moby stared at his TV with the phone still in his hand. "Oh my god, I hope Monique is ok. It looks from the video that she wasn't injured. Damn she was calm when she had her gun on that shooter. She's got to be going nuts right now, I mean she was leading the guy that was shot, she had him in cuffs, she was right next to him. She couldn't have anticipated that someone was going to take him out right then. I should try to call her, maybe I should go down there. Oh, man I don't know."

"Try to calm down. "I'm in the same situation. Neither one will answer their phones, and if we go down there, there's nothing we can do, and the cops will just keep us away. Plus, they both are going to be busy for a while and won't want us in the way."

"I know, man, but I need to be more supportive of Monique. That's one of the things Tessie and I talked about. Even if she can't talk to me, at least she'll know I'm there for her."

"Send me your address, I'll pick you up. I'm leaving right now," replied Walden.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"I JUST CALLED TO SAY I LOVE YOU"

Walden and Moby got as close as they could to the area in front of Tsar's Delights. Most of the area was cordoned off by yellow crime scene tape. The chaos resulted from enthusiastic paparazzi trying to get their exclusive breakthrough photographs. The problem was, they all shared the same conundrum. None of them knew what was actually going on, who the perpetrators were, what they had done and who they should photograph. Consequently, pushing and shoving ensued, each assuming someone else had the real scoop, ultimately to no avail. Given this debacle, no worthwhile photos were captured, editors were confused, and nothing went to print for the rag publications these paparazzi worked for.

Walden spotted the *WFLX* van, and he and Moby made their way over to it as it was not parked in a part of the roped off area. Tessie had just left the van, still wearing her blood splattered shirt as they walked up.

"Tessie," yelled Walden. She turned her head to him as he got closer, he was almost running.

"They're getting ready to start the press conference, I have to go."

"I know, I just wanted to see you, make sure that you're ok."

"Thank you, that's so sweet of you." She broke out into a big smile, came to him, looked him in the eyes and said, "I love you". She gave him a big hug and said, "I would kiss you, but I just put fresh lipstick on for the camera, but I will kiss you lots tonight," she winked and then turned and headed towards the podium area.

"Wow," said Walden to himself.

"What was that all about?" asked Moby. "Do you see Monique anywhere?"

A crowd, made up of personnel from other news stations, reporters from the *Herald*, a few tourists, several homeless people and other gawkers, had gathered in front of a makeshift podium that had been set up across the street from the night club.

Tessie was back in front of the camera, "We are live in front of Tsar's Delights, a very popular night club here in Miami. Earlier today it was raided by the FBI and the Miami- Dade Police. Several people were handcuffed and taken away and as that was taking place, a man stepped in front of one of the suspects and shot him three times before he took his own life. We are now waiting for an update. It looks like someone from both organizations is about to speak."

There were several law enforcement folks behind the podium, including Monique. A man in an FBI golf shirt, stepped up to the microphones and said,

“Good afternoon, my name is Carter Fritz, with the FBI and this is Captain Steve Wright, from the Miami-Dade Police Department. We will give you a brief update on the activities here today and we will answer a few questions afterwards. The FBI has been conducting an ongoing investigation into the criminal activities of certain individuals who have ties to the Russian Mob. Joint raids were also conducted today in New Orleans and Houston. Several persons of interest were arrested in those two cities as well. We are sorry to say, that our main suspect here in Miami, was gunned down and killed, by an individual who had a prior relationship with our suspect. The gunman also took his own life, before he could be apprehended. We believe the gunman acted alone. I want to commend the FBI agents involved today and those that have been a key part in this total operation and investigation. The investigation is still ongoing, so I’m not at liberty to discuss it at this time. I also want to personally thank the Miami-Dade Police Department on their cooperative assistance in today’s apprehensions.”

Reporters began to shout out questions regarding the events earlier today. Both the FBI spokesperson and the MDPD answered what they could but really didn’t say much. Most of the questions were about who Sergei was, why he was being arrested etc. Carter Fritz from the FBI repeated over and over that it was an ongoing investigation and he was not at liberty to say anymore. The briefing quickly ended as the agents and deputies exited the area.

Tessie was back in front of the camera and began by saying, “We really did not learn anything new from the FBI at this time. Agent Fritz repeatedly stated that the investigation is still active, and he would not give out any further details at this time. This all started last year, when an investigative reporter for the *Miami Herald* exposed a call girl service that was being operated out of some run-down apartments here in Miami. We have since learned that the Russian Mob was behind this and apparently there were similar operations in New Orleans and Houston; presumably run by the same Mob. The man that was shot and killed today, also ran the Tsar’s Delights night club and it appears that he was also running prostitution in the club and what else, we don’t know. We know his name was Sergei, but that is all we know so far. We will keep you informed as soon as we have more information. As the FBI said, this is an ongoing investigation.” With that, Tessie signed off. She walked to the station’s van, removed her microphone apparatus, said something to Roberto her cameraman and sought out Walden. She didn’t have to go far as he was standing about 20 feet away.

Moby was trailing the FBI group and as they began to break up. He was able to catch up to Monique and she was surprised to see him and gave him a quick kiss. He took her in his arms and just held her, whispered in her ear about how

worried he was and how he would be there for her as much as she might need him. She gave him another kiss and told him she must go with Agent Fritz to do another debrief but that she was looking forward to some quiet time with him later that evening.

Moby found Walden and Tessie and informed them that Monique appeared to be okay, but that he knew she was holding a lot in. He was certain that she was going to be held accountable for losing the suspect, Sergei. That's the FBI, someone is always accountable. He told Walden he was going to walk around for a while, probably wait on Monique and they should catch up tomorrow.

Tessie said she was not going back to the station tonight, she just wanted to go home, soak in the tub with Walden and a glass of wine.

"Sounds like a plan," said Walden.

"What about Sonny?" asked Tessie.

"He's not invited, besides, I haven't seen him since lunch, when you called to tell me about the bust. I left him at Pho U with Tali. It appeared that they had hit it off well. He's probably back at my condo by now and there's no reason for me to check on him. He's a big boy; he can fend for himself. Anyway, I need to help you unwind from such a tumultuous day. It may take more than just a glass of wine."

"Oh, do tell me what you have in mind, kind sir."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“JIM DANDY TO THE RESCUE”

Tessie had left for the station; Walden proceeded to gather his clothes and headed down to his condo.

He opened his door, and quietly went inside, not wanting to disturb Sonny, should he still be sleeping. The TV was on *WFLX*, the morning show was on. The kitchen was still in disarray from yesterday when he'd left suddenly, and there was a foul, putrid, odor assaulting his senses. It was coming from the empty Whataburger bags, he surmised. He vowed to not stoop to that level of gastronomy again.

The door to the spare bedroom was open and it appeared that the bed had not been slept in. Walden smiled and said to himself, “lucky bastard.”

Walden made coffee and then showered. He came out of the bathroom, singing the Beatles song, “*All You Need is Love*”. He cooked bacon, fried two eggs in the bacon grease and sat down at the table with his plate of food and a cup of coffee all the while humming different love songs from the 60's. He cleaned up after himself, found a scented candle in a jar and lit it, hoping it would masquerade the greasy food odors. Even though it was already getting hot outside, he slid the balcony door open to let some fresh air in.

Walden fired up his laptop, went through his email then pulled up the list he had started yesterday, “WHO'S TRYING TO KILL ME,” and put a strikethrough across ‘The Russians’.

He also changed the heading to “WHO IS OR WAS TRYING TO KILL ME.”

His phone began to ring, and he saw that it was Moby. “What's happening this fine morning my good man?” said a joyful Walden.

“Well, aren't we in a good mood this morning, let me guess, you won the lottery?”

“Close, close.”

“Yeah, I think I won the lottery too. I need to thank Tessie next time I see her. Her advice was spot on. Monique is going to be fine by the way, and thanks for asking. She said she had a long talk with her boss, Agent Fritz, and he doesn't blame her for the shooting. In fact, he's putting her in charge of the rest of the investigation. She has a flight tonight to Houston and then she's going back to New Orleans to follow up on everything there. But keep that between us. She isn't supposed to say anything to anyone about stuff like that and you know she likes to keep it between the lines when it comes to following the rules. So, do you think that someone is still after you, or do you think that it's over now with that Sergei dead and the others locked up?”

"I sure hope it's over, however, I still want to know why Clara died. I believe what you said about the Russians, they would have just kidnapped me or shot me and dropped me off in the ocean somewhere. So, I've got the feeling that something's still not right. I spent a lot of time investigating things, and I know as Yogi would say, *"it ain't over till it's over."*

"I did talk to my contact at Miami PD about that detective who talked to Credence, Theo Sogas, and didn't get much info. You know the cops, they don't like talking about their brethren, but she did say that this Theo is a real 'goes by the book' sort of guy and is trying to make a name for himself. What about you, did you find out anything from your source?"

"No, not yet", said Walden, not wanting to tell Moby that his source didn't show up. "Maybe we should all get together later tonight, when Tessie gets home. Are you available?"

"Yeah, I don't have any plans other than we have practice today, but we're usually finished around 7. Does that work?"

"Ok, why don't you come over here when you're done, no rush. Plus, I don't know what time Tessie will be home, and it won't do us any good to start without her."

Walden went back to his list of suspects and spent quite a bit of time reviewing all the events that had occurred since the fatal banquet. It was almost 10 am so he figured he should probably call Sonny just to check on him. He called, but no answer, so he left a sarcastic message.

Walden wanted to surprise Tessie when she got home, so he went to the ABC liquor store and bought a nice bottle of bubbly, plus a couple bottles of her favorite wine. He then stopped at the florist and bought a dozen red roses, in a vase with baby's breath and other greenery, as well as two bags of rose petals. Once he was back in his condo, he put the Champagne and wine in the fridge and took the roses up to her condo. He let himself in, placed the vase on her kitchen table, where she couldn't miss it and went to the front door then emptied the bags of rose petals and trailed them from the front door to the kitchen table and from the kitchen table to the bedroom where he lit two sexy aromatic candles. He then went back downstairs. He thought to himself, this sure would be a lot easier if we just moved in together and had only one place. But he doubted she would agree, and he couldn't believe he was even thinking about it. But maybe, just maybe it would work. He called Sonny again, still no answer and left another voicemail.

It was now 11 am and he decided to go back to Pho U as he missed out on lunch there yesterday. He'd sworn off fast food joints after his horrific "Quick Service" experience yesterday and was still trying to extricate the notion of the nasty funk emanating from the day-old Whataburger bag on his counter the next morning.

When he arrived at Pho U, he guessed that Tali wouldn't be there. She and Sonny were probably having some fun since he was not answering his phone. He walked in and was immediately greeted by Tali. She smiled, but he could tell that it was a forced smile, not her usual *'happy to see you'* one.

"I had to leave in a hurry yesterday, perhaps you saw it all on the news, what a complete cluster fuck. I didn't get to enjoy lunch with you and Sonny, so I thought I would come again and promise not to leave without eating this time."

"Ok, have a seat over there and I'll bring you some water and tea," and she promptly walked to the kitchen.

"Wow," said Walden to himself. "Looks like trouble in paradise."

Tali reappeared with the water and tea and asked if he was ready to order.

"Tali, what's up, why are you being so abrupt? Did I really piss you off that much yesterday? I know I was pre-occupied and probably rude, but still, we're good friends, what's bothering you?"

She glared at him for several seconds and then shook her head. "Your friend, Sonny. I thought we hit it off well. He was going to come back for dinner and then we were going to a place he had found to listen to some music. But he stood me up. I assume he sent you over here to apologize?"

"Whoa, whoa. What do you mean, he stood you up? He didn't show back up. Did he even call?"

"No!"

"That's not like him. I mean I haven't seen him in like 20 years, but he was never that way."

"I told you I haven't heard from him. He just didn't come back. Don't bring any more of your friends around trying to set me up. I don't need the aggravation."

"Well, he didn't come back to the condo last night, or if he did, he didn't stay, and I've called him a couple of times today and it's gone to voicemail both times. Something's not right."

"Should you go to the police?"

"No, not yet. It hasn't even been 24 hours, and unless it's a kid or an old person, they'll just say they can't do anything at this point."

The restaurant's phone began to jingle, and Tali went to answer it. "Pho U restaurant, how may I help you?"

"Tali, it's Sonny and I am so glad you answered. Please don't hang up, I'm in a bit of a situation and I promise to explain it all when I see you. I swear I had every

intention of coming back for dinner and then taking you to listen to some music. But something happened. I need to get in touch with Walden as soon as possible. My phone, well it's broken, and I'm using someone else's phone now and I don't remember phone numbers, so I figured if I called the restaurant, you would help."

"Maybe," said Tali. "But you better have a good reason that is verifiable, not something like *'I was abducted by Aliens'* or *'I was kidnapped by the mob and left to die'*. I have never been stood up before, maybe once in high school. I'm not a very forgiving individual when I've been disrespected. You want to speak to Walden, he's right here." Tali dropped the phone on the counter so that it made a loud thud, looked over at Walden and said, "It's for you."

Walden took the phone and said, "Hello, this is Walden."

Walden talked with Sonny, nodding his head on occasion, pulled out his phone, opened Maps and put in a name and got directions. He then said to Sonny, "According to Google, I should be there in about two and a half or maybe three hours."

Walden handed the phone back to Tali and said to her, "Well, I guess I'm going to have to come back another time for some Beef Pho. Damn, and I'm hungry too. I need to rescue Sonny. Want to come along?"

Tali just frowned and said, "I have a business to run and why would I want to drive six hours just to hear some lame brain excuse. I'll see you later. I'm going to go stand in the walk-in cooler for a while. Good-bye."

Walden got his car, turned on Apple CarPlay, and began to follow the directions out of town. He was headed to Immokalee, which was west towards the gulf. He spied a Whataburger and thought about it for a second and then he spotted a Popeye's and pulled in there instead. So much for not eating fast food again.

Two hours and forty-five minutes later, Walden pulled into the parking lot of the Seminole Casino Hotel and parked his Jaguar. As he walked in, he said to himself, "This better be good."

Walden strolled into what looked like Disneyland for adults. Two concierge desks were set up with comfortable couches and armchairs just across from the Casino. A long, carefully appointed cashiers' station where chips were purchased and cashed in. Rows of slot machines, all blinging with different sounds and lights. Scantly, but tastefully clad cocktail waitresses everywhere, offering libations to gamblers. Floor to ceiling beveled mirrors behind the Roulette and Craps tables. Poker and Blackjack tables were strategically set up in their own special area. Bars flanked the casino. Sonny was sitting in an armchair in the lobby drinking a Bloody Mary. His clothes were wrinkled, but other than that, he looked calm and

relaxed. He saw Walden got up from the chair and said, "Man am I glad to see you. Now, let's get out of here."

"Alright, tell me what happened."

Sonny began his tale: "So I stayed and had lunch with Tali. It was great, I met her sister Rebecca and everything. Tali and I really hit it off, she kept coming back to the table when she could. I lingered as long as I could, drank way too much tea. I told her I'd come back for dinner and then if she was up to it, we would go listen to some music when she could get away. All good right. I went outside and took out my phone to call an Uber, when this big Hispanic looking dude bumps into me and knocks my phone out of my hand. He said '*lo lamento*' and as I bent down to pick up my phone, he suddenly pushed me into the back seat of this black SUV thing. I think I tried to say something, and I remember feeling a slight pinch in my arm, and next thing I know I was waking up in the back seat of the SUV. I have no idea how long I was out. I looked around and found myself bewildered. The big guy was sitting next to me in the back seat, and he tapped the driver on the shoulder. The driver looked in the mirror and said something like 'glad you decided to wake up and join us Mudbone. I said, and who the hell are you, how'd you know my name and where are you taking me? He just smiled in the mirror and said his name was Juan, but he went by Johnny and that sitting next to me was Carlos. He said Carlos didn't talk much, but he was really good at what he does. We drove a while longer and finally Johnny pulled the car to the shoulder.

"We were on a two-lane highway, and it looked like we were in the middle of nowhere, which we were. Johnny put the car in park, turned around and started talking to me. He said he was sorry that they had to drug me; something about the new luxury cars are now SUV's and they don't have trunks like they'd relied on in the past. Then he laughed and said they couldn't have me waving at other cars and trying to escape. He said the reason he wanted to talk to me was Pinto. He's my ex-drummer, I'm sure you remember him. You seemed to think he was shooting at you in New Orleans and then that's how we met Monique.

Apparently, Pinto was Johnny's wife's, sister's, second husband's, first wife's, cousin's son. So that somehow made him a relative. He went on to say that Pinto had been missing for a little while and that his wife's sister was upset and complained to his wife. Then his wife complained to him, and when that happened, he had to do something about it just to keep peace in the family. Said it wasn't good to have his wife upset and said he was certain I knew that about women. He told me I was probably justified in firing Pinto. So, I explained to him about the band breaking up, with the new gig and all and he just nodded his head in agreement. He also said I was probably one of the last people to see Pinto. He wanted to know if I knew anything about Pinto's whereabouts and if

Pinto had said anything to me about what he was going to do next. I told him the truth, that we thought he was following us around New Orleans, but we hadn't talked to him, and we'd not seen him since we left New Orleans for Miami. He asked me more questions about when Pinto played for me. Did I think Pinto was any good. You know stuff like that. He seemed satisfied with my answers and then we started talking about my upcoming tour and about touring and music in general. He was inquisitive about life on the road. He asked a bunch of questions about big name acts and wanted to know about groupies. He was very friendly. He said he played a little guitar and really liked Johnny Cash and maybe someday he'd get a Taylor too. I asked him how he knew I played a Taylor. He just smiled and said, "It's my business to know things". Then he said if I was to remember anything about Pinto to let him know, no need to try to find him, he would find me. And then he handed me my phone and said that Carlos accidentally cracked the screen. He told me that I should probably get it fixed if I wanted to see anything on it and that it was out of power too. He looked at me real-serious-like and said to keep all of this to myself. Not tell anyone. He knew where I lived right now and that it was better to have a broken screen than broken fingers. He said it would be kind of hard to pick my Taylor with broken fingers. Then he smiled and winked. He thanked me for the conversation and said we should play guitar together sometime soon. Maybe I could give him some pointers before I left on tour."

Sonny continued. "Johnny pushed the unlock on the doors, nodded at Carlos and said they couldn't take me back to Miami as they were headed to Naples to take care of some nasty business. That's what he said, nasty business. I asked him where we were, and he said somewhere in the Everglades on highway 833. He said I would probably need to hitch a ride as it was a pretty long walk back to Miami. He told me to be careful; I should stay on the road and not go off onto the shoulder as *'you never knew what could be lying around in the brush.'* He shook my hand, I got out of the car, and they sped off."

"So, there I was, in the middle of the fuckin' Everglades. It was getting dark. My phone didn't work and I'm just standing in the middle of the road takin' a piss because I drank so much goddamn tea."

"So, how did you get to the Casino?"

"Well, what was I supposed to do, I started walking down that damn highway. I must have walked for an hour or more and I didn't see a soul. No cars, trucks, nothing. Finally, I saw some headlights, and I moved out of the center to the side of the road. The car approached, I waved, but it kept on going. This must have happened three or four more times, no one would stop. A car finally stopped, it was a couple of nice looking Native American girls, Seminoles I believe, maybe in

their mid-20's. They asked me where I was going, I told them Miami. They started giggling and laughing; obviously they were high, and they said I was walking in the wrong direction. So, I asked them where they were going, they said they were headed to the Casino. I said that worked for me, and they let me in the back seat. We probably drove for close to an hour, talked the whole time about different things. I told them I was a musician, and it seemed that they were impressed. We passed a joint around, which of course I couldn't refuse especially after the day I had. So, we pulled into the Casino- Hotel and it was about 10 o'clock. They parked the car, and we went inside. I said to them I was starving and I needed a shower. They looked at me, giggled some more, and asked me if I thought they had room service there in the hotel. I looked at them and said, "Well let's find out" and the next thing you know, the three of us were in the shower together and then we were chowing down on burgers, fries and cold beer from room service. I won't go into detail about what we did next, let's just say we didn't make it down to the Casino floor. I woke up about 10 this morning. The girls were still asleep, and I needed to get in touch with you, so I slipped on my clothes and headed downstairs. I couldn't call you from the hotel room because I don't know your number and my phone was broken. Even if I was able to charge it, it wouldn't have done me any good, the screen was totally black. So, I had breakfast, convinced a stranger to let me use his phone and called Tali's restaurant hoping she would get in touch with you. After I talked to you, I went back to the room and since you weren't going to be here for a couple hours, the Indian maidens and I made the best of it. And now here you are."

"So let me get this straight. You were drugged, forced into a car with a mobster who is probably with the Mendocino Cartel, driven to the middle of the Everglades, threatened with physical harm, but he's now your new friend who you're going to give guitar lessons to. He dumped you out on the road and you get picked up by two young women who drive you to a Casino Hotel where the three of you have a *ménage à trois*. And I'm expected to believe all this really happened?"

"Yeah, that's pretty much it. Or, I could tell you I was given a ride from an old dude in a pickup truck headed to the Casino to pick up his wife from work, and he just dropped me off and left. That's the story I'm going to tell Tali, so you decide what you want to believe."

"So, how are things with you Walden and what happened at that raid? Oh, and if you see a Starbucks, I could use a coffee."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“EVERYBODY ‘FRAID OF THE WICKED OLD WITCH”

It was early evening, Walden and Sonny were on their way back to Walden’s condo when Walden’s phone rang, it was Ralph from the *Herald*. Walden answered through CarPlay so the call would be on speaker. “What’s up Ralph?”

“I just thought you might be interested in some new news. Alvin Z’s office was basically roped off today by security. Mary Beth and I told you this might happen, and it did. We also heard that there may be some criminal charges too. Something about kickbacks for favorable stories and, they can’t find him. We heard that the police went to his house and his wife said he moved out after she served him divorce papers and that she thinks he may have left the country. Pretty juicy right?”

“Wow”, that’s great. I don’t want anyone to lose their job, but in this case, it’s about time, good riddance and all that. He’s a real SOB. And thanks, Ralph for letting me know, and please keep me informed if you hear anything else.”

“Oh, I will. Who do you think they will pick for the new Editor in Chief? Would that be something that you’d come back for?”

“Not a chance my friend. I have a book to write, plus that’s a real political job and as you know, I tend to piss off a lot of people.”

Walden said to himself, *“That’s another one I can eliminate from the ‘who is’ list, but not the ‘who was list’.”*

As Sonny and Walden pulled into the parking garage for Walden’s condo, Walden suggested to Sonny that he should shower, change clothes and then Uber to Tali’s restaurant and go from there.

Sonny hopped out of the car and said to Walden, “Hurry up, I’ve got some explaining to do to a very lovely lady.”

After Sonny left, Walden made a quick Espresso and sat out on his balcony enjoying the night air.

Moby arrived at 8:10 and asked Walden for a cold beer if he had one.

“No Perrier with a lime?”

“Not tonight. We had a very intense workout, and with everything else that’s going on, a cold beer sounds good. Hell, I may even have a shot of Whiskey or Tequila too if you have any.”

“I do and I will join you. It has been one helluva’ day!”

Walden got two Stella's from the fridge. He walked over to the liquor cabinet, picked out an unopened bottle of Maria Bonita Mezcal, and two small snifters and put it all down on the dining table. He went back to the kitchen, found two Stella Beer glasses plus a bag of Mission Tortilla Chips and sat down. "A good friend of mine in St. Augustine gave me this Mezcal. He brought it back from Guanajuato. He said he was down there to do research on boutique Mezcals and was going to write an article for some food and liquor publication, but I really think he was just meeting an old girlfriend from Costa Rica and used the research to justify paying for the trip. Anyway, he said to first inhale the aroma, that's why the snifter, take a small sip, roll it around on your tongue and then slowly exhale." They both did as instructed, and they both broke out into big smiles.

"Damn, that's really good," commented Moby. "I love the smokey flavor. I always thought Mezcal was Tequila with a worm in the bottle, and you were supposed to shoot it. Man, was I wrong."

Walden began to tell Moby about Sonny's adventure, when the door opened and Tessie walked in, followed by Credence.

"Hey guys. Look who I picked up along the way."

"Credence, it's great to see you. Would you two like to try some extremely good Mezcal? Moby and I were just getting ready to have another."

"Yes, we will," said Tessie without consulting Credence.

"Okay, let me grab a couple of glasses and then you can tell us what's going on."

Walden got two more snifters, two more Stella glasses and two more Stella's. As he was headed to the table, the door opened again, and in walked Sonny and Tali carrying two large shopping bags that had the Pho U label on them. Walden grabbed another pair of Stella's, beer glasses and snifters.

"Hopefully you haven't eaten," said Sonny. "And no, Tali's not giving us this food, I ordered it and paid for it."

"Yes, he did. He insisted. He ordered one of each appetizer, a couple of Pho's and I don't know how many other entrées. So, get some plates, bowls and utensils and let's dig in, and introduce me to everyone."

Tali sat the bags on the table as Tessie and Walden went to the kitchen to get the necessary dinnerware. As they returned to the dining room, they noticed Sonny and Tali on the balcony cuddled up together by the railing looking out and whispering into each other's ear, smiling, laughing and kissing.

Tessie set the plates down and went to the balcony door, knocked loudly and motioned for the two love birds to join them at the table.

As they began to attack the food, Tessie looked at Credence and said, "Tali is a very good friend of ours, do you mind if we discuss your situation with her here?"

Credence nodded her head indicating that's it was ok, and Tessie gave Tali a brief synopsis as to what had occurred to this point.

"Now Credence, why don't you tell all of us, what has happened recently and why you reached out to me today."

"Well, I think Delbert and his sister are trying to, I don't know, maybe kill me. After Wanda and her boyfriend, Li'l Stevie had been over to my place the last couple of times, I woke up in the mornings feeling like I was really hung over. But I'm not a big drinker and I don't do a bunch of dope. Sure, I'll smoke a joint with you, but I don't get into coke or meth, or anything like that. They do, but I don't. I usually have some wine or one of those spiked lemonades or even an occasional Maker's and I really like Dr. Pepper. But I remembered when I woke up that my Dr. Pepper tasted kinda' funny the night before. Then today I got this text. I'm sure it was sent to me by mistake. Let me read it to you."

Credence began to read from her phone: *'Did you see the news. Sergei was killed and the others arrested. Now we won't have to pay those bastards the money we owe them. So, once she's out of the picture and you get the insurance money, we can keep it. But you need to get her to sign that paper that leaves everything to you. Are you giving her enough coke and uppers to keep her going but not knowing what she's signing? Bring her over here tomorrow night, I have a banquet at 6, so I should be home by 11 or so and Stevie and I can help.'*

"So, I'm scared, I don't remember signing anything. Delbert and I talked about mom's insurance money and her will and all and he seems to be more interested in it than I am. I just want to move on. I don't know what to do, that's why I called Tessie."

"Who's Wanda and Stevie?" asked Tali.

"She's Delbert's sister and Stevie is her boyfriend."

"She mentioned a banquet, where does she work?"

"She's works at the *Excelsior* Hotel, the same place where mom died. I think she's a chef."

"Wait, wasn't she the chef that our boy here, Walden, exposed for fabricating scallops from stingray's? Shit! Becka, my sister, told me she met that woman at a function they were both catering. A guest was rude about one of the items they were serving and Wanda the Witch, that's what her kitchen staff called her, asked Becka if she ever felt like poisoning a customer. Becka of course said no, but the

witch went on about keeping a batch of something in her cooler just in case she ever needed it.”

“That sounds like her,” said Credence. “She can be a real witch with a capital B and she’s always bitching about work and what she had to deal with. And she’s complained a lot about the snooty customers she had to cater to.”

“Jesus,” said Walden. “I knew she was unscrupulous, but she’s bat shit crazy! We must let the cops know all this.”

“And tell them what?” said Moby. “We don’t have any concrete evidence that they can use to get a warrant and arrest someone. They’ll tell us we’re just speculating and wasting their time.”

Everyone just looked around, not saying anything. Walden asked if anyone wanted more Mezcal and they all held out their glasses. They sipped their Mezcal and Stella’s and didn’t say a word, just looked at each other and around the room.

Finally, Walden broke the silence, “I’ve got an idea. I need some time in the morning to get a couple of things in motion and then we’ll get back together tomorrow late afternoon, and I’ll explain it all. So, everyone get a good night’s sleep because I believe tomorrow is going to be busy and long. And Credence, you’re staying with us tonight. Tessie has a spare bedroom and lots of clothes, so don’t even think about going home. Oh, and turn your phone off, we don’t want anyone to track you. Is there anything else we should do to her phone to make her basically invisible, besides destroying it?”

“Yeah, hand it to me,” said Moby, “Monique showed me a simple way. This will only take a minute.” Moby took the phone and forty seconds later, handed it back to her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“NOW GIVE ME MONEY, THAT’S WHAT I WANT”

Tessie woke up and looked over towards Walden, but he was not there next to her. She got her robe from the chair, wrapped it around herself and walked into the kitchen. She smelled coffee and bacon. Walden was sitting at the table, completely dressed, drinking a cup of coffee and making notes in his journal. She said good morning and poured herself a cup of coffee. He got up, gave her a hug, leaned in to kiss her and she said, “Don’t, I haven’t brushed my teeth yet. Oh, and thank you again for the Roses. They’re beautiful.”

He opened her robe and said, “Well I’ll just have to kiss you here and here then, and you thanked me last night, but you can thank me again and again. After all it was a dozen. She slowly pushed him away and began to close her robe and said, “Stop, remember we have a guest.”

“Oh right, just one more quick kiss then or maybe two.”

“Walden, you’re incorrigible, but that’s one of the many things I love about you. Now I must shower and get ready for work. Do you have any eggs to go with that bacon?”

Tessie returned to the kitchen dressed, went to Walden and said, “I brushed my teeth, and I haven’t put any lipstick on yet. I’ll take that kiss now.”

Walden and Tessie stepped apart just as Credence came into the kitchen dressed in a pair of Tessie’s pajamas. “Good morning, I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything, if I could just get a cup of that coffee, I’ll go back to the bedroom and leave you two be.”

“Nonsense. Walden is just frying some eggs and making toast. There’s fresh OJ in the pitcher, help yourself to it and the coffee. How do you like your eggs?”

As they finished breakfast, Tessie started to clear the plates, but Walden said, “Just leave everything, I’ll clean up. You need to get to work. Credence, why don’t you shower and get dressed while I talk to Tessie for just a minute before she leaves. Also, I want you to give Tessie your phone. Let her know your password too. She’s going to take it with her this morning. You’ll get it back later today. Ok?”

Credence got her phone from the bedroom, handed it to Tessie and told her the password before she headed to the shower.

Walden said to Tessie, “I know we didn’t get a chance to talk about my idea last night, but I was just exhausted. My trip to pick up Sonny and then all the stuff with Credence. I think I could have been asleep as soon as my head touched the

pillow, but you wanted to thank me for the Roses and believe me, I'm not complaining. I promise I'll explain more later, but I have some things to take care of first. Give Credence's phone to Roberto so he can retrieve that text message and hopefully identify the sender, even though I think we know who sent it. There is something else that I need your help with today, so let me explain."

After Tessie left, Walden began to clean up the breakfast mess as Credence came back into the kitchen, showered and she wore a fresh set of Tessie's clothes.

"I hope you slept well and sorry for having to take your phone and keep you here. But we're all concerned for you and hopefully this will soon be over. Let's go downstairs to my condo and see what Sonny's up to."

It was just a little before nine and Sonny's door was closed when they walked in. Walden showed Credence where most everything was, explained the TV and remote and told her to make herself at home and apologized to her again. "Oh shit, what about work? We didn't consider your job. What is it you're doing anyway, I'm sorry, I forgot?"

"Walden, it's okay. I'm only working part-time as I'm still taking classes, trying to finish my degree. And besides, I've pretty much put everything on hold for a bit, still grieving you know and then with all this other shit that's going on..."

"I'll make some more coffee, as I'm sure Sonny will be up soon."

Walden made a large French Press, poured a cup for Credence and one for himself and right on cue, Sonny walked in the kitchen, looked at Walden and then at Credence, looked at the coffee cup in Walden's hand and asked, "Have you drank out of that yet?"

"Nope, just poured it, take it and I'll make some more."

"Much obliged, I think I'll take this with me and shower."

"Tali's not in there with you?"

Sonny face turned into one big smile as he said, "No, she has a business to run, I may see her later though."

Twenty minutes later, a refreshed looking Sonny reappeared and said, "You got any more of that coffee, and what's this big idea that you dangled in front of us last night?"

Walden told Sonny and Credence his plan and he then asked Sonny to get in touch with Moby and have him at Walden's at 6 pm. Walden said he had phone calls to make and gathered his phone, laptop and journal and went into his bedroom and closed the door.

Sonny and Credence sat around for a while. Sonny played his guitar; Credence watched a little TV. Around noon, they knocked on Walden's door and the three of them got in Walden's car and drove towards the beach to a small fish shack that Walden claimed had the best fried Grouper sandwiches in all of Miami. It did not disappoint. They sat there and enjoyed the food and a couple of cold sodas and then it was back to the condo. Walden still had stuff to do before everyone showed up.

Moby showed up promptly at 6 and was soon followed by Tessie and her cameraman, Roberto. Roberto was carrying a hard case and Walden asked him to set everything up on the table. Tessie introduced Roberto to the group, and they all praised him for the camerawork he did during Sergei's assassination. About 6:15 an assertive knock came on the door and Tessie greeted Tali who was aware of the get-together but hadn't planned to attend. "Hi guys, got some shifts covered and a party cancelled so I thought I'd join if that's alright?"

"Sure," said Sonny as he approached her for a kiss.

Walden explained his entire plan to all and asked if anyone had any concerns, questions, etc. and he emphasized that they could back out at any time. No one said a thing, they all exhibited a serious demeanor, even Sonny. Roberto opened his case and began to work.

Pizzas were ordered along with sodas, no beer or wine.

At 10 pm Tessie handed Credence her phone and instructed her to call Delbert and tell him she would meet him at Wanda's later and explain where she'd been, making up some excuse he'd believe.

Credence made the call, and she talked to Delbert in a sweet, loving way so that he wouldn't get suspicious.

Walden, Tessie, Tali, Credence and Roberto got in Roberto's van and headed to Wanda's apartment. Roberto had his very non-descript van set up inside with monitors and recording equipment as he worked a side hustle, doing video surveillance work for PI's, mostly boring insurance claims and a few renegade husbands and wives in domestic cases. Trying to set up and record a murder suspect was way more exciting. Roberto was into more than just the news.

When they arrived at the apartment complex, Credence pointed out Delbert's truck as well as Wanda's and Stevie's cars. It appeared; they all were there.

Roberto parked close to Wanda's unit but not in an area where they could be seen from her apartment. Sonny and Moby took the "whale mobile" (Walden's new name for Moby's soccer mom's van) and followed. Sonny and Moby parked in an empty spot, two buildings away from Wanda's.

Roberto fitted both Sonny and Moby with earpiece microphones that were the latest in stealth technology. He explained they were virtually invisible and undetectable. Tessie had grabbed a wig from the property room at the station and put it on Moby and had also given him some clear glasses to wear. Roberto had also placed hidden cameras in the baseball hats that both Sonny and Moby were wearing.

Walden instructed Sonny and Moby to pull the bills of their hats down to help hide their faces in case there were security cameras in the parking lot. Plus, he didn't think anyone in the apartment knew Sonny or Moby, but he didn't want to take the chance. He didn't tell anyone, but he hoped that Delbert wouldn't recognize Sonny from the time he tailed them from the Pencil Pointe Bar.

Walden, Tessie, Tali and Credence sat on the floor and wheel wells in the back of Roberto's van, facing the monitors while he got his equipment up and running.

Sonny and Moby walked over to Delbert's truck. Moby opened the tailgate, hefted himself on to the bumper, then into the bed and proceeded to jump up and down a few times to set off the truck's alarm. He jumped out of the bed, slammed the tailgate shut and the two of them high-tailed it towards Wanda's building.

Delbert heard the alarm from inside Wanda's apartment and suddenly appeared on the balcony looking out into the parking lot. It was relatively quiet except for his truck alarm. He heard a few shouts from other apartments like, *"turn that damn thing off,"* and *"shut that fucking thing off, some of us are trying to sleep, goddamnit!"* He started to yell back, but instead he took out his keys and shut the piercing sound off. He looked around some more but didn't see anyone as Sonny and Moby had disappeared into the stairwell and were climbing the stairs to the second floor.

Moby delivered a resounding knock on Wanda's door, that rattled not only the door frame, but also the adjacent window frame. Delbert pulled the door open and started to say, "What the fu...." but was roughly shoved inside by Moby. Wanda and Stevie came to the door as well to see what all the commotion was about.

Wanda was dressed in loose fitting gym shorts that showed her fat thighs, a half t-shirt that exposed her fat belly, free-range breasts, no bra, no shoes. Her hair was a stringy mess. Stevie was shirtless, shoeless and wearing what looked like Speedo underwear. His hair was also a stringy mess. Both were glassy eyed.

"Who the fuck are you? Wanda, call the police," said Delbert.

Moby gave Wanda a look that made her hesitate and then Sonny said to them, "You don't want to do that, I'm sure you don't need them here looking at your

lines of coke on the table over there and is that a meth pipe I'm looking at? Well, well, having a little party, are you?"

"Who are you guys, what do you want?"

"What do we want, we want the money you owe us asshole. Have you forgotten about the hundred grand you borrowed? Payment is due now."

"We didn't borrow no hundred grand from you."

"Oh, not from me directly or from my friend here, but you did borrow it from our late associate, Sergei, may he rest in peace, the scumbag. But just because he's dead doesn't mean you still don't owe us, so we're here to collect."

"Fuck you. I don't even think you're Russian," said Delbert. "And besides, we only borrowed seventy grand, not a hundred."

"Shut up Delbert, you're only making it worse," said a very high and visibly nervous Wanda.

"You're a real dumbshit aren't you," said Sonny to Delbert. "What makes you think the Russians only hire Russians? You just need to be ruthless. Do you want to see how ruthless my friend here can be? Maybe a little demonstration on you or on the little shy boy there hiding behind the bitch. The amount is a hundred grand today and it's going up every day that you don't pay. How about that, I made a rhyme. Maybe we should use that as a slogan. It has a certain ring to it doesn't it. So, where's our payment? I guess you heard your truck's alarm going off. Nice rig: shame if we held it as collateral. And I have a question for you too. Sergei mentioned to me that you were planning on knocking off some woman for her insurance money, so why did you try to kill that reporter fellow?"

"We don't have your payment, but we should have it soon. And what are you talking about, we didn't try to kill some reporter? We poisoned the bitch that had all that insurance money and a lot of other stuff. Sergei even thought it was a good plan; said it was something the Russians would do." Delbert turned and glared at Stevie and continued his diatribe, "And the only reason we don't have the insurance money yet, is because the coroner hasn't declared it an accident. If L'il Stevie there hadn't rushed things by trying to impress Wanda and stuck to the plan. But no, he had to put too much of that shit that Wanda made in the bitch's Martini Olives. If he had just put enough in to get her sick, like he was supposed to, then in a short time we would poison her again and she would get sick again and when she eventually died, they would have said, *'well she'd been sick a lot'*. Then her daughter would have gotten' the money and then we would have done the same thing to her daughter, who happens to be my fiancée. Then when she died, I would get the money because we would have been married by then. If the dumbass had just done what he should have there wouldn't be any inquest or shit

like there is now, and we would pay you and everyone would be happy,” said a pissed off and belligerent Delbert. “In fact, I ought to let you take him with you, maybe you could sell him to some slaver, and he could be someone’s bitch. He probably likes it in the ass. I bet he would give good BJ’s too, hell, try him right now, he ain’t doing’ shit except smoking my dope. There’s your fuckin’ payment.”

“Delbert, just shut the fuck up,” said Wanda. She looked at Sonny and tried to give him a smile while she rolled down the top of her shorts to show more skin and a little pubic hair, and gave her saggy boobs a push up as she rolled her dirty tee shirt up more tightly under them and then she pinched her nipples a little to make them poke out more and tried to sound sexy and said to Sonny, “If we give you the keys to his truck, can we use it as the payment for now? And then when we pay you the total amount, get it back?”

Sonny had to look away before he puked up the pizza. He looked at Moby and said, “Well you’re looking for a new ride, so what do you think?” Moby just shook his head and drew back an enormous fist, then punched Delbert, breaking his nose with disturbingly loud crackles and crunches. Moby glared menacingly at Delbert as Delbert laid on the floor squirming and whimpering in the fetal position.

Delbert dug in his pocket for the keys from this pocket and handed them to Moby. “There better not be any scratches on it when you bring it back to me” he whimpered in a high register nasal tone.

Moby kicked Delbert in the ribs, and then stepped on his left hand, breaking a couple of fingers and said, “Shut the fuck up!”

“We’ll be in touch real soon, you better have the money, or you’ll suffer a lot more than just losing your truck. That was just a taste of what he could do. And you can keep the little one, he’s not my type,” said Sonny.

Our heroes all went back to Walden’s condo. It was late, but they all partook in another bottle of Mezcal, and agreed to meet the next evening for a celebration dinner. The only one that was not cheerful was a very sad and tearful Credence.

Roberto said he’d have the un-edited audio and video ready by noon tomorrow so they could take it to the police.

Credence went to bed at Tessie’s, Moby and Roberto said their goodbyes and Walden, Sonny, Tali and Tessie each grabbed a beer and convened on the balcony.

Walden looked at Sonny and said, “I can’t believe that fat ass tried to seduce you,” and then Walden said in a sing-song voice, *“it’s going up every day that you don’t pay”*. *“And the Russians don’t just hire Russians; you just need to be ruthless.”* And I loved it when you said, *“he’s not my type.”* Where in the hell do

you come up with this stuff? I imagine you're going to write a song and use one of those lines." They both look at each other and burst out laughing.

"Holy crap," said an exuberant Tessie, "It really worked! That was pure genius."

"Well, Delbert and Wanda knew me and you, but they didn't know Sonny and Moby, I hoped. And I didn't want Credence to go in, that would have been too dangerous for her. Those two, plus Roberto's tech stuff, really pulled it off. I only hope the cops feel the same way. They should. Moby kind of ran it by Monique and although she couldn't really tell him it was legal, she basically said we should go for it, as it would at least give the police something to work with."

"And just think," said Sonny, "You found out that no one was trying to kill you, Walden!"

"Yeah, I hadn't thought about that. Wow, that's a relief. But I feel so bad for Credence."

The following morning, Walden was up early and, in his condo, prepared breakfast by 7:30. Sonny and Tali woke up to the sound of the coffee grinder and wandered into the kitchen.

Breakfast was over, Tessie and Tali had left for work and Credence had perked up just a little.

Walden got on the phone and called Detective Samantha Hart. She agreed to meet with him at three that afternoon and she also agreed to bring along Detective Theo Sogas.

Walden, Sonny, Tessie, Moby, Credence and Roberto all arrived at Pho U at 2:45. Tali had set up a table in the back with Asian screens around it for privacy. The six of them reviewed how they were going to approach the detectives with the evidence. The two detectives arrived, and Tali escorted them to the table and offered them tea and water. They were a little taken aback by the large group, thinking they were only meeting with Walden.

Walden thanked them and then started from the very beginning; the banquet, the text that Credence received and concluded with the scene from last night's sting at Wanda's apartment. Sonny, Tessie and Moby all chimed in at the appropriate moments. Credence stayed quiet. Roberto explained how he set up his recording equipment and then played the entire video and audio for them. When the playback was finished, Roberto gave the originals to Samantha.

Samantha and Theo did not say anything during the whole presentation. They both took notes but kept quiet.

Samantha looked at Theo, they both nodded and got up from the table. Samantha looked at Walden and said, "Thank you, and I'm glad no one was trying to kill

you.” She looked at Credence and said, “I’m so sorry for you. Justice will be done.” She said to Tessie, “I’ll let you know when and where once we get the ok.” With that, they both left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“WE’LL MEET AGAIN, DON’T KNOW WHERE, DON’T KNOW WHEN”

Two weeks had passed and the autopsy report regarding the death of Clara was announced and made public. Clara had been poisoned and as a result, Delbert, Wanda and Stevie were arrested “for the murder of Clara Mephisto and the conspiracy to commit the murder of Credence Mephisto.” The poison used was a strain of Botulinum toxin typically found in home canned foods improperly sealed. These toxins are among the most potent toxins known to science. Intoxication can occur by ingesting the formed toxin in food. This is an incredibly lethal and mostly undetectable compound with a neutral taste and easily mixed with food. A jar containing the poison (labeled “DO NOT TOUCH, CHEF WANDA”) was found in the walk-in cooler of the banquet kitchen at the *Excelsior* Hotel. The Police received a “tip” from a Health Inspector who performed a “surprise” inspection of the hotel’s kitchen and “discovered” the jar. The same kitchen where Wanda was the Banquet Chef. Tessie and Roberto were present during the arrest and the video with Tessie’s reporting was shown nationally on all major networks.

Delbert, Wanda and Stevie were still in jail awaiting a trial date as they were being held without bail. Having been told at their arraignment they could request an attorney if they couldn’t afford one, they all asked for an attorney. On the advice of the arraignment judge they agreed to separate lawyers to defend them. This, of course, was convoluted, since the prosecutor would immediately look for traitors (or liars) who would volunteer information for a lighter sentence.

Delbert, Wanda, and Stevie each had a visit in their separate holding cells from their appointed defense attorneys on Monday. Travis Dewy, founding partner of his firm represented Delbert, Leroy Cheatem, also from the firm handled Wanda’s case, and Leona Howe, also from Dewey’s firm took Stevie’s case. All three were partners and the Travis Dewey and Associates firm had gained quite a reputation for finding technicalities and loopholes allowing criminals to walk. Of course, the courthouse crew of prosecutors and investigators liked to refer to the firm as “Dewey, Cheatem, & Howe” a coincidental play on an old “Three Stooges” satire.

It was a Thursday evening, and Sonny had agreed with Chelsea, the owner of the Corner Tavern, to perform a one-set show. He planned to in 2 weeks to begin his tour with his new band “Mudbone Blue & the Swamp Queens”.

Walden, Tessie, Moby, Monique, Credence, and Tali were all in attendance. Samantha Hart and Roberto slipped in too but sat at a two-top in the back, holding hands. Sonny had just finished setting up when in walked The Fish, The

Fish's wife, Rosalinda, Johnny and his wife, Lorena, and Carlos. They sat together at the table next to Walden and his group. Walden introduced everyone and then took Sonny to the side and said to him, "I told you about Rosalinda wanting to sing, so please call her up on stage when you can. I'm sure it will be short and sweet and don't forget, Tessie doesn't know anything about her. Ok?"

"Yeah, ok. Wow, she is a real looker, how old did you say she was? And did you really give that up?"

"I'm with Tessie and things are really good, too good to screw up."

"Is that really you Walden? Damn, it must be you're not only getting older, but maybe wiser too. Happy for ya'."

Johnny went up to Sonny, gave him a gangster look and then broke into a big smile, almost a laugh and said, "Sorry about leaving you out in the Everglades, but it looks like it's all worked out fine. We still haven't found Pinto though. Hopefully we'll know something soon so my wife will quit riding my ass about him. Maybe next time you're out this way, we can jam together. I happened upon a Taylor, and as Brando would say, *'I made someone an offer they couldn't refuse'*, anyway it's a sweet guitar. Have a good set, and take it easy on Rosalinda, she's a little nervous. Has a great voice though."

The Corner Tavern was beginning to fill up. Sonny had played there the night before during open mic night to get a feel for the place and it appeared the word had spread that Sonny Mudbone was going to play a free concert as a prelude to his national tour, but sans his new band.

Sonny was introduced and he started with "Snake Bit Blues", a new standard 1-4-5 blues number he scratched out on bar napkins after buying numerous cocktails for a divorcee at the Broken Spoke Lounge. The hook line came about when she disappeared under the guise of going to the ladies' room. He then broke into a raucous version of Eric Clapton's "Blues Power", helping himself to an extensive lead guitar solo, then ground it down to a stretched ending that turned out to be electrifying.

Then, with great pomp and circumstance, complete with effective pauses, he introduced a "special guest" and invited Rosalinda to join him on stage. She was decked out in tight white jeans and a low-cut halter top, a pair of sexy Tony Lama Riding Boots. Needless to say, not much was left to the imagination, except whether or not Rosalinda could sing!

Rosalinda went up to Sonny and gently whispered something in his ear. Sonny grinned and started strumming his guitar playing the Jefferson Airplane classic, *"Somebody to Love"*. Rosalinda came in at the right time and, wow, what a voice and what a stage presence. The crowd was mesmerized by the duo and

applauded loudly and asked for more. Sonny looked at Rosalinda and silently mouthed *"Angel from Montgomery"*. Rosalinda came back with a nod and a wink. The crowd once again was ecstatic and again asked for more. Sonny and Rosalinda broke into Maria Muldaur's sexy number, *"Don't You Feel My Leg"*. Rosalinda teased the crowd with suggestive moves and gestures while she belted out the lyrics in a sultry voice. Rosalinda exited the stage to a standing ovation. Sonny finished out the set and then asked the crowd, "Should we call Rosalinda back up for one more?" The audience responded with raucous applause, whistles and shouts.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"SO HAPPY TOGETHER, HOW IS THE WEATHER"

Sonny had some rather brief conversations with Ross, the principal at Blue Skyes records, and the plan was for Sonny to meet Ross and his team in Tampa. Once he was there, they would audition and hire the rest of the band and then the tour would start at the Chastain Amphitheater in Atlanta. The band would leave Tampa on a new bus and there were stops set up on the way to Atlanta at smaller venues to provide Sonny and the new band with additional rehearsal time. Time to get to know each other and tighten up musically. Sonny was now to be in Tampa in 3 weeks instead of 2, as Ross said there had been a slight change in the itinerary, but nothing to worry about.

During the 3 weeks in Miami, Sonny spent some time with Rosalinda, going through tunes he thought she could handle. Chelsa let them use the back room at The Corner Tavern during the day, and they began to develop a good musical relationship. Good enough that he asked Rosalinda if she would like to join the new band, "Mudbone Blue & the Swamp Queens" as a singer. She immediately said yes and gave him big hug.

He told her where she needed to be and when. He outlined what was expected of her, letting her know he was in charge. He also told her what she should wear on stage and what other items should bring and said, "If you forget something or need something, we will be making stops and there is always a Walmart nearby."

Sonny started to explain to her what else to expect on the tour but decided it might be best for her to just jump right in and see for herself.

Sonny halfway expected Rosalinda to flirt with him quite a bit, but she kept it very professional, much to his disappointment. Which on second thought he decided was a good thing, thinking about her father, The Fish, the Fish's group of cohorts and Tali.

Sonny was still staying in Walden's condo as Walden had 'let him use it until he had to hit the road' so that Sonny could have some private time with Tali. Walden and Tessie had announced their intentions about their relationship going forward and were going to consolidate to one condo anyway. So, it worked out just fine.

Sonny and Tali were enjoying the evening alone, naked in bed, drinking Dom Perignon and noshing on Beluga Caviar and a French Camembert Cheese that was off the charts. But in the back of their minds was the lingering thought that in just a short time, Sonny would be on the road and Tali would be back at work running her restaurant, Pho U.

Sonny spread a little caviar on Tali's left breast and slowly licked it off. "I don't know if the salty flavor was from the caviar or if it was mixed in with some of the perspiration from your wonderful body, but it sure was mighty tasty. I wonder if it tastes the same on your other breast. I guess I'll have to find out!"

"Oh, Sonny, you are so bad, but it feels sooo good. Now it's my turn. How about I place a little right there? Hold still or it's going to fall off before I can get it in my mouth."

THE END