



Brady's

Run

Joseph Collum

A Max Brady Mystery

Brady's senses were regrouping like a school of fish after a shark's swum through it. Adonis's face came into focus and Max was struck by how much he'd aged since they last met. He looked drawn and his eyes had a deranged cast, underscored by deep black shadows.

"You know my name?" Adonis said.

"Crackhead told me all about you," Max said slowly. "He said to say hi."

"How is Crackhead?"

"Having a bad life. Blames you."

"Me?" Adonis said. "Throw Crackhead in a pit with eleven snakes and you got a dozen snakes."

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Sun River, Montana

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Dedicated to Donna

Chapter One

ON A MOONLESS MORNING so black even the shadows seemed to cast shadows, a tall, sleek figure glided through the inky stillness, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder, a blue canister in either hand. In the distance, he heard waves lap sleepily onto a beach and palm fronds whispering in the breeze, sounds normally pleasing to him. But his mood was dismal as a swamp.

What the fuck am I doing here?

He slipped through a swinging wooden gate into the courtyard of the Pelican's Nest Motel, feeling the pitchdark air, bleak and ominous as night-ocean water. The trespasser darted around patches of pink neon light cast by the lazy blinks of a Vacancy sign, ducked beneath a staircase, and stood stock still, waiting for his irises to adjust to the black velvet shadows. The motel was asleep and he felt invisible, his only witness a pair of stars winking overhead, watching down on him like a barn owl from the rafters. For an instant he smelled perfume, then realized it was the thick saccharine scent of jasmine—like flowers rotting in a graveyard. He fought off a momentary nausea. Then the answer hit him.

Money.

Lithe as a cat, the black-clad man bound up the stairs and moved along a rail overlooking a swimming pool and thatched tiki bar. It was October, still the slack season. Fort Lauderdale hadn't yet been invaded by vacationers seeking spiritual resuscitation from surf, sun, and sand. The motel's second floor was unoccupied. He put down the

containers outside Room 15 and deftly picked the lock, which gave a dull report and the door sighed open. Stepping inside, he pulled the drapes together and flipped on the television for light, revealing a garden variety Florida motel room; light, airy, clean as a new car. He thought of the dingy room he rented, with its Salvation Army décor and reek of disinfectant. *Rat's Nest.*

“Now here's the 4 a.m. update on Hurricane Phyllis.” The television was tuned to the Weather Channel, the sound just loud enough to hear. The intruder turned and listened. “Phyllis is shaping up to be a storm of historic proportions as it bears down on the Yucatan Peninsula. The National Hurricane Center reports that a hurricane hunter aircraft has flown into Phyllis's four mile wide eye and measured winds of 150 miles per hour. Barometric pressure is a record low 882 milibars, an incredible 100 points below what it was this time yesterday. At this point the storm track is quite wobbly, but all indications are it will hit Cozumel and Cancún within the next twelve hours.”

Poor fucking Mexicans, thought the man in black.

“Computer projections,” the weatherman said, “indicate that after she passes the Yucatan, Phyllis will loop north and east and gain strength as she heads toward South Florida.”

Good for business. He lowered the sound and opened his bag—a physician preparing for surgery. He pulled out a hotplate and set it on a white rattan table. Crumpling newspaper, spreading it around the room, his mind wandered away from Phyllis to the motel's owners. He'd been watching them surreptitiously for a week. Old bald guy and blonde wife. *Little long in the tooth, but firm body. Nice tits. I'd hit her.*

He removed a hand auger from the bag and soundlessly bored holes in the baseboards on either side of the room, then threaded plastic tubing through each hole. With little effort, he lifted one of the blue containers, attached the spout to the flanged end of a tube, poured liquid into the adjacent room, and repeated the process on the opposite wall. The remaining fluid he splashed on the beds and walls as casually as if he was watering flowers. He set the second blue canister on the hot plate and switched the burner to high, then opened the drapes and slipped from the room as silent as fog.

Five minutes later, he was sitting in a stolen car half a block away, tense, still as a statue, staring anxiously through the blackness, stony

eyes locked on Room 15's big plate glass window, counting down mutely.

3, 2, 1...

An orange fireball erupted followed by a dull *whomp*. He held his breath, watching flames climb the walls, black smoke billowing from the white door jamb. The fire quickly spread into the rooms next door. The picture window facing the courtyard burst and, within two minutes, the entire second floor of the Pelican's Nest was ablaze. Tongues of flame broke through the roof and licked at the black sky, red sparks dancing in the air like a swarm of lightning bugs.

"Fire!" someone shouted.

A man in a robe blew into the courtyard, swift as a gust of wind. The bald motel owner. He began pounding on doors.

"Fire," he hollered. "Everyone out."

Guests rushed into the night wearing pajamas and nightgowns, some wrapped in blankets. The motel owner twisted the nozzle of a garden hose and tried to douse the flames, but the water pressure was too feeble to reach the roof. He dropped the hose, grabbed a bucket, and plunged it into the swimming pool, then raced up the staircase, and heaved water at the blaze. He might as well have spit. He ripped off his robe and beat at the fire.

Old codger's got balls, the arsonist thought, watching from the street, captivated by the drama he'd ignited. He saw a woman dash up the stairs, the blonde wife, her breasts bouncing inside the robe like desperately beating hearts. She reached her husband and wrestled him away from the inferno.

Sirens were soon wailing and flashing lights replaced the darkness. Two red ladder trucks roared up and firefighters were quickly attacking the flames with high pressure streams of foam retardant. But too late. The building was burning like a tinderbox.

Crackhead would be proud. The arsonist snorted, the stolen car's engine thrumming smoothly at idle. *Crackhead! The pervert would be cranking his shank at a hundred miles an hour right now.*

Then the first squad car screeched up to the scene.

Time to go.

Chapter Two

MAX BRADY KNEW he was dreaming, but couldn't tear himself from his foggy netherworld.

A bright perfect morning without a blemish in the blue sky. Padding on foot across the Brooklyn Bridge—happy, content—basking in the memory of her the night before—soft, rapturous, ravenous. Then, with no signal, no warning, no chance to stop time, to alter events, his world exploded. Screaming into his cell phone.

“Get out, Victoria. Get out.”

“Max, it’s too hot.”

“Listen to me.”

“My God!” she cried. “People are jumping.”

“Victoria. Crawl to an exit. Get out now.”

“Max, I love you. Don’t ever forget.”

The phone clicked, leaving nothing but a hiss—a deafening, unbearable, eternal hiss. Brady heard screams and snapped his head up to blue sky filled with red fire, black smoke and falling bodies. He knew in an instant, knowing without thinking, his life had forever changed.

A giant cloud engulfed him and he gasped awake. Drenched in sweat, he was overcome by a profound sense of relief. A dream. Brady rolled over to caress her silky skin, still warm with sleep, and reality stabbed him. She wasn't there. She hadn't been there. Not for years. Only the nightmare that permeated his sleep like an endless loop of film.

Brady lay in the dark trying to get his bearings. *Where am I?* It took several seconds. *The boat.* He rolled from the bunk and staggered

naked onto the deck of the schooner *Victoria II*. A crescent moon hung in the black western sky like the half-open eye of a sleeping cat. To the east, the first indigo bars of dawn began to purr reveille.

He plunged over the side of the boat, slashing through a layer of mist into chilly blackness, tripping shrill alarms that speared his sensors like ice picks. Brady held his breath for a long moment, suspended in limbo, fiercely trying to retrieve his fast fading apparition. But, as ever, she swam off like a diaphanous white vapor, turning only to whisper, “*Don’t ever forget.*”

Brady hissed to the surface and gasped for air. Day was fast eclipsing night and, treading water, he watched the silhouette of a sprawling Spanish hacienda emerge against the illumining sky like a latent image materializing in a dark room. Victor Gruber, his friend and owner of the home, wouldn’t be awake for another hour. Max clambered over the transom and stepped onto the dock, his mind still clouded by the dust of his dream. He turned a spigot and a shower nozzle protruding from a piling gushed cold water on his head. A bar of soap sat atop the piling and he lathered himself then rinsed and ducked into the schooner’s cabin. Moments later he came on deck in a pair of ragged khaki shorts, high-topped black sneakers, and white T-shirt with skull-and-crossbones on the back and, printed in black on the front, the words *Sea Shanty*.

Brady traipsed through the dew-drenched lawn, grass blades lashing his bare ankles like chilly spears, the only sound the chirrup of morning warblers wakening in hidden roosts. An old green Schwinn was leaning against the side of the house. He pushed the bicycle onto Siesta Lane, pedaled to the end, then steered east beneath a catena of royal palms standing like silent sentries.

Max accelerated up the steep arch of the Las Olas Boulevard Bridge with an untroubled titanium sky spreading before him. He glanced right to a small half-moon bay where a dozen sailboats sat at anchor, reaching the crest just as the golden glare of the sun’s aurora broke over a placid sea. A small flotilla of cargo ships floated benignly on the horizon.

Fort Lauderdale Beach was a barrier island bordered by the Atlantic on one side and the Intracoastal Waterway on the other. Brady peered up the Intracoastal at the line of mammoth luxury yachts docked as

far as he could see, wondering, as he did every morning: *Who the hell owns those things?*

Then a jolt of electricity shot up Brady's spine. A thick plume of black smoke spiraled into the north sky. For an instant he wondered if he was still trapped in his nightmare. A car whizzed by, rattling the drawbridge's steel grate. He touched the railing and it was cold. Brady decided he was awake.

He raced down the bridge, alarm bells shrieking in his brain, eyes riveted on the dark pillar. At the bottom he tacked left and pumped hard, his dread surging the closer he got. Brady turned the corner at Playa del Sol and his heart sank. The Pelican's Nest Motel was a smoldering shell.

The street was a helter-skelter of fire trucks and hoses strewn like spaghetti across the asphalt. Dozens of people milled about, many wrapped in blankets, faces painted with numbed expressions, some streaked with tears, like war refugees, dazedly watching firefighters douse what remained of the motel. The red barrel-tile roof was caved in and water percolated from the second floor straight down to the first like a monsoon on a black forest. The straw thatch of the tiki bar was scorched and the swimming pool was rancid as a toxic waste pit.

Brady spotted a white and blue police car. A cop was scribbling in the front seat, a woman sitting next to him. Max pushed his bicycle over, reached through the open passenger-side window, and squeezed Olga Klum's shoulder. She looked up and a chill stole through him.

Normally a striking woman with a narrow fine-featured face and translucent blue eyes who looked much younger than her 50 years, Olga was now like a film actress transformed by special effects—her eyes red-rimmed and puffy, her face haggard and drawn.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" Max said.

Her eyes flooded with tears.

"Max," she said, a sob escaping from deep inside. "It was terrible."

"It's okay, Olga," he said, caressing her cheek softly.

"What are we going to do?"

"Don't worry. Everything's going to be okay."

The policeman in the driver's seat leaned over and looked up at Brady.

“Excuse me, sir, can you give us a few minutes?” Then a look of recognition crossed his face. “Oh, hi, Mr. Brady.”

Dan Mason was a young officer with a dark tan, close-cropped black hair and thick Popeye forearms. The beach was his beat and Brady had known him for him for a couple of years.

“No problem, Dan,” Max said. “Just checking on my friends. Is Gunther okay?”

The patrolman pointed to an ambulance across the street. The back door was open and a burly bald man lay on a stretcher while a paramedic bandaged his right hand.

“He was burned trying to put out the fire,” Olga said, a trace of German accent in her inflection, tears streaming down her cheeks. “But it was too far gone. Max, it was awful!”

“Olga, I’m going to call Victor,” he said, gently patting her shoulder. “He’ll want you and Gunther to stay with him as long as you need to.”

Olga looked up at Brady, swiping soot-smudged fingers across her wet face. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Brady negotiated the snarl of fire hoses to the ambulance, watching Gunther Klum as he approached, pathos swelling inside him for the big man. Gunther had a grizzly bear’s countenance but, Max knew, the temperament of a teddy bear. The Klums had come to Fort Lauderdale 30 years before from Germany, bought the Pelican’s Nest, and had lived an idyllic life since. Now their business and home was a charred heap of rubble. Grief was etched on Gunther’s ash-caked face, deepening the engravings already carved by age.

“Are you alright, Gunther?” Max said.

It was one of those reflexive questions people ask at times like this, knowing the other person is far from okay. The medic wrapping his hand, Gunther looked at Brady, his bloodshot eyes crinkled and his thin white lips curled into a wan smile.

“If by alright, Max, you mean alive, yes, I’m alright. A few minor burns. Nothing that won’t heal.”

Gunther was 70 years old but, like Olga, looked much younger. He seemed to have aged twenty years overnight.

“Gunther, what the hell happened?” Brady said.

“I don’t know, Max,” he said, his accent thicker than his wife’s. “There was an explosion. When I got to the door, flames were coming

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from the roof. They spread so fast. Thank God the upper floor wasn't occupied. I roused everyone, then grabbed the hose and did what I could. The fire trucks were here in five minutes, but..."

Gunther's voice trailed off, his bleary eyes gazing out at the gloomy black carcass of his ravaged motel.

"What could have caused such an explosion, Gunther?"

"Nothing," he said, slapping at the sky with the back of his good hand. "There are no gas lines. We didn't have anything combustible lying around. No paint or gas cans. Nothing volatile that could have caused this."

Gunther looked at Brady for several seconds, deep in thought.

"Max," he said gravely, "I don't think this was an accident."

Chapter Three

“MAGNIFICENT TREE,” ADONIS Rock said, his eyes sweeping the immense green canopy that monopolized the airspace over Jack Del Largo’s front yard.

“Pain in my ass,” Del Largo said. “My wetback gardener smuggled his entire fucking family across the Rio Grande with what I paid him just to blow the leaves.”

The two men had been stamped from vastly disparate molds. Del Largo short, pear-shaped, dark twitchy eyes, mangy thatch of brown hair, fleshy love handles hanging over his belt like saddlebags. Adonis, tall, resplendent, blonde locks cascading onto tawny granite shoulders, showcased in a black tank top T-shirt.

“I can take it out for you,” Rock said, assaying the monster trunk with a swift calculating eye.

“No thanks.”

“I’ll give you a good price.”

“I got enough on my plate,” Del Largo said, waving at Adonis to follow.

“Let me know,” Adonis said, still eyeing the tree.

Del Largo lived in an 80-year-old riverfront mansion on Sailboat Bend—a snug, leafy slice of old Fort Lauderdale. Legend had it Al Capone once wintered in the house. Del Largo had spent a gold mine remodeling the coral-hued abode with its russet tile roof, dramatic Castilian arched windows, and sumptuous pool looking out over New River that fetched *oohs* and *aahs* from passing boaters.

Del Largo was reaching for the handle when the front door burst open, nearly knocking Adonis off the stoop into a thorny bed of bougainvillea. A gangly beanpole of a woman whirled out of the house like a cyclone, a Virginia Slim dangling from her lips and shoulder blades protruding like pubescent breasts from the wrong side of her body.

"Jack," she said, her back to Adonis, "we've got to decide on the menu."

"Jesus, Marla," Del Largo said, "not now."

"Maine lobster crepe with a dill hollandaise," said Marla, ignoring his peevish tone, "or lobster mango canapés on crisp Asian toast?"

"Sounds delicious, Marla."

"Miniature Beef Wellington or smoked duck confit over endive with mandarin orange?"

"What the hell is *confit*?"

"Oh, Jack!"

"This goddamned wedding is gonna bankrupt me. I thought the bride's family is supposed to pay for this shit."

"For god's sake, Jack, they live in a trailer."

"The band alone is costing me twenty grand. I should be getting the Rolling fucking Stones."

"Jack! Your language!"

Marla spun about and caught sight of Adonis for the first time, her eyes growing as big and round as capital O's.

"Marla Del Largo," she said, extending her hand. "And you?"

"Adonis Rock," he said, not sure whether to shake her hand or kiss it. *What the hell.* He bowed and gallantly pecked her paw.

"Adonis," Marla said, her face lighting up like a callow girl being fawned over. "How fitting."

Jack Del Largo felt like puking. He knew his wife was a sucker for sweet talkers and hand kissers and had succumbed to the charms of more than one Casanova. He'd never confronted her, as she had never challenged him. *Ask no questions, I'll tell no lies* was the magic recipe behind the Del Largo's nuptial bliss. The bottom line for Marla, he knew, was the bottom line. Lucre trumped lust. If she had to choose between a blue-collar caveman like Adonis Rock and a roly-poly plutocrat like himself, she'd opt for the mansion, the Mercedes, and the A-list friends.

“He’s a tree trimmer, Marla,” Jack said.

Her face the picture of sudden disappointment, she said, “Tree trimmer?”

“I prefer arborist,” said Adonis.

“Oh,” Marla said, the spell broken. Then her eyes brightened like 100-watt lightbulbs. “Are you going to cut down that nasty old...what is it anyway? Oak?”

Adonis stared at the Del Largos, trying to camouflage his incredulity. *They don’t know.*

“I told Jack, er, Mr. Del Largo, I’d give you a good price,” he said.

“Can you get rid of it before the wedding next week?” Marla said.

“No problem. Two day job.”

“Oh, Jack, do it,” she said.

“How much?” said Del Largo, glaring at Adonis like he had a mouthful of mustard.

Rock folded his arms and stroked his chin, surveying the tree with a contemplative air. From taproot to tree top the gargantuan hardwood stood at least one hundred feet tall and its trunk was as thick as a Scud missile. Adonis did some quick arithmetic and felt a tremor in his gut. He’d normally charge five grand to take down an oak and haul away the timber. But this wasn’t oak.

“Three thousand,” he said.

“That’s highway robbery!” Del Largo said.

“Most tree services would charge five,” Adonis said with keen indifference, trying to sound blasé, as though he and greed were strangers.

“Jack!”

“No way, Marla. This wedding’s already costing me sixty grand.”

“Jack!”

“No, Marla! That’s final,” Del Largo said and lumbered toward the door. “Come on, Adonis.”

“Wait, Jack,” Marla said. “What about the first course? Wild mushroom herb ravioli with white truffle sauce or apricot ginger pan-seared sea scallops over seaweed salad?”

“Jesus, Marla!” Del Largo said, waving his hand dismissively. “You decide!”

Jack led Adonis into the house through an antique cedar door with iron grilles and a postigo window and proceeded down a long arched red brick hallway. The floors were polished black marble, and hand-carved Mexican furniture was everywhere; scallop-backed benches, mesquite armoires, and big red Tamalero ceramic pots.

Del Largo's study overlooked the swimming pool, occupied at the moment by a blonde in a white bikini floating face up on a raft. She had immense breasts that did not appear to be the work of Mother Nature.

"Raymona," Del Largo said. "My future daughter-in-law. She might be trailer trash, but she's a first-rate piece of ass."

"Your son's a lucky man," Adonis said.

"Not really. She's also a five-star cunt. I give them three years."

"Why pay sixty grand then?"

"Marla's a cunt too. If I don't throw a chichi wedding so she can show off for her society friends, it'll cost me five million in alimony."

"Romantic," Adonis said, muzzling a grin.

Del Largo shot him a malevolent look, stepped to the wet bar and splashed bourbon from a crystal decanter into two short glasses. He handed one to Adonis and plopped heavily into a black leather swivel chair behind his desk, then motioned his visitor to the seat facing him.

"Cohiba?" Del Largo said, proffering a foot-long cigar.

"No, thanks."

Del Largo flicked a butane flame and puffed until the stogie's tip glowed crimson. Then he unlocked the top drawer of his desk, extracted a thick manila envelope and tossed it to Adonis.

"Twenty-five large in tens and twenties, as agreed," he said.

Adonis rose to his feet and tucked it into the back of his denim shorts.

"Nice doing business with you, Jack. Let me know if you change your mind on that tree."

Del Largo calmly expelled a blue smoke ring. "Sit down," he said. "I got something else."

Adonis sat back down, a corner of the envelope jabbing him in the back. Del Largo dipped the unlit end of the cigar in his bourbon and drizzled a few drops on his tongue.

“If another motel burns down,” Adonis said, “it’s gonna get hot—no pun intended.”

Del Largo leaned back, palms and forearms turned upward on the wings of his chair, appraising Adonis like a big, flaccid, cigar-smoking swami.

“It’s not a torch job,” he said, chubby fingers flicking off an ash. “What about *removal*? Gotta problem with that? And I don’t mean trees.”

Adonis watched the fat man exhale another cloud of smoke, then rest his head on the pillow of flesh beneath his chin. He’d met Del Largo a month before through Dantrelle Peppers, his cellmate at Citrus Correctional. Dantrelle was doing five years for armed robbery. It was well known in population that a Fort Lauderdale lawyer named Jack Del Largo had connections at the Parole Board. Dantrelle paid him twenty grand and was sprung two years early. In August, out of the blue, Del Largo called him in Islamorada, where he was working on a fishing boat. They arranged to meet in the gift shop of the Snapper Creek service plaza at the south end of the Florida Turnpike. It was a sweltering day and Jack was slurping his second fresh squeezed orange juice when Dantrelle arrived.

“O.J.?” Del Largo said. “I’m buying.”

“Nah,” said Dantrelle. “*Acid reflux. But a cold Yoo-hoo would hit the spot.*”

They walked outside and sat at a picnic table in the speckled shade of a shaggy ficus tree. Dantrelle swiped his soiled angler’s shirtsleeve across the wood slats, sending several bird pellets flying.

“*Fucking feathered rats,*” he said, setting down his Yoo-hoo. “*Whadya need, Jack.*”

“A favor,” Del Largo said.

“*Anything for you, Jack.*”

“*Know anybody who can burn a building?*”

“*Donald Rockwell,*” Dantrelle said without hesitation. “*He learned from the best.*”

“*Who’s that?*”

“*Ever hear of Crackhead Corrales?*”

“*Drug dealer?*”

“*Arsonist. A legend. Never caught.*”

"Why don't I just hire this Crackhead?"

"He's in prison."

"I thought you said he was never caught."

"Not for arson. Shot some mobster over in Tampa. He's on Death Row. Donnie was his apprentice. Did eighteen months at Citrus on a coke rap. Last I heard he was out and changed his name to Apollo or something. Trying to make it as a model or some shit. Guy's cut like a fucking Greek god."

Del Largo had used his contacts to track down Donald Rockwell, who was going by the name Adonis Rock. The lawyer hired him to torch the Pelican's Nest. Now he had something else.

"Depends on the money," Adonis said. "Removal's a whole 'nother thing. Cost you a shitload more than a fire."

"How much?" said Del Largo, blue cigar smoke billowing from his nostrils.

"Fifty."

"That's about what I figured."

"Plus another ten for a long vacation."

"Now you're trying to fuck me."

"Like I said, things'll get hot."

"That's bullshit!"

"Take it or leave it," Adonis said, standing again.

"Okay, I'll take it. But sixty's final," he said. "Deal?"

"Deal."

Del Largo scribbled on a piece of paper, handed it to Adonis, and hoisted himself out of the chair.

"Don't do anything until I give you the green light. If it happens, it'll be short notice," Del Largo said, pulling the study door open and away from Marla's upraised hand.

"Jack! You scared me," Marla said and held up a menu. "Seared arctic char with pineapple crab salsa or carved porcini encrusted beef filet with mashed Yukon potatoes?"

Del Largo rolled his eyes and turned to Adonis. "I'll be in touch."

"Or," Marla went on, "petite filet mignon atop croutons with lemon butter shrimp..."

Adonis retraced his steps through the hallway arches, turned a corner and collided with the blonde in a white bikini. The centerfold from

the pool. Dripping wet. Adonis looked down and saw two prominent damp spots on his black T-shirt, just below the ribcage.

"I'm *so* sorry," she said with a molasses twang, turning dewy brown eyes up at him and inhaling sharply, like a swimmer come up for air.

"Don't apologize," he said, eyes locked on her heaving bosom.

"And who might you be?"

"I *might* be a movie star," he said with a sly grin. "Or I *might* be a U.S. Senator."

"Movie star, maybe. U.S. Senator, I don't think."

"Adonis Rock," he said, extending his hand. "Arborist."

"What in the world is an arborist?"

"Just a guy who trims trees. I was giving Mr. Del Largo an estimate."

"Raymona," she said, shaking his hand.

"Very nice to meet you," he said.

"Well, Adonis Rock," she drawled, "you can trim my bushes anytime."

"Trees."

"Un-huh," Raymona said, the tip of her tongue languidly tracing the contour of her pink lips.

She brushed past him and strutted down the hallway, reaching back to tug the white drawstring, liberating her bikini top as she vanished through a doorway.

Adonis shook his head. *Three years may be a stretch!*

Chapter Four

MAX BRADY WHEELED south on the beach road, letting the salt air wash away the stench of Gunther and Olga Klum's cindered dreams. Summer's sultry sauna season was over and the October air had a zesty bite. One of those sunny, serene days that felt good to be alive, if you let it.

Wavelets spooled onto the sand like tongues of liquid gold. A pod of dolphins bobbed languidly just off the beach. A pelican tilted low over them, then soared high and nose-dived into the sea, emerging seconds later with a breakfast fish thrashing in its bill.

Brady marveled at the metamorphosis Fort Lauderdale had undergone since he was a kid. Back then it was the Spring Break mecca, overrun by a locust-horde of college kids oozing hormones and Coppertone. An orgy of wet T-shirt contests, pillaged hotels, beer brawls, and cops carting rowdy students off to jail. *Come for vacation, leave on probation!* was the town's unofficial motto. Perfect place for a boy going through puberty.

After Brady went away to college—not to return for more than twenty years—the city's ruling class abolished the beach party and went upscale. Students were evicted and wrecking balls razed the seedy dives along A-I-A. A concrete canyon of condos and luxury hotels had risen in their footprints.

Max counted a dozen gantry cranes sprouting in the sky along the ocean like giant preying mantis. In an hour the air would be filled with dust and the rat-tat-tat of jackhammers.

For now, though, the beach was a placid paradise. Vendors setting out lounge chairs and jet skis beneath a throng of spindly coconut trees, their green fronds clapping in the timorous breeze like long slim fingers.

Brady steered along a low white wall curling the length of the beach, past sun bathers, water gazers, brown-skinned joggers, and rollerbladers with I-Pods plugged like stethoscopes in their ears. In the distance he could see the downtown skyscrapers jutting up like a cardboard movie set. Brady braked in front of *Sunny's* and leaned the Schwinn against a palm tree.

A smiling young woman with long golden hair stood on the sidewalk, serving tray in hand, her flawless figure on full display in a red thong bikini, red western boots, and red cowboy hat.

"What's the story, mornin' glory," Sunny Regan said.

"Just trying to break even, Sunshine," Brady said, taking a seat at an umbrella table a few feet from a young mother and father with two squirming little boys.

Sunny was the siren of Lauderdale Beach, a phosphorescent personality whose tiny bistro raked in a small fortune serving omelets and turkey wraps to tourists. But the main attraction was Sunny. Tourists paid five bucks to take pictures with her in her distinctive outfit, standing before the sign on the red canopy over her door: "*Sunny's*—*Tastes great and its goooood fer ya!*"

"The usual?" Sunny said.

"I'm feeling kinda untamed today," said Brady. "Make my toast rye instead of wheat."

"Max Brady, you are too wild," she said, scribbling his order, stopping twice to adjust the strap of her scant top. Walking inside, she looked back at him over her shoulder, forcing Max to keep his eyes on hers.

Two tables down, an elderly man was reading the *Miami Herald*, his brown skin cracked like old leather, long withered neck protruding from his shoulders like a tortoise from its shell.

"Morning, Max," he said without raising his eyes. "Don't enjoy my company anymore?"

"Morning, Jonas," Brady said. "Didn't want to disturb you're reading."

"Nonsense," said Jonas, clearing a spot in the shade. "Come sit."

Brady moved to Jonas Bigelow's table as Sunny emerged through double French doors beneath the red canopy with a steaming cup of coffee. Max saw lust flare in the old man's milky blue eyes, then fizzle like a spent roman candle.

"Now, Jonas," Sunny said, wagging her left forefinger at him, "don't start ranting at Max. He wants to enjoy the beautiful day and eat his breakfast without you harping about politics."

Brady looked at Sunny and they both shrugged and laughed. Silencing Jonas, they knew, was like trying to muzzle the sea. Max held up his cup and pointed at it.

"Best java on the beach," he said.

"Can't beat it with a stick," Sunny said.

Without looking back this time, she sashayed through the French doors and past three high-top tables littered with morning newspapers, both men eyeballing her every step until she'd disappeared behind the swinging kitchen door.

"Finest fanny on the beach," Jonas said, his eyes twinkling.

"Jonas, I'm shocked. Seventy-five years old. What would Betty do if she heard you?"

"I wouldn't live to see seventy-six," Jonas said, and they laughed.

But the good humor was fleeting. Max noticed Jonas's jaws clench, then heard the sound. Heard it before he saw it, the roar announcing the arrival two blocks ahead of the day's first giant cement truck thundering down the beach road, spewing a foul trail of acrid gray fumes in its wake.

"God damn them," Jonas said. "Greedy bastards! All they see are dollar signs."

Bigelow and his wife Betty owned the Coral Reef, one of a colony of mom-and-pop motels clustered in the central beach area. Jonas and a band of innkeepers and activists were fighting tooth-and-nail to stop the incursion of immense high-rises dwarfing their properties.

"They're destroying the beach, Max," said Jonas. "The breezy character is vanishing. They're turning us into a Vegas Strip on the ocean."

Brady nodded wordlessly, his rote response to Jonas's tirades.

"I know you don't want to get involved, Max," Jonas said, his voice rising, "but we need a good lawyer."

“Ex-lawyer,” Brady said. “Besides, Jonas, I’ve got enough problems of my own. I wouldn’t know what to do with yours.”

Jonas waved a hand at Max disgustedly. “Talking to you is like banging my head on the wall.”

“Don’t knock it. Head banging burns two hundred calories an hour.”

“It’s not funny, Max. You grew up on this beach. You know they’re destroying it. You should be up in arms more than any of us. If we don’t stop them, those buildings are gonna be around longer than dinosaur turds.”

“Times change, Jonas. The world changes. Buildings go up. Buildings come down,” Brady said, thinking, *yes, buildings do come down.*

“That’s a bunch of applesauce, Max.”

Brady studied the cantankerous old man for a long moment. Jonas was like a crazy uncle at Christmas dinner—prone to rant and rave—but Max was as fond of the curmudgeon and his wife as he was of Gunther and Olga.

“Jonas,” he said, “something terrible has happened.”

“What?” Bigelow said, an anxious look on his wrinkled face. “Did someone die?”

“Not that bad. But the Pelican’s Nest burned down this morning.”

“Oh, God, no!” Jonas said. “How are Olga or Gunther?”

Brady filled him in on the fire, Gunther’s burns, and that Olga and the Pelican Nest’s guests were unharmed.

“Damage?”

“Total.”

“Goddamnit,” he blurted. “What happened?”

“Don’t know. But Gunther doesn’t think it was an accident.”

“Arson?”

“I haven’t spoken to the fire marshal yet, but it could be.”

“Damn them,” Jonas said.

“Them? Them who?”

“Max, I know you think I’m a conspiracy nut, but I don’t believe in coincidences. The city’s handing out building permits for those monstrosities on silver platters. At the same time they try to squeeze us out. Jacking up our taxes. Crushing us with fines. Doing everything they can to run us off. Now they’re burning us out.”

Sunny came out with Max's breakfast in time to catch the tail end of the conversation.

"Fire?" she said, setting the plate in front of Brady. "Where?"

"The Pelican's Nest," Jonas said.

"No!" she said, clapping a hand to her mouth. "What about Olga and Gunther?"

"They're fine," Max said and repeated what he'd told Jonas.

"Those poor people," Sunny said, tears welling in her eyes.

"They were burned out," Jonas said.

"Jonas, you're jumping to conclusions," Max said.

"Really, my friend? Let me tell you something. Greed and corruption are as much forces of nature as gravity. These bastards will stoop to anything to get rid of us."

Tears were streaming down Sunny's cheeks. The beach community was a close knit group. Most of the small motel, restaurant, and shop owners knew each other and many were morning regulars at her sidewalk cafe.

"I'll put plates together for the Klums," Sunny said. "Jonas, can you drop them off on your way home?"

"Absolutely, dear. That's very thoughtful."

Sunny whisked back inside, a sense of purpose in her step, neither man watching her this time.

"Jonas," Brady said, considering the old man closely, "do you seriously believe the fire is part of some plot?"

"Max, this beach isn't all sunshine and bliss. The politicians and developers are in cahoots. We're like little Davids fighting Goliath."

Bigelow threw his newspaper on the table, jumped to his feet, and strode defiantly to his bicycle. At seventy-five, his step was as peppy as a vigorous man half his age.

"Those sonsabitches aren't gettin' away with this," he said.

Sunny came out and put a bag of food in Jonas's bike basket and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Give 'em hell, Jonas," Brady said, smiling as Bigelow rode off down the beach.

"Goddamned right I will," he shouted back. "Those bastards are gonna wish they'd never heard of Jonas Bigelow."

Chapter Five

BRADY FINISHED BREAKFAST, left Sunny a handsome tip, and pushed his bike a half block to the Sea Shanty, a no frills beach bar for people with sand between their toes. The sign on the door said it all: *No shoes, no shirts, no problem!* The Shanty had an L-shaped teak bar, a dozen wooden stools, and six small tables. The walls were adorned with pirate flags, ship lanterns, a 16th Century Seminole dugout canoe, and Max's old Dewey Weber surfboard.

There were photographs of his late parents, John and Mary Brady; Duke Kahanamoku, the legendary father of surfing; and an old black man with a black-and-white monkey perched on his shoulder.

On the outside wall facing the beach was a small courtyard enclosed on three sides, with a coral waterfall, several palms, a big twisty banyan tree and a beach sand floor where patrons could dig their feet in, sip beer in the shade, and watch the waves roll in across the street.

Brady switched on one of three televisions hanging from the walls and clicked to the Weather Channel, listening while he checked his ice bins and emptied the dishwasher.

"We have the 10 a.m. National Weather Service bulletin on Hurricane Phyllis," said an attractive blonde female meteorologist standing in front of a satellite map of the Caribbean. "The center of the storm was located near Latitude 18.1 North, Longitude 84.7 West, or about 215 miles southeast of Cozumel. Maximum sustained winds remain near 150 miles per hour, making Phyllis an extremely powerful Category Four hurricane on the Saffir-Simpson Scale. After passing

the Yucatan and making an expected turn north toward Cuba and southern Florida she is likely to gain intensity.”

Another storm, Brady thought. Just what we need.

Max spent the next hour preparing the day's fare. Cuisine was strictly pub grub: boiled shrimp, shucked oysters, chicken wings, and the house specialty—gumbo. He made a fresh batch daily, dicing fish, chicken, shrimp, sausage, okra into a giant pot with garlic, Cajun seasonings, crushed tomatoes and the proper amount of chicken bouillon that he covered and set to simmer over a low flame on the gas stove.

Then he slipped on a pair of size thirteen New Balances and set off on his *bikini run*. It was based on the carrot-and-stick theory. By following the trail of sandy-bottomed girls lazing on the beach, Brady could finish his daily six-mile jaunt with relative ease.

The sun vibrated overhead as he jogged down A-1-A, sniffing an olfactory stew of sunscreen, salt water, and deep-fry clams boiling in oil at Beachcombers Grill. Further down, construction sites were in full swing, lunchpail Lothario's in hard hats, scaling scaffolds, pouring concrete, and directing a steady stream of wolf whistles at girls on the beach.

Brady turned left at Playa del Sol and trotted to the smoldering remains of the Pelican's Nest. The place looked like carnage from a military attack. Only one fire truck remained. Three firefighters sifted through debris while another wielding a hose drowned the remaining smoky spots. Black water dripped from blistered coal-colored beams that once supported the roof, falling like sluggish tears onto the twisted ruins of the first floor, seeping from the rubble into the grim morass that had been a swimming pool.

A few onlookers gawked from across the street, but the Klums were gone. Max had called Victor Gruber who, as he expected, insisted Gunther and Olga come to stay with him. Victor's manservant, Charles, had apparently fetched them in the Bentley..

“Busy morning?” Brady said to a tall man with a grimy face.

Captain John McCarty, a Fort Lauderdale fire investigator, turned and grinned. Brady had known him since he opened the Shanty. At the time, McCarty was head honcho at the beach fire station. He had honest brown eyes and a boyish face betrayed only by a sprinkle of pewter that dappled the brown hair scaling his temples like harbingers

of middle-age. McCarty wore knee-high yellow rubber boots, latex gloves, and held three silver paint cans.

"I heard you were here earlier, Max," he said. "I didn't see you."

"Didn't want to get in the way, John. I was more concerned about the Klums."

"Damned shame."

"Whatcha got?" Brady asked.

McCarty held up the silver cans. "Collecting samples," he said. "Bedding, plaster, pieces of furniture."

"Figured out what triggered this thing yet?"

"The run-off water has a rainbow sheen," McCarty said, setting the cans in the back of a red Fire Investigation Unit van. "That usually indicates the presence of an accelerant, probably a petroleum distillate."

"Such as?"

"Could be mineral spirits or turpentine, but my bet is gasoline. One cup of 90 octane properly packaged can be as explosive as four sticks of dynamite."

"Any idea how this was packaged?"

"Answer's up there in the ashes," McCarty said, pointing to one of the fire-gutted rooms on the second floor. "At the source I found pieces of melted blue plastic. Seems to be from some sort of canister. Gave it the sniff test. Smells like it might have been a fuel container. Costco and Home Depot sell them by the thousands."

"Arson?" Brady said, palming beads of sweat off his forehead.

"We found a charred hotplate in the same room. It might have been used to ignite the accelerant. I won't know for sure until we run this stuff through a gas chromatograph flame ionization detector."

"Ouch," Brady said. "You're hurting my brain."

"Sorry, Max," the fire investigator said with a tired grin. "We're gonna do some tests."

"Seems like of a crude way to start a fire."

"Crude, but effective. When the accelerant explodes, flames spray in every direction. By the time our trucks got here the place was burning faster than my ex-wife's cooking. Beyond gone."

"Any suspects?"

Brady expected to hear McCarty say, "too early to tell," but the investigator hesitated. The look in his eyes made Max wonder if he already had a perpetrator in mind.

"Arson's tough," McCarty said, a slight smile cracking his sooty face. "Countrywide, we get a half-million a year. Less than one-fifth of them result in arrest."

"Good non-answer answer," Brady said, but didn't press further. Some secrets, he knew from experience, were best left untold until the time was ripe.

McCarty slammed the van doors closed. "The guests look clean. Mostly tourists here for a week in the sun. Your friends the Klums don't seem suspicious either."

"I can vouch for them, John."

"Owners are always the prime suspects in arsons," he said. "But I interviewed them. They seem genuinely distraught. No signs of deception. They said the place was turning a healthy profit. And they appear to be financially comfortable."

"They're good people," Brady said.

"Motel wasn't for sale. No new insurance policies. No *apparent* motives."

"Firebug?"

"Pyromaniac's burn out of obsession. Often sexual. This looks like a pro."

"Why would a professional arsonist torch a mom-and-pop motel like this?"

"That, my friend, is the million dollar mystery," said McCarty.

"Probably more like two or three million," Brady said.

"You tell me. You're the cop."

"Ex-cop."

"Well, give me a call if you think of anything."

"Likewise. Drop by the Shanty for a beer."

"Better yet, a beer and bowl of gumbo."

"You're on."

Chapter Six

JACK DEL LARGO WADDLED up the gangplank and onto the deck, stopping to catch his breath and wipe dribblets of sweat from his florid brow. He scanned the yacht, thinking: *Someday I'm going to have a boat like this.* His dream was to sail to a tropical island, live on fruit and fish until he was skinny, and nuzzle a native girl under a coconut tree.

Like Van Gogh or Monet or one of those French fucks. Marla was not part of his fantasy.

"Welcome aboard the Shangri-La, Mr. Del Largo," said a velvety and slightly breathless voice.

Del Largo looked up and gulped for air again, his extra chins jiggling like rooster wattle. Tiffani Bandeaux had that effect on men. Bandeaux was almost six feet tall, with jade eyes, a ravishing physique, and satiny auburn hair that reached her buttocks. She reminded Del Largo of a thoroughbred racehorse raring to run. *Scratch the native girl,* he thought. *I'll take Tiffani.*

"Tiffani, my dear," he said, patting a hanky over his forehead, his eyes feasting on her, "you are a walking aphrodisiac. I would love to take you on a Caribbean cruise."

Del Largo leaned over to kiss her hand as gallantly as a 300-pound man could.

"Would your wife be with us?" Tiffani said in a confidential tone laced with an inflection of possibility.

"Oh, no, dear," said Del Largo, hopeful. "It would be just us."

"Won't she mind?"

"Who's gonna care a hundred years from now?"

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Steele forbids us from consorting with business associates."

"Mr. Steele need not know."

"He knows everything," Tiffani said.

Del Largo suppressed a grin, thinking, *if that preening cocksucker knew everything, he wouldn't need me.*

"In fact, Mr. Steele knows you're here," Tiffani said. Del Largo looked at her, wondering if she was reading his mind. "He's in the main salon. Would you like a drink?"

"Do fish like water? *Chopin* on the rocks."

It was not yet noon, but Del Largo's appetite for spirits was ravenous and, no matter the hour, he could soak up vodka like a dry sponge. Tiffani moved down the companionway with the grace of a Spanish dancer, Jack following, his belly quivering like a vat of orange marmalade, eyes fastened on her perfect teardrop derriere encased in snug white slacks, realizing, with another sharp intake of breath, she wasn't wearing panties.

Bandeaux and the Shangri-La were a perfect match. Both had majestic lines and symmetry. The yacht was a gleaming 223-foot three-decker, navy blue hull, scads of teak and brass, five staterooms, formal dining room, theater, discothèque, gym, Jacuzzi, two jet skis, a 20-foot Chaparral dinghy with twin 200-horse Mercury engines, and a Bell 427 helicopter on deck.

Sherwood Steele was stretched out on a buff leather chaise lounge. He was as long and lean as Del Largo was short and fat, with a deep oily tan and a tongue of bottle-black hair lacquered into a "V" over his forehead. But his most striking feature was a pair of barren black eyes that reminded Del Largo of a shark.

"Jack, come in. Sit down," Steele said in a gravelly voice, without getting up. Tiffani handed him a bottle of vitamin water and, to Del Largo, a tumbler of vodka.

"Will there be anything more, Sherwood?" she asked.

"Tell Hendricks to have the bird ready in 30 minutes."

Prick's got more flunkies than Trump's had girlfriends, Del Largo thought, smiling to himself, knowing Steele conducted business like

he'd read the instructions on a Donald Trump Cereal box. Trump's brand was Trump. Steele's was Shangri-La. It was on everything he owned. *I wonder if he's got it tattooed on Tiffani's ass.* Del Largo's breath quickened at the notion of Bandeaux's naked white bottom.

Steele turned to him, his white teeth flashing a mirthless smile. "How we doing?" he said.

"Making headway," Del Largo said, savoring his day's first mouthful of firewater.

"I don't want to hear *headway*." Steele's black shark eyes bored into Del Largo. "I want to hear *mission accomplished*."

"We're going as fast as we can, Sherwood. I don't want to raise red flags. We've got some holdouts."

"What's this holdout shit? Isn't that why we're paying our friends a fucking fortune?"

"Well, Sherwood, our friends aren't earning their money."

"Whadya mean, ya fat fuck!" Steele said, glaring at the lawyer.

Del Largo felt his ears burn, hoping they weren't turning scarlet, feeling the cruel eyes on him, demanding to be met. He averted his gaze to the ice cubes melting in his glass.

"Look at me!" Steele snapped, jumping to his feet, jaw muscles bulging like rubber balls.

Del Largo, powerless to resist, turned his head feebly up at Steele's unctuous face, feeling like a fat kid again being humiliated by the playground bully. Steele, he knew, was a tyrant by nature, but kept tight rein on his Pavlovian instincts, rarely raising his voice, preferring to administer his malice with cool calculation. Osama Bin Laden showed more emotion on his videotapes.

"You're supposed to be the best-connected lawyer in Fort Lauderdale," Steele said, sneering down at him. "Don't I pay you a lotta fucking money?"

"Sure, Sherwood, sure you do," Del Largo said, squirming, the chair groaning beneath him. "And I work hard for you. You know I do."

"I know results. And I'm not getting them. Everything's riding on this. If it doesn't happen soon, I go down hard. And you go with me. And so do our *friends*."

"Don't worry, Sherwood. We're gonna get it done. It's gonna be okay."

"Follow me," Steele ordered and abruptly exited the salon.

Del Largo labored to his feet and plodded after Steele down a passageway carpeted by a llama skin rug shaggy enough to hide a Shih Tzu. *The guy's ice*, Del Largo thought. *Leveraged to his ears and living like the Sultan of Burundi, or Brunei, or wherever the fuck that guy's from.*

They entered a cabin at the center of which sat a large scale model of Fort Lauderdale Beach. *Shangri-La Resort* was inscribed in gold over an ersatz blue Atlantic bordered by white beach. Every hotel and motel between the ocean and Intracoastal was represented. A black band surrounded a four-block tract like a cummerbund. Yellow patches covered three-quarters of the parcels inside it and red squares overlaid the rest.

"Don't you understand what I'm trying to accomplish, Jack?" Steele said, an incandescent glow in his black eyes as they pored over the model.

"Sure I do, Sherwood."

"This will be the most opulent resort in Florida. And the biggest. It's like I'm building a goddamned mountain. I can't afford barriers. I can't afford delays. I need these red parcels to turn yellow by yesterday."

Del Largo pointed to a red square on Playa del Sol. "This'll be yellow soon, Sherwood."

"The smoke?" Steele said. "What makes you think so?"

"No brainer. They'll collect a boatload of insurance. Our friends can throw roadblocks at them to delay reconstruction two years, maybe three. They'd be crazy not to sell."

"Get it done," Steele said.

"This is the domino we've been waiting to fall, Sherwood," Del Largo said, trying to keep eye contact with Steele's predatory glower. "With them gone the others will cave."

"They better," Steele said and smiled. Del Largo felt his blood curdle. The smile was treacherous as a diamondback's rattle and, Jack knew, whenever he bared it he was coiled to strike. "Who's next?"

Chapter Seven

THE DAY WAS PERFECT for Max Brady's bikini run. Puffy white clouds sailed across a bluebonnet sky. A cool breeze blew off the ocean like a refreshing tonic. And the sand was dotted with plenty enough flat-belly girls to get him to one end of the beach and back.

Brady hit the Elbo Room at Las Olas and sprinted the last block. Breathing hard, he shucked shoes and T-shirt and waded into the tepid sapphire surf, laving the sweat from his body, then diving headlong and swimming with a powerful stroke, not stopping until he reached the basketball courts across from Bahia Mar Marina a half-mile down the beach. He floated for long minutes in knee deep water, letting the waves wash over him like children's laughter.

Sandpipers skittered along water's edge, leaving tiny hieroglyphs in wet sand, oblivious to Max stumbling from the ocean. Brady doo-dled back down the beach, skipping stones and catching up on his people watching.

Two little girls tossing crackers to a flock of seagulls chittering in midair. A group of Latino men strumming guitars, drinking cerveza, and grilling pork under a coconut tree, their women lazing in the shallows, vigilant eyes on a gaggle of naked toddlers chasing each other ecstatically in the sand.

A small plane caracoled overhead towing a banner ballyhooing "Ladies Night" at a local club. Max crossed the beach to a sidewalk shower and rinsed the salt from his skin, then flopped across the street on bare wet clown-sized feet, walked a half-block and ducked into a

doorway. He sprang up three flights of stairs to the Papillon Gym on the roof of the same building that housed the Sea Shanty.

"Getting a little gut, Brady?" said Rose Becker, the gym's proprietress.

Rose was quite an eyeful. Wholesome as an apple, she had long pitch-black hair, eyes blue as the Gulfstream, and the shapely, athletic physique of a fitness maven.

"Gut?" Max protested, assuming a body-builder's pose and pulling up his shirt to expose his bare belly. "Six three, one-eighty, abs of steel."

"More like abs of butter," she said with an impish gleam.

"Butter?" said Brady, wounded. "They're at least hard as toast!"

"You better hit the iron, buddy."

Rose was something of a local heroine. To some, Joan of Arc incarnate. Anointed leader of *SOB*—or *Save Our Beach*—a resistance group fighting developers and politicians bent on plundering the oceanfront. Jonas Bigelow and Gunther Klum had persuaded her to run for mayor of Fort Lauderdale. Her odds of winning were somewhere between nada and nil, but she was campaigning hard. Despite a lissome figure—plainly apparent in her spandex shorts and butterfly T-shirt—Rose was no fragile flower. She had a clear-eyed steadiness about her that Brady was drawn to.

"You plan to wear that outfit at City Hall?" he said.

"Why not? I certainly won't be giving up the gym after my election."

"Good. Then I won't have far to walk to complain."

"Brady, you've got to earn the right to complain," she said, hands on hips, not smiling. "You just stand back and let it all be."

"Springsteen. *Jungleland*. Right?"

"Yeah, right," Rose said and walked off to tend to a lumpy older woman who looked like she'd never been inside a gym before.

Brady went through his usual rigorous thirty-minute routine of curls, presses, and belly crunches. With his daily run and swim, it was enough to keep him in decent enough shape for a 42-year-old, despite Rose's mockery. He was on his way out the door when Rose was finishing with the old lady, who looked like she'd just spent a half-hour on the torture rack.

“Are you related to a guy named Torquemada?” Brady said to Rose. “If you happen to lose the election, I hear Guantanamo’s looking for a new Grand Inquisitor.”

“Very funny,” she said with a tart smile.

“See you later, Rosie.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a promise,” Max said, then noticed a cloud pass across Rose’s face.

“Brady, what happened to the Pelican’s Nest?”

In addition to being card-carrying members of SOB, Olga and Gunther Klum were regulars at the Papillon Gym. Brady told her what happened and that it looked like arson.

“Why would anyone hurt those sweet people?” she said.

“The fire investigator doesn’t think it was intended to harm them physically. But why someone wanted to destroy the motel, I have no clue. John McCarty’s a good man. He’ll get to the bottom of it.”

Rose was standing at the door of a large greenhouse she’d had built on the rooftop overlooking the ocean. Even though she was a physical trainer, her degree was in zoology, with a specialty in lepidoptery—butterflies.

Hence, the Papillon Gym. Rose maintained the butterfly was the perfect symbol for a health club, a place people came to transform, like caterpillars that mutate into exquisite winged creatures.

“Want to see something special?” she said.

“I’ve really gotta go...”

“Follow me,” Rose said, ignoring his balkiness.

Brady dutifully obeyed and trailed her into the greenhouse. It was another world, a lush, verdant magic garden bursting with all manner of orchid, hibiscus, and bougainvillea representing every stripe in the rainbow. The air was redolent with exotic perfume and Max inhaled deeply while hundreds of butterflies danced about, chasing one another blithely from blossom to blossom, reminding Brady of the giggling children he’d just watched on the beach.

“The orange and black ones with white spots on their wings are Monarchs,” Rose said, pointing to two butterflies fluttering among a cluster of honeysuckle. “The yellow and blacks are Tiger Swallowtails. Then there’s the Zebra Swallowtails, the black and white ones.”

"What do you feed them?" said Brady, who knew nothing about butterflies except they were pretty and harmless.

"They suck nectar from the flowers through a proboscis that winds in and out like a garden hose."

"That's gotta be tasty."

"Butterflies taste with their feet."

"How the heck do they do that?"

"Don't worry about it, Brady. Just take a look at my newest specimen."

Rose picked up an enormous creature with broad brown wings and white markings, a cream-colored body, and a red tuft on its throat as dense as fur.

"Wow!" Brady said. "I didn't know you were raising condors."

"It's a Queen Alexandra Birdwing, the world's largest butterfly. Most Lepidoptera have wingspans of three-to-five inches. The Queen Alexandra is more than twelve inches across," Rose said, holding it gently as a newborn baby. "I had a dozen shipped here from New Guinea."

"He's absolutely beautiful," Brady said.

"*She*," Rose said. "Beautiful, yes. But looks can be deceiving."

"How so?"

"She's lethal as a black widow spider."

"I didn't know butterflies bite," Max said with a trace of shock. "Do they bark too?"

"They don't bark and they don't bite."

"*Dancing in the Moonlight* by King Harvest," Brady blurted. "Right?"

Rose looked down her straight aristocratic nose at him like a schoolmarm glaring at the class clown.

"Sorry, Miss Becker. Sometimes I can't control myself," he said with genuinely feigned contrition. "How do they kill if they don't bite?"

"Queen Alexandra's are poisonous. Eat one and you die," she said, the giant insect fluttering in her palms

"I'm glad you told me," Brady said. "I was thinking about putting them on the *Shanty* menu. They're bigger than chickens."

"Don't be silly, Brady! People don't eat butterflies. Predators do. Mainly birds. Eat one and they die. It's a built-in defense system

that protects the species. You know, survival of the fittest. Darwin. Evolution.”

“Didn’t the Supreme Court declare that unconstitutional?”

“Right,” Rose said with deadpan face. She released the immense butterfly and closed the greenhouse door.

“Well, Rose,” Brady said. He was standing close to her. She smelled fresh as new mowed grass. “Hate to cut and run from entomology class, but I gotta go before my gumbo burns.”

“See you later?” Rose said.

Brady was about to ask if that was a threat, but stopped cold. Rose was looking at him with eyes as serene as a forest at dusk and, for a heartbeat, their gazes locked.

Max descended the stairs, wondering what had just happened. Halfway down he passed a muscular man approximately his height, but about ten years younger. Brady had seen him in the gym before. His long blonde hair and square jaw reminded Max of the model Fabio, if he overlooked the work boots, cut-off shorts, and a dirty black tank top. Judging by his swollen biceps and deltoids, Fabio spent a lot more time pumping iron. *Fanatic!* Brady thought. They nodded to the other. Something about the man ignited an uneasy flicker inside Max—but exactly what it was he couldn’t put a name to.

Chapter Eight

NORMAN EPSTEIN REMEMBERED his own death like it happened yesterday. He sat in his 50th-floor penthouse office, head propped bleakly in his hands, oblivious to the magnificent day outside his window. Instead, he watched himself take a slow motion swan dive off the balcony through a world—his world—as black as midnight.

Epstein was short and slim as a knife with skin the color of unbaked biscuit dough. His oversized spectacles and shirt-pocket pencil holder made him look more like a high school geometry teacher than CEO of one of America's fastest growing banks.

When Sherwood Steele founded the South Florida National Bank five years before, Epstein was a midlevel manager at Steele's former bank. Despite his milquetoast personality—or perhaps because of it—Steele christened him captain of his new ship. He proved to be an inspired choice.

SFNB was riding the crest of Florida's spectacular real estate boom, financing huge condo projects, office towers, shopping malls, and many of the opulent homes that lined the waterfront. From his lofty perch he could see construction cranes soaring in every direction, most financed by SFNB capital. It should have been a sight for Epstein to savor. But he knew he was looking at the seeds of destruction—SFNB's and his own. The bank's ascension had been a product of the times, the rising tide lifting all boats. The tide had shifted, though, and Epstein didn't need a Ouija board to tell him his ship was being driven inexorably into an iceberg. The bank was as doomed as the Titanic.

The boom was being powered by the same riverboat gamblers behind every economic bubble from 17th Century tulipmania to the dot.com frenzy of the 1990s. After the high tech balloon burst, real estate became the next big thing. Quick money junkies bought and sold property like day traders, borrowing hand over fist, flipping land faster than TV poker players flip cards. And everything came up aces. Prices shot to the stratosphere. Speculators raked in huge pots, then dove back in for more, as if the gravy train would never end.

But Epstein had been counting the cards. The aces were all played and the deck was now stacked with jokers. He'd done the math a thousand times. South Florida was about to be swamped with 80,000 new condo units, most bought pre-construction by speculators. The market would soon be saturated, prices would plummet, and the gamblers who would jump ship like rats, leaving him to go down with the boat. South Florida National Bank was holding ten billion dollars in bad paper. Much of it belonged to Sherwood Steele, who treated SFNB like his own personal piggybank.

The despair was eating Epstein alive. He'd kept the bank afloat by fudging, juggling, and outright fabrication. He knew, though, it wouldn't be long before he felt the hot breath of federal regulators. Like a cancer patient prays for remission, Epstein prayed for a miracle. But he didn't delude himself as he imagined again leaping off the balcony into thin air.

Chapter Nine

THE SEA SHANTY was thick with the savory aroma of gumbo. Max Brady ducked into the tiny galley behind the bar and lifted the hood from a brimming black kettle, ladled out a spoonful of the chowder, and tasted.

“Perfect,” he said to himself and switched off the rickety stove.

Brady began turning the TVs to ESPN for the lunch crowd, mostly men who worked on yachts and dive boats at Bahia Mar Marina. Later the *soggy dollars* would wander in off the beach in flip-flops and bathing suits, order fruity drinks, and pay with cash soaked in salt water. Late afternoon was mainly off-duty lifeguards and beach workers who drank beer and watched technicolor sunsets from beneath the banyan tree.

Spinning through the channels, Brady stopped when he saw video of flames and smoke against a platinum sky. It was the Pelican’s Nest fire. Gunther and Olga, identified as “the motel’s longtime owners,” stood by helpless, her head on his shoulder, tears streaming. When the video ended, an attractive female reporter, Sylvia Sanchez, appeared standing before the smoldering shell.

“Investigators say the blaze appears to be a case of arson,” she said, “but they’re baffled over why someone would burn down this motel. Gunther and Olga Klum are fixtures in the beach community and appear devastated by the destruction of the motel they have called home for three decades. I’m Sylvia Sanchez, reporting live from Lauderdale Beach.”

Just before noon, Brady opened the Sea Shanty's doors and let the pungent bouquet of broiling chicken and gumbo drift like bait out over the sidewalk. Within minutes he'd hooked his first customer, the guy from Rose's gym—Fabio.

"I know you," Brady said. Fabio tensed and shot a vigilant look at him. Max watched as the man tried to place him. Finally, he said, "From the Papillon."

The man's wariness melted and was quickly replaced by an engaging smile.

"I'm there every day, usually in the afternoon. Had some free time this morning so I got in my workout early," he said, sticking out his hand. "Adonis Rock."

"Max Brady," he said, gripping Rock's hand an extra second, estimating him, taking his measure.

Max detected something peculiar about Rock, just as he had on the stairs. He had brawny brown shoulders and the muscled, well-defined chest of a trained athlete. But there also seemed to be some anomaly, something off-kilter, or maybe absent. His eyes were vivid blue, but a touch too close together. He was exceptionally handsome, with a salient jaw and high cheekbones, but seemed a bit of a peacock. He could have been a fashion model or movie action hero, one of those powerful blonde Aryan types who don't say much, yet attract women like a cozy featherbed on an arctic night. There was something else, though.

The *Semper Fi* tattoo on his forearm? The deep lines around young eyes? The guarded way he carried himself?

Brady's antenna was picking up something, but the picture remained fuzzy.

"Rose recommended your place," Adonis Rock said.

"Oh-oh," Brady said. "Now I owe her another margarita referral fee. I think she's up to twenty now. Good thing she's a Shirley Temple kinda girl."

"Rosie don't need no alcohol," Rock said with a cool assurance that crossed the border into cockiness. "She's a smoking piece of ass just the way she is."

Brady was taken aback by the remark. Crude talk about women was as common in bars as tequila shots, but hearing Rose referred to

like that irked him. He wondered if it was macho bombast, or if there was something between her and Mr. Beefcake. Whatever, his reaction surprised him, and he wasn't sure why.

"Rose said you serve a nasty bowl of gumbo."

"It's what I do," said Brady, his voice flat, not gruff, but not congenial either. "Five bucks for a bowl and a beer."

"Sign me up."

By noon every stool at the bar was occupied. The jukebox was blasting The Eagles singing *Take It Easy* and Adonis Rock was on his second bowl of gumbo when Jonas Bigelow came in looking as exuberant as a kid on Christmas Eve. The stool next to Adonis opened up and Jonas grabbed it. Brady poured him a Sam Adams.

"Why so excited, Jonas?" Max asked.

"Rose and I are going to City Hall," he said, his eyes like blue beacons beaming from a parched brown desert. "We're gonna rip the bastards for being in the developers' pockets."

"Watch out or you're gonna get hit with a libel suit."

Jonas bolted from his seat and thrust his face at Brady across the bar. "Sue, sue, sue!" he shouted, exploding like a storm without warning. "Is that the only pabulum you lawyers know how to serve?"

Max smiled at the old man. Despite a hair-trigger temper, Jonas was less threatening than a furniture leg in the dark.

"Ex-lawyer," Brady said, setting a bowl of gumbo in front of him. "This is the only pabulum I serve now. Of course, I do offer side orders of saloon psycho-babble."

Jonas sat back with a contrite smile on his lips, his tantrum come and gone faster than a dust devil.

"Max," he said, "I think Gunther and Olga are gonna need some psychic massaging. The TV news says it was arson."

"I saw."

"I blame those sons-a-bitches at City Hall," Jonas said with another burst of fury, then began attacking his food.

Max noticed Adonis Rock next to him, eating with languid disinterest, not listening, or at least pretending not to, he presumed out of politeness. *Maybe he's not such a jerk.*

"I told you, Max," Jonas said between bites. "They've been trying to run us out. Now they're burning us out."

Rock got to his feet, his second bowl of gumbo only half eaten. He pulled a thick roll of cash from his pocket and skinned off a ten and two singles.

“Good vittles,” he said with a nod to Max, throwing the money on the bar. “Just as advertised.”

“We aim to please. Y’all come back now.”

Brady watched Adonis walk out, triceps rippling beneath smooth gold sun-tinted skin, blonde locks falling down his back.

“That guy looks like the model,” Jonas said, turning his head. “What’s his name?”

“Fabio,” said Brady.

“Yeah, the guy on the covers of those potboilers Betty reads.”

Max grinned at Jonas. “Did you know studies show women who read romance novels have sex twice as often as other women?”

“They must not’ve been counting Betty,” Jonas said with a chuckle.

Adonis Rock crossed the street and slid into a battered red pick-up truck with Yardbird painted on the side. He backed up and started to drive off when Max saw him peer back over his shoulder at the Shanty. Then it hit him. He realized what it was his internal radar had been picking up.

“Big guy,” Jonas said, gouging a spoonful of gumbo into his mouth. “Must get tons of pussy.”

Chapter Ten

THE BIG ROOM had the feel of a Star Wars bar, packed with an odd assortment of characters, some in business suits, others in Bermuda shorts and polo shirts, and a band of twenty or so sporting cardboard hats shaped like mushrooms. They faced a horseshoe table at the front of the room. At the center of the U sat a thickset man with a bulldog face and nose that looked like it had been pickled in whiskey.

“The meeting will come to order,” David Grand said with a bang of his gavel. “This is the Fort Lauderdale City Commission’s final hearing on the Sun Palace.”

Grand fancied himself a consummate politician, often joking he’d been voted president of his maternity ward at two days of age. He was, in fact, a master at the scurvy art of speaking *ad nauseam* about almost anything and saying absolutely nothing. And as mayor Grand had not done much more than that, but he’d done it well—at least on behalf of the city’s powerful development community, whose lavish support had put him in office. Grand’s chief qualification was that he, too, was a builder. And he’d rolled out the red carpet for his peers, rubber stamping billions of dollars in new construction that had transformed the city skyline. The Sun Palace was the latest. When it was approved—there was no *if*—the hotel/condominium would soar 300 feet over the beach.

“The Sun Palace,” Mayor Grand said, “is a proposed five star resort complex on A-I-A between Surfside and Cabana Streets. Today is the final vote on this excellent project. First we’ll hear comments.

I am happy to see Mr. Robert Langston, the distinguished CEO of the Florida Millennium Group, developer of the Sun Palace. Mr. Langston?”

Robert Langston approached the podium, a tall, tanned, silver-haired man attired in an impeccable camel-colored suit, white shirt, and yellow tie.

“I used to know a guy named Langston,” Jonas Bigelow whispered to Rose Becker. They both wore mushroom hats, emblems that the beach was being destroyed by the veil of shadows cast by all the new towers. “He was full of applesauce and this guy is, too. I bet he’s got dollar signs stenciled on his balls in India ink!”

Langston flashed a mouthful of white teeth that stood out like Chiclets against his bronzed skin. “Eighteen months from now,” he said in a silken voice, “the Sun Palace will open its doors as the biggest and best hotel on Fort Lauderdale Beach. With 400 rooms, three first class restaurants, and the largest swimming pool in South Florida, it will be a mecca for visitors from around the world. The Sun Palace will create hundreds of new jobs and pump tens of millions of dollars into the local economy. We see it as a win-win for Fort Lauderdale and the Florida Millennium Group.”

“Thank you, Mr. Langston,” David Grand said. “In my opinion the Sun Palace will be a radiant gem the whole city will be proud of.”

“Bullshit,” someone yelled from the crowd.

“You’re killing the beach,” another voice shouted.

A babble of rebellious sound came from the mushroom people.

“*Silence!*” Grand bellowed and slammed his gavel. A frosty stillness filled the room. “Anyone who speaks without being recognized will be ejected.”

The mayor called on the head of the city Business Alliance, a tiny man with an egg-shaped cranium that reminded Rose of Humpty Dumpty, who gushed and bubbled over the Sun Palace like a mountain brook. Several more suits came forward from banks, labor unions and tourism boards to praise the project before Grand ended the love fest.

“The time has come for the final vote on the Sun Palace,” he said.

“Wait a minute,” a mushroom shouted.

“This is a sham,” another said.

"The fix is in," someone hollered and the mushroom people began chanting in unison, "*Fix! Fix! Fix!*"

"*Quiet,*" the mayor yelled, red-faced, hammering the horseshoe table.

Rose Becker lurched from her seat and ran to the front of the room, her toadstool hat swaying like a chef's chapeau.

"Those bootlicks aren't the public," she hollered, her fellow mushrooms howling support. "We're the public! We demand to be heard."

"Public commentary is over," Grand said, his eyebrows arched like cat hackles.

"Don't you dare call that yammering public commentary," Rose shot back.

"Take your seat, Miss, or I will have you removed."

"Don't *miss* me, Mayor," Rose said. "You know exactly who I am."

"I know the newspapers call you *Madame Butterfly!*" Grand said. "Because you're as flighty as a butterfly."

"She's the butterfly who's gonna take your job," Jonas called out to more hurrahs.

"*Fix! Fix! Fix!*"

The mayor looked down at Rose like a wrathful god, front teeth biting his lower lip so hard they left two white gashes. Rose took great delight knowing she rubbed him raw as sandpaper. Grand raised his palms in a cease and desist motion until the hurly-burly mob simmered.

"Okay," he finally sighed with a tone of resignation, removing his wire-rimmed spectacles to massage red pockmarks on either side of his veined nose. "You've got two minutes. Step to the microphone and state your name."

"Rose Becker," she said from the pulpit, "owner of the Papillon Gym, leader of the SOBs, and the next mayor of Fort Lauderdale."

The crowd went wild. Grand scowled like a dog with a thorn in its paw.

"No campaign speeches," the mayor said. "The clock's ticking."

"I'll get right to the point. Mayor Grand, you and your cronies are selling this city down the drain."

"That's outrageous," Grand said.

“Please don’t cut into my time,” Rose said. “You are turning Fort Lauderdale Beach into a shadow world. Every afternoon the sun disappears behind those 25 and 30 story atrocities you’ve already allowed.”

“If *Madame Butterfly* had her way,” the mayor said, “we’d still be a mosquito infested swamp inhabited by Seminoles – and I don’t mean FSU Seminoles.”

“I’m not trying to turn back the clock,” Rose said, pivoting to face the audience. “I’m trying to prevent a murder. These atrocities are killing the golden goose. They are killing our beach. That’s what makes Fort Lauderdale such a magnificent jewel.”

A stone-faced man was sitting to Grand’s left wearing a plaid jacket, pencil-thin mustache, and bad toupee. To his right a woman with severe red lips, a snarl of copper hair, and a face with more crinkles than a prom dress the morning after. The troika of Mayor Grand and Commissioners Jarrett Griffin and Anita Plante voted together on every issue and controlled the five-member commission and, thus, all development in Fort Lauderdale.

“Miss Becker,” Jarrett Griffin said with a smarmy smile, “thanks to world class hotels like the Sun Palace this city has become a tourist mecca. Do you realize we had ten million visitors last year who spent eight billion dollars here? That’s three times more than a decade ago.”

“But these atrocities are turning the beach into a concrete jungle. The beach is being blanketed by more shadows than sunshine.”

“These *atrocities*, as you call them,” Griffin said, “are paying the salaries of thousands of school teachers, policemen, and firefighters. That’s fact.”

“The fact is,” Rose shouted, “these developers that you and Mrs. Plante and the mayor have sold out to are decimating our beach.”

“I’m not in anyone’s pocket,” Grand said, his anger flaring like fat dripping on a fire.

“Look at the numbers,” Rose said. “Builders have pumped a quarter-million dollars into your campaign chest. I think they’re getting their money’s worth.”

The mushrooms jumped to their feet screaming invectives. Robert Langston’s suntan seemed to grow two shades lighter and Humpty

Dumpty's face turned solemn as a death mask. David Grand looked like he was being poked with a cattle prod.

"That's it, young lady," he said and motioned to the back of the room. "Officer Dent, get her out of here."

"You can kick me out, Mayor Grand," Rose said, "but you can't shut me up."

Rose felt something clench her elbow like an iron claw. She winced and turned and gasped. A big man with thick-shoulders and a shaved head scowled at her, his lips curled exposing nicotine stained teeth, the odor of old sweat surrounding him like stale perfume.

"Let's go, lady," Officer Dent said in a trombone voice as deep as Darth Vader's.

"You're hurting me. Let go!" Rose said, shrinking under his menacing gaze.

He pushed her toward the door and the mushrooms erupted in a chorus of boos. Jonas Bigelow, his face blue with rage, rushed to the microphone.

"We know your game, Grand," he said. "You're trying to run us out."

"That's absurd," Grand said.

"Absurd? Who burned down the Pelican's Nest this morning?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the mayor hollered, but he was drowned out by jeers. He slammed his gavel and stood up, sputtering. "Ten minute recess. Officer Dent, I want the chambers cleared of all these, these, these toadstools. Then we'll approve the Sun Palace!"

Chapter Eleven

MAX BRADY WAS rinsing beer mugs behind the bar when Captain John McCarty walked in and sat down. He attempted a smile, but his cheeks wouldn't cooperate.

"You look exhausted," Brady said.

"I'm ready for that bowl of gumbo."

Brady dried his hands on a dish towel. "Something to drink?"

"Why not? I'm finally off duty. Johnny Red on the rocks."

He splashed an extra dollop of scotch into McCarty's tumbler and the fire investigator drained it in a single swallow, grimacing as the liquid scorched his throat.

Max set a steaming bowl on the bar. "Bon appetit!"

McCarty tucked into the gumbo, shoveling a hearty spoonful in his mouth. "Yummy. Haven't eaten all day."

"Plenty more in the pot," Brady said. "Compliments of the house."

"Trying to bribe the fire investigator?" he said with one side of his mouth, chewing with the other.

"Call it friendly inducement."

It was late afternoon and the Sea Shanty was deserted except for a man and woman in bathing suits sharing a hushed conversation over beers in the corner. Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels were on the music box singing "*fe-fe-fi-fi-fo-fo-fum...*" A tall thin young man with a wild mane of straw-colored hair padded up to the bank of open windows and stuck a white nose smeared with zinc oxide into the bar.

"Gotta check out," the life guard Johnny Glisson said over the music. "Back in ten for a Tecate."

Brady stabbed the air with his thumb and turned back to McCarty. "So what's the scoop, John?" he said. "Solve the Pelican's Nest mystery yet?"

McCarty polished off his second scotch and deposited the glass on the bar. "You know the Klum's pretty well, right?"

"We're friends. They usually come in about this time every day."

"Do they have enemies?"

"Not that I know of. I can't imagine they do. Why?"

"Just wondering," McCarty said, the grog stoking a warm glow inside him. "The torch was definitely a pro."

McCarty explained that the gas chromatograph analysis confirmed what he'd suspected. The accelerant was gasoline.

"Arsonist Daily says it's the flammable favored by four-out-of-five firebugs," McCarty said, poker-faced.

"They have their own newspaper?" Max said with mock wonder.

"My hunch about the hot plate was also correct. It was clean and efficient and gave the torch time to vamoose."

"What's the flashpoint for gasoline?"

"Flashpoint relates to a trigger, like a spark from a sparkplug. We're looking at kindling point, the temperature a substance ignites. For gasoline that's 495 degrees Fahrenheit."

"I never realized hotplates got that hot," Max said.

"Typically, they don't, especially the ones you'd find in motel rooms. Our guy brought his own, a Biomega P-40. Made for laboratories. We've got a half dozen in our lab. They get hotter than 700 degrees. When I saw that I knew the torch was a pro. By the time the plastic container melted he was long gone. When the gas ignited, flames sprayed everywhere. The studs in that building were 50-year-old Dade County pine. Perfect tinder. The place went up like a box of matches."

Brady had been involved in arson investigations as a cop, but he'd never heard of using a hot plate to touch off a fire.

"It's not common," McCarty said. "The U.S. Arson Clearinghouse has a few cases on record. Most back in the early '90s over in Tampa. A string of bar fires."

“They ever catch the torch?”

McCarty held up his empty glass. Brady hesitated. He could see by the fire investigator’s slightly glazed eyes the two scotches were already doing their work. He didn’t want McCarty driving off drunk, but he was starting to unwind. Max poured a short one.

“I was with National Fire Insurance at the time,” McCarty said, eyeing the glass and looking askance at Max. “I’d been a firefighter. Me and my future-former-wife were having problems. I thought it might help if I took a private sector job. The money was good and hours predictable. NFI had coverage and I was their man on the Tampa fires.”

“Did you crack the case, Sherlock?” Brady said with a wry grin.

“Never made an arrest.” He dispatched the Johnny Walker. “But I identified the arsonist.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“There was a local legend on the prowl around Tampa at the time. Real bad actor. Worked for Cisco Blas. Ever hear of him?”

“Reputed hitman to Tampa Godfather Santo Magadinni,” Max said. “Magadinni was old school mob, shrewd, unpretentious, lethal as a cobra. Controlled drugs and gambling on the Gulf Coast. Suspect in everything from plots to kill Fidel Castro to the JFK assassination.”

“When Santo died—of natural causes without ever going to prison—the family rewarded Blas with a string of strip joints. Then, a few years later, somebody put a bullet in Cisco’s brain. Ever hear of Crackhead Corrales?”

“Drug dealer?”

“Nah. Stone cold killer,” McCarty replied. “Crackhead murdered people for Cisco, like Cisco did for Santo. He was also a torch. Cisco collected more than two million dollars from NFI when some of his joints went up in smoke.”

“Crackhead?”

“Scuttlebutt was Crackhead was a pyromaniac. Polished his rocket while he watched. But we could never pin a thing on him.”

“What’s the connection to the Pelican’s Nest?”

“Tampa newspapers called them the Hotplate Fires.”

“Sounds like Crackhead’s your guy,” Brady said with a raised eyebrow.

"Nope," McCarty said.

"Why not?"

"He's on Death Row."

"For what?"

"Crackhead whacked Cisco."

Johnny Glisson walked in and took a stool beside McCarty. Brady pulled a cold Tecate out of the cooler. Glisson was a lank, smooth-faced stringbean with a tall forehead and prominent Adam's apple. Every inch the beach boy, he had a festive spirit and loved to laugh and make merry. Yet, he'd been picking Brady's brain about law school.

"Why would you leave a job that requires you to sit on the beach every day and fend off nubile young girls in bikinis?" Brady said, winking at McCarty.

"There's no future in it," Johnny said with utter sincerity. "I'm nothing but a sex object to those girls."

"Everybody's got their cross to bear," McCarty said.

"Yeah, but that'll get old in 10 or 20 years. Then what? I want more substance in my life."

"Well, then," Brady said with a straight face, "you've got time to think about it."

"Maybe I'll be a fireman," Johnny said.

"You could do worse," McCarty said, lifting his glass. "Twenty-four hours on, forty-eight off. Good pay, great benefits, retire after twenty five years at seventy five percent pension."

"Are there fire groupies?" Johnny said.

"You kidding?" McCarty said. "Women love guys with long hoses."

"Is that all you guys talk about?"

The three men looked up and their eyes widened. Rose Becker stood in the doorway looking spectacular, long black hair pulled back tight, drawing their attention to her clean, perfect features.

"Why do most men," she said, "think their hoses are so much longer than they actually are?"

"Really?" said Brady. "And you know that from personal experience, do you?"

The men choked back laughter as Rose's face turned radish red.

"No," she said quickly, "but girls talk."

Johnny moved down one seat and Rose took his stool. Max placed a tureen of gumbo and bottle of water in front of her.

“Try this.”

She tasted it and blinked. “Too hot,” she said, sticking out her tongue and fanning it with her hand. Brady went into the kitchen and came back with another bowl. She took a spoonful and shook her head. “Too cold.”

“Who are you, Goldilocks?” Max said, and fetched a third sample. “Try this.”

“Just right,” she said. Brady raised his arms in mock triumph. Rose kept speaking between bites. “Have you spoken to Olga and Gunther since this morning?”

“No. Victor says they disappeared into the guest suite. They’re probably asleep.”

“Or grieving,” she said. “Those poor people. Who would do such a thing?”

“Do you know Captain John McCarty with the Fort Lauderdale Fire Investigation Unit?” Brady said. “John, this is Rose Becker, a.k.a. Madame Butterfly, our next mayor.”

“Well, captain?” Rose said, turning to McCarty. “What can you report to your future boss?”

“All I can say, eh, Madame Mayor-to-be,” McCarty said, suppressing a grin, “is that whoever started the fire was probably paid. And my guess is it wasn’t by the Klums.”

“I guarantee you that,” Rose said and took a swig of water. “They loved the Pelican’s Nest. They planned to spend the rest of their lives there.”

The evening wore on and the party animals packed into the Sea Shanty like cattle at a feed lot. Music blared and conversation became hopeless. Rose, Johnny, and McCarty bid Max farewell. On her way out the door, Rose turned and looked at Brady and their eyes locked for an instant. After she’d gone, Max was oddly unsettled to find himself thinking about her.

Brady stepped to the jukebox and pushed A-12 and Bruce Springsteen’s raspy voice poured from the Bose speakers singing *Jersey Girl*. Max reached behind the bar and cranked up the audio. He walked outside and stood barefoot in the sand beneath the twisty banyan,

Brady's Run

wrapped in a garland of amber lightbulbs that cast a faint glow, his mind a million miles away. With the Boss's throaty tones reverberating from the bar, he thought about his own *Jersey Girl*, Victoria, born and raised in Bayonne.

Max's friends told him time would erase his grief, but the years had brought no solace. Yet, he freely embraced the jagged pain, if that was all he had to hang onto. Since her death he'd been living with the dread that someday, someday, his memory of her would fade, that he'd somehow forget the ferocity of their love. Or worse, she would vanish altogether into the mist of time, into the vast legion of the forgotten, all trace of her gone, like a second death. He reached up absently and ran his thumb over an inscription he'd carved into the banyan's bark the day he opened the Shanty.

Max & Victoria—Don't ever forget!