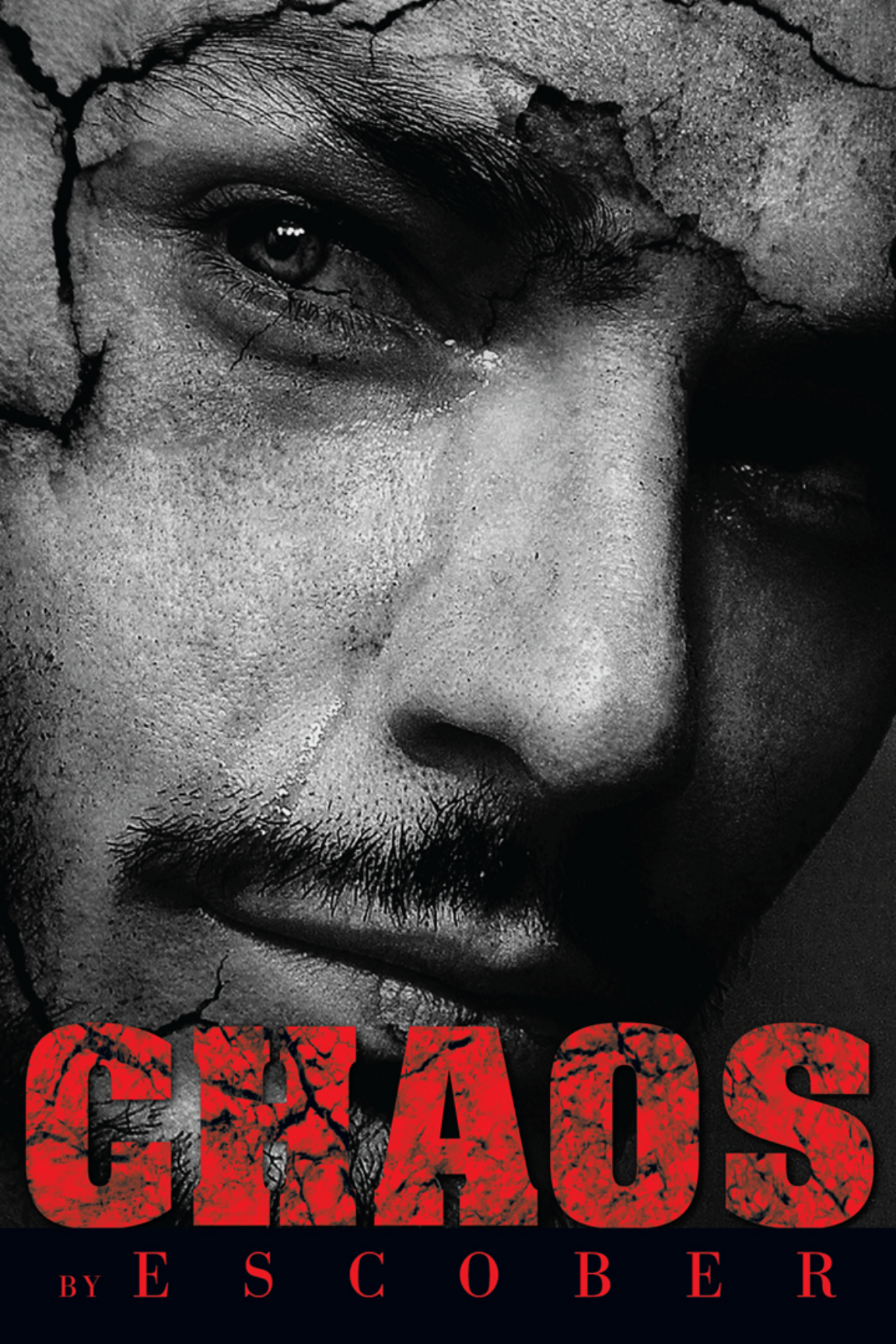
CHAOS
BY ESCOBER

CHAOS

by ESCOBER

When this began / I had nothing to say
And I'd get lost in the nothingness inside of me
I was confused / And I let it all out to find
That I'm not the only person with these things in mind

—Linkin Park, "Somewhere I Belong," *Meteora*

SAN SEBASTIÁN

I cry / when angels deserve to die

—System of a Down, "Chop Suey!" *Toxicity*

Angela guides the gleaming BMW through the hangars. Rusted sheet piling on concrete, grotesque and abandoned. They loom out of the dusk like corroded monuments.

Two crows flap their wings lazily, avoiding the car's wheels.

"What's this all about?"

She glances at me. "I have to do this . . . Ten minutes. Then we can go."

"I want to know what we're doing here."

She holds my eyes, fleetingly probing, then focuses on the road again.

"Drugs?" I ask. "Goddamnit, is it drugs?"

She shakes her head. Her face is drawn, wan with tension. "This bloody weather, it's like night out there," she murmurs. She inches the car forward.

A hangar emerges right in front of us. A truck is parked at eleven o'clock, some forty yards from the rusty sliding door.

I reach for the door handle. "Let me out here."

She doesn't react, but parks the car parallel to the truck, some distance off. There's a man in the cab, I notice. Shadowy type, he

looks like bad news. He stares straight ahead, seems to be chewing on something. I give him a stony look. No reaction.

The hangar door screeches open in front of us. Two guys. One in black jeans and a leather jacket, a hand on his belt. His companion has a red bandana wrapped round his battered head, like a pirate. His left hand clutches a Škorpion, a vz. 61. Czech made, I recognize the folding stock braces instantly. Small, fully automatic, no more than eleven inches long and a little over four pounds with a full magazine. Easy to conceal, it takes less than a minute to spit out a whole heap of .380 ACPs, or 9 mm Lugers, or .32 ACPs—the choices abound. A weapon much loved by terrorists.

"Goddamnit, Angela!" I grip her arm.

She sits still, almost defeated. My grasp slackens.

"Give me ten minutes," she says softly, without looking at me.

She raises her head and stares through the windshield. Her dark eyes are almost liquid. "I have to do this." It's nearly a whisper, a mantra.

"Have to?"

She nods in brief assent and bites her lower lip. I let go of her arm, but pull the keys from the ignition.

"Give them to me," she says.

"No way."

I cast the guy in the truck next to us a quick glance. He's still staring straight ahead, like he's autistic. The two men in the hangar haven't moved either.

Angela leans toward me, placing her slender hand on mine. I clutch the keys tighter. She glances at me again—a look that could mean anything, but reveals nothing. "Don't leave, okay? Promise me that?"

I ignore the question. I catch a dark shape out of the corner of my eye. Black clothing, six feet, maybe a little shorter. He's to the right of the BMW and he's looking straight at me, the barrel of his Glock aimed at my head. Then he steps back a few paces, stands there. His message is clear: I'm watching you. Don't do anything stupid.

I clench my jaw. Whatever I may have wanted to do, it's too late now.

"Ten minutes," Angela whispers.

She gets out, opens the trunk, and walks toward the hangar. Calmly—one foot in front of the other, briefcase in her right hand. The wind blowing through her long, dark curls.

I can feel my heart beating, the blood pumping through my veins, the air sucked into and rasping out of my lungs. My limbs numb, frigid phantom limbs, no longer part of me. Why don't I act? Why don't I do something? Why am I still sitting here like a fucking zombie?

She's walked twenty yards in a straight line from the car. She stands still, the contours of her fragile body and slender waist mapped by the orange light burning above the hangar door. She puts the briefcase down.

A man emerges from the hangar. Tailored suit, short dark hair, thick neck. *Made in Zagreb*.

No drugs? *I have to do this?* Yeah, pull the other one!

Ten minutes? No, damn it. This is bullshit.

I need to go. Anywhere but here. My limbs slowly awaken to my brain's provocations. I worm my way behind the wheel of the BMW and woodenly insert the keys into the ignition.

Glock Guy is suddenly in front of the hood—and he doesn't like my game of musical chairs. His chin up in agitation, he trains the weapon on me once again.

To appease him I raise my hands. They're trembling.

In front of the hangar The Suit approaches Angela. His bodyguards dog his steps like trained German shepherds. They're watching everything, alert, sharp. The pirate eyeballs me for a second, then roves further. One man watching right and one left. They've done this before. Many times.

Shit. I should have stopped this an hour ago, when Angela arrived in this shimmering Beemer. I should have already known then that something was rotten. What was I thinking?

Angela cradles the briefcase and opens it to present its contents. The Suit gestures and throws a knowing look at the truck driver to my left.

An ear-shattering crash rips apart the quiet evening. Out of nowhere, an invisible sniper's bullet smashes through the truck's

side window. The driver collapses forward, as if in slow motion. The horn, engaged by his deadweight, accompanies the shots that are coming fast and furious like war has broken out. They seem to be coming from everywhere.

My personal guard is felled by a bullet straight through the neck, leaving a black hole spewing blood in its wake. Another one hits him in the chest. A fountain of blood gushes across the windshield as his body thumps against the hood.

A Fiat tears into view at two o'clock, at breakneck speed. The pirate reacts instantly, his forearm horizontal as the Škorpion spits lead. Its muzzle sparks in the twilight. His mate throws himself to the concrete, rolling as he empties his magazine in the direction of the newcomers.

The Suit is on the ground, curled up, motionless.

I can hardly breathe. My senses are trying to tell me something, but my mind is blocking every stimulus.

Go, go, go.

I turn the ignition—almost breaking the key—shove the stick to drive and stand on the gas. My former guard slides off the hood.

Two figures roll out of the Fiat to my right and, from the safety of the car doors, open fire on the bodyguards.

In a flash, I see Angela running toward me, head down, almost tripping over her own feet. More shots, from the left, coming at me. I try not to think, not to freeze, only to act. I try to get to her right side as quickly as possible, to get between her and the Fiat gunmen so that this damned German block on wheels can suck up the bullets.

The truck's horn is still yowling like an air-raid siren.

Less than another dozen yards before I'm there.

For a moment it seems as if all the noise has been silenced, as if time has frozen. I see only the blue polished steel, softly gleaming in Angela's hand. The bullet—*her bullet*—hisses through my open window. I feel the air displaced close to my face. Hear the impact in the headrest. I hear, I see, I feel, but I do not believe. I simply can't believe what my senses are mercilessly trying to clarify. The second bullet comes barreling from her weapon and brings me

back to the here and now. I spin the steering wheel, the rear end slides out but the wheels quickly find traction again.

Angela appears ahead, in front of the BMW. The gun, the barrel aimed at me, and then her face—a vague mask of muscles, skin, and black eyes.

I jerk the wheel once again and hit her square. She takes aim, grim. I shut my eyes for a fraction of a secondfor the nauseating sound of her hitting the hood, and when I open them dark, curly hair is fluttering across the windshield. I shove the Beemer into reverse, without looking where I'm going. The rear window shatters and another lump of lead propels itself into the headrest. I shift to drive and hit the gas. The engine screams.

The stench of gunpowder and burning rubber fills my nose as I accelerate away at the speed of light.

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COZUMEL A Week Before

It's easier to run
Replacing this pain with something numb
It's so much easier to go
Than face all this pain here all alone

—Linkin Park, "Easier to Run," *Meteora*

1 I awoke with the knowledge that I had nothing left to lose. It should have felt good, but it didn't.

Squinting against the sunlight, which flooded through the sliding glass doors of the mud hut, I stretched out on the hard double bed. Then examined the ceiling fan slowly doing its mechanical rounds, reassuring screeches emanating with each revolution. And listened to the murmuring sea.

Closer by, on the paved paths, there was the sound of the rattling carts propelled by Mexican women in immaculate white uniforms. Loud, bubbly conversations in rapid-fire Spanish. The sliding doors permitted a view of the sky. Perfect blue, not a cloud in sight. It would be in the upper eighties out there, like it was most every day. Inside, the humming air conditioner kept things a little cooler.

I rubbed my face with my palms. I needed a shave. I'd have to get up to do that.

The way I felt now, it would have been an achievement of Olympian proportions to crawl to the bathroom.

Throwing off the sheet, I placed my feet on the floor. The movement caused a degree of commotion within my cranium, like being on a listing ship. Eyes shut, deep cough. Shuffle to the bathroom. As I relieved myself with a hand on the white-tiled wall, an awareness somewhere deep inside me flickered awake. I felt nauseous, and that could only mean one of two things—I had either drunk too much last night or I was becoming sick. Scouring my memory, I could not remember how I got back to the hut last night. Strange.

I was thirty-four and until recently there had not been a single occasion of forgetting something. Not remembering something. Not because of alcohol or exhaustion. Never.

Sharp as a knife.

Until the blackouts began to dominate my life.

I looked at my watch: 14.30.

I always woke up at 09.00. Fourteen-thirty was late. Far too late. Both breakfast and lunch gone by.

The faucet on, I leaned into the basin. A white towel to dry my face and widespread fingers for a comb. I didn't even look like my passport photo anymore, the pale man I left behind in England. My skin started taking on the color of the locals—although any similarities ended there. I was almost a foot taller than the average Mexican. And blond.

I swept a pair of three-quarter pants off the bathroom floor and donned them, slipped my feet into leather flip-flops, and completed the outfit with a tank top.

Stepping out, I took the shortest route to the sea. It's never far away here.

Cozumel lies about twelve miles off the east coast of Mexico in that salty turquoise puddle they call the Caribbean, a haven of coral reefs, barracudas, and whopping great turtles. A constant breeze and hardly a day when it dips below the high eighties.

A short stroll took me across a paved and beautifully maintained path between the palms and banana trees and past the towering subtropical plants in bloom. An iguana was stretched out lazily along a thick branch. He winked at me as he extended his bony toes, warming his blood in the shimmering sun.

I arrived at the beach, kept the sea to my left and ambled half a mile, past the dive school in the holiday resort, and a rusty shipwreck that looked as if it had washed up there many decades ago and left to rot on the beach for reasons unknown. On occasion I absently raised my hand when a staff member threw a greeting my way.

Smiling was harder. I felt sick to my stomach.

It had been three weeks since I arrived with the sole intention of doing nothing for a month. Of emptying my head. And then to think about my next move, about what to do with my life now that everything I believed in, everything I lived for, had gone to hell.

The weeks drifted, but my head stayed full.

John's place was open.

The whitewashed wooden cabin consumed some thirty-five square yards of beach and was built with its rear almost in the jungle. Sets of white plastic garden furniture with blue umbrellas decorated the front. The interior held a wooden bar and six stools, and the familiar whiff of stale beer, cigarette smoke, and something sweet hung in the air. The floor was rough and mildewed from the humidity and salt. A young couple were drinking coffee in the corner, at one of the whitewashed tables. A transistor radio creaked behind the bar.

I shifted onto a barstool.

John, owner-manager of the beach bar, was a thin Englishman of around sixty. His long, gray hair was collected together at the neck with a brown elastic band. He wore a black, much-too-large shirt bearing a Jack Daniel's logo and white shorts that showed off far too much of his bony legs. John, stuck somewhere between ex-rocker and ex-hippie—someone who'd never been able to choose and who had retained something from every era and trend he'd been a part of. His face bore the brunt of all those years.

Without waiting for my order he slid a bottle of Dos Equis and a glass in my direction.

"Not today, John. Something with vitamins."

Grinning crookedly, he planted a lemon wedge on the edge of the glass.

I pushed it away resolutely. "Nothing to eat in this dive? What about fruit juice?"

"They on strike in that Hilton of yours, or whatever it is?"

I tried to smile but stopped trying when my stomach started to churn. "Yes, between three and six."

"I'll fix you something."

John didn't do menus; he did whatever he could find in the kitchen. Nobody seemed to mind. At any rate, it kept the ever-demanding Americans out of his shack, which was probably the reason in the first place. He rummaged around in the adjacent room. A chink in the rickety door revealed him to be juggling two eggs. He tossed one behind his back and caught it in a single rapid move. He was damned lithe for his age—there was a performing artist hiding in that crooked English shell. A real clown.

I turned ninety degrees and barked a staccato cough. My gaze fell upon a white converted fishing boat, glimmering in the sunlight as it sailed parallel to the coast some hundred yards further up. A group of people in black wet suits sat in the stern, surrounded by oxygen tanks hanging from hooks. A flock of seagulls swarmed around the ship.

I hadn't dived in over a week. Actually, I'd done little more than drink, eat, sleep, and loiter. Just vegetating.

Not my style.

"By the by, that woman yesterday," John shouted to me from his little galley, "did she wear you out? Or did you fall asleep before you even hit the bed?"

Woman? I tried to catch his eye, but he avoided the look.

"The woman you left with last night," he explained. He appeared in the doorway holding a plate.

I didn't answer.

"Dark, small—maybe five two. Everything in the right places. Especially those places where you had your hands." John manufactured a smile. For the first time I noticed that he needed to see a dentist. Urgently.

Was he pulling a fast one on me? I couldn't tell. He had a strange glow in his eyes, as if he'd have liked to put his hands somewhere too.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said honestly. I remembered talking to a girl, but if I'd had my hands all over her, I would surely have remembered.

Irritated, John waved me off. "Whatever."

I ate the food mechanically. Omelet with cheese and bacon, but today it tasted like anything and nothing.

Something didn't fit.

Over the last ten, twelve years I'd blocked out quite a few things. Saved them in a different location on the neurological hard drive. Sealed up, deep frozen. The annoying things. There were more than enough to forget, to put away.

But a female companion with everything in the right places was not one of these.

"It doesn't stop, you know that," John suddenly blurted out.

I looked up. "What?"

"Whatever you're running from. It doesn't stop."

"I'm not running."

"We're all running."

I held my tongue.

"Burglary," John bent forward conspiratorially. "They had me on six counts. Six out of God knows how many, too many to count. I got careless toward the end. Kept the merchandise at home. Stupid, that I grant you."

I still didn't react, instead scouring my memory for the last recollection of the previous night.

"You know what the problem is with England?" I heard John saying. "Everything's become so bloody expensive you can't survive on a normal job alone. We've gone back a century—rich or poor, and nothing in between. Blokes buying a new Aston Martin every year while the lower caste can't even raise the rent for their shitty little flats. The country is rotting, I tell you. It's rotting from the core and they just let it happen. So what's a lad to do? You do a bit of trading here and there, make sure you get some cash. Buy new clothes, shoes, furniture, a new car. Go out for a meal. You spend your cash. The state allows that, it's the policy of tolerance and all. . . . They'll get the tax anyway. You

get it? But every now and then they'll pick someone out. It's for the statistics, understand? It's just to create the impression that they're really doing something. I was that statistic. After six months I was released and they were lying in wait at my house. A week after the fuzz got me, they rolled up a gang of chaps I delivered merchandise to on occasion. So they thought I'd ratted them out. Logical, from the gang's point of view, but it wasn't the case. I didn't grass on them. Still, the fellows were out for blood and I didn't want to witness the execution." He nervously gnawed at his thumbnail. "And every day I wonder if today will be the day that one of them walks in here. If you're on the run from somebody then the world suddenly becomes a damned small place, you know what I mean?"

He dragged a cloth across the bar. The wood was dirty and moist, saturated with beer and water, and John's halfhearted attempt to clean it did little to change the situation. "This place is crawling with people like me," he continued. "We're all on the run. You too—as good as. I can see it. Shit, I can smell it, man. You've been here—what—two or three weeks? You're not sitting here for the fun of it. Nobody does that here. A week is the most you need here, then it's time to move on. So what did you do?"

I averted my gaze.

"What are you doing here?" John urged. He seemed suddenly very interested in my past, yet he'd never asked me anything of importance in all the time I'd been eating and drinking in his shack.

"Thinking," I said evasively.

"In a resort full of rednecks? Bullshit! You can't even hear yourself speak, never mind think. These guys live in constant fear, fully convinced that when they finally shut their fucking gobs just one time their hearts will stop."

John meant the Texans. They couldn't count on his sympathy. Nor the Mexicans for that matter, or his own—and my—countrymen.

He was not of a tolerant nature.

"Maybe I've sorted it out already," I said, just to get off the subject.

John ceased his useless polishing. "You're going on to Guatemala?"

I scowled at him.

He looked at me with alarm. "That was your plan, wasn't it? Didn't you say that to me?"

It began to dawn on me. A week or so before, I was sitting here on exactly the same stool, and told John that I'd probably head further south via Guatemala. It was February and cold in the U.K. Winter. Somber, gray skies, disconsolate faces, rain and hail and sleet. Great weather if you had a warm home, a loving wife, a Labrador at your feet, and the aroma of a stew coming from the kitchen. But Jesus, it was weather that depressed the hell out of you if you were alone and had to spend your days in a room above a garage.

I didn't want to have to deal with myself. Not yet. I needed sun. I needed booze.

"Didn't you want to go to Guatemala?" John repeated.

"I guess so," I answered dully.

I scraped the last morsel of food onto my fork and forced myself to swallow, then slid from the barstool. I fished a ten dollar bill from my pocket and slid it across the bar to John, then went back to the beach.

"Take care," John called after me.

The converted fishing boat was nothing more than a dot on the horizon, its sputtering diesel engine hardly audible.

Habit took me back to my cabin. Iguanas the size of dachshunds ambled idly alongside the path, their tails slithering over the closely cropped lawn. Starlings battled each other for a scrap of trash.

The cultivated greenery ahead hid three hundred nearly identical cabins. From the outside they looked like mere shacks, merging into their environs with their wooden balconies, stained dark and supporting bilious green hammocks, topped by a round thatched roof. But they contained all the conveniences: air-conditioning, cable TV with CNN—and a handful of curious geckos thrown in free of charge.

My refuge, my temporary shelter. A meal three times a day in one of the five restaurants and fresh linens daily. A gym. Sun and sea. A white beach fringed by palms that wouldn't have looked out of place on a postcard or a travel agency poster, if it weren't for

the fact that it was crawling with those Texans John had referred to—noisy, overfed, and long past their sell-by dates. That aside, there were plenty of places you could think of where you had to get by with fewer conveniences.

The money was almost all gone, but to return home was simply not an option. Nobody was waiting for me. Nobody.

It had all gone to pieces.

The nausea and the rolling in my stomach slowly faded. I had not drunk that much the night before—no more than usual. Maybe a beer or ten, three during supper and the rest spread across the evening, right up to that ephemeral moment when my memory abandoned me. Far short of the amount needed to get me feeling this rotten, and certainly not enough to cause memory loss.

Did something happen yesterday to trigger a blackout? Fireworks? I thought I'd left all that behind.

I stepped onto the porch and pulled the sliding door open. The bed had been made. My towel, an old, washed-out Adidas specimen, had been shaped into a swan by an experienced woman's hands, and rose petals were scattered across the bed. My reward for a ten dollar tip that I'd left behind for the cleaning ladies on my very first day. That, and the real reason for my generosity—a constantly replenished minibar.

I shoved the door shut behind me unsuspectingly.

And I froze.

I was not alone.

Two men were standing beside my bed.

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2

Two guys in black Mexican police uniforms; black shirt, black trousers, and a kind of cowboy hat. One of them clutched an M16, the barrel pointing at my chest. I'd often seen the weapon round here, casually worn by cops being macho down at the Playa del Carmen harbor.

I didn't react. Stood still and tried my utmost to conceive of a reason why I was being covered with an assault rifle. What it might mean.

Nothing came to mind.

The armed man stepped forward and prodded my shoulder with the barrel of the weapon. He was so close his aftershave irritated my nostrils. I moved involuntarily sideways until I felt the edge of the TV cabinet hit my leg.

The situation was so bizarre, so unexpected, that for a second I could only stare. At the man, at his gun, at his partner, and back again.

At the same time a third man slid into the cabin. He looked flushed, as if he'd run for miles. Navy blue suit, white shirt, and a striped tie held in place by a gold tie bar. I recognized him immediately—one of the resort managers. Numbers four and five joined him, a woman and a man in hotel uniforms. Senior members of the hotel staff.

I examined first the one, then the other. The whole scenario was still sinking in, and I was still wondering if this was all a hallucination.

While his partner kept the barrel of the M16 aimed at my torso, the other man grabbed my wrists. Out of the corner of my eye I saw he was gripping handcuffs. Reflexively, I pulled away. I stared down the guy in front of me, ignoring his weapon. Strangely enough, I was not afraid, only amazed. Irritated.

Whatever was going on, whatever the reason for their visit, it had to be a misunderstanding.

Gunning me down was not on their to-do list. Not in a four-star resort in the middle of the day with a hotel manager and two members of the staff as witnesses. The shooting of a tourist would kill the industry for at least a year. And that's what I was, a tourist. A citizen. Whoever—cop or not—did something like that on this island would be lynched.

Outside I could hear children calling to each other in German. A voice reached me from the closest swimming pool: "It's now or never."

But inside it was quiet. Eerily quiet. Nobody had said a single word yet.

The guy with the handcuffs broke the impasse. He grabbed an ID card from his pocket and shoved it in my face. Laminated card, some logo, a photo, and black lettering. An illegible signature.

The card vanished once more, replaced by his nasty face. "*Policía*." His breath hit my face.

I shifted my gaze to the hotel staff, shuffling their feet with embarrassment. The manager rubbed his hands tentatively, sweat stains pocking his chest. His male colleague looked just as nervous. I caught a brief glimpse of the woman's expression, which could only have been considered one of contempt.

What kind of joke is this?

"You are arrested," the cop with the M16 said in broken English.

My body jolted.

"For what?" I managed to say. "Arrested for what?"

"Rape."

Rape.

I couldn't hide my amazement. "Impossible." I said it again.

I was so amazed that this time I let him take my wrists, let him encase them in steel.

The long march to the reception office looked like a procession. The manager led, sweating even more than he had in my cabin. The cop

who flashed his ID followed him. Then me, handcuffed and followed by the armed guy who, at the strenuous urging of the manager, let his M16 hand loose, barrel pointed at the ground. His hand lay on the weapon, but he kept his finger off the trigger. Our parade was concluded by the two staff members carrying my luggage.

It wasn't much. Only two duffels. You don't really need much.

Our destination was a white minivan parked at the entrance to the reception at the end of a lengthy drive in the shade of the palms. Brand new, not a scratch. Rear windows blacked out. The door slid open.

A flutter of commotion arose. To the left of my entourage stood a group of tourists with their tour leader sheltering under the reed roof. They were evidently waiting for a bus to haul them off to some tourist attraction. Now I was the tourist attraction.

The manager gesticulated nervously. We had to hurry. He didn't want Texans complaining in his office. No uncomfortable questions from Iberostar's head office or panicky phone calls from travel agents. The illusion had to be kept alive. His guests paid a thousand dollars a week for it.

So did I. Until today.

I got in through the side door and sat on the forward-most seat. A chipboard partition divided the back part of the Chrysler from the driver's section and permeated the vehicle with the scent of fresh wood. The vehicle was quite literally fresh out of the box.

The sliding door was shut behind me and for a moment it was pitch black. I shifted over to the window, tried to find a crack in the blackened plastic film. No luck there.

The vehicle shuddered and the engine kicked in.

I lowered my eyes and tried to gauge the speed we were traveling. Tried to make note of where the Chrysler slowed, where it swerved, stopped, and turned. It was the only thing left to do, try to visualize the route.

But my thoughts inevitably wandered.

Rape.

John's face popped into my mind. *Dark, small. Everything in the right places. Especially those places where you had your hands*.

There were many, many things in my past that I was not proud of. Burglary—which they'd apparently nicked that old limey for too—was from a legal and moral point of view the least disturbing of that long list. But never—not even for one mad moment—had I ever toyed with the idea of taking a resistant woman. Self-knowledge is a godsend. So is self-respect.

Consensual, otherwise not at all.

The steel cuffs were biting into my wrists, and when I tried to wriggle my hands free, the edges only cut deeper into the skin. I still felt hungover, and the car's jolting around did nothing to help.

After about an hour the Chrysler slowed and turned off the road. The smooth asphalt the Chrysler's wheels had been chewing on changed to something bumpy. Without doubt a gravel road, the car barreling down it like a ship on the sea.

Suddenly the engine was switched off and the door pulled open. Brilliant sunlight flooded the car and I squeezed my eyes shut. I could smell salt, the sea, and heard the murmur of waves. The two guys stood on each side of the door, in front of a landscape of sand and rocks, with a few thorny bushes rustling in the wind. The atmosphere was sweltering.

I guessed we'd ended up on the southernmost tip of the island. A quiet area. Very quiet. No tourists. No buildings.

And certainly no police station.

The man with the M16 beckoned excitedly. "Out, out!"

My hands tingled and the blood pulsed in my wrists as I slowly moved toward the door. The handcuffs were cutting off circulation. It wouldn't be long before my hands were completely numb.

Bastards.

"Out, out!"

I took my time. The next moment, one of them grabbed me roughly by the shoulder and hurled me out of the car. I did not give them the pleasure of seeing me fall and managed to keep my balance, kicking out angrily with my right foot. It connected with nothing but air. At the same time the butt of the assault rifle connected with my left kidney. A thudding pain shot through my body, a nauseating pain. The bile rose in my throat and I almost vomited.

I was shoved, pulled, and prodded while they screamed at me in Spanish. Another kick coming my way. To the knee. I couldn't stay up this time and fell sideways, my hip and shoulder slamming into the dry and sandy earth. Reflexes took over and I raised my knees and curled up. It seemed to be the signal they had been waiting for to really get started.

They kicked me in the back, the legs, head, arms, everything they could reach and at a rate that left me no chance of absorbing the violence. The force of their kicks propelled my body to and fro across the sand. The pain shot through my body, it was all-encompassing. My ears were ringing. I tightened my muscles and tried to take the blows, tried to shut myself off. To imagine I wasn't here, but somewhere else. I was lying on the beach in the sun, the sound of the sea a mere arm's length away, a glass of Guinness in my hand. The pain was my friend, the blows caresses. I loved the pain. Embraced it. I repeated that mantra over and over. Maybe I even screamed it out loud.

They stopped just as suddenly as they had started. I lay in the fetal position on the sand and gasped for air. I opened my eyes slowly, coughing out the yellow dust I was inhaling. I could only see smudges. Large ones and small ones, they circled on my retina, then collided and slowly merged into objects.

The two men were standing a dozen paces away and lit up a cigarette. They exchanged a few words in Spanish then threw me a glance. Worked up. Panting.

I swallowed, my throat like sandpaper. My entire body was bruised, yet stangely numb thanks to the adrenaline. But pain was on the way, ETA maybe five minutes—ten if I was lucky—and then I'd be very much aware of the billions of fibers and cells they had pulped.

But pain was not the most pressing problem.

One of the men approached me. I braced myself once again, but the kick didn't come. He smirked and walked on. Through half-closed eyes I saw him retrieve a bottle of water from the Chrysler. He popped the lid and drank, then tossed it to his mate, who finished the bottle off. He in turn threw it into the bushes, wiping his mouth dry with the back of his hand.

They were taking their time. Their little fiesta of violence had only been a macho reaction to me kicking out. They were going to kill me. Right here. But they hadn't finished playing yet. I could picture it already, like a bizarre mirage: a deep hole in the middle of the white beach, a grave. They would pump me full of lead from their M16 and ice my body with six feet of sand.

What really bugged me was that I still had no idea why. I'd pissed plenty of people off in the past, people who'd have loved to join this twosome here. But most of them were dead, or would not have bothered to come all the way here.

Was it all about last night? Were these the brothers or friends of the woman I was supposed to have ravished?

Why did I have to think of Helen now?

Ashen, swollen skin. The right half of her face in bandages. Watching me with her lone uncovered eye. It no longer divulges any love, any solidarity. The woman I love, my beautiful, darling Helen. My everything. Terrified.

I crushed the thought and forced myself to focus on the here and now. The pain arrived, together with the understanding that if I did not do something now, this day would be my last. On the virgin sand of a godforsaken tourist trap in the Caribbean. I didn't even know who my executioners were. Or who sent them.

I wouldn't even know why.

A few seemingly endless minutes passed before one of the men approached. He gripped my hair and pulled me to my feet. Reeling, I stood upright, and tasted the blood streaming from my nose, and from my forehead or temple. The armed man was now right in front of me, the M16 aimed at my torso. His mate produced a roll of duct tape, ready to wrap it around my face.

The guy with the M16 went down as I kicked him in the stomach, a kick that would have broken anybody less well built. A gurgling sound emanated from his abdomen as he bent over double and collapsed on the dry ground. Quick as a flash I turned to the other man and my heel connected with his jaw. He dived back, but I was faster—a head butt to the temple and a kick, mustering all my aggression and strength, to the body as he went down. I kicked to

hit, to break, to destroy, to splinter any bone my foot might come into contact with. And again, this time with the right foot. As he hit the ground, my fast-descending foot found his neck. I heard a dull, cracking noise.

My balance lost, I went down on top of him, then gasped for air as I got to my knees and stumbled to my feet, my arms a deadweight bound behind my back.

I staggered toward them through the gritty sand. My mouth wide open, panting, out of breath. Phlegm streamed down my chin, mixed with blood and sand and mucus.

The man I'd kicked in the stomach lay there groaning—he'd be a while yet, but I didn't have much time. The other man didn't move, just lay there with his face buried in the sand.

He could be dead. I didn't really care for that matter. The only thing I cared about now was getting my hands free of these fucking cuffs.

My hands wrestled with each other as I grabbed the barrel of the automatic rifle and swung it away a few yards, in the direction of the car. Then I knelt down next to the silent man. I lay down, turned my back to him, and wriggled close—as fast as possible, didn't waste precious energy. Nor time. But my tingling fingers reacted listlessly.

Key.

The time it took to find the lock, get the small key inserted, and get myself free, was infuriatingly long. I rubbed the purple bruises that had formed on my wrists, stretching and clenching my fingers. My circulation started once again.

I jumped up and staggered to the automatic rifle, checked it. Loaded. I looked around, agitated, hunted.

It was only a slice of no-man's land baking in the shimmering Mexican sun running into the empty ocean. No trawlers, no scuba divers, no snorkelers. Nobody.

Now I scanned the men. The M16's previous owner coughed heavily, rolled over, and reached toward his foot, where a small-caliber automatic was velcroed to his ankle.

I glanced down at the weapon in my hand, felt its weight. Looked up again. My heart clawed at my throat and adrenaline buzzed

through my body. I could not think clearly any longer. It was no longer possible.

Safe all the way through to *fully auto*, I squeezed the trigger twice without a second thought. The guy, who moments before was still frantically trying to grab his spare gun, was briefly lifted off the ground before collapsing. His pistol fell from his lifeless hand. Blood gushed out the back of his head and shoulder, creating syrupy black rivulets in the dry sand. His mate was dead before the three NATO bullets ripped apart his flesh, splintering his skull.

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In a daze I stood there, looking at the motionless bodies in the sand. The wind was rising, bringing even more sand and dust with it to cling to their black clothing. I fought the instinct to jump into the Chrysler and floor it. Flee, before someone appeared and connected me to the bodies. I tried to calm myself with the thought that my two victims had been in no rush themselves. They were most probably locals who knew the island, and they would certainly not have chosen a tourist-heavy location for my execution.

As plausible as that seemed, it did little to calm me down.

I walked down to the sea, crouched, and splashed my face with water. The salt stung like hell and kicked my tear ducts into action. I scrubbed my face clean, rinsed my hands, forearms, and neck, then pulled off my shirt and draped it in the salty seawater. I wrung it out and slipped it on again, then repeated the process with my pants. The thin cotton would be dry within an hour.

The key was still in the ignition. It was attached to a card bearing the name of the rental company. My luggage was on the floor of the passenger seat and I found my wallet and passport in the front pocket of one of the duffels. My wallet was empty, bar some change. I rummaged around in the glove compartment, but my money wasn't there. I eventually found it in a cloth bag shoved under the passenger seat. Some two thousand dollars in cash. Everything I had.

I started the car and drove up the gravel road. In the rearview mirror I could see the huge, thick cloud of dust I left in my wake.

It was only once the car was back on the asphalt, heading toward town, that I allowed myself the luxury of thought. I already knew

that something strange was afoot when I saw the interior of the Chrysler—chipboard and plastic film, brand new—it all indicated an urgently transformed rental car. But I was only dead certain once we left the resort drive and turned left, south. There was only one police station on this little island, and it was twelve miles to the north.

The ID card was meaningless—anybody with a pouch laminator and a word processor could have made it.

I tried to understand what it all added up to—what the hell was going on. Two men, definitely islanders, posing as cops, running someone in, taking him to an abandoned cape, and then beating the living shit out of him.

But why?

Could it be that the entire show was put on merely to rob me? No. Illogical. They could have done that in other ways. Easier ways.

I overtook lumbering trucks, their open load areas crammed with laborers—firm black hair blowing in the wind and surly faces staring straight ahead.

Last night. I desperately tried to recall every nagging detail, as I suspected that was where I'd find a clue. Only my memories could give me a foothold.

I had eaten down at the American steak house. It was the most popular of the five restaurants in the resort, which was not surprising given the fact that 80 percent of the visitors were American. Habit led me to a table in a corner, providing me with an overview of the entire area. A stocky Mexican in his fifties wearing a blue and white uniform waited on the tables in my quadrant. First course was some kind of bean soup. Then I tucked into a T-bone steak. Half a pound of meat, almost black on the outside and pink inside. It was accompanied by sweet corn and roast potato. I had a few beers. Heineken, three bottles. No dessert, no coffee.

Then I strolled to John's place. Wednesday evening was karaoke night in his shack and I didn't feel like sleeping. And, yes, maybe it also occurred to me that I didn't want to spend my nights alone.

I missed Helen. Her absence ate at me, left a painful emptiness, a hollow, hungry feeling that hovered permanently inside me. We should have been here together. It had always been a dream of hers—to disappear to a hot and faraway place with palms and white beaches. It never happened, thanks to me. My presence here—without Helen—left a sour taste.

I'd phoned her just last week, against my better judgment and with the full conviction that she would immediately put the phone back down. But she listened to what I had to say. That I missed her. That I was sorry. Clichés—all of them. Far too common to express what I really felt. She listened, if only for a little while. Then hung up.

John's place had been full, not a stool free. The small space was jam-packed with tourists, predominantly American, with a single German, a couple of Brits from Manchester, and a handful of Dutch. I bought a beer—maybe two simultaneously—from the young woman that John brought in when things got busy. She was a sweet girl, even if she got grouchy when the place got too rowdy, as it was last night. So she didn't say much, forcing a smile. It was a rush. Some chattering bald guy with an earring emceed while tourists embarrassed themselves before an international audience they would never see again once they'd left the island. The atmosphere was relaxed. Quite fun, really, insofar as a night like this could be fun when you're alone.

I talked to a woman somewhere on the brink of thirty. Spanish, I seemed to recall. At least, that's what she said. Whatever she said, her English was fluent. I was left of the entrance with my back to the wall so that I had a view of everyone there. Beer in one hand, the other in my pocket. I tried to size her up. She was gorgeous, that much was certain. Nice breasts, shapely hips—not broad, but full. She was small, no more than five six, and with tanned skin, a small nose, and dark eyes. Her curly black hair hung loose halfway down her back. Everything was great.

Except for the two of us. She was married, she said. Her husband was in steel or something, together with her brother, and was a Muay Thai champion. He'd gone off somewhere with his buddies

in search of fun—night diving, I think she said. She gave me contradictory signals, drawing me in then pushing me away, and I really didn't know where this was going to lead. I gave it up after a while, because I didn't feel like dealing with a whole lot of bitching, but by that time I'd put away another four or five beers and was on the beach once again, maybe thirty yards from the pub, where the light from John's Chinese lanterns was sucked up by the darkness. From that point on, my mind went blank. The next thing I knew I awoke—just a few hours ago—in my bed. Nude, on the sheets. It was 02.30. I had a hole in my memory that was about fourteen hours wide.

A subtle noise emanated from the dashboard—short and sweet. In the distance, to the right of the two-lane road leading to the city and the harbor, I could see the Iberostar flags flapping in the wind. I could simply drive on, straight through to San Miguel de Cozumel. Jump a ferry there to Playa del Carmen on the mainland—there was one every thirty minutes—and take a taxi to Cancun. From there I'd try to find a flight to Europe. Anywhere in Europe.

I could be out of Mexico by tonight.

I checked the fuel gauge. You could normally squeeze another thirty to forty miles out after the first warning. That would mean an easy cruise into town, less than fifteen miles away. Barely thirty minutes, probably even less. I checked my watch. 18.10.

The next boat departed at 18.30. I could be on it and be gone. Wisest thing to do. The hotel manager saw me leaving with the two Mexicans, him and about twenty tourists. Being a murder suspect was never pleasant, especially in a country where people's command of English was as good as my grasp of Spanish.

Another ferry left at 19.00. I'd have thirty minutes to get to the harbor.

Twenty minutes' leeway.

And if that was too optimistic, there was always the 19.30 ferry.

I twisted the wheel and swung into the drive leading to the hotel complex.

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I found a parking space halfway up the drive, where I abandoned the Chrysler in some degree of anonymity.

I scaled the wall that sealed off the complex and slowly lowered myself until my feet sank into the soft and moist soil. Nobody around.

A thin line of flagstones wound its way through the cultivated jungle.

I avoided the path, opting to stay low and follow the wall, keeping me sheltered from the prying eyes of any possible passersby behind the thick bush. The wall took me northeast toward the sea, to a point near the swimming pools where the overgrowth had been stripped and I risked exposure. I steeled myself and scaled the wall once again.

Here the jungle was still wild. Low bushes, leaves the size of car tires, palms jutting out of the ground at crazy angles. The sickly smell of rotting vegetation and sweet flowers filling my nostrils. It was swarming with insects and I disrupted an angry-looking iguana—gray with black stripes—from his siesta. The sea was close now.

The side wall of John's place lay a hundred yards to my right. The onshore wind carried human noises with it—people talking, laughing, and fainter marine diesel engines.

The Chinese lanterns that designated the improvised terrace swung from their ropes. A handful of customers were drinking outside, dressed in swimwear with diving gear resting on the decking. John himself was absent from the scene.

I walked on until John's beach bar was between me and its customers, then emerged from the bush and, after a quick glance left and right, approached the shack.

The back entrance was a weathered, whitewashed wooden door that led into the kitchen. Two overflowing and uncovered trash cans stood next to it, enduring a constant assault by a swarm of nasty wasps. I opened the door a crack. Nobody home. I walked in and shut it softly behind me.

Ripped-open boxes were scattered around the room, brown and black muck was caked to the surfaces. Spatters of cooking fat decorated the floor.

John was not too concerned about quality control.

Among the boxes on the floor of the oblong room, which measured barely six by nine feet, were cans of soup and vegetables and two buckets with defrosting meat. On the left was a deepfreeze and a two-door display refrigerator. Next to that, on a Formica table, stood a dirty sandwich toaster and gas burner. The opposite wall was dominated by two sinks and a draining board with a mountain of unwashed plates and glasses. The door to the bar was closed.

I crossed the room and put my ear to the door. People were sitting at the bar, talking; an Eagles song emanated softly from the speakers.

Suddenly the door was pushed open.

I moved back and on my way scooped up a carving knife from the draining board. A simple, wooden-handled one.

John scurried in. He didn't see me.

Not wanting to give him an inch, I pushed the door shut with a foot and grabbed his gray ponytail.

The Englishman froze. Just looked at me, perplexed.

"Not a word." I carefully placed the point of the blade on John's throat, a few inches above the acme of his nervously bobbing Adam's apple. My other hand was still wrapped in his greasy hair.

John swallowed hard. Didn't move.

"Tell me about it," I said.

He started to sweat. His eyes darted around. Breathing hard. He seemed undecided. He didn't know what to do. "What's wrong?" he said hoarsely. "What are you doing here?"

"Talk." I hissed it, and put some pressure on the knife. A drop of fresh blood trickled past the blade's point, obeying the laws of gravity.

I watched as it crawled down John's suntanned neck, now a thin stream finding a path between the gray chest hair and his black shirt.

I could smell his bad breath—beer breath. It was rancid.

"Tell me about it John, Henry, Chris, whatever your real name is. I don't give a shit, nor about your criminal past. But tell me what you know, otherwise you'll be as dead as the fake cops who picked me up this afternoon."

A brief shudder traveled through his thin body. His eyes grew larger. Something was dawning on him. "Fisher," he whispered. "Fisher, I'm an old man. I didn't come here to get hassled—that's what I was trying to get away from. Last week, some bloke came knocking. He offered me two hundred dollars for information. Information about you."

That startled me, but it was over in a second. "What bloke?"

"White, short blond hair; the same as you, but shorter."

"Age?"

"Forty . . . I guess."

"Name? Nationality?"

John shook his head almost imperceptibly.

I wished I could see inside. "Where was that guy from? What accent?"

John was trembling now. "I can't . . . can't say. The south, maybe. But I'm not sure."

"A Brit, then?"

John swallowed. "Or someone who'd lived there a long time. Long enough to pass himself off as a Brit."

"And what did he want?"

"He wanted to know what you were doing here, how long you were planning to stay." Again he swallowed hard. "Listen Fisher, could you please put the kni—"

"What did you tell him?"

"That I didn't know. And . . . and that you told me you might be moving on to Guatemala . . . just like you told me. That's all I said. That's all I knew."

He was lying. I could feel it. "Carry on."

The old man looked at the floor. "The knife. Please."

My answer was to apply a little more pressure.

He hissed. "Fisher, *please* . . ."

"Only when you tell me what I need to know."

"The woman you were talking to last night . . . She slipped something in your beer. I saw her do it."

I was silent. That explained the memory loss. Plenty of substances that will send you off to the land of nod for a while, many of them orally ingestible and nearly tasteless. "And you didn't tell me about it."

"Two . . . two hundred dollars is a pile of cash."

"Twenty servings of bacon and eggs," I said sarcastically. I kept the knife to his throat, was tempted to push it hard so that John would keep his lying trap shut, permanently.

One thing I don't like is people who betray one another for a few measly quid. I really don't like it. It's probably part of human nature and in that case I'm an exception—a freak of Mother Nature.

"I have to work hard for that sort of cash here. I've also got expenses. It was easy money. I mean, how well do we know each other, Fisher? Come on!"

"You're a rat, John. A lying rat. You could have told me."

He avoided looking at me.

"Did you know that woman?"

"No, never seen her before."

I pushed the knife a little deeper into his skin. "You sure?"

His eyes bulged in panic. "Yes, I'm sure. Jesus, man, calm down. I'm not lying, I swear."

"Did the guy say what he was planning?"

"No."

I believed him.

Two people, a dusky woman in her late twenties and a blond Englishman around forty. They'd worked hard to devise and organize this game. Paid people to make the whole charade come true.

It had to be important. *I* had to be important to them. But it remained a mystery who "they" were and why they were after me.

I examined John. The wound on his throat had already stopped bleeding—hardly any damage. At least, nothing that couldn't be

hidden by a Band-Aid and that wouldn't be gone within a week. Nothing to cry about.

"No address?" I knew the answer already. "Or a number?"

"No, the guy wasn't here for more than ten minutes."

I withdrew the knife. I was done here.

Time to scram. Now.

I gave him a penetrating look. "I haven't been here, John. If he comes back, or whoever comes here, I wasn't here. It's in your own interest."

I went out, tossed the knife as I passed the trashcan, and upped my pace.

Briefly, very briefly, I looked back. John had a point—how well did we know each other?

He could suddenly come storming out to plant a knife between my shoulder blades, all because he felt his manliness or pride had been tarnished. Or he could take me out with the hunting rifle that he kept under the bar.

It could happen just like that. Everyone has their own reason for breaking.

But the door stayed shut.

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5 18.55. I had just handed in my luggage and watched as a couple of stocky Mexicans pushed the jam-packed carts off. The passengers' possessions were loaded into the hold.

The air-conditioning was on full in the ship, blasting air onto the rows of bright blue upholstered chairs, seating at least two hundred, bolted onto the blue patterned carpet. The chairs all faced a large screen, upon which a film danced with safety instructions in Spanish and English. It was interrupted with commercials for hot spots in this slice of Mexico. Mayans, ATV safaris, snorkeling excursions and jungle expeditions in old army trucks.

I stiffly made my way down the aisle to the stern of the ship. My head throbbed. Of all the physical pains I was enduring, my shoulders and back were the worst. My first mission was to locate the restrooms so that I could try and decently clean myself. The crusted sea salt on my shirt chafed my skin and bit into the cuts and grazes.

The chairs were for the most part occupied by Mexicans. Women in their forties and above, solidly built, with jet-black hair. Some were still wearing their white work clothes. They chattered urgently to each other. I guessed they were on their way home from their island jobs.

I found the restrooms and for the first time had a chance to examine the damage. It wasn't too bad. The cut on my temple had already set, framed by purple skin. I washed the salt from my face, hands, and arms. My pants were light pink in places. There was little I could do about that now. Raising my head, I inspected my nose in the mirror, blew it softly, and rinsed the basin out.

If all went according to plan, I could have a good shower tomorrow evening. Something to look forward to.

I exited the restroom and made my way to the deck aft, where the tourists were trying to absorb every last ray of sun. I sought out a free spot on one of the white benches. The deck was shrouded with a relaxed atmosphere, with the elatedness that is a part of a vacation and the prospect of a rapid journey to the Mexican mainland and its cultural treasures.

I rested my arms on the backrest in front and tried to relax. As soon as I hit Cancun I'd hop the first available flight far away from here. Málaga, Fortaleza, Los Angeles—right now I didn't care, as long as it was far from Mexico.

The boat churned away from the harbor. The engines that propelled this colossal metal vessel were no toys, their diesel power fighting the deep and treacherous current. They made an enormous racket, their exhaust fumes rising from the sea to the stern deck. The metal deck trembled beneath my seat. I turned to watch the harbor getting ever smaller. A wide wake of white foam demarcated the route we had ploughed through the ocean. The ferry rolled across the waves and seagulls screeched through the air above us. Two backpackers, tribal tattoos, early twenties, tossed scraps of food into the air.

Fatigue was creeping up on me. The nausea returned, my whole body a war zone. I tried to stretch out my legs, but they only just fit under the bench in front. Forty-five minutes to the mainland—I may as well try and get some sleep, I thought.

It was barely thirty minutes before I felt pressure on my bladder, and mumbling "excuse me's," I wormed myself between the benches and knees and walked into the metallic blue and white interior of the boat. There was a line for the restrooms and I killed time watching a film about coral reefs on the big screen. My eyes drifted to the hundreds of heads—nearly all adorned with black hair—between me and the screen. Most of them were conversing with each other or watching the film—scuba divers were now drifting through the jagged coral protrusions—with boredom. They'd probably seen it dozens of times before.

And then I froze. A woman sitting between two balding men glanced around and at me, then quickly looked back at the screen. I forgot why I was standing in the line. I walked down the aisle.

No mistake. Even if her face was not painted with makeup and even though she'd exchanged the black dress, which would have raised the dead at a funeral, for jeans and a plain T-shirt. Her dark hair was loosely pinned up. Again she glanced up at me and then quickly to the floor.

I averted my eyes, just to give the impression I did not recognize her.

Fatigue forgotten, the pain gone, I felt my heart thudding in my throat.

She was here, the woman I'd flirted with last night before my world went black. The one who'd slipped me a Mickey Finn.

Was she alone? I scanned the faces around her, row by row, then focused on the men in her immediate vicinity, then the guys standing around and leaning against the walls, and finally the ones in the line I'd just left. Nobody seemed to be paying particular attention to me—no one who either avoided my gaze or held it.

Five minutes passed, in which she threw me the occasional look and then quickly stared ahead with an unnatural expression, eyes fixed but unseeing on the screen. I could be totally wrong, but I was pretty sure she was alone.

Again I excused myself as I made my way rather roughly between the rows.

She saw me approach, stayed put. Looked the other way. Her neighbor was a Mexican man wearing a patterned jersey stretched taut across his stocky torso and generous belly. I pushed past him and stopped right in front of her. Her knees touched my legs, and she still pretended I wasn't there. It was getting ridiculous. Her head turned almost all the way to the left.

I leaned down. "Where's your husband?"

Her response comprised raising her hand to her mouth and chewing her nails. Not a word.

"Where's your husband?" I repeated.

"Back on the island."

Her voice was warm and melodious. I had to fight to keep focused. "You're lying."

She turned her head again. "I've got nothing to say to you."

My hand shot out, grabbed her chin. The guy next to her shifted in his chair, his face forecasting bad news. A knight in shining armor. Happy to get involved, I could see that immediately. But he wasn't her companion—he'd have reacted very differently if he was.

I couldn't do much more. Not here, unless I felt like diving straight back into the shit I'd just paddled out of.

"You're not European and you're not married—not to anyone who's running a steel company in the U.S. with your brother, at any rate," I said to her, my voice quieter now. "So tell me what's going on. Did they hire you?"

She gathered her things and tried to stand up, but I was in the way.

"May I please pass?" she asked, without looking at me.

I moved my feet. Her neighbor shifted his legs out of the way and stared at me with naked aggression. I raised a hand in his direction, calming him, letting him know it was nothing serious. Just a little domestic squabble.

She grabbed the backrest in front and pulled herself up, then shuffled sideways toward the aisle. I followed. Legs were shifted and raised, bags picked up, accompanied by groans and soft curses.

Once in the aisle she headed for the deck aft. Not a seat to be had. The two backpackers occupied my former seat, basking in the sun.

She turned to face me. "I work in Cancun," she said. "I'm a dancer."

No surprise there. A smile flashed across my face.

She looked offended. "Not like *that*."

"All right," I said. "A dancer. Whatever."

"There was a guy there last week, in the audience. He wanted to talk to me after the show. I thought he would want to do more than talk—it happens often enough, not many days go by without a proposition. But . . ." she looked straight at me ". . . I'm not like that. Anyway, he really wanted to talk. Made me an offer I couldn't refuse. I needed the money."

I'd heard that more than once today. It seemed like the whole world needed the money. "So what did the offer entail?"

She looked away. "Perform a little play. No danger involved."

"Slip something in my beer?"

She nodded, eyes focused on the deck now. "Sorry."

"So why'd he choose you?"

She shrugged, looked straight at me. She obviously really didn't know.

I knew. I only had to look around the deck to know that every single man there was staring at her.

They, whomever they were who were after me, were playing it safe. So they used a walking man-magnet to make sure she'd grab my attention. And it had worked. By God, it had worked.

"What did they pay you?" I asked. She hadn't moved.

"A thousand. U.S."

"When will you get it?"

"Already did. That same night."

"Big risk," I commented. "Paying your freelancers in advance."

"Not really. Everyone knows where to find me."

"Any idea where he is, that guy?"

She shook her head. Her face was slightly mournful.

"What did he look like?"

"A bit like you—blond and blue eyes. But he was older, and not as tall. He was well dressed. Expensive suit."

"And where was he from?"

Again she shrugged. "He spoke English."

It all corresponded to the man John had described. I delved through my memory for an Englishman of about forty, smaller than me, blond and blue eyed, who I had done wrong to. An impossible task. Could be hundreds. A good suit cut the number to a handful, but I could not see any of them making the journey from Europe to Mexico to set up this little honey trap.

The ferry swung around as it approached the dock. The passengers collected their attachments and stood. A circling flock of seagulls screeched down at us.

I hesitated.

"Where you going?" she asked.

"To Cancun."

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6

Her hands gripped the wheel of her decrepit Nissan. Its shock absorbers were wrecked. The chassis was almost rotted through and there was a leak somewhere in the fuel hose—the whole car stank of gas. Both windows were rolled fully down, courtesy of the stench and the lack of air-conditioning.

Her name was Angela. *Angel*.

The sun's heat was softening with its setting. The orange light danced in her hair and brushed it with a golden braid. I couldn't find anything about her I didn't like.

"Where do you live?"

"On the outskirts of Cancun. It's nothing special."

"And your English? Where'd you learn to speak it so well?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

"I'm curious."

She braked as a truck pulled out in front of us. Shifted down. "Can I also ask you a few questions?"

"Only if you tell me where you learned to speak such good English."

She looked straight ahead, at the tarmac. "I was married to a Scotsman. We lived in Alloa, near Stirling. For two years."

"Didn't work out?"

She shifted up again. "No, he was a prick."

Clear enough.

I looked out the window. Streets lined by half-completed houses, the occasional sheet of blue plastic serving as a roof. Children and dogs playing in the dust in the dirt roads. Poverty. Welcome to Mexico. Welcome to the slice of Mexico you don't see in the brochures.

"So what are you doing here in Mexico?"

She shrugged. "Sick of Europe, the weather. The sun's always shining down here. I've got a job. Where are you from, Vince?"

I'd given her a fake name. Not honorable, I admit. Just cautious. I glanced across at her. I'd have to be careful, especially after the ride I was taken on last night. It had been some sort of sedative, but it could easily have been cyanide. "England," I said.

She was silent a moment. "And what are you doing here?" she asked after a bit.

A question I'd asked myself a few times too in the last couple of weeks. "Just a vacation. A break, pure and simple."

"Got a job?"

Difficult one. Tell her I was unemployed? Or tell her I was on the payroll of the British army, and risk a more directed interrogation from her? Either way, it would get complicated. "I'm an architect."

"*That* I hadn't expected."

"What did you think?"

She granted me a quick smile. "Secret agent or something."

I returned her smile and pulled at a loose thread in my trousers. "Would you have preferred that?"

"Maybe."

The towers of the airport loomed in the distance, and I felt a slight pang of disappointment. My body had already forgiven her for what she did to it last night. I wanted to continue driving, continue sitting next to her in that Japanese tin can for the pleasure of looking at her, talking to her. But then I remembered the two corpses I'd driven away from on that abandoned beach on the southerly point of Cozumel.

I had to leave.

"Do you know the guy?" She was suddenly serious.

"Which guy?"

"The one who's after you."

I shook my head. "No. Not as far as I know."

"So you're on the run now?"

"Beginning to look like it, that's for sure."

"Where will you go?"

"Málaga, I guess. If I can catch a flight, that is."

She shot me another smile. Gorgeous mouth. "Málaga?"

"Yeah."

"Why Málaga?"

Because I've got to get the hell off this continent and I can't face the grayness and coldness of the British Isles. That's why. "Why not Málaga?"

"Don't you have to get back to work?"

Oops. "I took a few months off."

"A few months." She raised her eyebrows. "You got your own company, then?"

"Something like that."

She was quiet for a while. "I've got a brother in San Sebastián. Haven't seen him in years . . . Your friend paid me well and . . . Ah, forget it."

My eyes lit up. "You're going to Spain?"

"Well, strictly speaking, the Basque Country. I've got two weeks off."

"Have you booked a flight?"

"No." She shrugged. "There are daily flights to Spain from here. If you wait until just before a plane leaves, you can sometimes take it at a quarter of the ticket price."

The fluorescent lights of the departures hall bathed everything in a green sheen. Lobster-red tourists and pleasantly tanned *pensionadas* arrived and left with carts piled high with luggage. Children whined and whimpered. People greeted each other or said their farewells. A couple of coffee bars were scattered around the hall, where you could grab a bite or buy cigarettes, alcohol, candy, and perfume. That was it, really. When it comes to the facilities, Cancun International Airport is not something to write home about.

The airline companies were located in a separate hall. The first counter I got to, I put down my bags. Angela stayed by my side. The girl behind the counter waved me away as soon as I asked

about a flight to Málaga. Tonight, if possible. No luck either at the second counter. But at the third, Iberia Airlines, I got a result. The next afternoon, 13.20, a Boeing was taking off for the south of Spain. There was a seat available.

That meant a night and the whole morning in the departures hall. Most airports did not complain if you took a nap on one of their benches, but I did not think it a good idea to hang around here more than necessary. Getting out of the country this very evening would have been the best thing for me, cruising at some thirty thousand feet above the Atlantic.

I didn't know what John had done after I'd paid him a visit—there was no way of knowing. And the bodies could always be found.

I suddenly felt the urge to move.

I asked the man at the desk if there were any other options. The only destination left tonight was Madrid. He looked at me strangely. Angela took my hand. It was the first time I had touched her, really touched her, and it felt great. Soft skin.

"Maybe . . ." she began. "Well, maybe . . ."

"What?"

Her face held an expression that I didn't get when she looked at me.

"Madrid, that's kind of near San Sebastián, isn't it?" I asked impulsively.

Her smile widened. "Closer than Málaga, at any rate."

We bought ourselves two tickets for Madrid, one-way for me and round-trip for Angela. Twelve thousand pesos, over a thousand dollars in all. No discount.

She handed the man her passport and I managed to get a quick look. Spanish.

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7

Everyone in our immediate vicinity was sleeping. A few reading lights were still dotted around the cabin. The engines rumbled monotonously, accompanied by the occasional muffled cough.

I could not sleep, the gears of my brain grinding. Someone had gone to one hell of a lot of trouble to stitch me up and, try as I might, I could not think who it could be. The entire day had been a surreal experience, as if it had all been a dream. But the pain in my back and shoulders, that was no dream. Nor was the cut near my eyebrow. I don't dream pain.

I hoped those two men on the beach were bastards in their own world, and not just unemployed fishermen who desperately needed a few dollars.

Christ, I felt like shit.

Angela mumbled something and swung her head toward me. Her eyes fluttered open, didn't register, closed again. Her face was so close to mine I had to resist the temptation to kiss her, to cuddle up to her. Unwillingly, I put my head against the vibrating fuselage and stared at my own ghostly reflection in the window.

I wanted to be completely certain she wasn't lying—that she was really Spanish, a dancer in Cancun, married to some Scottish bastard from Alloa, and with a brother in San Sebastián.

Maybe everything she told me was true. And maybe I was an architect. And maybe my name was Vince.

It had been enough of a victory already that I'd been able to travel, that the paranoia didn't grab me by the throat and induce paralysis when I waved my passport, that I boarded a plane without a heart attack.

✚

My passport had been gathering dust in a drawer for years. I deliberately neglected to carry any form of identification on my person. I was untraceable; I wanted nobody to be able to find me. My Helen was driven to the point of madness. She wanted to get away, even for just a week—it was all the rain and people that got to her. Anywhere. Benidorm, Torremolinos, it really didn't matter. As long as the sun was shining. But I wasn't flying anywhere, and I certainly wasn't going abroad. To appease her we booked a hotel in Blackpool. On the coast and in my homeland, so everything was cool. Until the man at reception asked for a passport.

"Why?" I asked.

He looked at me across the gleaming surface of his counter as if I was relieving myself against it. "Rules. Insurance and police."

Helen put her arm on mine. Maybe she also said something soothing, I really can't remember. The last thing I do remember is pulling the guy out from behind his counter and screaming in his face that he, that nobody can fuck with me. I found out later that I didn't stop at that—but I have no personal recollection of it. After a few hours in the cells we drove home in silence.

Nice vacation.

That was paranoid, no doubt about it. But now was different. I had every reason to be distrustful now, to be vigilant. A damn good reason. Somebody wanted me out of the picture and had done a lot of work to ensure they got what they wanted. So who?

I didn't even know where to start. I'd done eight months of security work before fleeing the U.K.—simple work, peanuts. Watching people, writing reports, playing taxi. Soul destroying. Yeah it was simple, but I'd still screwed it up. Could that be the reason? Did it involve Harry, my old employer? It was hard to believe—even if he'd never take me on again, or want to see me.

I sniffed and tried to squirm into a comfortable position and grab some sleep, but I could not rid my mind of these thoughts. Shit, I had to calm down. The only thing that mattered now was that a couple of thousand miles separated me from Mexico and tomorrow

I could make myself disappear somewhere in Europe. Maybe I would go to Málaga after all, just as I told Angela. And maybe I wouldn't—just because I told Angela I would.

There was no way of telling how straight she was being with me. You never knew that, about anybody. You could be best mates with somebody for ten years before he betrays you to the goddamn IRS, fucks your woman in your own bed, or plants a bullet in your brain—depending on the circles you move in. It all boils down to the same thing.

Trust nobody, not any more.

That attitude had been diluted in the last few months, but the crap that had been flung my way the last twenty-four hours had reignited it with a passion.

I turned and looked down at the sleeping Angela.

She could be a dancer.

I wanted her to be a dancer. I really did.

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8

The rain poured off the awning and onto the stacked terrace chairs. The atmosphere in Horas, one of the countless pubs we'd encountered in the pedestrianized area of Madrid's city center, smelled of beer and cigarette smoke. The windows were misted up.

Angela sat across from me. Her moist hair clinging to her neck, Spanish music filling the background and a nice pint of Guinness in my hand—in another life I would have considered my present state as being one of happiness.

"Are you happy?" A deep question that suddenly burst out.

She gauged me for a moment. "I think so."

"Think so, or know so?"

"I've got enough to eat and I have a roof over my head. I've got a job—I'm a good dancer and I like my work. I don't have to suck up to anybody and I earn enough to simply go home after I've done my show. A lot of the girls don't."

I didn't have to ask what they did after their shows concluded. It flashed across my mind whether . . .

I'm not that kind of dancer.

"Did you . . ."

She looked away. "That's got nothing to do with you."

Very clear. I took a drink. She was right; it had nothing to do with me.

She came close to me, she pushed me away—she'd been doing that ever since we touched down on the tarmac. In the first instance she seemed innocent, gentle, enchanting. But she could react very unexpectedly to a soft whisper and a smile. There was a touch of danger about her, something sultry, something indefinable. I was

fascinated by her. It was the only reason I'd agreed to have a drink with her before she made her way north and I south. Before we'd never see each other again.

Maybe it was my troubled spirit. Or maybe I'd just been without a drink too long.

I gestured toward the bar. The waiter, a bespectacled student, looked up and approached us. I raised my empty glass and looked at Angela. She nodded and looked at my glass. "Thirsty?"

"I could use a nip," I responded. Those last few years with Helen I'd been drinking more than I did now. A lot more.

"I'm sure you could."

Another look that only engendered confusion in me. She wasn't talking about alcohol any longer.

I forced a smile and wrenched my hand through my hair. It was stiff. Caribbean sea salt. Mexico already seemed a lifetime ago, but it was a mere fifteen hours ago that the Boeing had dipped its wings in farewell to Quintana Roo.

I tried not to think about it.

The pub was becoming busier, noisier. A young family sat down at the table behind Angela. The mother loudly scraped a chair out and parked a baby carriage in its place. She did not look very pleased, more stressed than anything. The husband disappeared to the toilets. The son, about three years old, immediately started drawing on the misted windows. His mother grabbed his arm and slapped his wrist, then showered him with Spanish curses.

"I'm moving on tomorrow," I mumbled, playing with the beermat.

"Where to?"

I shrugged. "Guess I'll find out tomorrow."

Angela slowly moved the teaspoon in her cup. She didn't look up. "Why don't you stay?"

I took another sip. "Why would I?"

Her face darkened. She gripped a napkin and looked outside. An elderly couple ducked under the awning and entered the bar. The man took her coat, shook the rain off.

"Okay," I said, just to break the silence. "So you're off to your brother's in San Sebastián tomorrow."

She nodded.

"Aren't you going to phone him?"

"No. I want to surprise him."

"Maybe he's gone away."

"He's always around . . . He works from home."

"You stay in touch?"

She nodded. "We phone at least once a month."

"What does he do?"

"He's got a little factory. Handmade flooring tiles. Terra-cotta stuff." There was pride in her voice. Her brother did exist. Or maybe it was a close friend. "He supplies kitchen fixtures and exclusive tile shops throughout Europe."

"Business good, then?"

"I think so. We never talk about it. He only ever asks how I'm doing. He's a bit concerned about me."

"A true older brother," I observed. Not that I knew anything about it. I wouldn't have minded an older brother myself. Or any brother. Or a sister.

Smile lines appeared around her eyes. "He's five years older."

"Married?"

She nodded again. "Two children, eight and twelve. The older one lives with his first wife."

"And when did you last see him?"

"A year or two ago." She was silent a moment. "So you really don't know where you're going tomorrow? Maybe also to see your family?"

I shook my head. My folks would barricade the door and call the cops if their—as far as they were concerned—completely derailed kid turned up on their porch. "Roam around a bit," I said, looking outside through the flowing net curtains. "Head south, I guess."

"You know . . ." She gave me a penetrating look. "You become a good judge of character in my line of work."

I said nothing.

"And you're not who you say you are," she continued.

I raised an eyebrow and looked straight at her. "I'm not?"

"No," she said with certainty. "Why are you lying to me?" she added softly.

The coffee and the Guinness arrived.

"Are you this direct with everybody?"

"Only if I like someone."

I gripped my glass and took a long drink.

"You're not answering," she said.

"Answering?"

"My question."

"What question?"

"Why you're lying. You're not who you said you were."

I sniffed, and then chucked the rest of the stout down my gullet.

"Why, Vince?"

I ignored her.

"You don't seem like the type to travel for fun," she persisted. "I hardly saw you laugh once in Mexico. Nor today. You seem restless. Not like . . ."

"Not much to laugh about, is there?" I couldn't keep the cynicism out of my voice. "Somebody's put me at *numero uno* on their hit list and they're smart enough to track me down in Mexico. Nobody knew where I was."

"I'm sorry." Her hand searched out mine on the table. Long, slender fingers. "We got off on the wrong foot."

"Putting it mildly, that is. You drugged me and got me kidnapped by two psychos who thought that their boots would make great murder weapons."

"I had no idea that was going to happen."

"You didn't? It never occurred to you what you were getting your bloody money for—that it was an entirely plausible epilogue to slipping a Mickey Finn into my drink? Christ, I could be dead."

"I'm sorry. I needed—"

"The money," I completed her sentence, irritated. "I'm sure you did. And you had no idea who I was, so you just didn't give a shit. Did you?"

She nervously dragged her hand through her long, dark hair. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a couple of men looking our way. They examined Angela approvingly, and I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all.

"I'm not proud of what I did," she almost whispered. Her hand covered mine once more. "To be honest, I didn't want to go through with it after I struck up a conversation with you. You were just too nice. And . . . attractive."

I held my breath a moment.

The corners of her mouth turned slightly upward and her eyes grew even darker. "Maybe . . . maybe I can make it up to you?"

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9

She was astride me, her legs spread above my face, her ass pushed against my hips. She cooed, she moaned, sucked, pulled, inserted her tongue deep in my mouth, wound under me like a cat in heat, and we spent the entire day in a rickety bed in an even more rickety hotel—the name of which is lost to me—while the rain cried down from the dour sky.

She poured vodka down my throat, over my chest and stomach. I hissed as the alcohol bit into my wounds and called her a sadistic bitch. She took it as a compliment, smiling with satisfaction. Then she went down on her knees and licked the liquid off my body, while her hand tried to reawaken my ravaged cock and she never took her eyes off me. I laid my head back and stared into the psychedelic greens, oranges, and browns of the wallpaper, which had without doubt been pasted to the thin walls in the sixties and for some unfathomable reason was still with us today.

Angela. I'd never met anybody like this before. She sucked my life out but recharged me, she was innocent but completely nuts, and I didn't know whether I wanted to marry her or throw her out the window.

Maybe I'd fallen in love. Maybe I'd lost myself. At any rate, I'd forgotten all about heading to the south of Spain.

And I was drunk.

There is little that comes close to the utter euphoria produced by drinking copious quantities of vodka—or any goddamn alcohol—in combination with fantastic sex. Complete happiness hovered in my head, while dark clouds hovered above Madrid and dumped their loads to rinse the streets clean, and while the sound of banging and rhythmic pounding from adjacent rooms effortlessly floated through the walls.

I wrestled the bottle from her hands and emptied it into my mouth, then let it fall to the threadbare brown carpet next to the bed. The mattress felt damp beneath me.

Angela sat astride me once more and dragged her nails down my chest. I stretched out my hands to enclose her breasts, small and not completely identical, with hard, brown nipples that did not yield an inch. I followed the gentle sloping of her ribs to her midriff, taut and muscled, then on to her unparalleled hips and ass, which were soft and round. It was all perfect.

A smile danced across her face. Her head bowed, shoulders pulled back, and eyes partially hidden behind wisps of hair, hanging loose and adhering to her bronzed skin. Her fingertips explored every inch of my body and she drank me in like an academic subject she'd be grilled on later.

Color of eyes?

Three birthmarks, where exactly?

Size of cock?

Describe his chest hair.

See any fillings in his teeth?

"What are you looking at?" I asked.

I only just caught her response over the siren of an ambulance racing below our window. "I'm looking at you."

"What's so interesting about me?"

Another skewed smile. "Nothing much, really. But, oh well. I'll do what I can with what I've been given." And then, apologetically, "You've got a pretty good body for somebody claiming to be an architect."

"Angela?"

She raised a leg and stretched it backward, then leaned forward, hanging over me. She took my penis and inserted it into her mouth. Her hair covered my stomach and hips.

"I want to . . ."

She looked up, two brown eyes peeking out through the curtain of hair. "Yes?"

I grasped for words, but I couldn't remember what I wanted to ask.

She giggled, a brief giggle, went back to work.

I felt her lips, felt her tongue. I swallowed hard. Scrutinized the wallpaper. Green circles, brown circles. Orange lines. They were moving. Dancing.

The whole room was dancing around me and mocking me.

The euphoria slowly descended back to reality. End of brief moment of happiness. The oncoming train at the end of the tunnel.

"Give me a moment, darling." I pushed her off me and tried to stand up. The hotel room had become a runaway carousel and I was at the epicenter. Bad news. I shut myself off and leaned against the wall. Shit, now the floor was also moving. I managed to drag myself to the bathroom and only just had the presence of mind to lock the door. Vodka, port, whiskey, Guinness—all in that sequence—were ejected from my body at the speed of light, mixed in with the half-digested remains of a tapas meal.

I thought I heard Angela giggle, but it could have been someone in the bathroom next door.

The faucet wouldn't budge without some firm persuasion on my part, and eventually emitted water that stank of chlorine, with which I washed my mouth out and washed my face. Then I sat down on the floor. The room was spinning at a slower speed already and I inhaled and exhaled deeply a few times. I glanced down at my watch. 22.00. I had to get another room. I couldn't sleep in the same room with Angela. That wasn't an option.

Fuck.

"You all right?" Then giggles.

I mumbled something to the affirmative and breathed deeply again. Stood up, rinsed my mouth out once more, and opened the bathroom door. Angela was adorned in my shirt hanging around her slender shoulders like a cowl. "Are you ill?" Her eyes were laughing. She thought it was funny.

I rubbed my eyes. "I'm fine now. But I'm leaving."

That seemed to startle her. "Leaving? Where?"

I tried to shake the confusion from my head and looked for my clothes. Boxers under the bed. "Down to reception."

"Why?"

"I'm not staying here."

I snatched my pants off the floor, stepped into them, unearthed my socks, and stuck my wallet in my back pocket. Then I tripped over my

own feet and flopped down onto the bed.

"You're serious."

I looked up. "Yes, I'm serious. Now give me my shirt."

She made no attempt to remove it. "But why?"

"Because it's my shirt."

That earned me a dark look. "I want to know why you're not staying."

Difficult question. Well, the question wasn't so difficult, it was the answer that posed a problem for me. One I couldn't provide—it simply wasn't the right time to hand her a complete list of all my handicaps and aberrations. She already knew one of them. It didn't seem to faze her.

She must have perceived my resoluteness, for she pulled the shirt off and chucked it to me. I dried my face on it, then put it on.

"I don't want you to go, Vince."

I climbed off the bed, staggered but remained upright with a hand to the wall. "You don't want me to stay, believe me."

"But what's wrong?" She was masking her uncertainty with a smile.

I put my back to the wall for support, then pulled her against me and buried my face in that part of her body where her shoulder met her neck. "I've got a problem, at night."

She pulled her head back and looked at me in alarm.

Shit, now it looked as if I wet the bed. Compared to that, I'd rather tell the truth. But then the architect story wouldn't gel.

It was too early to show her my everything. It was probably always too early. "I just want to sleep alone. That's all. I'll see you in the morning. Sorry."

"Sorry? What the hell's wrong? Jesus, Vince, don't act so weird."

She pushed her body against me.

I wanted to stay. In spite of the psychotic wallpaper that was giving me a throbbing headache, the odor of transience, the noisy neighbors—new ones every hour—I wanted to stay. I wanted to lie on the vodka-soaked bed, put my arm around Angela just like a regular guy, and fall into a deep sleep. I wanted to be together with her.

Maybe I could do it.

And if you can't do it, Alex? Then what?

She kissed me. Deep and warm. "Come," she said. "Come lie next to me a bit."

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