

28 Counting Out Time

The girl continued to sink into the lonely, dark waters and he quickly lost sight of her. There was that old, familiar struggle with his heart and his mind: to live or to die. He gave up on his pursuit; he never won; he never saved her. The decision came to him quickly and there was a sliver of hope in his heart and so he turned and began the long ascent to the water's surface crawling upwards toward the golden glimmer of water so far above him. He began to smile: he was going to make it! But just as suddenly his raging lungs gave out and the last of his sinking air was painfully expelled and he panicked. No! I want to live! He began to spasm as water poured into his spent lungs and then there was peace. Yes, he would pass over, his soul taken before he could make amends.

There was a sudden roar, like a beast coming to claim his floating body. He shot up in bed. His hair was soaked as were his sheets and pillow. He was cold, shivering; the room was beginning to brighten. The roar was fading and he realized the Catalina PBV that had been there earlier was now gaining altitude away from Genesis Cay. All that was left was the gentle lapping of water and the realization that his prayers had not been answered. The girl was still dead and he was still a fugitive and he was still on this forsaken island. Goddamn it all!

Why had she sat down next to him at the bar? Why had he been attracted to her? He felt her everywhere, inside and out and he couldn't get the feeling of her away from him, no matter how hard he pushed. She was in his dreams and in every waking moment and he

wished he could go back and tell her to fuck off. Go away. Leave him alone. And live. Live out your life and find someone who will take care of you and nurture you and grow old with you. Not some washed up son of a bitch that got you killed. Why couldn't she have just stayed away?

He showered, letting the cold water run over his body, washing the sweat and sins away, whirl pooling down the drain. He had woken alone: his decision. He had carefully explained to Brita that he was still grieving. Part of that had been the truth, part a lie. He didn't want to hurt her feelings; thus was his arrogance. Instead of being devastated by the rejection of a hunk of a man over which every woman drooled—again, at times, his arrogance knew no bounds—Brita had been very civil. She hugged him in as nonsexual way a naked woman could a naked man, then dressed, gave him a very gentle kiss on his lips and had disappeared into the night. Disaster averted.

He dried and looked in the mirror. He looked like shit. His hair was tangled and the growth on his face made him appear as a gay lumberjack, drawing out the slight femininity of his soft eyes. He grabbed a razor and began to lather up his face. With razor in hand he leaned close to the mirror and just as he was about to make the first swipe down the side of his cheek, he paused. He had an idea, or at least the beginnings of a plan. He washed the shaving cream from his face.

On a shelf in the closet, he found a bathing suit, pulled it on and marched to the back patio. He dove into the crystal water. He swam thirty yards to a floating dock, turned and swam back to his patio. He completed twenty laps and pulled himself back onto his pier, his arms slightly shaking from the exertion. He wiped the water from his eyes and ran

his fingers through his stringy hair.

La Araña had returned sometime during the night, its lumbering, graceful magnificence anchored at the mouth of the bay. It was still early and the bay was dead except for a trawler docked along side a floating pier on the other side of the bay. Its narrow white hull was streaked with rust with a simple wood cabin sitting in the bow in front of a long deck stretching to the stern. Several men were offloading small crates brimming with cased vegetables and fruits, and large canvass bags onto the dock and then placing them in a dingy on the other side; obviously they were resupplying the resort.

“How about some breakfast, Mr. Whitte.” Gabby caught him off guard and made him jump. “I’m sorry I startled you.”

“That’s okay, I was lost in another world.” He glanced back at the woman with a smile plastered across her face. “I think I’d like to eat up at the resort if that’s okay.”

“Certainly. Come up whenever you are ready. I brought you some coffee.”

“Thank you.” She smiled and turned to leave. “Hey, Gabby,” he called out. “Do ya’ll have a barber here?”

Sleep had come in fits for Tiffany as Johnson’s snoring from the bedroom kept her up most of the night. Once she realized that the snoring wouldn’t stop, she played around on the computer some, discovering more money flowing into and out of the various Whitte business interests. Money came in as an investment and money went out in the form of partnership dividends once a quarter. From there, the dividends seemed to disappear into

faceless corporations and emerge into the hands of key players in various corporations and from there, into organizations that influenced government policy. It was textbook laundering but even if the money could be properly traced instead of the guesswork and extrapolation she was using, it would be hard to prosecute. There was no crime in investing in a company and receiving the investments back, with or without realized profit—as these were obviously not profit generating investments—so long as the appropriate taxes were paid. Still, it was wrong and she knew that if Jack Whitte knew about it he was as guilty as all the rest. But she didn't believe it for a moment.

Now, she was sleeping with her head on the table, the keyboard tucked neatly under her folded arms. There was a soft tune that wafted into her dreams. She was lying alone on a beach and Jack Whitte strolled toward her. She wanted to have him in the worst imaginable way—she felt it deep inside of her—but as the tune hummed along, he held out his hand and she embraced him. They danced and he held her close. *Don't worry; it will all be fine my little angel*, he whispered. She stood on her tiptoes and reached for his lips with hers and they kissed passionately and fell back into the sand. Then they waded out into the gentle Caribbean Sea and they made love. That had always been her fantasy since she was growing into her teens; to make love in the water with the man that Jack had been.

Her head ached as she regained consciousness and realized the music was real and it was coming from the bedroom. She stood, rubbing the sleep from her eyes and let the soft sound of the horn pull her into Johnson's bedroom. He sat in bed, shirtless, leaning against the wall, a pillow tucked behind his back. His eyes were closed and he softly exhaled into his cornet and the sounds that emerged were truly angelic. Suddenly he

stopped and opened his eyes.

“Oh, shit, man. Didn’t mean to wake you.” He looked her over. “You look like shit, by the way.”

“Thanks Louis Armstrong. You’re good.”

Johnson keyed his cornet, removed the mouthpiece, and placed it back in the beat up case. “You know, you don’t have to sleep on the couch. Why don’t we switch?”

“Are you kidding?”

Johnson’s legs hung over the arm and almost touched the floor so, in practicality, that wasn’t even an issue. “Here, I’ll leave so you can shower. Why don’t we go get some Key Lime pie-on-a-stick and go for some R and R? I need a down day and so do you.”

Britannia Morgan had stationed herself by the pool, wearing the same outfit she had the day before for the hike to the other side of the island, a daypack slung over her shoulder. A tall man with close-cropped beard and hair, eyes shaded behind Ray Bans and dressed in hiking shorts and sports shirt walked toward her.

“Oh. My. God. It’s brilliant, Mr. Mango!”

With his trademarked foppish dark hair now gone, Jack Whitte looked and felt like a new man. “You like?”

“I didn’t know it was you till just now.” She motioned him to turn around with her finger. She examined the new Jack Whitte, now more attracted to him than the day before.

“Completely smashing. I’ll hang with you any day.”

“Thank you.” Whitte replied.

“Now, we’re going to have to get you a little sun. You’re completely white around your neck and ears. How long has it been since you wore your hair short?”

“About twenty years.”

“Then we have twenty years of sun to make up for.”

They followed the same path as they had the previous day. When they reached the overlook, Brita removed her clothes, stretched a beach towel over the boulder and climbed up. “Are you going to go down and swim again?”

Whitte was examining the spit of land that lay two miles away, the lush greenery disappearing over the horizon and into the Caribbean midday haze. He wondered how many days he would have to swim to get his stamina up to be able to make the crossing. Maybe a week? Five days top. That was more time than he had. His arms still ached from the morning trial run and he knew he was too out of shape to swim two miles, especially if there was a strong current in the middle of the straight.

He contemplated asking Brita about the island across the way that could be his freedom but a little voice told him the fewest questions asked would raise the least suspicion. “I’m going to do a little hiking and then I’ll probably end up down there for a swim.”

“Can I meet you there?”

“Of course.”

Brita smiled and positioned her eyeshades to keep from getting white rings around her eyes and laid back.

Whitte hiked down the path that led to the small cove with the sandy beach. As he approached, another trail led off to his left away from where he had come. This is what he had been looking for. The trail was rugged, less maintained, and he almost lost his footing a couple of times along the thick roots of the island figs. It climbed about fifty feet and then descended to a flat walk for about forty yards. Finally he came out on another cove. He didn't walk out into the open, however. From his vantage he saw the same boat from the day before with two sentries watching the water. The trail continued to his left so he pushed on. It led up another hill and then made a sharp turn to the left and into another opening. Just around the bend *La Araña* was moored thirty yards offshore. He had made it completely around the island. It took about forty minutes from the cliff, which was about forty minutes from his cabana. But he had made the trek in sunlight. What would it be like in the dark. The moon had been shining bright the night before. How long could he count on that before the moon phased out? On his way back he took his time, memorizing little nuances on the trail such as where brush jutted out and where unexpected roots might jump out at him at night. A plan was definitely coming together.

About two hours after he and left Brita, he reemerged at the sandy alcove. Her pack and clothes were haphazardly tossed on the sand and she was lazily floating in the water. He took off his clothes and swam out to her.

"There you are," she said. "I was about to send out the troops to find you." She swam up to him and embraced him. She softly whispered, "Are you still grieving?" He knew he would regret it, find guilt and despair but this time he did not fight off her advances.

Marks and Johnson purchased a day pass to the Hyatt Key West Resort and Spa and rented a private cabana by the pool. Flush with CIA cash, this was the life of the other half. The pool was breathtaking, facing the Gulf of Mexico side with a sliced view between the main building and the three-story building that housed the suites. They had asked if there were vacancies, with a thought of moving their base of operations but none were to be had. Tiffany had bought a rather revealing bikini in the gift store and laid on a teak wood chaise lounge while Horse was holed-up in the canvass-shrouded cabana, reading Harlan Coben.

Despite the fact that her skin was still peeling from the day she had spent with Whitte jet skiing, she wanted to darken her skin to help shield her identity even further so she rubbed tanning oil on her exposed body and relaxed on a lounge chair, letting the burning sunrays suck out the tension she felt. Scrutinizing the pool area through sunglasses, the atmosphere was tropical with an infinity pool stretching out to the edge of the Gulf of Mexico which shined like a jewel, glimmering in its allure to get lost and, perhaps, to never be found.

There was an attractive older man, tan and graying on his temples and chest hair. He was with an equally statuesque woman who, Tiffany assumed, was his wife. They laid on chaise lounges, occasionally holding hands. From time to time, the man bent over and kissed his wife on the cheek, obviously from something she had said. There was a teenaged boy, possibly their son, lying across the pool from her, gawking at her breasts through the

corner of his shaded eyes. She wanted to laugh but refrained.

She thought about growing up without her father. It had been only she and her mother for so long that in order to protect her mother, she had to grow strong. She had fought off the sloppy advances of all the boys because there had been that spark so many years ago that had led her through life and to this very moment. She had wavered once: her first physical love who had betrayed her; he had stepped over the line and once crossed she never looked back. Still, she continued to watch from afar, keeping track of the life that changed hers forever.

Her thoughts floated until crashing head on into the man she had killed with the iron skillet; she was horrified at her lack of empathy for his death. She had never killed in the line of duty and actually had never been in a situation to do so. Her initial reaction as she had watched him enter her apartment had been to let he and the Ranger hash it out and when all was said and done, sneak in and retrieve the Devil Box and prepare for her life on the run. But something pushed her after the man and when she realized his assignment was to kill everyone associated with her blown operation, she had killed him; not out of saving the Ranger, that had been secondary, but out of her own self-preservation. That realization frightened her, that she could detach emotion and the basic concept of right and wrong and kill at the drop of a hat. Some would say it was training that took over and removed her principles from the equation but she knew better.

Then her thoughts turned back to Jack. Now that she had the luxury to think about herself and not self-preservation, she allowed for that guilty trip into her mind. She expected different from him. His reputation, as the saying goes, preceded him. He was

supposed to be brash, reckless, and impulsive. Instead, he was charming and mature, restrained and reflective. She couldn't help her feelings that matured over just the two-day period that they were together.

She knew his story intimately. He had been wide-eyed and innocent and savages tore that from him; his dreams shattered. As he healed, he threw himself behind ivy towers and emerged aloof and adrift. He tried being a professor but that restrained a hunger to be free; he tried so gallantly to run away from the dark. His father rescued him. Robert Whitte knew the fear that remained in his son's heart and so he brought him back to his side, to a place where Jack could fulfill the hunger that ate at him every waking hour. For a while it had been enough but then his father left, the anchor had torn loose. And now he was crashing against the ragged cliffs of the hell that had so ravaged his heart.

She would save him. She had to. And now, in her heart she knew, she had crossed her own line. She was no longer detached; she was vulnerable.

Her face was stoic, her body in repose but behind the mask of her sunglasses, she was silently sobbing.

Johnson's cell phone rang; it was Jose Sanchez. Tiffany wiped her eyes on a towel and repositioned her sunglasses and hauled herself up and joined Horse in the cabana, squinting as her eyes adjusted to the shade. There were several huh-huh's, and yeah's, and no's and finally he hung up.

"He'll have them done tomorrow night. He's already booked a flight into Tampa

Bay for the next afternoon.”

“Why Tampa?”

“I promised him a vacation for he and his family at Disney World. He didn’t want any other payment.”

“I’ve got no problem with that,” she laughed. She glanced at her own cell phone.

“Let’s head to Sloppy Joe’s”

“What’s that?”

“Tourist dive. It was supposedly Hemmingway’s favorite bar. I want to get drunk.”

Horse rose and stretched. “What the hell.”