

The background of the cover features a close-up of two shirtless men. The man in the foreground is on the right, shown in profile looking towards the left. He has dark brown hair and a light stubble. Behind him is another man with blonde hair, also looking towards the left. They are set against a bright blue sky with palm trees visible in the background.

ICE, WIND AND FIRE

Mel Keegan

"Unputdownable"

(HIM magazine on DEATH'S HEAD)

"A fine example of this genre"

(Gay Times on FORTUNES OF WAR)

"A powerful futuristic thriller"

(Capital Gay on DEATH'S HEAD)

"...the MASTER of gay thrillers ... Mel Keegan's name is a byword for thrilling gay adventure in the past, present and future"

(Millivres on AQUAMARINE)

"This rip-roaring and colourful new gay thriller zooms along with a breathless enthusiasm that never flags"

(Time Out on ICE, WIND AND FIRE)

"Gripping"

(Scotsgay on STORM TIDE)

Also by MEL KEEGAN

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ICE, WIND AND FIRE

DEATH'S HEAD (abridged)

EQUINOX

FORTUNES OF WAR

STORM TIDE

WHITE ROSE OF NIGHT

AN EAST WIND BLOWING

AQUAMARINE

NOCTURNE (due 2004)

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CRIMES OF PASSION
MEL KEEGAN: 20 POEMS

Ice, Wind And Fire

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft, South Australia

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Chapter One

The torch beam probed into the dark interior of the warehouse, illuminating crates and boxes. My wary eyes saw a hundred shoot-holes, my nerves were crawling and the palm of my hand itched on the door's peeling paintwork. If this was a setup, it was classic. If it was not, it would be tomorrow's headlines. Byline or obituary, a risk Matt Lansing's journalists seem to run too often.

The bitter north wind must have come straight off the Arctic. It numbed me as it stirred litter in the shaft of the torch beam. The English cold still cuts me to the bone, eight years after I left Australia for pastures greener. A young journalist with his eyes on the future wants the spotlight, the big cities where tomorrow's news is made, or the world's war zones. There is an old saying about being careful what you wish for.

I stood in the partial cover of the warehouse's open door, listening for any sound from inside, but the place was like a crypt. It was abandoned, already vandalized. I saw telltale signs of squatters, refuse and the black brands of fires on the concrete; but no sound betrayed people. A ginger cat mewled at me from the gloom. It scooted out past my legs, as nervous as I was. Then I was alone.

It was four in the afternoon on a dim, cold March day, and I had gone out to pick up a package. A phoned call, anonymous, offering Lansing the kind of information that has made *Perspective* the magazine it is. Outspoken, radical, dedicated to the truth, irrespective of the toes it crushes. We have been into court three times in the last two years, and staff journalists have been known to be worked over. We tread a lot of toes, make a lot of enemies. I knew as well as my boss, the anonymous call could as easily be an engraved invitation to an ambush as a genuine drop of information.

I edged into the warehouse, playing the torch about. The scuttle of rats behind the boxes had my heart in my mouth. I did not begin to breathe properly again until I saw the manila envelope waiting for me on an upturned crate. The word '*Perspective*' was scrawled on it in felt pen. If I was still in one piece ten metres through the door, it was not likely to be a setup. A man outlined against the daylight, blinded by the sudden darkness, makes an easy target — so does a torch. I got a grip on my paranoia. The envelope could have been wired, but sense argued that a knife between the ribs is equally effective, and a lot less risky.

No, the envelope was just an envelope. I could feel a sheaf of papers inside, and what had to be a video cassette. It went into the inside pocket of my top coat as I left the warehouse. Daylight was like an affirmation of survival. My heart began to slow as I hurried back out to my battered old Escort.

Traffic was congested, London drab and grey un-

der its perpetual overcast. With Lansing's information on the seat beside me, I was at liberty to pass the time in fantasy. England in a cold, rainy March is a place for escaping from. I felt a million miles away from Sydney. It was two years since I had been back, and that was on assignment for Lansing. The family greeted me with mixed emotions; nothing every changes. How can it?

I thought of Sydney's sprawling cityscape, remembered the way the heat you can still get in March, which is early autumn, seems to shimmer over the buildings while the streets are like canyons, filled with city dust and hot wind. London is another world, but a world I call home now. Though I dreamed of escaping for a while as I drove back to the office, my plans did not include Australia.

The plane tickets were in the drawer at home, under lock and key, and our bags were packed with two days' grace. Greg and I were out of there, tourist class on British Airways, on Friday morning — nothing short of the outbreak of nuclear war would stop us.

A lot of people regard working for a magazine like *Perspective* to be a glamorous occupation, but the first year on the job cures you of the belief. We draw a lot of desk work, a lot of routine surveillance, and there can be danger when you make enemies, as we do, telling the stories we tell. It might thrill some folks to be a glorified clerk, as we are half the time, and up to the eyeballs in mud, dodging Khmer Rouge snipers the other half. But for me, the novelty quickly wore off.

I've seen a lot of action since I put Sydney behind

me. I was a green kid, needing to grow up, learn. The Falklands, Grenada, Chad, Lebanon, Kampuchea. There's not much I haven't seen, and some I wish I'd missed, if only because I like sleeping at night. My friends say I'm addicted to my own adrenaline. They're partly right.

But I'm even more addicted to the truth, and the myth of human rights. Eloquent speeches do little to disguise the fact that human rights are still little more than a nice idea in this world. Black, Jewish, gay — every city is full of victims who will tell you the truth.

Perhaps I'm more motivated than the White, Anglo Saxon Protestant male, over twenty-one and married with 2.4 children. He has nothing to fight for, since he was given everything as his birthright. I'm gay. Lansing knows it, knows about Greg and me, and approves. He isn't homosexual, but he stands on the principles of the magazine, that prejudice is the only real, mortal sin. *Perspective* 'arrived' in 1985, with the story lifting the lid off persecution in the suburbs, the cross gay guys have had to bear with AIDS rearing its ugly head. The byline was mine.

The office was starting to gear down for the night. The day staff were on their way out and the skeleton crew beginning to drift in for the late shift. I threw the envelope onto Lansing's desk and hung my coat over a chair. The heating was on, making the air stale, Matt Lansing is not a young man, and he won't make old bones.

He was blue about the eyes, chain smoking, sur-

rounded by spent coffee cups and dogends. He looked like a walking coronary, but he's looked the same for the eight years since I met him. I arrived in London with a letter of introduction from a *Bulletin* editor, and high hopes. Green and painfully young? Maybe. Probably. Still, Lansing liked what he saw. I was on probation and would have been out on my arse at the first cockup; but the cards fell my way.

Lansing shoved the swivel chair back against the venetian blinds and jammed one foot against the edge of the desk as he took a knife to the envelope. The cigarette bled ash onto his shirt, unnoticed.

"Anybody at the place when you got there?" He has never lost those flat, north-country vowels, as if he's proud of them. Working Class Hero.

"Not a soul." I perched on the corner of the desk among the detritus. He started on the sheaf of papers, eyes narrowed against his own smoke. "Has Greg been in yet?"

He shook his head, engrossed in the scribbled sheets. "Your better half's still in Putney, talking to some bird with an axe to grind. RAF wife wanting compo after her husband flew his Jaguar into the ground. Nice, juicy tidbit — big government grinds little people underfoot."

"Same old story," I said acidly.

"And a public favourite." He peered at his watch. "You keen to punch the clock, Connor? You're not going to get on that plane one second faster by shoving off early today. Sweat it out, enjoy the anticipation."

I shrugged philosophically. I like Lansing. He's a forthright kind of a man who demands a lot but gives a lot in return, which is one reason I've turned down offers and stayed with *Perspective* since 1980, running risks when I could have been photographing orchid shows and horse races. "I'll hang about till Greg gets in, if it's all the same to you."

He scanned the bottom of the last sheet and knocked the stack back into shape. "Good stuff. Head-line stuff," he muttered, smug and loving it. "Let's see the French wriggle out of this one."

I craned my neck to see the top sheet. The writing was big and bold, not an educated hand. The strokes suggested anger. The group protesting had the cause of the century: French nuclear testing in the islands around Tahiti, a nest of cancer, deformity and sickness. No way will the French admit their testing is responsible for the misery and human suffering. No amount of evidence matters a damn — the kind of situation that draws Matt Lansing like a magnet.

And makes his best journalists put their necks on the block again. I hoped there was enough in Lansing's hand to spark a storm, and I speculated idly as to the chances of Greg and me getting an assignment out of it. Australians are mildly concerned about French nuclear testing, but normal Pacific weather patterns take the fallout and polluted water away, and the situation seems too far from home to be worth protesting. That is their mistake, but it's going to take freak weather dumping French fallout in Queensland to drag them

out of the complacency that seems to come naturally, living in Australia.

If the information proved out, Greg and I could be heading south soon. I soberly contemplated the wisdom of a side trip, home to Sydney, as I heard my lover's voice in the outer office. He was joking with the sports editor, making various ribald cracks about body builders. Greg has no time for 'narcissism' while half the world is trying to kill the other half. Herb Sadler, meanwhile, has a morbid fascination for over-inflated bodies, and a low flashpoint.

Lansing gave me a push off the desk with his elbow. "Get out of here, Connor, and take bloody Farris with you before he starts a shindig."

I laughed at the idea. Greg would mop the office floor with Sadler. My partner might be slightly built and a hand's breadth under my height, but they do not come tougher than Greg Farris. He's a fighter, he has always had to fight. He was a battered child, institutionalized, tortured at school because of his emerging homosexuality, and finally, a teenage runaway. A lot of boys would have committed suicide. Greg says he came close before he took himself by the scruff of the neck and dragged himself out of the gutter.

I stood at Lansing's door to watch him. Greg is only two years my junior, but you'd take him for a kid. He's built like a dancer, all legs and shoulders. His face, if you can tear your eyes away from his bum, is almost feline, with catlike grey eyes and high cheekbones, and a mouth that pouts and says 'kiss me'. He's beautiful.

'Handsome' is a word that sits uneasily on Greg; his features are too unusual. But beauty surrounds him, no matter where he is or what he's doing. He wears his hair long, thank God, thick chestnut waves on his brow and collar, seducing your fingers.

He looked up over Sadler's unhealthily tidy desk, winked as he saw me, and I watched him slide in behind his typewriter for the last job of the day. I brought a couple of polystyrene beakers of dishwater coffee from the machine, looked over his shoulder as he typed up a rough copy from the notes he had taken in Pitney. Sadler had his coat on. He left as the typewriter began to chatter, and we had the office momentarily to ourselves. I took the opportunity to be close. I felt the tension in Greg's shoulders, and rubbed his neck as much for my own pleasure as his.

"You're strung up," I said quietly. Lansing was still working next door and the kids who mind the shop and answer the phone on the graveyard shift were just outside.

"You've noticed." He looked up and back at me, grateful for my massaging fingers. "One of those bloody days, Alex. Been one of those weeks. Two days, and we're out of here."

Greg is a Londoner, born and bred — and quite *well* bred, which makes it all the more troubling that he should have been battered as a child. You can never tell what goes on behind the polished oak front doors of the middle class. It's a mistake to assume domestic violence springs out of poverty and the better-oiled are

above it. That in itself is a kind of prejudice, against the poor. Greg's father was in banking. He smiled at me, a lover's smile, and went back to the rough copy.

We had been counting the days till our escape and could taste freedom. Sunshine, blue skies, green sea. There is enough of the Aus in me, still, to chafe at England's grey skies and cold winds. I took my hands away from him as the boss appeared at his door, shouting for a typist, and Greg finished up the rough in record time. The typescript slid into Lansing's copy tray for approval, and we left at once.

"Chinese, Italian or Indian?" I asked as the lift took us down. The freezing March wind hit us in the face and I turned up my collar. We had the choice of several decent restaurants on the road home.

"Indian," he decided, and we ate scalding curry at the Taj Mahal, talking shop. I watched his eyes brighten as I told him about Lansing's feed of information from the Tahitian activists, out to light a fire under the French government.

Greg is an idealist as well as a damned fine journalist. Anger is an emotion that looks good on him, makes his eyes glitter and his face all the more feline. "Tahiti," he mused as we ate ice cream to douse the curry's fire. "You fancy the assignment, do you?"

I had mixed feelings about it, and I said so. "Dangerous. Not just the French contingent — the place is ticking like a clock. Headline today, cancer in ten years." I picked at my own dessert. I remembered the other incident, years in the past now, when the French

took prisoner the crew of a Greenpeace protest ship. What followed was brutal. "Not the kind of risk I like to run," I said, alluding to the radioactivity. "Armed French sailors are one thing, cancer is something else."

"And if nobody runs it?" He arched one brow at me. Pushing.

"You're game," I observed, refusing to be needled.

He sat back with an eloquent shrug. "Maybe. If we could get results."

"You're up against the French government," I argued. "The original immovable object. Anyway, Lansing's got hold of enough to make trouble. See what happens when the shit hits the fan next month. It's worth the cover." I enjoyed just looking at him in the restaurant's soft, amber lighting. There were ivory elephants and lanterns behind him, and a potted palm, an exotic background that suited him, and fanned my sensual mood. They say curry's an aphro. They could be right. He looked up at me over the dessert, caught the look on my face and laughed quietly. "So I've got a one-track mind," I said indifferently. "It hasn't bothered you till now."

"Doesn't bother me yet." He stood up, jingling the keys to his Triumph. We had left my geriatric Escort at the office. "Home, James?"

"And don't spare the horses," I finished.

Home was a flat in Islington, in a quiet, private building where people looked sideways at us, suspecting, but still smiled and nodded as they passed by. A locked door, the sanctuary of one's own space ... I had

wanted him since he returned to the office, and he knew it.

He was teasing, flirting, at the restaurant, and he knew I would jump him a foot through the door. I pinned him to the hearthrug while the gas heater warmed up. He did not even try to wrestle me off, but relaxed into a boneless sprawl under me. "Wanton," I accused. "Randy animal."

"And not the only one!" He wound both arms around my neck and pulled me down. I gave him my mouth to ravage and he bucked his slim hips against me to rub us together. If there was ever a time I could resist Greg, or wanted to, it's long in the past. He was undressing us while our mouths were still sealed tight. I had his shirt off, and delighted in his chest, which wears a pelt of fine hair as chestnut as his head.

He arched his back, wanting me to attend to his nipples. I know what he likes. It's the beauty of being lovers, the knowing. I suckled, bit down on them as they hardened to little brown pebbles in my mouth, and he moaned. I know every sound he'll make. He wears his Levis so tight, I've seen people stop in the street, to watch him walk away. I zipped them down, tugged them off him with difficulty, and paused only to toss away my slacks before I was on him again.

His cock slid snugly in beside mine as we humped together, slick with pre-cum and loving it. I was feverish when he sank his fingers into my forearms, stopping me so that he could hook his legs over my shoulders and have what he really wanted. I held

myself on knees and palms, looked down into big grey eyes that were luminous in the lamplight. He had collected our pre-cum from his belly. His hand brushed my cock as he reached down to make himself ready, and I was alight, heart trying to skip out of my chest. He knew, and kissed me while he waited for me to get a rein on my runaway glands. Then I was in him, deep in him, cocooned in the hot, moist insides of him.

Did I tell him I love him? I know I moaned something, but it could have been curses or abstract blasphemies. His hands were talons on my back, pulling me closer, as if he could not get enough of me, until I lost rhythm and control and erupted in him. I felt him pumping his cock, the few quick, hard strokes he needed as I began to come. He plunged headlong into orgasm with me.

Sticky, stiff and tangled on the hearthrug, we rolled over and laughed at each other. My knees were two big bruises and he was rubbing his back. I looked down at myself and made a face. "Bath," I decided, less than impulsively.

We shared it, yawning over double brandies as we lounged in the water, and arousal began again. He has the hands of an artist. I sat back against the side of the tub and let him make free with my charms, watched lazily as he held me in one fist and himself in the other. He paced us perfectly until our cream fanned in the water, almost at the same moment. For that, I leaned over and smacked his mouth with a kiss.

"I thought we were going out tonight," I said, al-

lowed to breathe again after some minutes of silence.

"You're kidding?" He yawned deeply. "For a start, I've got to be in Manchester at nine for that rally. Women Against Nukes, remember?"

In fact, I had forgotten. I should have been on assignment with him, laden with my cameras, but I was due in court in the early afternoon. Lansing had told me to be there on time or get my behind kicked. There was a chance Greg could be delayed in Manchester till late, so Bobby Craven was going up as his photographer, on Lansing's orders.

He reached for his glass, which was balanced precariously on the side of the tub, a little brandy left. He drained it and rinsed it in the bathwater before delving under my sensitive arse for the plug. I gave a yelp as he pulled it, making him snicker as I stood up quickly.

"You're wicked," I growled at him as I reached for towels.

"Evil," he agreed. "Also knackered. Go out if you want, mate, but I'm hitting the hay." He yawned, emphasizing the sentiment as he headed for our bedroom.

I stood in the doorway, weighing the allure of the disco against warm sheets and Greg's weight, sleeping on my chest. The disco lost. It was early. I made dry jokes at my own expense as we slid into bed — old age catching up with me, into bed at ten, and a nice mug of cocoa if I was a good lad. Greg snorted in disgust, wriggled that tight little bum at me, perhaps to remind me of what I had done to it an hour ago. Then he was

all over me, limp, sound asleep in minutes while my mind continued to race itself in circles with the day's business.

I was vaguely aware of him slipping away at some ungodly hour of the morning, but when I woke properly he was gone. An early morning rendezvous with Craven at the office, a dash up the motorway to the delights of Manchester, and a date with a crowd of mothers, school teachers and no few Lesbian sisters, to whom the future was a matter of survival — whether we make it, or don't.

Greg would enjoy himself tilting at windmills in Manchester. Demonstrations, lost causes and idealistic crusades are basic to his nature.

For myself, I was due before a magistrate at one, choked in a collar and tie and minding my manners. I was a reluctant witness, counting the hours until my last day on the job was done, and Greg and I would take those plane tickets and use them. I sat in the waiting room outside one of the Old Bailey courts, indulging my fantasies of Montego Bay, Jamaica, and what I was going to do to Greg there. Lansing arrived five minutes before my name was called. I went into the box, under oath, my hand on the Bible, for what that was worth. I'm a sinner, and an unrepentant one at that. Is the Bible the right book for me to swear on?

The case involved a frame I had shot months before. It was a view across Trafalgar Square with Greg's interview subject, a retired general, in the foreground. In the background, to the surprise of everyone, a petty

crime was taking place. The action showed up clearly on four of my frames. I was in the waiting room for an hour and a half, and in the witness box for about a minute. Lansing was not amused. It was a day's idleness on wages, even if it did give us a tasty little piece to print. *Perspective* acting in the public interest yet again. Altruism is our middle name.

I waded through a backlog of desk work in the afternoon, caught Herb Sandler leering at me at four, and tolerated his jibes about Greg and me, and our holiday. He was green to the gills with envy. We had promised ourselves a real "fly away" vacation for years, and for almost the first time in our lives we could afford to do it. We had both traveled the world repeatedly on business, but Montego Bay is a dimension away from Beirut and Kampuchea. To begin with, nobody is taking pot-shots at you for your unwanted white face.

Greg was back at five, hustling me out of the building before we could be detained on any pretext. We stood on the pavement, looked up at the red and black lettering spelling out the magazine's infamous name, and I wished it good riddance for the next glorious fortnight. Greg was in an exuberant mood, boisterous as a kid. He bought me ravioli and chianti, took me home, tumbled me on the bed and fucked me senseless before we showered, changed and hit the disco for the evening.

The crush and noise of threshing bodies and hard rock are not Greg's usual taste. he inclines toward

classics and film soundtracks, but that night he wanted to dance. If only the mood would overcome him more often. He is a natural dancer who hardly seems to have bones and joints like ordinary mortals. He danced me into the floor, and I let him. You're only young once.

And you fly away to Jamaica once in a year, if you're lucky.

The first time I ever saw Greg Farris, he was leaning on the wall of a hotel called The Upland Goose, in a place that was unknown but would soon be one of the best-known names in the world. Port Stanley.

It was bitterly cold. Only two years out of Australia, I felt the cold right through to the bone marrow, but the Falklands Islanders did not seem to notice it. Greg was standing in a patch of wintery sun, wearing the customary Levis and a brown sheepskin jacket, boots, sunglasses. He had his shoulders against the brickwork, weight on one leg, hips thrust out, thumbs hooked in his back pockets. I remember the way my heart picked up, just at the sight of him. A walking wet dream, with the wind in his hair and his face turned to the sun.

I had been living and working in London's unhappy places, doing a story about the gay related diseases that were just becoming recognized as AIDS. I felt depressed, tainted by the drugs, the booze, the privation and illness I had seen, and before me was what seemed to be a boy, beautiful and disgustingly healthy.

Lansing sent me to the Falklands because, without arrogance, I'm bloody good at what I do. I was good as a sprog working on Sydney's *Bulletin*, and I had matured with experience. It was March of 1982, and history was about to be made. *Perspective* was then four years old. I had been a staffer since I came out from Australia in '80. Lansing had sent me to Vietnam, Laos, Chile, places where a news photographer's life can be dangerous. Lethally so.

I learned on the job, survived by the skin of my teeth while I kept my mouth shut and watched professionals at work. The breed of veteran battlefield journalists who will tell you horror stories about Tet and Khe Sanh. My heroes were Neil Davies and Tim Page, and still are. Even now there is a little boy inside me, looking for heroes to worship. Lansing sent me into situations that were suicidal, and paid me well when I came back alive, with the goods. Pictures that helped make it the magazine it became.

The saying goes that a picture is worth a thousand words. In fact, it's closer to five thousand. And some are bought at the price of a man's life.

When our sources in Argentina phoned home with the first sibilant rumblings of what would soon be a full Atlantic storm, Lansing put me on a plane, south-bound for Port Stanley. We had a man there, so I was told, a good freelance who had worked with us several times already, sending stories from East Germany and Libya. I knew the name and respected the man from his writings, and agreed to work with him at once,

when Lansing offered me the assignment.

My head was still ringing after the flight. My bones vibrated with the phantom sensations of aeroplane engines. I had no idea the walking wet dream leaning against the wall of the hotel was my writer, and had half decided to send him signals, see what bounced back. I fell in lust the moment I set eyes on him. The rest came later.

He must have been waiting for me, and recognized me by the weight of camera gear I was carrying. When he asked if I was Alex Connor from *Perspective*, and gave me his hand, I felt that sinking feeling.

There was the delightful anticipation of working with him. There was also the disappointment of realising I now had to mind my manners. Making the wrong advances to the wrong person can screw a job up royally which is professional suicide. I pinned on a smile, shook his hand instead, bought him a beer in The Upland Goose and feasted my eyes. Indulged my private fantasies. There is no law against window shopping.

Did I broadcast the signals without realising it? Perhaps. That was March 31st and we were in adjoining rooms at the hotel where we met. Two days later, it started.

The shooting began at four in the morning, waking us and everyone else in Stanley. Greg was suddenly in my room without bothering to knock. We could see nothing from the window. What we would not learn for days yet was that a hundred and fifty Argentine

Buzo Tactico, or Special Forces troops, had choppered in, landing just three miles southwest of us. I dragged on what clothes were closest to hand, grabbed my gear and ran. Writers can compose copy at their own convenience, but a photographer fights like hell for the frame that will put him on the cover of *Time* or *LIFE*. Or *Perspective*.

Greg often works with a pocket cassette recorder. I had grabbed the Canon, with a Nikon for backup, extra batteries and all the film I could stuff into my pockets. I did not know how long it would have to last, so I chose my frames with care. The firefight went on for hours. We felt an absurd sense of unreality.

Islanders called in to Stanley's radio station, describing what they could see and hear. If not for the gunfire punching sporadically through the freezing night, you would have been forgiven for thinking it was a Mercury Theatre production — young Orson Welles scaring the pants off America with a Martian invasion.

But just before nine in the morning, I got several shots of Argentine tanks on Ross Road, pictures of infantrymen in blackface. The Police Chief had called a state of emergency at half past seven, and at quarter past nine I lay flat on my belly in the mud with a long lens on the Canon, watching the Royal Marines surrender. For the lads of "Naval Party 8901", as the garrison was coded, and for the islanders, it was over.

For Greg and me it had just begun.

We could have masqueraded as tourists, but we

expected the curfews, the preoccupation with pieces of paper that would begin soon enough. We sat in a ditch not far from Mullet Creek, where the *Buzo Tactico* had landed in the middle of the night, and made plans. We would stay on the outside, keep out of their way, wait and watch, and do the damned job Matt Lansing was paying us for.

It was cold, it was muddy, and if Greg felt anything like me, he was scared witless. Fear is healthy. It reminds you you're alive, and keeps you alive. We hid in a barn to get out of the weather that night, not even daring to let the farmer know we were there. We burrowed into a pile of straw and we cuddled up to share body heat.

And I turned on. By then I was beyond caring if he took umbrage. I did not attempt to hide what was happening. If he wanted to be a son of a bitch about it, that was his prerogative.

In fact, he practically raped me. And I helped him do it. Afterwards we laughed at each other, buried in a heap of smelly straw, insides growling with hunger, feeling on top of the world. He had wanted me since he watched me walk up the road to The Upland Goose, and had practised the same laudable restraint as myself, not eager to risk alienating the photographer he must work with, come hell or high water, for the duration. I think I wore his finger bruises for a week.

We were on the outside, living from day to day, cold and wet, literally under the gun. In those brutal conditions you come to trust another human being

quickly, or to despise him just as quickly. Greg earned my trust a dozen times over. It was a joy to watch him work. He was just twenty-six then, two years younger than me, and as tough as they come, mentally and physically.

I got his story out of him in the cold dead of night, as he got mine, anything to talk about while we held each other for warmth, for pleasure. Stories of a skinny little kid whose father called him a “nancy”, and who thrashed him regularly to beat some “starch” into him. A kid pushed beyond endurance until he got out and ran, and survived by a fluke in a world that should have eaten him alive.

We could not hope to keep ourselves secret for long. The farmer was a dairyman, a veteran of World War II. He took us for looters at first, and showed us the wrong end of a twelve gauge. My stubborn Australian accent, and Greg’s London, seduced the old man into a kind of French Resistance fantasy. He told us we could stay, and fed us occasionally.

We were still shackled up in his barn when a thunderstorm seemed to erupt in the middle of the night, almost a month later. It was the Vulcans hitting Stanley’s airfield, but we did not discover this till later. The batteries in my transistor held out. We would listen to garbled reports of disaster. *Belgrano* went down the day after the Vulcans came, *Sheffield* two days later.

There was a lot of bombing, but that was not the worst of it. The Argentines had imposed a curfew and after dark would shoot at anything that moved, any

chink of light, or just at buildings. Rounds would punch straight through walls, and God help anyone inside.

And yet those were weeks when I felt more alive than I had in years. The danger, the adrenaline, were addictive. So was Greg. Lansing had given the pair of us up for dead. A fortnight later, when the Argentines surrendered at last and I picked up the phone to call home, he pulled strings somewhere. We went back on an RAF "trash hauler". Lansing must have something on someone high up.

My pictures and Greg's copy were picked up by several of the national dailies, and Greg was hired onto the staff. It was strange, falling into a proper bed together after six weeks of straw and thistles. Lansing gave us a tasty bonus and three weeks' holiday. Scotland was paradise by comparison to Stanley.

I wanted Greg to live with me, be my lover, embrace monogamy and live happily ever after, but the little sod turned me down flat. He had a fierce independence. I knew it was a leftover from his nightmare childhood. If he had not learned self-dependence he would have gone under. So I let him take his time, wined, dined and bedded him every chance I could. Those months, I had no one else, wanted no one else. Greg was more than enough.

In the end, it was a new nightmare that buried the old one and brought us together properly, after a year and a half of my wanting and his evasiveness. AIDS put the fear of God into us. Invited to a wild party,

Greg attended. Boozy, druggy, it spiralled into orgy, and when he woke up he could not remember a single face, it was a blur. His arse was sore as hell, he knew damned well he had been fucking, but with whom, and how?

He came to me one day, fretting and shamefaced. We both took the tests, sweated it out till we were given the all-clear, and we've stuck together like glue since. Monogamy can be boring if your partner is boring. Greg is anything but.

It is over three years since we set up shop together. It seems more like three weeks. Our old lovers threw confetti at us. Lansing made the customary jokes about Greg "keeping me off the streets". Mockery aside, we were running scared. You can't help wondering about the humble condom when there are kids born daily who wouldn't be if the damned things worked a hundred percent. We were scared enough, and deeply enough in love, to break Greg's addiction to independence. Lansing teamed us, reckoning that to split us for weeks or months would be the quickest way to finish us. Temptation is everywhere — monogamy is a decision, not an accident of fate. I won't say I haven't been tempted. I *will* say I've been faithful, and I trust him when he tells me the same. It's staying alive.

We were together in Chad, Libya, Beirut, Laos, the last places in the world you would be in by choice. We shared a dream of escape and aimed all year at that morning in mid-March. Plane tickets in our pockets, bags packed, sights on Montego Bay. Two weeks of

sheer idleness and delicious indulgence ... we should have known better.

Chapter Two

Jamaica.

Lush, tropical, balmy, full of tourists who spend a couple of hundred million quid a year there. Poverty-stricken, depressed, troubled, if you care to look further than the white beaches and highrise hotels. The land of rum and pirates, Maroons, freed slaves, sugar plantations, moonlit beaches and jungle-clad mountains. Scuba and cricket. The thought of being turned loose for a fortnight in a place like this with the person you love, and whose delectable little body still drives you wild with lust six years after you first lay down with him, are enough to make you salivate.

London had been cold and wet, and the aircraft had been so cold we both drank too much to keep warm. They keep it cold to offset the effects of so many passengers who have that predilection to throwing up. We were squiffy when we left the plane and whistled for an absurd little Jeep taxi at the Sir Donald Sangster International Airport.

It was, by local standards, a little cool, but Greg was stunned by the sudden heat. To me it was like stepping out into the soupy air of a warm, moist March

afternoon in the old country. If I closed my eyes, it could have been Sydney, and I could be on my way out to Ashbury for a guardedly polite and indecently brief visit with a family that has not *quite* disowned the black ram. Yet.

Greg had shed his pullover and jacket just before we landed, and he was still sticky before we dumped our baggage and did an exaggerated double-take at the size of the bed. The management of the big hotels look the other way when tourists book in. Two guys can go to Jamaica to watch the cricket, dive and ball their brains out with whomever they choose, but West Indians take a dim view of homosexuality in their own people. Fortunately, they leave the tourists alone, perhaps despising them but at the same time wanting to separate them from their money.

Two men can share a room in reasonable innocence. We had booked as G. Farris and A. Connor, and asked for a double. After discreet "fishing holidays" in Wales and Scotland I naively expected two narrow little single beds. The hotel must have expected a regular couple and it was too late to change now. The hotel was fully booked.

There were apologies as we were given the key and the management realised the mistake. I called it serendipity. Would they guess? If they did, they'd turn a blind eye. They want your shekels, they take no further interest in you, trying to ensure that you "come back to Jamaica", as the slogan goes.

"You could get lost in that," I said glibly, referring

to the bed. "Pack your hiking boots, did you? If you fancy a bit in the middle of the night you'll need bloodhounds to find me."

"We'll rope ourselves together," he said, just as glibly. "Like climbing the Eiger only not so exhausting." And then he caught my eye and we both laughed, grabbed each other. "Well, maybe more exhausting, I admit." He nipped my ear, kissed me and gave the bed an amused look. "They ought to hand out a map." He yelped as I dumped him into the middle of it. The mattress was horizontal heaven.

Being larger and stronger has its wicked benefits. Usually, Greg resents being picked up physically, man-handled right where I want him. He normally bellows in outrage. Perhaps it was the booze we had both put away on the plane, but he was laughing that day as I sat on him, pinned his wrists over his tousled head. "We've got all day to try the bed," I said, attempting a disapproving tone as he writhed around under me. The kind of gyrations he knows turn me on faster than it takes to tell.

"All day," he agreed with mock gravity. "And I want to swim, so get your bloody carcass off me and let me unpack!" He struggled up, kissed me before I could even blink in surprise, and with his tongue in my mouth there was no way to even pretend annoyance. Instead, I subsided, let my whole weight sink him into that mattress, trying to get a curse out of him. He preferred to ravage my mouth and hug like a boa-constrictor until I was the one begging to breathe.

My lips were bruised as I sat up. "Swim?"

"You seen the beach?" He bounced up off the bed, a dynamo of energy and enthusiasm that made me feel like his father. He stripped as I watched, tipped out the contents of his suitcase in search of the shocking-red bathers I had bought him. French. Sheer. Almost indecently so. "Wonder if there's a place around here that hires tanks? There's a reef just off the point. I haven't dived warm water for years."

There is a myth about the big, sun-bronzed Aussie. A six-foot-four-inch hunk of glorious masculinity, blond, blue eyed, wearing a tiny scrap of lycra that conceals nothing, and a ridiculous little lifesaver's cap tied atop sun-bleached curls, while the salt water courses off the perfect curves of his muscular body, leaving behind waxen droplets riding the soft, slick sheen of suntan oil ... they do exist. Once, long ago, I would spend my adolescent afternoons at Dee Why, gazing lustfully at these demigods. The myth is that all, or even most, Aussie males match the image.

And then there is the truth. Some of us cannot bare our skin to the sun, and I was cursed as one of them. My family came out from Dublin at the turn of the century, not long before Australia became a nation. My Irish genes will not tolerate the sun, and Greg knows it. People have the idea I'm modest, even prudish, and just refuse to strip in the Great Outdoors.

I hate to puncture their illusions, but the truth is simpler. This skin, which Greg likens to marble or alabaster, was never designed for the sun. I don't tan, I

burn. And burn. Then I'm a mass of peeling blisters until I'm right back to alabaster. By lamplight in bed, alabaster has its charm, but in the cruel blue light of day I would be more inclined to describe my tender skin as fish-belly white, and shudder at the sight of it.

By March Greg's tan had faded too, but he still had a residue of the gypsy-brown colour left, making him the colour of honey, or apricot jam. Saturdays on the river, I remembered. Afternoons spent fucking on a rug at a friend's farm in East Anglia. I groaned, knew it was all my own fault as I searched my own bag for my bathers, sunblock and the blue beach robe I'd bought with the thought in mind of covering the alabaster, saving myself some pain. "Slip, slop, slap", as they say in Australia — "slip on a teeshirt, slop on some sunscreen and slap on a hat." My battered old Akubra came out of the bottom of the bag.

Greg laughed rudely. I shot a glare at him, intending to be furious. But he was hopping on one foot, bathers half on, naked and supple, enormous grey eyes filled with mischief. Instead I just smiled, mock-sweetly, like a bad impression of Boy George, and turned my back on him.

Arms slid about me a moment later and he pressed against my back. We stuck sweatily together despite the room's air conditioning. "Hey, I'll rub the oil in for you," he promised sultrily. "I don't want to watch you burn. And altruism's got damn all to do with it, mate." A kiss devoured my ear. He bit my lobe quite painfully. "I'm getting randier by the minute and I don't fancy

getting laid by a lobster."

"Such kindness and considerations overcome me," I lisped. I pulled out my bathers and a plastic bottle. "Bugger off and see if you can get some beach towels and stuff. Buy 'em if you have to. And Greg." He was at the door, turning back as I called his name. I threw his robe after him. "Put that on, or you'll be gang banged and sold to white slavers before you get to the service desk."

He laughed, caught the green terrycloth robe, and I made noises of resignation. I changed into the skimpy nylon bathers like a martyr on his way to the scaffold. The big walk-in wardrobe sported a long mirror, and I studied myself critically in it.

I'm just on six feet tall, and I build muscle easily. I look after my body, partly because, so looked after, it returns the favour; partly because in my job unfitness is dangerous; and because I work, constantly and hard, to keep Greg mine. My looks are Irish, the pale skin, blue eyes and hair that is almost black. I favour my father in features. Connor men were always handsome creatures, and we know we are. But that white skin was going to cost me. My fault for bringing us to Jamaica instead of Sweden or somewhere intelligent.

There were compensations. Watching Greg frolic like a seal in the surf, duck-diving with him, pulling him under and then watching him splutter for air while I swam to a safe distance. Running for my life as he chased me out of the water and up the beach.

By lunch time we were both exhausted. The hotel

had a five star restaurant but we spent a few dollars on bananas, sweet rice and corn at a little stall a mile or so away from the tourist trap. Two white faces amongst a crowd of beautiful black children. Some of the most beautiful people in the world are Jamaicans. The adolescent boys are enough to awaken the chicken-hawk in a man.

I was sticky with sun oil and sea salt and dragged Greg back to the hotel for a shower when he wanted to explore. "We've got a fortnight, for Christ's sake," I argued. "Why run yourself ragged the first day?"

He was itching, more than ready to share the shower, and surrendered on a whim. Piped reggae music played quietly in the room, someone called Jimmy Cliff, a local folk hero, and the rhythms were infectious. Greg lounged under the shower while I picked up the phone to send down for drinks.

The scotch and ice arrived fast, as if the management were still trying to make amends for the "mistake" of putting the two of us in one vast, king-sized bed. I longed to share the water but waited for the drinks, deliberately discreet. Sharing a room with a man is not the same thing as being caught under the shower with him. West Indians have an old fashioned moral code. It paid to be careful.

"I'm like a prune, waiting," Greg told me as I stepped under the water. "Where the hell were you?"

"Sending for drinks." I ladled shampoo onto my hair and shook soap out of my eyes. "And you don't look like a prune to me." I kissed him, got a mouth full

of suds. "Look more like a plum. Fancy being plucked?"

"Nice word for it." He leaned against me, warm and wet. I soaped his buttocks for the sake of it. "Before I fall asleep and it's too late," he added with a theatrical yawn. "Going to hire a car tomorrow. There's a road-map by the service desk — dirt roads up into Cockpit country. Old haunts of Cudjoe the Maroon."

"Cudjoe the what?" I turned the water off.

"Jamaica's answer to Robin Hood." Greg inspected his fingers. "And I am like a prune!"

"Wrinkled as old Aunt Florrie," I agreed dolefully. "Wrinkles on your bum, even." I had him. For half a second he screwed his spine around to peer down his own back, and I laughed rudely. He glared at me but good humour ruined the performance. "I lied," I confessed, chucking a towel at him. "Come here."

Warm and wet, he is irresistible. No one else I know smells like him, tastes like him. I ate him alive from mouth to knees and back. Soon he was swaying, dizzy with arousal, his cock hot and hard against my cheek. I sucked it, to feel him come on my tongue, but he had other ideas.

A lush groan, and he shoved me away, stepped out of my reach. "You've had lunch already. Come on and do me properly. I'm squeaky clean." He took my wrists and hauled me to my feet. "And I feel like the deluxe treatment." With that he turned away, tilted his hips, gave me a glance over his shoulder, heavy-lidded. "Or have you got other plans?"

Six years since I first tasted his mouth, touched his

body, and although there is not one square inch of him I don't know by sight, feel, taste, he can still drive me into what writers understate as that frenzy of lust, with a gesture or a look. Perhaps because I know his body so well, and it's like going home. Or because I've always known he'll do anything to make it great for me, and frustrated disappointment has yet to happen between us. Just Alex going soft in his declining years? If that is the case, so be it. I shall go on being soft — I like it.

Greg heaved and panted, wild under me. I was out of my head, equally as wild, and almost did not hear his muttered curse, but I never liked to hurt him. Half believing I somehow had him in pain, I stopped with an effort of will and shook my head clear of its scarlet cotton stuffing. "What?"

"You know what we forgot to pack?" His face was taut, fingers clutching at my forearms, and I already had his left knee hooked over my shoulder. "We left the stuff in the bedroom!" He said indignantly. He came down a little, eyes clearing. "The new tube."

"Oh brill, utterly brill," I said lucidly. Our pre-cum was scattered far and wide and I offered him my palm. "Care to spit on that?"

He winked at me. "Got a better idea." My sun-block was within arm's reach. He shoved the bottle into my waiting palm.

"Better get a towel as well, or we'll have this fancy duvet in one hell of a mess." I dragged the beach bag closer. "How would you like to come all this way and

be ejected from the premises for unnatural practices?"

"I could always prostrate myself on the floor," he offered, not quite solicitously. My fingers inside him silenced these expressions of wit.

Eons later I groped after the bottle of Grouse and glasses and slopped the rich, expensive amber fluid into gorgeous Waterford crystal. I balanced his drink precariously on his chest. He lay spread-eagled like a swastika, limp and almost asleep. It's in moments like that I love him most. I think I am the only person alive who ever saw Greg Farris let go to that extent, boneless and wrung out, so unselfconscious and at peace, he doesn't care what he looks like.

His old lovers have called him aloof, distant, standoffish, as if Greg always had the safety catch on, even in intimate scenes. With me, his defence mechanisms shut down all the way. Total trust. In these moments he is mine, utterly.

I dabbed a little whisky over one nipple, suckled it dry and looked his body up and down. His hair was damp, his semen spilled carelessly on his flat belly, his legs splayed as when I released him. Wanton. Like nothing human, I thought — Pan, was it? Faun or satyr. I wriggled around to lap at the silvery trails of his milk until he laughed at me and tousled my hair.

We slept for hours, dressed in slacks and colourful 'surfie' shirts, and I loaded the Nikon for a stroll along the waterfront. Afternoon grew hot, sultry. There was going to be a storm. The sky brooded, dark out over the hills in the east, but in the West Indies that is nothing

to worry about. It can be thundering at noon and the sun blazing again at two. A tropical paradise, in every sense of the word.

The island has a long, lurid history, from the time Columbus discovered it in 1494 to the British capture of the Spanish colony in 1655, and the awful years of slavery. In those hell years only the Maroons, under their General Cudjoe, were at liberty. Jamaica is steeped in history, the whole place reeks of it, and the tourist industry is an unhappy graft of a new limb on an old body.

The Jamaicans are so poor many of them can't feed themselves adequately, and meanwhile tourists — people like Greg and myself — go there to lounge around in the sun, eating, drinking, screwing and swimming, without a care in the world. Justice? In my experience, it's a myth.

The poverty exists back-to-back with the tourist traps. We strolled a couple of miles away from the hotel and I watched Greg's face harden. Poor people's houses are the same no matter where you go, but you expect them in countries like England, which have no delusions of Paradise. Here?

We came to a halt in the deep shadows under the palm trees just above the beach. It was late, we would have to turn back soon or miss the last call for dinner at the hotel. We were alone. The beach stretched away before us, Montego Bay like something out of an Errol Flynn fantasia, no one to share it with, just the two of us.

I pulled him against me, felt him relax into my arms, and when he lifted his mouth I kissed him, long and hard. We came up for air, and he was smiling again.

"I was just thinking about the people who live here, Alex. They've got it hard."

"About as hard as growing up on the Sydney docks," I said, trying not to remember my own childhood, which was lacking until I was out of the nest and gone. "Or having your father beat shit out of you till the authorities confiscate you, and then growing up in a government home." His mouth compressed. "That's the way life is." I licked along his deep upper lip. "You're born, you die, and what you do between times is up to you. Got to get out and make things happen."

"You're becoming a philosopher," he teased. "Come on, Socrates, they'll be serving dinner soon."

"Jog back?" I asked. "How's your rump?" I glanced meaningfully at his slim little backside, in its white slacks.

"Okay." He winked at me. "You're too good to hurt me."

We had been working on the streets since Christmas, and it was tough work. We seemed to have been running for weeks and had acquitted ourselves very, very well against hardcases a lot of years younger. A week before, we ran the gauntlet of a truckers' picket and it turned nasty. And then a meeting with gay youth representatives became a brawl. I watched Greg gallop the legs off a kid ten years younger, catch him going over a wall and not even get out of breath. The

lad had stolen one of my cameras.

We have ten years left at this kind of work, if we stay fit, but by Lansing's calculations we have been on borrowed time for the last couple already. We were in Thailand in '82, not long after the Falklands circus, doing a story on the drug trade and the plight of the beggar brats in Bangkok. I took a bullet in the shoulder. Greg was shot in '79, in Tehran, and again in 1981, that time just a graze when he got between a Klan youth and the black boy he was out to shoot, one balmy night in Florida.

The shootings are the worst of our mishaps, but both of us have been pasted for sticking our noses in where they were not wanted, taking pictures and making trouble. We both ache on cold days, the leftover pains of sundry fractures. Sometimes, in the middle of winter, I can ache in a dozen places and I know I'm slow. Greg must be too.

Lansing watches us like a hawk, although he doesn't say much. No jock on his payroll will be much better than us. We have all been through the grinder in a dozen countries. It goes with the job. *Perspective* is a law unto itself. One day Lansing will put us out to pasture, no doubt about it. But not yet.

We aren't oblivious to the fact we push our luck, and more than once Greg has expressed his feeling that it's loyalty to Lansing and his ideals that keeps us at work. I ask myself sometimes what we will decide if the boss suffers the coronary he richly deserves on his steady diet of coffee, whisky and cigarettes. Buried or

retired, Lansing will be sorely missed. But if we find ourselves working for a starched collar we don't know and don't want to know, I doubt we will be so keen to go on.

Holidays away, like our interlude in Jamaica, are balm on raw nerves, getting us out of the hot water, helping to even up the odds. That was the big theory, and as usual we were dead wrong.

Trouble follows us about like a stray dog.

We showered after jogging back, dressed in our gladrags and strolled down into the Grand Hotel's dining room in time for the last sitting. We could smell the lobster, caviar and champagne on the warm night air. After the poor people's houses along the waterfront we found the rampant wealth strangely disgusting.

It always makes me smile to see Greg turn up his nose at the upper crust, and those who put on the dog like them. If he had endured, taking the beatings, straightened out his act for his father's benefit and let the old sod pay his passage through Oxford or some business college, Greg could have been the one with the silver spoon in his mouth. Instead he vilifies that whole caste, mimics the accent brutally. It is a point of honour that he refuses to hobnob with them.

There was champagne in a bucket of ice, prawn cocktails served in brandy balloons, fillet steak in French dressing, crepes, mint chocolates, coffee, cheese and crackers. I could feel my waistline thickening while I watched Greg nibble his way through what

would have fed a regiment. The one item that could make me envy, even resent Greg, is that he can eat and never gain an ounce. He falls underweight under stress. Then I have the delight of watching him consume chocolate and eggnog, and brave the scales each morning only to groan in anguish as he discovers he has not gained.

Very mellow after good food, good wine, good company, we lounged at the bar, watched the couples dancing under nodding lanterns. We could hear the sea. The tide was on the turn. Lights glittered like jewels on the boats, riding at anchor out on the bay. The band was playing soft calypso rock, a big mamma crooned old love songs in one of those tenor, blues voices that come from decades of indulgence in moonshine. The night wind was warm, almost too warm, and when we looked up there were no stars. The whole sky was blanketed in with a dense overcast.

"Looks like that storm's going to hit." Greg was looking eastward, where the Caribbean islands trail out onto the Atlantic. "Lightning over the hills."

The bar, with its calypso band and lantern-hung dance floor, was on the hotel's patio. We were not the only ones to notice the worsening weather. Waiters were unobtrusively taking in the chairs and bolting down awnings. "Just our luck. We leave England for the tropics and the rain follows us," I grumbled, trailing Greg into the foyer.

In fact, it was a light show spectacular. We stood at the window, watching the lightning rip across Mon-

tego Bay. It was a sight we would not have missed. Like a laser show over a rock arena, but a thousand times more powerful, generated by nature, unpredictable, violent. The palm trees bent double before a gale we could not feel. West Indian hotels are built to withstand the battering of full blown hurricanes.

Long after midnight we called it a day. I had intended to capitulate in bed with a flourish, fling myself at his feet and tell him to do his worst. Or best. It would have been the perfect end to a perfect day, but I was sound asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow. The next I knew, the sun was waking me, streaming in under a blind we had thoughtlessly left up on an east window.

I gave a grunt of disgust at the interruption of my dreams and turned my back on the dawn. I buried my face somewhere in the regions of Greg's armpit, luxuriating in the smell of him, clean and warm and male. He was still asleep but once I wake there is no chance of me settling down again, and I amused myself for some time, watching him dream. Asleep, even blue about the jaw, he looks so young I can feel pangs of guilt, as if I'm shamelessly exploiting youth.

And then he woke, stirred, yawned, fluttered his eyelashes as he stretched. I heard a joint crack and leaned over to kiss him. No one should taste so good in the morning, or wake up so randy. Last night my capitulation would have been a grand affair with music and passionate words wooing abandon, and such drivel. This morning I had no time for the hoopla. I

kissed him breathless, pushed the bottle of sun oil into his hand, snorted with laughter at his expression of surprise, and turned over on my side, arse presented demandingly.

He took it. Greg has never been a lad to turn down a priceless opportunity. When he is in me I can't remember my name or what day it is. There are more important things in life than these mundanities. I was running slick with oil, it was everywhere when we returned to our senses. We took a look at the bed, at each other, and were caught between ribald laughter and sheepish contrition.

"Better not do that again. Greg was always practical. "We'll find a chemist, get a tube of something. We're going to start getting hate mail from the laundry."

I wriggled around. I could still feel him inside, phantom sensations I wished I could share. My buttocks were slippery, tender between, but the sheets were in a messy condition. "We could always tell them you got a sunburned bum." I yawned in his face.

"Me?" He demanded. "You're the one with the alabaster bod, for Chrissake, and you're the one one with sun oil up your —"

"Point," I said aridly. I slid carefully out of bed. "I'm going to take a shower, honey. Phone down for some breakfast and share the water?"

We had the radio on while we shaved and ate, learning, not to our surprise, that the storm over Montego Bay which we had watched until the lightning was spent, was the worst in years. The hotel had not

suffered. It was built to survive even moderate earthquakes. But in the poor quarter there was a great deal of hardship, even loss of life. Cascades of water off the hillsides, murk in the sea, broken palm trees, flattened shacks.

An hour later we hired out a cabin cruiser and scuba gear. Tanks, buoyancy compensation devices, octopus regulators, only the best of equipment here. The sign on the wall assured us that the dive shop attached to the hotel was an affiliate of the Professional Association of Diving Instructors. The boat was a nice little thing, sunshine yellow, with an acre of plate glass and twin Johnson outboards. Its name, *Light Fantastic*, was stencilled over the transom.

Montego Bay is a great dive. For that matter, anywhere in the Caribbean is a fantasy come true for the hobby diver. And there is always the chance of picking up a few coins, a Spanish trinket worth the price of your plane fare.

We took the boat out about a mile. The tide was idle, slack water, and the sea like a pond, slapping gently at the boat. Barely a breeze stirred, although it was degrees cooler there than onshore. The depth was no more than thirty feet to the coral spires of the reef, so there would be plenty of light, and these waters are not so cold you have to suit up in rubber. Greg put on his BCD, weight belt and tank over bare skin. I followed his example. You cannot burn in thirty feet of water, even with skin like mine.

The storm had stirred up the whole sea. The visibil-

ity was poor even though the sky was clear now and the sun strong. The murk was disappointing, but the sea bottom settles again quickly. We had plenty of time to wait for it. Today was for fun.

We poked about, played tag with the reef fish, admired the coral and enjoyed reacquainting ourselves with our old skills. We were both well trained, with the Advanced Open Water certificate. I did my training as a pimply adolescent on holiday in Cairns, nursing a terrible crush on the instructor and blowing every cent I had on fees, gear, boat hire. The Great Barrier Reef is probably the best dive in the world, even today, when the ravages of tourism and pollution are taking a cruel toll. A decade ago the damage and commercialism had still to set in badly, and north of the Sunshine Coast one might have entered another world. Happy memories.

At the same time, but thousands of miles away, Greg was doing his own dive training in the Aegean, all of it financed by an admirer. A benefactor. Greg's first big break in life, and long overdue. I know he has his own happy memories of two years that must have been the best of his life, to that point.

The water was cold enough for us to be chilled in half an hour. We needed to think about surfacing by then in any case, or we would not have enough left in the tanks for a second dive when we had warmed up in the sun. I gave Greg a nudge and tapped my watch, and when he nodded we inflated the BCDs to rise back to the boat, which seemed to hover above us against

the sun.

We had bought potato crisps, fresh fruit, beers, the flotsam on sale at the boatramp. We lay in the well of the boat to soak up the sun, and made short work of the food. I was sinking into a pleasant torpor when I felt his fingers sliding into my more erogenous zones. I pried open my eyes to watch. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Oh, yeah." He kissed my nipples. "You're too beautiful to let you fry. God, look at you." His expression became smug. "Look at what's mine."

"Possessive bugger," I observed lazily. In fact, I crave such expressions of possessiveness. What is there between us but promises, trust and love? No pieces of paper, no legal gibberish, nothing to tie us together if we wanted to drift apart. We are where we choose to be. I wondered how many married couples could say that as I opened my arms and invited him to lie on me. His body was warm now, hard and bony, just the way I like it.

"Yeah, I'm possessive," he said with curious indifference. "I keep what's mine. Thought you knew."

"I do." I hugged both knees firmly around him, fondled his rump through its wisp of damp, clinging lycra. I slipped my hands between fabric and dewy skin and kneaded him, which he loves. His eyes closed, as if he were a pampered cat. "Want to dive again? There's half an hour's worth left in the tanks."

He nodded dreamily and took his weight on his palms, on either side of my chest. "You know, I've always had evil fantasies about this. Being on holiday,

far away from Lansing and bloody telephones. Get you in some beautiful place. Things to do. Privacy, so we can do what we like in the fresh air! You realise how long it is since we had the chance to do it outside?"

I racked my brains and shook my head. "When?"

"Last autumn." He gave me a dig in the ribs. "Groping around in the orchard at my cousin's place."

I licked my lips salaciously. I recalled that afternoon fondly. "Want to neck? Go on, live dangerously."

Where half an hour went I would not attest to, but it was almost lunch time when we went over the side for our second dive. A breeze was getting up, a little cross chop rocking the boat, but a few feet below the surface it was like being suspended in weightlessness. The water was cool, shockingly so on our sun-hot skin, and the murk was clearing as the tide began to run. We cast out seaward, ambled along the coral spurs where rainbow fish ducked and wove in startlement as we swam by.

It was easy to forget the time and wander too far. We had reached the outmost arm of the reef and were on the point of turning back when an object caught my eye. A mass of geometric angles where none should have been. The murk of the storm-churned water made it difficult to pick out what it was and I caught Greg's attention with a hand on his shoulder. He turned toward me, and I pointed him at the object.

As curious as I am, his journalist's instincts rule him. He kicked out, a couple of powerful, jetfin surges, and was ahead of me by yards. I followed, and as we

drew closer the geometric object I had glimpsed became much clearer. It was a light plane, a Piper Navajo, high wing, single engine, the kind of plane that buzzes about the Australian bush the way a VW waddles through city traffic. Hundreds of kilometres can separate one station from the next. Flying is a matter of survival. This Piper carried an American registration.

And the pilot was still in it. Or, his skeleton was.

The fish had picked it clean, right down to white bone, as the windscreen had smashed away. He sat slumped over against the side of the cabin, but the plane had settled the right way up. Aerodynamics are as functional in a liquid environment as in the air. The plane would have glided slowly down, tugged nose-first by the weight of its engine.

For the life of me I could see no reason for it to be there, on the ocean floor in thirty feet of water. The whole aircraft looked to be in perfect condition, no sign of explosion or fire. It must have feathered down into the sea, since there was no sign of crash damage. The registration read N5612L.

The Navajo is not a new plane. This one could have been built twenty years before it crashed, in the days before American civil aviation was strangled to death by a legal system that provides any damned fool pilot with the power to sue the manufacturer for an arm and a leg, irrespective of the fact he piled up the plane himself. But pilots and the authorities regulating them have far stricter standards and practices than divers. Aircraft that are structurally unsound are auto-

matically grounded. So this one, no matter its age, must have been airworthy.

Yet here it was, parked neatly, broadside-on to the outmost spur of the reef, with a skeleton in the pilot's seat. Greg's hand on my arm brought me back to reality with a start and I took a look at my watch. Time to go up, without delay. We were down to a few bars in the tanks, getting close to the safety limit of five atmospheres. I filled my BCD and kicked out toward the shape of the boat above us. Greg was a little behind and below me.

"Going to have to report that," he said as he dumped the empty tanks into the rack behind the boat's cabin. "Somebody will be having fits over that plane."

"I couldn't see a damned thing wrong with it." I cracked open a can of Budweiser, American beer that is like bitter brown fizz after one acclimatizes to European beer. "Might have been pilot failure — the man could have had a heart attack. These things happen."

"Could be." He took the beer from me, disposed of half of it before he handed it back. "N5612L. That should speak volumes to the insurers, also the registration authorities." He cracked a second beer, needing it.

Tank air is dry air — there can't be so much as a molecule of moisture in it, or the inside of your tanks oxidise and become toxic. Which means your whole respiratory tract dries out as you breathe. Greg savoured the frothy Fosters as I started the Johnsons and headed the *Light Fantastic* for home.

I still wonder, if we had known the hornets' nest we were disturbing, would we have left nature to itself? We had flown thousands of miles to get away from police and hardcases, and almost the first thing we did was blunder into the midst of a local intrigue. It was, I admitted as I nudged the cabin cruiser back into its berth at the boatramp, bloody typical of our luck.

I recognized one yacht turning gently at anchor, just off the beach. *Condor of Bermuda*, the beautiful, gracile maxi belonging to Marlon Brando, twenty years old and still one of the fastest hulls in the water. She brought back memories of bouncing around on a dinghy-sized spectator craft with half a dozen young hopefuls, looking for close-up shots as the maxis butted out toward the Sydney Heads at the start of the Sydney To Hobart. Sand in your lenses, water in your camera — and a frame that appeared in the *Sunday Telegraph*..

The man in charge of the boatramp was a bloated tub of lard with a high, squeaky voice. He was like a beached whale. His skin was like black leather in the sun, his head bald, teeth tobacco stained. His name was stencilled over the shed that housed the phone and paperwork. Thelston Conway.

It was an odd name for a man so very *unIrish*, but meant only that, however long in the past, one of his forefathers had been owned by an Irishman. Slaves owned by a man took that man's name. And slave children born into a householding were as often as not fathered by the owner, so they were due it. Only humans would think of a system like that.

Greg passed the tanks over the side of the boat to me and hopped onto the blistering concrete of the ramp. He waved for Conway's attention, and when the beached whale looked over called, "Where's the nearest police station?"

"Police?" Conway's voice sharpened in surprise. "You got trouble, man?"

"Just something to report." Greg shuffled urgently on the sun-hot concrete slabs as he searched our bag for his sandals before the soles of his feet scorched off. "How long since they searched for the light plane that disappeared around here?"

Conway's eyes narrowed to slits. "How de 'ell you know 'bout dat?" He demanded, as if we had no damned right to know.

"We found it," I said indifferently. "Just now. Out that way." I waved in the general direction of the reef. Some weird, animal sixth sense warned me to say no more. "How long since it happened?"

"Nearly a year." Conway took the tanks from us, one in each enormous hand, as if they weighed nothing. He marched off to the shack to dump them in the back of his utility. They would go for refilling to the service station up the road. "Dey turn de place inside out, man, never find nothing. It vanish jus' before a storm, an' by de time dey lookin' for it, it was gone."

"Buried," Greg speculated. "The storm yesterday probably cleared it off again. The whole sea's churned up. Which way did you say the police station is?"

"I didn't." Conway turned back to us and for just a

moment there was an odd look on his face — a look I did not like. It was quickly masked behind a fat, cheerful smile that bared his stained teeth. He pointed the way to the copshop, but I had seen it and felt a tingle, like spider feet, running down my spine. Paranoia?

As we walked up from the waterfront Greg cast a glance over his shoulder. "What d'you make of that?"

"You picked it up too?" I shrugged. "Maybe he had something to do with the search. Half the boats on the island must have been out looking. Maybe he knew the pilot — or maybe there was trouble. Not our trouble, mate. Sleeping dogs and all that."

"Too right," he agreed with that annoyingly accurate Australian accent he conjures to tease.

It was a short hike back to the hotel and along the road we were passed by an orange Jeep with a sun roof up. "Got to hire some wheels," Greg decided. He had turned up the collar of his shirt, aware of the weight of the sun on the back of his neck. "Today."

"After lunch." I shouldered my way through various 'holiday wallies' queuing to buy ice cream. "Talk to the police after lunch, too."

We had planned to eat at the hotel but our shortcut introduced us to a tiny, dim cavern where locals dined on seafood and rice. A quick shower in our room, fresh clothes, and we were back there, conspicuous among the Jamaicans. It was rough and ready, not the kind of establishment that would attract tourists, which is exactly why we were there.

If you can escape the tourist trap you will see the

real face of Jamaica. It may not always be pretty but it is honest. Sometimes painfully so. There is poverty, unemployment, privation, need. Illiteracy, ill health and every other malady of modern civilization. Drugs, religion and radical politics make strange bedfellows.

The cricket was on the radio. I pricked up my ears as I heard some magic names. Richards, Dujon. In England we are accustomed to seeing these men play on the same team, captain and wicket keeper for the West Indies touring team. There, at home and playing for the Shell Shield, they were on opposing sides. Richards captained Antigua and the Windward Islands, and Dujon captained Jamaica, both brilliant players and as good to watch as dancers. The game was being played on the other side of the island, at the ground in Kingston.

"Want to go over, tomorrow?" Greg forked the hot rice and prawns into his mouth. "Sounds like they're going to make a match of it."

"You're on." I cocked an ear to the radio. "There's three days left, and there's a domestic shuttle." Then I leaned closer, teasing. "I wouldn't mind catching you in the gully at deep fine leg myself."

He has gone beyond the stage of choking on his food when I say such things at awkward moments. Now, he gives me the kind of smile you would pay money for, and demands I deliver on rashly made promises. That remark would cost me later, I knew. I looked forward to paying up as we finished lunch with fruit and chocolate, and left the locals to their cricket

commentary. It would be good to hop over the mountains to Kingston on some banana airlines flight tomorrow. But business came before pleasure, and there was still a niggling, needling feeling in my insides as I remembered that look on Thelston Conway's face. He knew something, and no way could it be anything innocent.

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