

## SIX

The Hog's Breath is one of my favorite bars. It's open to the elements, has live entertainment, friendly bartenders, and doesn't pretend to be what it isn't. A jury-rigged canopy protects the small outdoor bandstand from sun and rain; the concrete floor is cracked and uneven from foot traffic, and two large trees grow in at different areas of the outdoor section, offering shade during the setting sun and a place for free-range roosters to crow.

I followed Padre Thomas through the crowded, outdoor bar into the interior restaurant and found Capt. Maybe, the old pirate, sitting at a corner table by the T-shirt shop entrance. He didn't look sick, he looked old. His bushy, white hair, and close-cropped beard, framed his leathery face, and a large smile showed stained teeth. He would never be mistaken for a Disney pirate, but I heard stories that suggested he had been a smuggler in his day.

Lively, brown eyes betrayed the imp hidden inside Capt. Maybe. His long, bony fingers held onto a cup of soda and he stood as we approached. We shook hands and his grip was firm, but he looked thinner than the last time I'd seen him. Like Padre Thomas, Capt. Maybe wore an old, faded-yellow sleeveless dress shirt, cargo shorts, and sandals. The popularity of wearing Oxford collared dress shirts, minus the sleeves, instead of T-shirts was growing. His arms and legs were muscular from his years on the water. Unless you've lived on a sailboat, you can't appreciate the work it takes to keep her shipshape and sailing is great for building upper body strength.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he asked, as we sat down.

We ordered two beers from Kris, and waited quietly for them to be delivered.

"Thank you for coming, Mick," Capt. Maybe crunched a piece of ice he sucked from his cup of soda. "I need to ask a favor."

"No, first you've got to tell him your story." Padre Thomas took a cigarette from his pocket.

Capt. Maybe stared at me and smiled. "Once a priest, always a priest," he laughed. "Here I am telling the good Padre why I believe in God and he doesn't like my reasoning."

"You are on your own, you stubborn old coot, but you gave me your word," he said, with a fondness that indicated a long-term friendship.

"I did Padre, I did, and I am a man of my word."

"So tell Mick." Padre Thomas turned to me. "You won't believe this."

"I believe it," Capt. Maybe smiled, "and that's what's important."

"I'm not sure what I'm doing here, guys," I said, to help speed it along.

"Mick, you don't know much about me." Capt. Maybe began. "A long time ago I was married, with a son, two daughters, and a lot of money." He scratched his nose. "I still have the daughters and most of the money. When my son died, my wife left me, and I went to sea. If the truth be told, one of the reasons she left was I wanted us all to go to sea."

He made eye contact as he talked, but never seemed to find a comfortable position in his chair.

"It seems like a long time ago now, so, whenever it was, my oldest daughter became ill with what the doctors thought was a neurological problem. For no reason she'd lose feelin' in her legs or arms for awhile and she began to have horrible migraines." His face tightened with pain as he remembered. "She went to the best specialist in Boston and New York. They all had opinions, but not answers. The frustration was killing her ... and me." He paused and took a sip of his soda.

"I need a cigarette." Padre Thomas walked to the outdoor bar.

"I guess he gets upset at this part," Capt. Maybe mumbled, as if it confused him that he could upset Padre Thomas. "Anyway, Mick, I don't know how, but I ended up in a church after taking my daughter home from a doctor's visit. I hadn't been in a church in a long time and I ain't sure I was even a believer. But there I was, on my knees prayin' ..." He stopped and I could see his expression change. "No, it wasn't prayin'. I was tryin' to make a deal with God."

His eyes watered up and he rubbed the tears away with a paper napkin.

“Did you make a deal?”

“Yeah.” He blew his nose in the napkin. “I told God ... maybe I asked Him ... that if He needed to take someone, He should take me. I told Him I already knew how cruel it was to have a parent bury a child, especially one so young and beautiful and talented.” The tears come again and he wiped them away, unembarrassed. “I made an agreement with Him, me for her and I walked out of the church feelin’ it was a done deal.”

He wiped his eyes again and finished his soda.

“My daughter got better,” he smiled. “And today she’s healthy and happy and married. A few months ago I found out I have cancer. I guess that’s no secret on the rock. Is it?”

“Rumor has it.” I sipped the final drops of my beer.

“Well, I got it and I got it good,” he smiled, as if it was a reason to be happy. “I went to Miami six weeks ago and the specialists told me what to expect and what they could do for me. When I walked around the hospital I saw men and women of all ages, walkin’ the halls with IVs attached to poles, others were in wheelchairs, IVs hung above ‘em. The livin’ dead, that’s what I saw,” he frowned, remembering. “I forgot all about my deal with God and then the doctors were telling me about treatments and hope and how no one knew what cures might be found overnight, and it was like then that God slapped me offside the head,” he laughed softly, remembering. “He was callin’ in my marker! I got up and walked out of the hospital and flew to my daughters.” His smile widened. “I didn’t want my life to end in a hospital, one of the livin’ dead.”

He signaled for another soda and Kris brought us both drinks.

“I looked back on my life, after that experience, and concluded that I’m pretty satisfied with it. There are things I didn’t do and a few things I shouldn’t a done, even a few I would probably do differently, if I could do ‘em again, but overall I’ve had a good life. I couldn’t really ask for more. Want, yeah, sure, but deserve, I don’t know.

“I left Miami and spent a month with my daughters,” he smiled. “It was nice. We had videos taken of me and the grandkids and photos, so later, when I’m gone, they’ll have something to remember me by. I like that.” He nodded to me.

“That’s nice,” I said. “It’ll be something they’ll always cherish.”

“Yeah, they will,” he said. “Anyway, now I believe in God. I ain’t afraid to die because I have proof He exists.”

“Because you have cancer?”

“Because He’s callin’ in my marker, yeah, I’m dyin’. I never welched on a bet in my life, Mick, and I ain’t about to begin. My daughter lived and the doctors had no explanation for it, but I do. That’s when I knew there was a God. I just kind of lost track after I didn’t die that first year or two. Hell, He gave me more than twenty years to enjoy and I sure did enjoy ‘em.”

Arguing with Capt. Maybe about his deal with God would have been like arguing with Padre Thomas about his angels. I couldn’t fault him, if the memory helped him find peace with his own death. He had a month with those he loved and that’s more than a lot of us get before we die.

“Do your daughters know?”

“Hell no!” he laughed. “They’d think I was crazy and want me to take the treatments. Damn, Mick, I don’t want them to see me at the end, remember me that way, an old man kept alive by an IV drip. No, they got the video and photos of Pops, that’s what they call me, and that’s how they’ll remember me.”

“Sounds like you got it all worked out, Captain.” I finished my second beer and didn’t want another.

“He telling you he’s got his deal with God?” Padre Thomas sat down. “You believe him?”

“Why not,” I said. “You have your angels, why can’t he have a deal with God?”

“And God waited almost twenty years to take him?”

“Aren’t you the one who lectures me on how our idea of time isn’t God’s? What is it you told me once, a thousand years is but a blink of the eye to God. If that’s true, twenty years is probably less time to God than what it took you to smoke your cigarette.” I enjoyed tossing some of his words back at him.

“I’m eighty-five,” Capt. Maybe said. “I’ve done all I can do about death. I’ve eluded it for years by exercising and watching my diet and being moderate with alcohol. I don’t have a complaint about dying now. I just wanna do it on my own terms and that means not being a burden to my family or anyone else.”

“It sounds like you’re giving up.” Padre Thomas signaled for a beer. “There is always hope, a miracle.”

“Well, Padre, hope, in my case, doesn’t exist because the cancer has spread throughout my body. I could delay dyin’ and die something I ain’t; or I could go sailing and die on the water. Miracles, I would rather have them saved for my girls, if they are ever in need of ‘em.”

We sat quietly listening to the mixed conversations from within the restaurant and the live music that wafted in from the outdoor stage. I didn’t need the two beers I’d had and I certainly didn’t need another one.

“Capt. Maybe, I respect your decision.” I drained my beer. “Is there something you need me to do?”

“Yeah, there is.” He pulled two manila envelopes from the seat next to him. “I have a small home on William Street, close to the cemetery.” It embarrassed him to admit owning property. “And I got some rental properties in other parts of Old Town. Padre Thomas and I talked and agreed you were the best man to handle this.” He pulled some papers from one of the envelopes and handed them to me.

I looked at power-of-attorney forms, all filled out, and signed by everyone, including a notary, but lacked my signature.

“I don’t understand.” I scanned the papers.

“A couple of the papers give you direction to sell all my property and distribute the money between my daughters. All but my house on William Street,” Capt. Maybe said. “The kids are co-signers on my other bank accounts and investments, but not on anything in Key West.” He opened the other envelope and pulled out a book. “I have a library you will appreciate. Lots of first editions and many signed. In payment of doing this for me, I’ll give you this book. I’m told it’s one of your favorites.”

I took the book and was shocked to see a first edition of Hemingway’s “The Sun Also Rises.” The dust cover was well preserved and in plastic. I opened the book and it was signed. Its value was in the thousands.

“I can’t accept this.” I closed the book and offered it back. “This is valuable.”

“Yes, I know, but you’re the only person I trust to see my library is sold at its real value,” he smiled, and pushed the book back into my hands. “Your friend Mitch at Island Books can do most of the work and you can see that the money reaches my daughters.”

“Captain, I’ll be happy to do this for you without payment. Do you know this book is worth more than \$10,000?”

“I’m a big Hemingway fan and bought most of all his works, signed, right after his suicide.” Capt. Maybe thought back years and I could see it in his expression. “Believe me, I think that edition cost me less than a grand.”

“How many books do you have?”

“More than a thousand.”

I whistled. “What about your house on William Street, what happens to that?”

“Padre Thomas lives there and it’s his for as long as he wants it,” he smiled. “When he doesn’t want it, my daughters can figure out what to do with it.”

I scanned all the papers. There were rental properties that he wanted offered to the renters at below market value, but still showed a profit for his daughters. His instructions for the properties and books were clear.

“Okay, captain.” I signed the papers, all three copies and handed them back. “It instructs me to begin this in ninety days.”

“I’m told I have less than three months to live.” He stood up and put the papers in an envelope. “My attorney will send you your copy of these. Mick, thank you, it helps to know you will take care this for me.”

“You’re my friend, captain, I’m glad to help. I only wish the circumstances were different.”

“I don’t.” He almost laughed. “I saved my daughter’s life and believe in God. I have no regrets.” He walked out through the T-shirt shop, whistling.

“Thank you, Mick.” Padre Thomas picked up the Hemingway book. “God forgive me, but he’s probably doing the right thing.”

“He’s braver than I would be.” I took the book, looked at Hemingway’s signature, and then put it back into the manila envelope.

“Maybe his faith is stronger than yours.”

“I’m sure it is.” I went to stand up. “I need to get something to eat.”

“But I still need your help.” He reached out, grabbed my wrist, and squeezed.

“With what?”

“The evil, Mick.” He let go of my wrist. “What are we gonna do about the evil that’s here? Jay is dead and the deputy is dead, and if we don’t do something, it’s only the beginning.”

