

SEVEN

I wanted to call Tita, explain what happened, take her to dinner, and avoid Padre Thomas' discussion on evil, but it didn't look like I'd be successful. I could have eaten at the Hog's Breath, but I thought getting up to leave would be a hint that I wanted to be on my own. Padre Thomas didn't get it, or more likely, he ignored it.

"You should call Tita." He lit a cigarette, as we walked through the parking lot to Duval Street.

"Yeah, I need to," I mumbled, and thought that maybe he could read minds too. "Where you off to?"

"We can eat wherever you want." He exhaled smoke through his nose. "My bike's locked up across from your Jeep."

Traffic filled Duval Street; it was a mixture of worn, tinny-sounding scooters that belched smoke, loud motorcycles, cars, and trucks in a variety of makes, colors and conditions, and those god-awful, snail-paced electric cars tourists pack into to crawl along the streets. Like walking around the island wouldn't be a health benefit to them.

The extended daylight that came with spring kept the late afternoon sun warming the sidewalks, as groups of men and women window-shopped along Lower Duval. Padre Thomas and I became part of the gaudy parade as we walked toward Hotel Key West, dodging crowds that held drinks in plastic cups and stopped in the middle of the sidewalk to talk or gawk.

Two Key West Police cars remained parked outside the hotel, but the sheriffs' cruisers and unmarked cars were gone. Starbucks had a line waiting to order and traffic rushed along Duval, to stop only when the signal light turned red. Everything seemed normal; there were no signs of the violence from only a few hours ago.

"The Chief didn't call you," Padre Thomas said, as if he was reading my thoughts.

“Nothing to tell me, I guess.” We crossed to the other side of the street and stopped outside Jack Flat’s. “You coming in?”

“We need to talk.” He inhaled deeply, and tossed the smoldering cigarette into the street.

Basketball fans watched the NBA playoff games on a selection of TV screens that hung above the bar, and baseball fanatics watched a variety of games on the bar’s other TVs. The sound was off, but the crowd made up for it with their applause of approval, mixed with cries of foul and loud explanations of what should have been.

It’s often pointed out to me that I’m one of a few American males that do not follow sports. My father was a big baseball and hockey fan, but it didn’t rub off on me. He often spent evenings and weekends in front of the TV watching sports and sipping his high ball. Once or twice a year he would take us to Fenway Park to watch a Red Sox game and the only thing I remember about those pilgrimages were the great hot dogs and wondering why my mother couldn’t get the same large, delicious hot dogs at the Stop and Shop. When I was growing up, they were frankfurters, a word not heard often in Key West.

Padre Thomas led me to a table at the far end of the cavernous bar, where the screams and cries of sports fans echoed off the wall. Alexis brought me a Sam Adams and a draught for Padre Thomas.

“Are you eating?” She smiled the whitest smile in the Keys.

“Cheeseburger, well done.” My smile paled in comparison.

“Dolphin sandwich,” Padre Thomas said, while he stared at me, his blue eyes circled in red.

“Be right back.” And she left.

We sipped our beers. I was curious as to what could turn this usually upbeat, though hyper priest into a neurotic paranoid. I put my cell phone on the table and willed Tita to call. She didn’t and neither did Richard. A beautiful day had turned sour when Jay fell through the sky and

died in front of me. I'd lost any progress made in my relationship with Tita, and the chief of police and county sheriff lied to me and, of course, I had lied to them first.

Padre Thomas fumbled with his package of Camels.

"You can't smoke," I said, and wished I could light a cigar.

"I know." He picked up the package and then put it back on the table. "I need to talk to you, Mick, because this is too much for me alone."

When he first came to Key West, Padre Thomas got in trouble because he went to the local authorities with information on violent, unsolved crimes. It would have been obvious to anyone else that bringing this knowledge of crimes to the police would make them a suspect, but he came forward and it resulted in his being detained.

You couldn't blame the cops. Here was a stranger to the island, a skinny, homeless-looking man spouting off about being a Jesuit missionary who talked to angels, while he rode a rusty bike around town. Sanity was never an issue. As hard as they tried, they were unable to connect him to the crimes, but they closed cases because of him.

The police, he found out the hard way, were not big believers in angels. Now he keeps his insider information to himself, but often confides in me.

Alexis brought our food, smiled brightly, gave me a split second callous stare, and walked away without saying anything. It made me think of Tita and I wonder what they had talked about while I was with Richard at the hotel.

"I'm a captive audience." I splashed hot sauce and salt across the burger and fries, and then added ketchup.

"I'm not sure where to begin." He added salt to everything on his plate, removed the lettuce and tomato, left the raw onion, and placed the bun on top of his fish sandwich. "I haven't been this concerned since Guatemala."

Padre Thomas had his missionary church in Guatemala, before the angels told him to walk away. While there, he stood up to government soldiers and brutal death squads, defending

the villagers who scraped a living from the land. He didn't consider himself brave, just a man of faith.

"Begin at the beginning," I said, between bites. I added a few fries as I chewed the burger. "What's the beginning?"

"Early April, the angels warned me about what was to come." He finger-fed fries into his mouth. "First, I thought it was another drug deal and I didn't pay it too much attention." He sipped his beer. "Then they told me ..." He paused. "I had a vision while they were with me. Evil men were coming to meet with men here ... and they were bringing a new evil with them ..." he mumbled, while he searched for the words, his food all but forgotten. "It would all begin with two deaths ... murders ... and it would only get worse ... unless ..." He stopped and the sadness in his eyes reminded me of the stare of madmen I have known.