

Excerpt from *Playa*

“Oh the sea is cold and the sky is gray,  
Look across the island into the bay.  
We are all islands until comes the day,  
We cross the burning water.”

Johnny Clegg

**P**ROLOGUE – Playa del Carmen, Quintana Roo, Mexico. A few years ago.

“I’m not asking you to sleep with him, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

The old man’s words are tossed at her bare shoulders as the two of them thread their way thru knots of partiers pressed close around the tiny dance floor – which is really nothing more than a stretch of hard-packed turf filled with writhing, twisting bodies; alcohol-fueled and hungry for the release that comes of loud music and rhythmic motion. Tall poles stuck in the sand hold blazing torches overhead, rendering the scene in primitive flaming flickers, like some ancient newsreel footage, but scored with the driving pulse of an amplified band. Lost for the moment is the metronomic schuss of the nearby surf, drowned-out but ever-present, and ready to reassert itself at any quiet interval.

“I slept with you didn’t I?” snaps the young woman, brushing an insect from her forehead as she turns to confront him. Her voice is raised to compete with the chaos all around them, and her tone is harsh, her expression fierce, but only for an instant, after

which one eyebrow lifts and a smile rolls in, revealing the gentle tease. Just as she'd hoped, it breaks the mood, softening his expression and bringing back that foundation of boyish optimism she so loves to glimpse beneath his weathered features.

"I like to think that was different," he pleads, taking up her hand in a gesture at once familiar and also nostalgic. This is very important to him, the gesture says, just as it should be. This desperate desire to reach out to his daughter again despite all the years between them and all the dangers it might bring, is something the woman can well relate to: if there was a chance for her to reconnect with her William - to see his face again, and hear his voice - she'd ask anything of anyone; no matter what it meant for the life they've cobbled together in the here-and-now. Still, given the nature of their relationship, it's only right to make him pay a little for the privilege, so that is what she does as they resume their progress, dodging and twisting, pushing and pressing their way forward to a spot which will afford a better view of the man at the bar. The band has wound its song to a close, and the brief pause allows avenues of view across the field of dancing combat. Even so, it's difficult to tell much, what with the evanescent flames and random light changes by the band's technician - whose efforts reflect the fact that he's paid mostly in the beer he can consume - but the guy they're seeing is the right age, though it's awfully odd to imagine running into him in like this.

On the other hand, plenty of folk would think it odd to find the two of *them* here and together; his plouffy-white fringe of senior-citizenship so totally at odds with her profusion of beaded dreadlocks, their caterpillar ends the color of beach sand. They might easily be taken for a young mother and grandfather, if only they had a little one in tow - and if not for the intimacies they share; the clasped hands, the way their eyes lock and then jump away from one another, the downcast of his entire face when he asks something of her. There's familiarity in those gestures, and old habit, and trust - and debts owed in both directions - and anyone who watches them for more than a heartbeat can tell that history runs very deep between these two, though just exactly what that

history is, would be only a guess.

Just as this 'plan' of his is only a guess. Even if he is right about who he has seen, what then? 'Something will happen,' he says in response to her question; and then something else, and after that something else; and out of all those happenings he'll piece together a way to get what he wants - or at least, what he really needs. It's what's worked for him before, and as few things as there are in this world that he trusts, the fact that *something* will happen is definitely one of them.

They've got a good life together, she'd like to remind him as the band launches into a new tune, paired drummers bouncing rhythms off one another's flying palms, sari-wrapped singer scraping and shaking a brightly-painted gourd held high above her head. Not exactly what either of them would have planned, but then neither of their histories entitles them to expect that. For some time now she's felt safe - which is no small thing - and loved, and something else as well that she's hardly willing to admit even to herself; something perilously close to happiness. Now he's talking about risking all that, and despite his breezy confidence and assurance that he won't take any risks, she knows that life *is* risk, and nothing ever goes the way you thought it would. Even just talking about any of this feels an awful lot like the beginning of 'goodbye,' but if that's what it takes for him to close his circle - to reconnect with the family whose loss he says is the only real regret of his life - then that is what he must do, and not only will she not stand in his way, she'll do her best to help him. After all, whatever happens is not going to break her heart; that honor's already been awarded, and more than once.

Satisfied with what they've seen, she turns and takes up her lover's hands in hers, tipping her head back to look into his eyes, where reflections of flaming torches flash and sparkle. The new tune is in full swing now, breathy flute pumping energy into the atmosphere as the other instruments push the beat faster and faster, the crowd higher and higher in their jostling, challenging, gyrations.

"No problem," she grants, with a toss of the head that sends her dreads swirling all

around. “For you - no problem at all.”

## **P**ART 1 – ZUMA (Montezuma, Colorado, USA) A Few Days Earlier

### **1**

Like most interruptions, this one came right before the climax. Cash Dollarhyde had just parachuted from a low-flying plane into North Korean territory and was up to his earlobes in apparatchiks when Gary arrived, slinging the heavy door of the guesthouse shut against the cold with a slam that only the man who had paid for it would risk.

“Stevie-boy,” he hollered over the noise of the paint stirrer. A motorized contraption hung over the edge of a five gallon bucket, monotonously turning a paddle in the paint - che-chaa, che-chaa, che-chaa - its syncopated sloshing resembled nothing so much as the pumping of a mechanical heart. “Where the hell are you?” Gary called out, then, catching sight of the painter, he laughed. “Still channeling Michelangelo, I see?”

True to his employer’s wisecrack, Steve Sears was indeed lying on his back atop a scaffolding beneath the soaring ceiling, only rather than a paintbrush, his right hand held the dog-eared paperback in which Dollarhyde had been just about to wreak mayhem on the female bodyguards of evil genius Kim Long Night, who had taken beautiful Kitty D’Angel prisoner in order to lure the super-spy to his own annihilation. That it was quarter-past-eleven, and that Steve’s 6:30 start this morning justified an early lunch, were not the sort of facts of which he could expect Gary to keep track. “Even geniuses got to eat,” Steve replied in his own defense, offering up the sandwich in his other hand as a flag of truce at the same time he set the book face-down to save his place. Despite the

buddy-buddy tone, he didn't really enjoy bantering with Gary; the balance of power between them was too far from equal...

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