

The Shades of Paradise

a novel

by

J. Alvin Read

The Shades of Paradise



The Shades of Paradise

Part One

CHAPTER ONE

February 1997

Beth Tierney peered through the window as more than thirty thousand feet below the Gulf Coast slipped behind and, for the first time in thirty-five years of life, she was beyond the continental limits of the United States. It was a little frightening: back there was her whole existence and she was leaving it, not on a two-week holiday, but really leaving it on a spur of the moment decision, after a lifetime of weighing carefully every choice. As a child, she excelled in school then continued on through graduate school to earn a Master's of Science. Later, she advanced to a prestigious position, invested wisely and participated in community activities, yet when a series of crises struck taking her parents and career, she found that what remained was a dry, empty nothingness. For all those years of effort, sacrifice and planning there should have been something more that remained, something of meaning that would endure through the worst of times, to buoy her with purpose and direction, but there wasn't. When put to the test, the sum of all she had been and done resulted in a failed attempt at life. She needed out – and this was it: her brand new beginning.

Through all of her four and one half years of graduate school, Vermont had felt like a foreign place. She had constantly encountered people whose speech was so strange as to be practically unintelligible and with food and customs fascinatingly different from Wisconsin's. But Costa Rica wasn't prim and proper New England: it was a totally foreign, sizzling-hot Latin culture, her new world and where she would finally begin to live – in a place so different from home it seemed anything was possible. Beth didn't want to miss any of it. She wanted to see it all and do it all: improve her Spanish, learn how to dance the meringue, the salsa – all those hip-swaying sexy dances – eat spicy foods and tour the country from one end to the other.

According to information she'd downloaded from the Internet, Costa Ricans were friendly, not at all like New England where everyone seemed to delight in giving misleading directions to strangers. And down there too, somewhere below all that blinding white puffiness, situated on 'her beach' in the tiny Caribbean pueblo of Chautita, would be *Cabañas Arrecifes*, her own little treasure unearthed by exploring every Costa Rican WEB site she could find. She pulled the *Cabañas Arrecifes* brochure from her bag and smoothed it flat across her knees, marveling at its tranquil beauty, not to mention her good fortune for finding it. It seemed too exotic, too intensely beautiful to be more than fantasy, yet there it was, photographed in living color. She pictured herself in each scene. There she would be, lounging in a hammock slung between palms while turquoise water lapped the white sand, or perhaps in the other picture, seated at the bamboo beachfront bar sipping a cocktail and chatting with the smiling waiter. Or she could be snuggled into bed inside one of the thatched cabanas with the breaking surf lulling her to sleep. The center photograph, the largest, was of smiling tourists bathing on the white-sand beach with a colorful sailboat plying the water behind. "That's me," she whispered. "No more high heels or business suits for you, Lady Tierney. You're moving to Bikini-town."

Outside, amazing things were happening: in the engines the liquefied, then refined remains of solar energy collected by a forest millions of years ago were converting into heat, then kinetic energy, at such a rate as to hurl them through the air at six hundred-fifty miles per hour. Wow! She could just envision and, at odd moments when they passed through a wisp of cloud, actually see the air divide as the wing, driven at such immense speed, cut through it to create at its upper surface a void that literally sucked the tremendous weight of the aircraft to over thirty thousand feet above the ground – five miles, wow!

A voice among the muted babble in the rows behind reminded her of her singular regret over walking out on life: Mrs. Leonard. Dear old Mrs. Leonard was a true, dear and steadfast friend and neighbor and the only person to remain loyal through all the trouble. As a child, Beth and her friends feared the old woman and were banned from her yard. Even bent at the waist, head buried deep among flowers, she could still somehow sense the presence of any trespasser. It was a mystical talent that earned her the nickname, 'the seeing butt'. Time did its thing and turned that all about. She grew up and, next door, the seeing butt became like one of the family. She taught Beth and her mother secrets of gardening that resulted in a fragrant band of flowers encircling their yard – from which mischievous children were banned. There were piano lessons, each Tuesday and Thursday for six continuous years in which Beth learned that the old woman had an ear for more than simply children in her garden and in her teenage years, when parental opinions were viewed with suspicion, she would listen with an understanding ear and offered sage advice. And now, she was Beth's only friend.

Her seat suddenly dropped away like the floor of an elevator, sparking a tiny flash of terror that a chime for the fasten seat belts sign, an accompanying change in engine pitch and a reassuringly smiling stewardess combined to alleviate. Pressing her nose to the window, Beth squinted into the brilliance. Regardless of the speed, they seemed to drift, gradually settling into a cavernous ravine between towering mountains of feathery-white billowing vapor whose size dwarfed the airplane to a mere speck. Sunlight glared, then glared again like flashbulbs igniting before her eyes as the plane sliced through fringes of cloud; then all was gray and the world of space and objects was lost to a nether world where relative speed was non-existent, an in-between place devoid of features, with no up, down, here nor there. How good it would be to emerge and find that the previous year hadn't happened. All right then, but where then might she find herself? Would it still be today with all memory of the previous year erased, or would it be a year earlier, before it all began? It was an interesting question, but one thing was certain: she wouldn't be on a plane to Costa Rica. She'd be back in her office in Green Bay, still deluding herself that Mr. Andreesen secretly adored her and considered her work indispensable.

Finally on the ground and settled in for the long bus ride to the Caribbean coast, Beth reclined her seat and sighed comfortably. She wondered at the strange system of streets without names, buildings without addresses and whether she would ever be able to understand Spanish spoken so rapidly. If she couldn't speak with anyone, how would she get along? And how was she to find things even if she did understand, like bus terminals for example, if there were no addresses or street names? Locations, Erika had explained were identified by citing directions from the closest landmark and she knew none of them. The fact was she was a little frightened. Maybe she wouldn't be able to function in this strange Latin culture, but going back would be giving in and she couldn't do that. There certainly was nothing compelling back in The States: no career, no retirement program, no friends except Mrs. Leonard, and not a house either – sold that. The old neighborhood had lost that familiar home feeling that had always made everywhere else seem wrong. She had no parents, no husband, no children, no life – nothing, nothing at all. No, scared she could handle: she was staying.

It seemed inconceivable that, just over a year earlier, she had been snug in a comfortable life: a fat cat, on top of the world with a well-calculated life's course plotted. How quickly a life can crumble away! The first blow came on January fourteenth more than a year ago when, like a house of cards in a tempest, her career blew away. Even the weather had been awful. For nine straight days, an Arctic storm had straddled the border between Alaska and Canada's Northwest Territories, refusing to move. It pulled the jet stream south in a deep arc across the face of North America. Driven before it, a massive volume of subzero Arctic air moved unmercifully southward, becoming stationary over the Midwestern States. Temperatures dropped to record lows, day after endless day. Beth had begun to wonder if it might not be the dawning of a new ice age. The morning of the fourteenth, a biting north wind bore down upon the city. It whistled in quick, cold, and nasty from the north,

across the frozen bay. Around the buildings of downtown, the stiff wind swirled, creating confusing eddies that lifted glistening blizzards from snow banks, blinding pedestrians, and snatching away hats. In the narrow canyons of avenues, the bitter air channeled again gathering speed as it resumed its southbound rush.

She should have turned around and gone back to bed when she opened the garage door and the neighbor's dog didn't come out to bark. Every living thing with half a brain was hidden away from a razor sharp wind whose bite was capable of freezing flesh beneath fur and overcoats alike. Half of the office staff wouldn't be in, but she was intrepid even when her car just groaned, draining power from a frozen battery. She valiantly pounded the steering wheel and said the magic words: "start, damn you, start," and her mother's hand-me-down caught. Innocently unaware of what awaited, she blew a column of frozen breath towards the windshield in grateful relief.

It was early that summer that H.G. Andreesen Consulting relocated to the center section of the converted strip mall, yet the promised conversion remained a far off dream. Mr. Andreesen was now on his third contractor and although the upstairs offices were completed, moving the hammering and sawing to the first floor hadn't improved things much. And just then, during the worst cold snap of the year, the door to the parking lot was solidly barricaded requiring a long, frozen walk around the block. Every morning of the interminable cold snap with temperatures defiantly remaining well below zero and with a stiff breeze from the bay, Beth pulled her mittens on, snuggled a wool cap tightly over her head, and climbed from the car for the frigid walk. The morning of the fourteenth was no different. After trudging the icy length of the alley, she came to the short slice of side street and Lum's Chinese restaurant, with its pagoda-like roof, green and red paint and a golden dragon at the door, the first milestone of her daily trek. Around the next corner, the first store in the block-long strip was Vincent's Hardware, above which the owner lived with his family, a fact appreciated for not having to wallow through foot-deep snow. Each morning, astride his little tractor, Mr. Vincent would clear freshly fallen snow from the sidewalk along the entire length of the strip.

Adjoining the hardware was South Bay Luncheonette with neon signs adding shimmering highlights of red and green to twisting rivulets of condensation descending its bay windows. Outside, as she approached the frequently opened glass door, the frigid gusts laced with snow carried the inviting scents of brewing coffee, ham and eggs. By then, she was shivering inside her coat with her chin already trembling, a sure sign her teeth were about to chatter. She did the only sensible thing and followed her nose to sanctuary, joining other harried commuters stomping snow from their shoes while waiting for take-outs. The place was alive. Busy kitchen sounds mingled with the steady drone of conversations punctuated with laughter, and always in the background Green Bay's all news radio station. A satisfying feeling of security came from being a member of the busy throng passing through the doors of South Bay, which drove the wheels of Green Bay's commerce. The other satisfying feeling came from central heat.

Vista Travel, which occupied a space the width of a door and window, appeared tiny and lost sandwiched between the luncheonette and its larger and more prestigious neighbor, Beth's office. A week earlier, the routine of her morning trudge around the block changed when a poster portraying a Costa Rican beach she simply couldn't pass without staring at, appeared on an easel in their window. It was a sweeping panorama of a pristine, white sand beach, with aquamarine water and an out of focus frond hanging in the foreground. Words other than 'Costa Rica' in large blue lettering across the bottom were unnecessary. The image of serenity manifest that held her spell-bound said it all.

The morning of the fourteenth found her, once again, in the subzero wind enjoying a before-work pause gazing dreamily at the poster as coffee steamed from its cradle of double-insulated mittens. She easily imagined herself there: rays of a tropical sun warming her skin as an onshore breeze gently lifted her hair. Real coconut oil would melt lusciously into her

skin, making it supple and shiny while baking to a toasty tan. Of course, there would be a good book to read and, possibly even, a piña colada served in a coconut and made with real pineapple. Somehow the captivating poster and, interestingly enough, the bitter cold too combined to bring the sensations of the beach almost close enough that regardless of below-zero wind biting her nose, beneath her overcoat, she was basking in the sun.

Leaving the Caribbean, she crunched her way over the last twenty yards of brittle morning moisture and pushed through the new revolving doors into the offices of H.G. Andreesen Consulting. The lobby, with its high ceiling and wide reception area, was designed to impress, make a positive statement for H.G. Andreesen. With the entire front wall of glass and the many white outlined rectangles of smudged, gray, yet unpainted, sheet rock for walls, it wasn't much for lasting impressions. She strode across the lobby, to the women's room below the stairs. "Good morning, Miss Tierney," Rebecca Norton, the new administrative assistant said. Her voice was strained, containing a cutting edge of false politeness that caused Beth to turn and look in wonder at the boldness of this young snit. "You should know there are some government officials waiting for you in your office." Again, the haughty tone. Startled, she stared curiously at the young woman. She knew she wasn't very well liked by fellow employees who generally considered her to be a mousy, workaholic whose bitching about details that mattered little or not at all to government inspectors. Beth received invitations to social events only when not doing so would be socially uncomfortable, like to the office Christmas party. She knew and accepted the situation; no problem. Unpopularity was okay, but outright rudeness wasn't.

"The government people can wait for a minute, thank you, Ms. Norton," Beth retorted and returned to her closet. She pulled off her camel hair overcoat, boots and woolen leggings then turned to study her reflection, nodding, satisfied with her confident professional presentation, although her dead straight hair that bent like a folding ruler when she lifted it was a disappointment. She could just as easily have inherited her father's slight wave, but it was what it was, so she kept it blunt cut above the shoulders for easy maintenance: and straight across the back – simple. Her only attempt at style was to allow it to curve slightly longer at the sides of her jaw, which compensated for a narrow face. Business suits were meticulously chosen, invariably leaning towards brown with the skirts cut to a half inch above the knee with an off-white blouse and black Pilgrim tie. As much a part of her apparel as her clothes was her suede briefcase, laden with papers. It had been a gift from her father, presented in honor of her master's in geology that, regardless of how old or battered it became, was a pride to carry. A sudden heart attack claimed his life five years earlier while he was yet in his prime and she only thirty. His loss was a crushing blow, but her pain was nothing as compared with her mother's. Then, a scant two years later, she was taken from her too, in a death more attributable to broken heart than to anything medically specific. Watching her mother waste away had been agonizing. Each day, through her very pores another small bit of her soul would slip away until she was but a ghost peering from the deeply recessed eyes of a skeletal body. Beth tried every day to reach her, to offer some small amount of cheer, but death was inevitable, and a welcome relief for both when it came.

Beth found herself alone in the world. Earning, shortly after Mother's passing, a prestigious upstairs office renewed her focus. She assumed a new pride in herself for her abilities as a geologist. The pride didn't come so much from the prestige of the office or from having her very own south window to nurture African violets, or even filing cabinets that were hers alone. It was that the office and position of project engineer were symbolic of the respect she had earned for consistently surpassing expectations and planted her firmly on the highway to success. Each new project became her reason for being and consumed her totally. Career dedicated to H.G. Andreesen, she was comfortable in the knowledge that she was valued for that very carefully considered choice. She, in turn, was thrilled for the opportunity to be an active participant in cleaning up a tiny portion of the nation's groundwater mess. The term workaholic used behind her back didn't faze her; she acknowledged it.

Her accusers' lack of sophistication didn't allow them to appreciate her love of ecology or that she considered her work to be her entertainment. They all had spouses and family; she applied her devotion to career and the accuracy of her data. Since the bitter ending of her last relationship, more than three years earlier, she'd devoted herself entirely to career. Office popularity mattered not, what did was that her professional approach and quality of work were highly respected and appreciated by those who counted, particularly Herman Andreesen himself.

The government inspectors waiting upstairs would be there to review her data detailing the extent of contamination for a proposed cleanup site. Her figures were dead-on precise, as always, and she was confident the government inspectors were familiar enough with her work to already know the same. Nevertheless, it was a small but necessary step, and she was prepared to do it well and insure that H.G. Andreesen would be selected as the clean-up contractor. "Well, Miss Tierney, you thirty-five year old workaholic," she recalled saying to her mirrored image, "let's go convince our government bureaucrats just how desperately they need us." Slipping on heels and with a tiny adjustment to her skirt, she spun from the closet, closing it with a flick of the wrist.

Two wide staircases framed either side wall of the lobby. For those unable to climb, on the back wall beside the new marble faced reception desk, torn brown paper protectively covered the stainless steel doors of now operating elevators. Beth's office was in the middle of the easternmost of two green-carpeted corridors. Between the two, were the kitchen, conference rooms and storage closets. It was a good arrangement that afforded every second floor office a window. She climbed the east wall stairs, taking them with a light skip. Her sturdy, sensible, low heels clicked the count: thirty-one stairs, the last thirty-one steps of a safe, structured life.

Coming around the corner, she stopped short. Her office door was open and inside people were moving about. 'What's this,' she asked herself, 'who gave permission to whom to enter my office? Rebecca Norton, I'd bet!' Outside of her opened office, a man and a woman, fellow geologists at H.G. Andreesen, conferred in hushed tones. Slack jawed and staring in her direction, the whispered conversation abruptly ended and, as she approached, the eyes of both flicked nervously. Without returning a word to her offered greeting, both slipped quickly into their respective offices. There wasn't time to consider what it all meant.

"Ms Beth Tierney?" An unknown woman standing beside her desk fired at her in an accusatory tone.

"Yes, may I help you," she snapped before taking in the entire scene. Her cabinet had been broken open and a uniformed officer was intently scanning her files from the bottom drawer, reading project titles to another who transcribed the information onto a clipboard. The remainder of the drawers had been sealed shut. 'FBI, DO NOT OPEN' stickers formed X's over them. Her top desk drawer lay, bent and broken, on the desktop and beside it, her computer in pieces.

"Ms. Tierney, I am agent Paula Hobson with the Federal Bureau of Investigation," said the woman in the trim, navy blue suit with an ID hung from a light chain about her neck. Her outstretched hand offered a document as she spoke. "He," she said nodding to the man with the crowbar, "is my partner, agent Fred Rogers and this is a federal warrant to seize all of your files, personal and professional, paper and electronic. You will surrender your briefcase at this time, Ms. Tierney." Herman Andreesen, the founder of the firm, stood behind the agents, gulping and tugging at his tie, but saying nothing. Beth couldn't understand how he could just stand there while this was happening. She had always counted on him to be able to fix problems, and he had always come through, but now he avoided her attempts at eye contact. Wordlessly, she offered her briefcase to Agent Hobson. The other one, Rogers, she remembered, had frightening eyes that seemed to be his center about which the rest of him moved. They didn't waver from their focus on her, following every movement, while the rest of his body struggled to remove tightly fitting black gloves.

The following ninety days were a surrealistic dizzying spin through one nightmare after another. She had been named as one of the principal figures in billing fraud perpetuated by H.G. Andreesen Consulting against the US government in an FBI investigation of Super Fund contractors. The specific charges alleged that she conspired with Herman Andreesen to bill the government for work not performed. Beth was stunned to see her name listed as project manager for false projects, which apparently existed only on paper, but complete with data from projects she actually had supervised. Convincingly accurate forgeries of her signature and initials appeared in every appropriate location. The total fraud amounted to more than two million dollars. She was driven home in the caged rear seat of an FBI sedan followed by a caravan of two others and a white van boldly emblazoned with large, black FBI lettering. They pulled up in front of the house with emergency lights flashing and the whole neighborhood watched as she was escorted in, an FBI agent at either arm. Brandishing a search warrant, the agents ransacked everything like a wrecking crew marauding through the house, hauling off her computer and every one of her files – files capable of proving the charges to be groundless. She sat on the sofa by the front window, defeated, knowing that every gossip in the neighborhood was out there, witness to how old maid Beth Tierney brought shame to the proud memory of Ken and Angela.

Three months into the torture, a call came from chief investigator Rogers informing that she was no longer under investigation. She was to be escorted into the closed, former offices of H.G. Andreesen Consulting and permitted to recover personal possessions. She also appeared at the property clerk's office in the federal building, downtown to claim the remnants of her home computer and other property removed from the house. Official acknowledgment of her innocence made her feel better, but for only a short while. While the FBI informed her that she was no longer a suspect, they didn't bother to inform former friends, neighbors or other groundwater consulting firms. In the eyes of most, she carried the stigma of guilt and was viewed with suspicion as a criminal element, someone whispered about, avoided. Her letters of introduction and resumes submitted to consulting firms were returned unopened or with scathing comments attached. Anonymous messages, condemning her, appeared regularly in her e-mail, people she had known her entire life turned their faces from her, garbage was dumped in her driveway and Mrs. Leonard, her only loyal friend, told of a circulating petition, which demanded that Beth vacate her home. As large as is the United States, the community of groundwater geologists is small and the scandal, complete with Beth's name as a perpetrator, was common knowledge throughout. To her absolute dismay, came the realization that there was to be no restarting her career, not in Green Bay or any other city. She was unemployable.

She sobbed herself to sleep at night, feeling totally alone in a cold and hostile world. Of the secure life she had, there was nothing left. She was without family, friends, husband, children, and apparently without future either. The singular employment opportunity, the result of months of constant searching, was, ironically, with the federal government, evaluating clean-up proposals as an independent consultant. The work could all be done on-line; apparently they preferred her out of sight despite anti-discriminatory hiring regulations and all she could hope to earn would be but a tiny fraction of her former salary. Worse: the job was mundane, mindless paper shuffling requiring neither inspiration nor creativity.

Three AM found her unable to sleep, surfing the net, trailing thoughtlessly a link she created by joining the words: 'life, work, and where' as the root of a WEB search. To play the game, she simply clicked her mouse and page after page of sites appeared, related somehow via electronic reasoning to her three chosen words. Screen images flashed hypnotically to the idle tapping of her finger as her tormented mind sought escape from her dilemma. Another click and, on the screen before her, appeared the same Costa Rican beach scene she had seen in the window of Vista Travel. Her finger caressed the smooth, curving surface of the mouse delaying the next click while the beach and all of its glorious colors filled her eyes. Winter, the FBI, Green Bay, even the loss of career melted away and she was there, running, almost flying, towards the surf in a tiny red

bikini. She began toying with the thought of a two-week vacation, although not taking herself completely seriously, until her breath caught like a hiccup with the realization that Costa Rica could happen, and it didn't have to be for just two weeks either. There was not so much as one compelling reason to stay, so why not sell everything, take the stupid on-line consulting job and just GO? With a laptop, she could work anywhere on Earth, and in Costa Rica at least she wouldn't be vilified at every turn.

□ □ □

CHAPTER TWO

A cacophony of horns, brakes and roar of diesel engines announced their arrival at the Caribbean port city of Limon where the majority of passengers disembarked at the side of the road, finally allowing her a window seat. They were at the outskirts of the city, but it didn't look like much: mostly a collection of ancient clapboard buildings and unpaved side streets lined with humble homes. The throng walking and riding bicycle was comprised entirely of Black people without any evidence of the minority Ladinos, Native Americans and Whites she had read of. Ahead, the line of cars, trucks and buses inched along, while bicycle traffic threaded its way through at twice their speed, apparently frustrating drivers who fruitlessly blasted away at their horns. Adding to the bedlam, vendors walked beside the bus, hawking through the open windows cold drinks, ice cream, coconut candies, tamales wrapped in banana leaves and a multitude of other foods she intended to try.

The map showed Limon to be on the coast, but a glance down every street failed to provide even a glimpse of the sea. Then, approaching the tiny airport, she had her first breathtaking view of the Caribbean. There, stretching into the misty distance was a palm lined, sandy beach. It was beyond lovely; its beauty was so utterly heart stopping that she felt flush for it, but something was wrong – missing. It was people! There wasn't a soul to be seen. It was inconceivable! Where was everyone? The sun was shining, the surf gentle, the colors unimaginable; the sand should be covered with towels and umbrellas, yet it continued in that manner. For the next several hours they drove south, paralleling a coastline that was practically continuous beach backed by coconut palms and, with the exception of driftwood and an occasional dog, it was empty.

Dark was nearly upon them when the bus lurched over rocks and potholes and came to a stop opposite a cantina with a wide covered porch where several dogs lay like melted butter, an occasional tail flip their only sign of life: the heart of the tiny pueblo of Chauita. The streets were of pot-holed soil with the only traffic two cars parked half in the road. There were few people about: a pair of barefoot teenage girls giggling in conversation as they passed, several tourists in swimsuits seated on stools at the counter of a roadside stand where a sign promoted tropical fruit licuados, and an old man, bent under the weight of a wheelbarrow, making his way slowly through the ruts. The bus stop featured a bench at the side of the road with a rickety support of sticks to hold aloft a badly rusted roofing panel for protection from rain and sun. Looking eastward, she saw only a quiet lane with homes and bungalows to let, but no sign of the sea. She thought to walk the lane and find the Caribbean to dip her feet in before returning and sampling a fresh fruit licuado. While she pondered where to stash her bags, a dark muscular man approached.

“Señorita Tierney?” Between hand gestures and her limited Spanish, she understood that his name was Jesus and he was there to drive her to Cabañas Arrecifes. He loaded her bags in the back of a four-wheel-drive Mitsubishi then held open for her the passenger door.

“No, I walk – camino,” she said embellishing her words with the motion of two fingers walking.

“No Señorita, no se puede. Esta muy lejos.”

Lejos, lejos – ah yes, she remembered: far. ‘It’s very far,’ he had said. But, it wasn’t: she had the map right in her bag and it clearly showed Cabañas Arrecifes only four hundred meters, about the length of four blocks, from where they stood in the center of town. “Mire esto,” Beth demanded, pulling a street map of Chauita from her briefcase. She pointed to the center of town then to the cabañas and the arrow between the two with ‘400 Meters’ written upon it. One didn’t need Spanish or

English to understand that. He took the map, seemingly fascinated, studied it closely, then insisted anew that she should ride with him. Slightly miffed at his single-mindedness, she climbed in only to be glad she did several minutes later when they pulled off of a dirt road through a bougainvillea shrouded entrance to a parking area where, barely visible at its depths, a small wooden sign hanging askance under a palm was the only identification. Cabañas Arrecifes, it said in faded red lettering. Looking at the sign, she had to admit that Jesus had been right; she never would have found her way and, even if she had, the sign would have been impossible to read in the descending dark.

Deciding on a quick tour of the grounds before total darkness, she set off for an opening in the parking lot's perimeter of shrubbery, leaving Jesus to tend to the bags. She found herself on a gravel trail bordered with varieties of flowering plants completely unknown to her. There were flowers from the delicate simplicity of two petals about a single stamen to chrysanthemum-like clusters, and orange and white beauties that could have been sculpted from wax. She continued along enjoying the scents, passing two well-separated cabañas on her right while on her left was a shrubbery-enclosed patio topped with a trellis grown over with hibiscus. Then, with the Caribbean in front, shimmering under a waxing moon, she found nestled among the palms like a fairy tale dream her cabaña: number three! It had bamboo walls with a thatch roof that also covered the open front patio. Flowering shrubs grew along one side and a stand of banana at the other. Screened windows with open shutters were to either side of the door, on the side walls and two others at the rear. The door was locked, but peeking through a window, she could see that the inside walls were finished and that the furnishings appeared as comfortable as they had in the brochure.

Closer to the beach, enclosed behind by the arc of cabañas and shrubs, she located two other bamboo structures, also with low overhanging palm thatch, trimmed square above doors. A sign listing rental rates for snorkeling equipment, surfboards, and two small sailboats identified the first as the sports shop. The other, with its face open to the Caribbean, became the beachfront bar from the brochure and there before it, on a tiny patio under an awakening starry sky and washed over with a warm February breeze, was a cluster of tables, the gentle beat of reggae and a panorama of beach overhung with palm. In perfect animation of her daydreams, the bartender was busily preparing drinks for two couples on barstools, while a third sat at a table on the patio staring out to sea, arms intertwined, enraptured by it all. And, in that moment, an unacknowledged secret fear that the brochure was nothing more than a collection of retouched photos dissipated like dust before the wind and her spirits, her thankfulness and her hopes rose higher and higher. Cabañas Arrecifes was everything she had hoped for and more, so much more. She hugged her arms about herself, smiling and took a seat at an empty table to order her first all-natural fresh fruit piña colada.

A crowing rooster sounding as though it was perched on the headboard woke her early the following morning. Bed was a soothing cloud of enfolding comfort: rolling into its loving embrace for another forty winks would have been heavenly perfection, but Mr. Cock-a-doodle Rooster was an insistent taskmaster. Grudgingly, she allowed her eyes to open, but just a crack. And, what a sight they opened to: she had awoken in the belly of a dinosaur! Mosquito netting became visceral tissue enshrouding her. From high above where they joined a single pole that could be breastplate, bamboo ribs of the beast that had swallowed her whole descended about her. Even the rising sun conspired, tinting the entire scene in glowing pink. Sunrise over the Caribbean and she was missing it! She flew from bed, wiggled into the bikini and raced to the sand before another minute could pass.

Breakfast and several sipped cups of coffee later, Beth was ready to explore. Cabañas Arrecifes' main building presented an entirely different image from the gloomy shadow it had been at night. Located back from the beach near the gravel road, it was a beautiful building of white stucco with Spanish arches overhung with flowering bougainvillea and with its

entire ground floor open to the central patio it enveloped on three sides. Within, was the reception area, a parlor, bar and lounge, a kitchen emitting odors that whetted her appetite, a dining room and gift shop. The second floor appeared to be living area for Mrs. Cecilia, the delightfully friendly mistress over all, her husband Alberto, a fountain of information about the well-tended gardens and master at repairing anything, together with their two children, eleven-year-old Oscar and Wendy, the shy eight-year-old who tittered behind her hand when Beth attempted to speak with her. Mrs. Cecilia was a beautiful Black woman who painstakingly did her own and Wendy's hair in hundreds of braids with colorful beads woven in at the tips, wore delightfully interesting jewelry, and whose English was like a harmonious song.

Beth had selected the outdoor terrace, dappled in sunlight filtering through overhead bougainvillea and open to the cabañas through an overgrown arch, as her preferred breakfast area, as had the Dutch newlyweds and the Italians with four children who all ate in their swimsuits. Two American men she had noticed at the bar the night before were however, fully dressed and had their meal in the dining room. The one with white hair and tight Western clothing even wore his cowboy hat, a high, white suede one that, with his conversation, became animated.

She didn't believe the map would be necessary, but she grabbed it anyhow and set off to become acquainted with Chauita. Picking her way southward along Main Street over rocks and potholes, she was surprised at the twenty-degree temperature difference between beachfront and street and to discover the potholes filled with water and a mini-flood crossing the road. The day had dawned to clear blue skies with no hint of what must have been an overnight downpour. Bordering the street were the broad leaves of banana, several varieties of palm, shrubs and flowers whose perfumes turned February to August. From the large open window of an unpainted clapboard house, a young woman captured Beth's attention to expound the virtues of the cakes and cookies she offered for sale. She spoke with Mrs. Cecilia's beautifully accented Caribbean English in a lilting rhythm that was a delight to hear, but moved so slowly in putting Beth's selections in a sack and counting change that it made her wonder if she had forgotten she had a customer. Perhaps nothing moved too swiftly in Chauita where the heat bore down like a leaden weight, but the open warmth and laid back temperament of the townspeople she met invited conversation that more than made up for lack of motivation.

Before the week was out, Beth was familiar with Chauita's every lane and already feeling a part of the community for being stopped to chat as a familiar friend whenever she strolled into town. She had been virtually adopted by Margarita, a wizened old woman who ran a tiny store and whose passion was applying folk wisdom to the lives of all she met. Beth told her little, yet Margarita suggested she 'pluck chickens,' a sure cure, she contended for those who mourn their parents. She had the correct collection of pebbles and seeds to place before a candle and herb to produce a tea, which would combine their forces to reenergize her 'field,' weakened she said, by a betrayal. And at the entrance to the national park, where pristine beach and monkey filled jungle were protected from development, the guards accepted her as a local and she paid no fee. But Cabañas Arrecifes and the beach in front was where she spent most of her time and what she referred to as home. Alberto and Mrs. Cecilia accepted her into their family fold as one of their own and the title *jefe pequeño* that she assigned to Oscar, her new little boyfriend, was adopted even by them as his second name. He had earned it for knowing, as any 'little boss' should, virtually everything about Cabañas Arrecifes and for always being close at hand. He seemed intensely curious about her, staring in rapt fascination as she did the most mundane of things: copy columns of data from one page to another, light a candle or retie her hammock. When given a rake to clean the grounds, the area in front of her cabaña seemed to receive the majority of his attention. He was shy, usually not answering when spoken to, but his face lit with joy when Beth read the words Chicago Bulls from his favorite t-shirt. "Yeah, Cheecago Bulls," he responded enthusiastically, elaborately pantomiming a

hook shot to an imaginary basket atop her roof. His favorite pastime, however, seemed to be watching her eat as though she was some strange creature whose habits he wished to study.

Rounding the corner from the dining terrace to her cabaña one morning, Beth had a near collision with a woman skin-and-bones thin. She was caught short with her mouth open to offer apology when the woman sneered and shoved roughly against her with both hands before running off towards the beach. “Well, excuse the hell out of me!” she said to the woman’s disappearing image, then noticed her door ajar. She ran out to the beach after her, fearing that everything she had had been stolen, but the woman was swift and nothing remained of her but a small figure far down the beach. She returned to the room with a heavy heart dreading what she would find missing. Her pocketbook had been sitting right out in the open on the night table with everything in it: money, passport, credit cards, my God, what else? There was the wristwatch and the wedding ring from her mother in the little saucer next to the bathroom sink.

She was actually frightened to enter her own room; she approached feeling weak, her insides in turmoil. Upon going in, her first sight was the purse on her nightstand, just as she had left it. Opening it cautiously, she was washed through with relief to see that everything was there. A glance in the closet and around the room showed nothing amiss: her clock, clothes, shoes and books appeared perfectly in order. Maybe the woman hadn’t been in her room after all and Wendy, cleaning her room, had left the door open. Feeling meekly embarrassed for her suspicious mind, she entered the bathroom and was caught short. The woman had been there! The contents of her toiletries case lay scattered on the counter below the steamed-over mirror wiped clear in a small area over the sink. On the floor was a soaked towel amid watery footprints but, in the dish where they had been, the wristwatch and ring remained untouched. The woman had taken a shower, used her makeup and not stolen a thing. She knew she should count herself extremely fortunate, but what persisted was a creepy sense of violation.

□ □ □

CHAPTER THREE

A rumbling distant thunder shook the still air of dawn, contradicting the otherwise total serenity. Rising from their nighttime roost, a twelve-wing squadron of pelicans fell into formation above the palms. They swept out over the water to parallel the beach then, mimicking their leader, each in turn dove steeply. They descended effortlessly, perfectly in formation and settled into a file riding the updraft from the incline of an incoming swell. With wing tip feathers etching fine lines onto the satiny surface of turquoise water, their breakfast quest began, then suddenly, from three feet below, a shadowy figure surged upwards. Keening shrilly, the leader flapped its wings to lift sharply skyward, scattering the column in mad disarray.

Unaware of the turmoil, Beth burst through the surface in a watery eruption gasping for air. Her feet found the bottom and rising, she tossed her hair in a wide arc, enclosing herself in a ring of spray. The springy new feeling to her hair was wonderful and particularly noticeable when it was wet. She liked too the way the loose curls created accent that seemed to round her narrow face, and how, after a week under the Costa Rican sun, her usual mousy blond had lightened. A golden tan colored her skin, and her eyes, in the tropical sunlight, shimmered deep blue.

Before her, spread a beach of golden sand with coconut palms arching above. Towards either mist-shrouded horizon, as far as her eye could see, it was pristine save for driftwood sculptures carved by waves and wind into fantastic creatures. Little waders – sandpipers, she thought, remembering the name from a half forgotten book – scampered before the incoming rush of foam then, just as swiftly, reversed to poke with needle sharp beaks for hidden morsels. Their busy peeping seemed in perfect synchronization with the surf while far inland mountain peaks reflected the first pink rays of sunlight.

She was still new to it, yet felt kinship with the landscape more profoundly than with a lifetime among Wisconsin's hills and lakes. She loved it and everything new in her life, even including the swimsuit that had been so difficult to buy. She'd had a regular two-piece in mind when entering the Green Bay shop but, upon seeing the miniature strips of cloth it was made of, lost her nerve. Only the attendant's problems in locating any others in their boxed up summer collection led her to buy it and now, here she was, wearing the skimpy thing outdoors, on a beach far better than the one she had once only imagined. "This is Paradise! Paradise!" she shouted to the heavens, her head thrown back, arms spread to embrace it all.

Abruptly as a striking bolt of lightning, fear prickled her skin as, from the thick growth of jungle above the beach, someone shouted rude hooting noises. She froze, instincts screaming with chilling clarity: you are defenseless and virtually naked! Her eyes flashed to the left, then right: nothing. She was alone with a pervert on a deserted beach in a strange land! Which way to run? The trail back to the cabañas began high on the beach in the shade of the trees where her towel lay – and just where some degenerate lurked! She was trapped! A terrible sense of injustice welled hot tears up to her eyes.

In a tide of reversing emotion, anger took over – mouse-woman lost again. Beth Tierney wasn't going to let her morning be spoiled by some creep! She stomped up through the surf, arms swinging like pistons only to stop short at the discovery of fresh footprints crossing her own from when she had run to the surf. Two people had passed: their wavering trail continued along the beach, broken where the surf had erased its memory. So, there were two! That made it worse, much worse: trembling fear returned. She ran the short distance to her towel, grabbed it and wrapped it tightly around, tucking in the corners firmly. Scowling into the jungle, she stood with her legs spread, hands on hips and upper body swaying defiantly. "Show's over, assholes!" She shouted, drawing her makeshift robe closer in a tight angry tug. More loud hoots – but they came from above. What? Beth squinted into the deep shadow of overhead branches. A dark form moved, catching her eye,

then another: monkeys! Big ones! There must have been a dozen peering down at her. Fear washed away in a wave. Laughing at her foolishness, she played with the monkeys. Moving to one side, the bodies of the entire troop leaned perilously from their branches in the same direction then back again when she did. It was a dance with multiple grunting partners all of whom followed her lead.

Beth returned to her towel and the task of lathering on sunscreen while the troop of howlers, bored by her motionless sitting, staring off to the sunrise, lost interest and disappeared into the jungle. “My own beach,” Beth whispered, her gaze savoring the details of her surroundings. “Look at this beautiful place. A slice of heaven on Earth and today, it’s all mine to enjoy.” The panic caused by the monkeys convinced her that she still had a long way to go, but how much loosening up could she expect of herself after just a couple of weeks? What she really needed to do was to stop feeling sorry for herself. Grateful would be more appropriate. After all, the whole nasty mess had given her this opportunity to start life over, and not many people are as fortunate. This time she intended to do it right, without the mistakes of the past: the truth was that they all did her a favor, she just needed to chill out.

Far down the beach, two people jogged beside the low surf. She watched as they approached, appearing to grow larger. They weaved, following the shimmering remnants of waves slipping towards the sea on the nearly level beach, their feet splashing in an inch of water. When a wave surged onto the beach, they snaked towards the trees. Then, as it spread itself thin again, slowly returning to the sea, the joggers veered seaward again, maintaining their steady, splashing progress. “The footprints return,” she said aloud, “let’s see who these guys are, Robinson Crusoe and Friday perhaps.” Closer still, they came until she was able to see that it was two men, both barefoot with brown skin and dark hair. Each had an athletic body, but one had the build of a marathon runner and the other could be a heavyweight boxer. The thinner, leading as they banked up the sand towards her and slowed to a walk, wore a yellow cotton turtleneck pullover with sleeves removed, knee-length blue shorts and moved his narrow frame with quickness apart from the exercise.

“Good morning. You must be Miss Tierney,” he managed to say between pants. The man’s appearance was shocking. Scars covered his entire face. One, particularly visible from her vantage below, was an ugly mat of wrinkled flesh, burned black and pink below his chin and down his throat to disappear under the turtleneck. His nose was also wrong, it appeared to be made of two mismatched pieces. The upper and lower halves met off center at a deep scar that crossed the entire right side of his face, a dark line slanting below one eye. She smiled up to him, trying desperately to keep her reaction from being apparent. His hair was normal; that helped. It was dark, short and cut military style: she focused there. He stood erect in the sand, soldier-like, arms at his side, panting lightly. Meanwhile the bigger man behind remained bent at the waist, hands cupped over his knees, fighting for his breath.

“You’re right, my name is Beth Tierney. You have me at a disadvantage, though,” she acknowledged. No answer. His left ear, opposite the scar had an oversize hole pierced through it. Bright morning sunlight caught the hole perfectly, creating the effect of a huge diamond earring. She held her smile, trying not to notice. “How do you happen to know my name?” she asked more directly.

“My pardon, Miss Tierney. I’m your host, Truman Herrera. I own Cabañas Arrecifes.”

“Oh, but I thought Alberto and Mrs. Cecilia...”

“That’s okay, Miss, most people assume they are the owners. I prefer to remain in the background. People are put off by my scars,” he said laughing easily, “so, it’s better for business, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, don’t say that. Under those scars, you have fine features: Italian, I’d say.

“Yes, on my mother’s side, you’re very good.”

“It’s your eyes and your nose. You have kind of a Roman nose, if it wasn’t – like that,” she finished lamely not knowing quite how to express herself without insult.

He laughed good-naturedly. “See what I mean? The gentleman with me is Jesus Calderón,” he said, gesturing grandly towards the muscle-bound man behind him. “Jesus is our security man, and very good at his job, actually.”

“Oh yes, we’ve already met. He was at the bus stop to meet me the night I arrived.”

“Chauita is a sweet little town. I can assure you, you’ll not have any problems here. Nevertheless, if you’d like to have Jesus escort you at any time during your stay, just ask. Unfortunately, however, he doesn’t speak any English,” he declared in a pure North American accent.

Truman had a sincere friendly expression that put Beth at ease and narrow cheeks like her own. The right one dimpled when he smiled, which he did often, so it was first present then gone again, making his conversation pleasant to watch as well as to hear and the scars no longer matter. “I can speak some Spanish,” she answered, “just not very well. I studied it in college, but I’ve never actually used it.”

“*Diga hola a la Señorita Tierney, Jesus.*” Truman said speaking slowly and enunciating carefully for her benefit.

“*Mucho gusto en conocerla, Señorita. Para servirle,*” Jesus replied, lifting himself erect and smiling broadly. He was handsome with a meaty face and wide, muscular neck. Bulging shoulders and arms enclosed a trim torso with visible abdominals. He had no tattoos or jewelry and wore his hair long in back to hang over his shoulders, but trimmed close at the sides and his black swimsuit was every bit as revealing as Beth’s bikini bottom.

“See? I understood what he said,” she proclaimed. “He said, ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss. I’m at your service,’ right?”

“One hundred percent.”

“*Tambien, tengo mucho gusto en conocerle de nuevo, Señor Jesus,* (And it’s a pleasure to meet you again, Mr. Jesus),” she replied, twisting her tongue around the strange sounds.

“That’s very good, Miss Tierney,” Truman responded. “Your Spanish is excellent.”

“Not really.” A mid-air battle between a gull and frigate for a fish held their attention momentarily. “Come to think of it, I did have one problem,” she added, responding to the issue of security. “A girl broke into my room a couple of days ago, a very skinny girl – pretty. I think she just took a shower and might have stolen some makeup. I don’t know, but nothing else was missing: it was all quite weird. At any rate, now I’m keeping my room locked.”

Truman turned towards Jesus, still bent over behind him and spoke rapidly in Spanish. “I’m sorry about the incident,” he said, directing his words to her. “We know who this woman is. She’s a crack addict from down the beach. I’m sending Jesus to talk to her. You won’t be bothered again, Miss Tierney.”

“Please, call me Beth. Miss Tierney is too formal for me. It feels as though you’re speaking to another person. What did you say your name was?”

“Truman Herrera.”

“Have a seat, Truman Herrera. After running for so long, your legs must be tired.” He had thin lips framed between trimmed, black mustache and square jaw and straight black eyebrows. In the shadow below, equally dark eyes returned a gaze, captivating, for its capacity to switch from cheery sparkle to cold stare. He could be a very handsome man...

“Thank you, Beth,” he sighed settling into the sand beside her. “I try to stay in shape,” he continued. “When I’m here, I get out early every morning. Run maybe five or six K. It’s good for Jesus too. As you can see he doesn’t get enough

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

