

# **Before the Storm**

## **The Hunters: Origins, #1**

**by Chris Kuzneski, 1969–**

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**A Note**



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



## **A Note About *The Hunters: Origins***

The *Hunters* series opens in the middle of a daring heist as four strangers attempt to steal an important relic from Russian mobsters. Jack Cobb, Sarah Ellis, Josh McNutt, and Hector Garcia prove their worth by breaking into a heavily guarded compound in Brooklyn's Brighton Beach while being attacked by an army of goons and chased by the FBI. Based on the team's success, Jean-Marc Papineau hires them to find something far more valuable than a single artifact: a treasure train filled with Romanian gold.

If you've read *The Hunters*, *The Forbidden Tomb*, and *The Prisoner's Gold*, you know what happens next. But have you ever wondered what the team members were doing before the first heist? If so, I've got some great news for you. Over the course of several short novellas, *The Hunters: Origins* will delve into the history of the major characters in the series while providing clues and insight into *The Hunters* movie and future books.

The first story is called *Before the Storm*, and it focuses on the team leader of the *Hunters*. After his unexpected discharge from the U.S. Army, Jack Cobb finds it difficult to adjust to civilian life. Thankfully, two of his closest friends (Jonathon Payne and David Jones) come to his rescue in the oppressive heat of Florida. But their tales of adventure do more than cheer him up. They open Cobb's eyes to an opportunity that will change his life forever.

Chris Kuzneski

## **Chapter 1**

**Tuesday, August 14  
Clearwater Beach, Florida  
(23 miles west of Tampa)**

Jack Cobb wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone.

Not the hostess, not the locals, and certainly not the shirtless tourists who whooped with glee as they drank their piña coladas while listening to a white guy with dreadlocks play a reggae version of *Margaritaville*.

Cobb rolled his eyes and gulped his beer.

Another fucking day in paradise.

Prior to his trip to Florida, he could tolerate Jimmy Buffett, but his beach songs were played so often—and so poorly—at the bars and restaurants around town, Cobb was tempted to pull his gun and shoot the wannabe Rastafarian before he could inflict more damage to the public's eardrums. With the liberal gun laws in the Sunshine State, Cobb was ninety percent sure he could plead self-defense and get away with it.

The thought of violence made him smile.

It was the first time he had smiled that day.

With its stifling heat, Florida is miserable in August. While the winter months are heaven on earth, summer is closer to hell. According to a plastic thermometer behind the bar, the temperature was ninety-five—and so was the humidity. It was so hot even the seagulls were cranky. They shrieked obnoxiously as they searched for food on the wooden deck overlooking the wide white beach and the vast turquoise sea.

From his stool at the end of the bar, Cobb watched the birds fight for scraps. The imagery pissed him off because it made him think of his current ordeal. He had come to the Palm Pavilion, a popular beachfront hangout on Clearwater Beach, to take his mind off things, but the place was having the opposite effect.

Everyone around him was loose and having fun.

Meanwhile, he was coiled and ready to strike.

People sensed it, too.

The place was packed, but the stools next to him were empty.

His icy gray stare kept people away.

Thunder rumbled in the distance like gunfire in the Middle East. The locals were so used to the threat they paid it no mind. Along this part of the Gulf Coast, it rains almost every day in the summer, normally in the middle of the afternoon. The showers were often quick but powerful. With more thunderstorms than just about anywhere on the planet, this region proudly calls itself the lightning capital of the world.

Cobb glanced at his watch. It was 1:37 PM.

He guessed he had ninety minutes until it started to rain.

He raised his hand and ordered a pitcher of beer.

It was time to pick up his pace.

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For a man like Cobb, this was rock bottom.

After graduating from West Point, he had joined the United States Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment and thrived. Nicknamed the Night Stalkers, the 160th SOAR is a Special Operations force that provides helicopter aviation

support for assaults, attacks, and reconnaissance. Its missions are usually conducted at night, at high speeds, at low altitudes, and on short notice.

Simply put, the Night Stalkers are badasses.

And Cobb had been their alpha dog for many years.

Whether on the base or in the field, people naturally looked up to Cobb. Not only the soldiers under his command, but also the officers above him. As if everyone sensed he would someday be in charge of the whole damn army. Some called it charisma; others called it leadership. Whatever it was, the quality was palpable with Cobb.

It didn't hurt that his father—a Brigadier General in the U.S. Marines—was on the shortlist to be the next Secretary of Defense. Bloodlines mattered in the military, even if the two Cobbs didn't get along. Recently their fracture had widened to a massive chasm when Jack was dishonorably discharged for killing a high-level terrorist who was supposed to be captured, tortured, and used as a political pawn.

At least that was the rumor.

Few people knew what actually had happened.

The details of Cobb's court martial were so heavily redacted it would have been more efficient to dump a bucket of black paint on the transcript than to go in by hand and conceal the confidential information in the 512-page report. About the only words that weren't crossed out were prepositions.

Despite the incident, Cobb had somehow avoided prison.

But that didn't mean he hadn't been punished by the Army.

The military was his life, and it had been taken from him.

And so had his reputation.

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Cobb had come to Florida to visit MacDill Air Force Base.

Located four miles from downtown Tampa, MacDill serves as headquarters for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), Special Operations Command (SOCOM), Marine Forces Special Command (MARCENT), and several other units. In total, there are twenty-eight mission partners based at MacDill, which makes it the most critical military hub in the United States outside of the Pentagon.

Over the years, Cobb had spent a lot of time at MacDill and had hoped one of his contacts would throw him a lifeline—whether it was a job at a military gun range or a teaching position overseas. But word had spread quickly amongst the ranks that he was off limits. Simply put, anyone seen talking to and/or helping Cobb would be blacklisted by the military.

To active personnel, he was *persona non grata*.

Hell, they wouldn't even let him on the base.

As cruel as it sounded, the military took its code of conduct quite seriously, and Cobb's dishonorable discharge was such a stunning fall from grace that no one at MacDill was willing to risk his career for a man who had screwed up so badly that even his high-ranking father couldn't save him.

It was the Army's equivalent of the scarlet letter.

Even worse, private military companies like Academi (formerly known as Blackwater) and Aegis were forced to back away as well. Normally there would

have been a bidding war for someone like Cobb, who could be dropped anywhere in the world to lead an entire platoon of mercenaries, but private contractors were so dependent on military money they couldn't risk upsetting anyone at CENTCOM, particularly a Brigadier General who may become the Secretary of Defense.

After several days of rejection, Cobb realized he was screwed.

He had come to Florida for a second chance.

But was forced to settle for another beer.

## Chapter 2

Cobb was halfway through his pitcher when his phone started to ring. He glanced at the caller ID and saw a name from his past.

He smiled for the second time that day.

Maybe he wasn't screwed after all.

Cobb took a deep breath before answering. "Well, I'll be damned. You must've read my mind. I was thinking about giving you a call."

"Really?" the man said. "Why didn't you?"

"I wasn't sure your secretary would put me through."

The caller laughed. "You have my cell number, not my work number. Besides, I'm not in the office. I'm on vacation."

"Me, too," said Cobb as he struggled to hear. He covered his left ear with his free hand, but the torturous wails of the white Bob Marley were echoing in his head. "But I bet you're somewhere fancier than I am—like Malta or the Amalfi Coast. Meanwhile, I'm melting in Florida."

"Really? I'm in Florida, too."

"Which part?"

"Beats me. Everything looks the same."

"Don't I know it."

"Plus it's, like, three hundred degrees. It's so damn hot I just saw a squirrel blowing on his nuts."

Cobb laughed. "What are you doing down here?"

"Visiting a friend. And you?"

"Drinking my ass off."

"Alone?"

"What can I say? It's been one of those weeks."

The caller nodded knowingly. He was well connected at MacDill and had heard about Cobb's situation from a number of people. All of them wanted to help but couldn't risk involvement. "In that case, maybe we should meet up."

Cobb's smile grew wider. "That would be great. Just tell me when and where, and I'd be happy to make the drive. My schedule is pretty wide open at the moment."

"I'm not sure driving is a good idea—particularly if you finish that pitcher."

"You're probably right."

"I'm always right."

Cobb paused. “Wait. Who said anything about a pitcher?”

“No one had to. We’ve gone drinking before. I know your MO.”

Cobb shook his head and glanced around the Palm Pavilion. He suddenly realized his friend was nearby. “No way. I’m not buying it.”

“Well, I’m sure as hell not buying it. You ordered it before I got here.”

Cobb stood and spotted his buddy near the entrance.

He was even bigger than Cobb remembered.

Dressed in a black T-shirt that showed off his physique, Jonathon Payne moved through the crowd with ease. People sensed his presence and got out of his way—and those that didn’t were sidestepped easily by the agile giant. Unlike most men his size, he was blessed with the dexterity of an Olympian. That rare combination of strength and grace allowed him to letter in football and basketball at the U.S. Naval Academy.

It had also paid dividends in his military career.

Prior to his retirement, Payne had led a Special Forces unit known as the MANIACs, an elite counterinsurgency team comprised of the top soldiers the **M**arines, **A**rmey, **N**avy, **I**ntelligence, **A**ir Force, and **C**oast Guard could find. His position included final say on all personnel decisions, which was how the two soldiers had met long ago.

Like most officers with his security clearance, Payne was fully aware of Cobb’s track record with the 160th SOAR and felt Cobb would be a perfect addition to his squad. To make that happen, Payne had flown to Fort Campbell, Kentucky—where the Night Stalkers were based—in order to convince Cobb to join the MANIACs.

His recruiting pitch had included beer, food, and a lot of laughs.

Although they had never served together, they quickly realized they were kindred spirits—men from prestigious families who took great pride in molding a squad of elite soldiers into a well-oiled fighting machine. Unfortunately, despite their admiration for each other, it was obvious their similarities would prevent them from working together.

To put it simply, both men were born to lead.

And two leaders wouldn’t work well on the same team.

Nevertheless, they had grown close over the years.

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On his own, Cobb was an intimidating guy.

Chiseled, but not bulky, he was a shade over six feet tall with a handsome face and a stare so icy it could freeze water. People often underestimated Cobb’s strength until they saw the muscular definition of his arms and legs and six-pack abs.

But next to Payne, he felt like a garden gnome.

Knowing what Cobb had been through, Payne greeted his friend with a massive bear hug. It so powerful and unexpected it actually knocked the wind out of Cobb, whose feet briefly dangled above the floor. In that moment, Cobb knew what it felt like to be mauled by a grizzly.

“Put... me... down,” Cobb gasped.

Payne grinned as he released his prey. “Good to see you, too!”

Cobb couldn’t help but laugh. “Holy shit, I see the steroids are working.”

Payne laughed. “Look who’s talking! Your veins are huge. It’s like you have dicks under your skin. Then again, what’s the expression? *You are what you eat.*”

Cobb playfully punched him in the arm. It was like hitting a telephone pole. “I’ll ignore the insult and focus on the bigger picture. What the hell are you doing here?”

“Looking for you.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured that. I mean, how did you find me?”

“How do you think?”

Cobb rolled his eyes. The answer was obvious.

He was quite familiar with Randy Raskin.

The computer genius worked in a windowless office in the subbasement of the Pentagon, but due to his classified position as a researcher for the U.S. military, the data he compiled frequently found its way to the White House.

Payne had used his services on many occasions, which had eventually led to a friendship. Raskin often pretended he didn’t have time for Payne, but the truth was he admired him greatly and would do almost anything to help. And the feeling was mutual. Payne loved to brag about the gifted hacker to anyone who would listen.

“As you know, Randy can find just about anything.”

“Except a girlfriend,” Cobb joked.

Payne laughed loudly as they headed toward the bar. “Truth be told, I don’t think he’s looking for a girlfriend. He’s too busy building one.”

## Chapter 3

There were too many people milling around the bar for a private conversation, so Payne grabbed a table in the back of the Palm Pavilion while Cobb ordered drinks.

The air conditioning and ceiling fans struggled to cool the back room, but the panoramic views of Clearwater Beach and the Gulf of Mexico more than made up for it. So did the glass door, which dimmed the hustle and bustle of the beachside bar and—more importantly—muffled the sound of the wailing white guy who was now butchering the Drifters’ classic summer song, “Under the Boardwalk”.

Payne was a fan of live music and usually tipped musicians generously, but this singer was so dreadful Payne was tempted to pay the customers seated next to the stage who were forced to listen to the screeching. Payne ultimately decided against it because he assumed the singer had to be related to the owner—or possibly the owner himself—and didn’t want to get thrown out of the place.

At least not this early in the day.

The fun was just getting started.

Cobb entered the lime-green room with a pitcher of beer and two frosted mugs. Payne was sitting at a table in the far corner. It was the most tactical seat in the place. The wall protected Payne’s back, and he had a clear view of the glass door and the bar beyond. It was the seat Cobb would have chosen if given the choice.

Not that they were worried about an ambush.

To them, these precautions were second nature.

Kind of like breathing.

“I hope you like Reef Donkey,” Cobb said as he walked through the empty room. “The bartender recommended it. Said it’s brewed locally.”

“Is it beer?”

“Yes.”

“Is it cold?”

“Affirmative.”

“Then I’ll like it.”

Cobb smiled. “A man after my own heart.”

He poured two mugs before sitting in the wicker chair across from Payne. From there, Cobb had a clear view out the back and side windows, which meant they could see collectively in every direction.

Although they were no longer in the military, their training was hardwired into their DNA. This was obvious in all aspects of their lives and one of the main reasons why it was so difficult for elite soldiers to transition to the private sector. After years of honor, discipline, and service, the real world was something of a letdown.

Payne knew this better than most.

He had inherited his grandfather’s company—a multinational corporation named Payne Industries—and the fortune that came with it, but quickly found himself bored with the day-to-day minutiae of corporate life. Despite having more money than he could possibly spend in his lifetime, he found himself constantly risking his life in pursuit of adventure. Whether it was searching for a lost throne in Greece, a secret crown in Germany, or a death relic in Mexico, he realized he needed to risk his life to feel alive.

And he assumed Cobb would feel the same.

“So,” Cobb blurted. “What gives? Why are you here?”

“Why?” Payne sipped his beer before leaning back in his chair. “You asked the same question on the phone. My answer hasn’t changed. I’m visiting a friend.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“I need a reason to visit a friend?”

“Under the circumstances, yes.”

“What circumstances are those?”

Cobb growled softly. “You’re such a dick.”

Payne couldn’t help but laugh. “Did you just growl at me?”

“Maybe. But not on purpose.”

Payne laughed again. “Jack, I swear, I’m not being a dick. I’m just trying to gauge your situation. There are tons of rumors flying around, and I’ve probably heard less than half of them. So I truly don’t know what’s going on with you. That’s why I hopped on a plane to Hades to have a beer with you. It’s why my balls are sweating.”

“Your balls are sweating because of me?”

“Just not in the way you’d prefer.”

Cobb cracked a smile. “You’re such an ass.”

“I’ve been called worse. In fact, someone just called me a dick a minute ago.”



“Sorry. I didn’t mean to attack you. But my anger is working overtime at the moment. It’s been a tough week.”

“In what way?”

Cobb pondered the question as he sipped his beer. “During the past few days, I’ve felt like I had the plague. Everywhere I went, people slammed doors on me. Literally slammed doors in my face. Some of my oldest contacts even shut me out. I’m not sure what I expected when I flew down here, but I sure as shit didn’t expect this.”

“Come on, Jack. We both know it’s for show.”

“What is?”

“Their reaction! Do you really think your friends are going to bail on you over some trumped up charges that no one is allowed to read? Not a chance in Hell!” Payne glanced through the window at the scorching terrain. “Actually, given our current location, I didn’t need to say Hell. That’s already implied.”

“Hold on. I’m confused.”

“Really? I thought it was obvious. It’s really hot down here, so—”

“Not about that! I’m confused about the first part. The reaction part.”

“Come on, Jack. You’re a smart guy. A heck of a lot smarter than I am. You had to know what was going to happen when you went to MacDill. Did you really think they were going to let you on the base?”

“I had my doubts, but—”

“Then why’d you go?”

“I had to know for sure.”

“And now you know. The military is done with you. It’s no longer an option. The sooner you wrap your head around that, the better.”

Cobb nodded but said nothing.

“That said, your friends aren’t done with you. Even the ones who slammed a door in your face are still in your corner.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Jack, trust me, they have your back. So much so, I’m kind of jealous.”

Cobb stared at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Do you know how many calls I received from MacDill over the past few days? Forty-eight! Forty-eight calls about your sorry ass.” Payne changed his voice to a sarcastic tone. “*Oh my God, we’re soooo worried about Jack... Our hands are tied, but we want to help Jack... Help me, Jonathon. You’re my only hope.*”

“No, they didn’t.”

“Yes, they did,” Payne assured him. “Well, maybe not that last one. I think I got that from *Star Wars*. But all the other ones are accurate. And if you don’t believe me, call my secretary. She’s the one who took all the calls.”

Cobb breathed deeply, relieved to hear the news.

Maybe things weren’t as bad as they seemed.

Payne grinned as he sipped his beer. “Truth be told, she’s the *only* reason I’m down here. She was so sick of hearing your name, she forced me get on a plane to stop their whining. As you know, I don’t give a damn about you or our friendship.”

“Obviously.”

“I’m merely here to keep her happy. She’s been with Payne Industries for more than fifty years and runs a tight ship. Without her, the company would fold overnight.”

“In that case,” Cobb said as he raised his mug, “here’s to your secretary. It’s good to have someone you can count on in your time of need.”

Payne lifted his mug. “Don’t I know it.”

“Seriously,” Cobb said as he lowered his mug. “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable, but your visit means the world to me. Thanks for taking the time to fly down here. It means more than you can possibly imagine.”

“No worries, man. You’d do the same for me.”

Cobb shrugged. “Actually, I’m not sure I would. I mean, I don’t have a secretary to guilt me into it, or pack for me, or make my flight arrangements. Honestly, I’d probably just send you a text with a sad emoji and that’s about it.”

Payne grinned. “Now who’s being a dick?”

“Sorry,” Cobb said with a laugh. “Things were getting a little too serious. I wanted to cool things off before you went in for the kiss.”

“Don’t worry, Jack. You aren’t my type.”

“Speaking of your type, where’s DJ?”

Payne glanced at his phone. “That’s a very good question.”

## Chapter 4

David Jones was easily distracted, particularly on a tropical beach with dozens of sunbathing beauties in bikinis. As much as he loved the city of Pittsburgh, he would be the first to admit it lacked the scenery of Florida.

The sand and water were great to look at, too.

“Sweet gelato,” Jones said to himself as he stared at the parade of ladies that overwhelmed the stretch of beach near the Palm Pavilion. It was as if all the modeling agencies in Tampa Bay had arranged a field trip to Clearwater to guarantee every model in the area had the same amount of tan lines.

Whatever the reason for their presence, Jones viewed it as a gift from a loving, benevolent god, who was obviously a horny man or lesbian. Not wanting to insult this free-spirited deity, Jones decided to investigate the women sprawled before him.

This, of course, made perfect sense considering his line of work.

A graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, Jones had served as Payne’s second in command in the MANIACs before leaving the military to set up a private investigations firm in Pittsburgh. It had been a lifelong dream to become a detective, and Payne had helped Jones achieve it by arranging the necessary financing and giving him an entire floor of prime real estate in the Payne Industries complex atop Mount Washington.

To Payne’s financial advisors, the transaction had seemed far too generous, but what the pencil pushers had failed to realize was the fraternal bond the men had forged while fighting side by side behind enemy lines.

Payne and Jones were more than friends.

They were brothers.

After losing the only legal relative in his life—his grandfather—Payne had realized the best way to keep his sanity while transitioning into the real world was to keep Jones nearby. And Jones had been more than happy to oblige. Although Payne was white and Jones was black, the two of them were like twins. The duo had a connection that few people in the world would ever get to experience, and though neither of them would admit it, they realized they'd be foolish to take their friendship for granted.

That said, their friendship was far from perfect.

The two of them constantly got on each other's nerves.

And this was one of those times.

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Payne growled when he glanced at his phone.

No messages, no missed calls, no updates of any kind.

His best friend was M.I.A.

"Now who's growling?" Cobb teased.

Payne laughed. "Sorry about that. Sometimes DJ pisses me off. We fly all the way down here to see you, and somehow he gets lost in the parking lot. He probably saw a balloon or something shiny. I swear, he has the attention span of a toddler."

"No worries," Cobb assured him. "I prefer this for the time being. It gives us a chance to speak in private. As I mentioned, I planned to give you a call this week."

"About?"

"As much as it pains me to admit it, I need a favor."

Payne grinned. "No problem, man. Whatever you need. As a former Naval officer, I'm used to bailing out Army personnel on a regular basis."

Cobb rolled his eyes. "Go on. Get it out of your system."

"But it's true. If you'd like, I'd be more than happy to rattle off a list of a hundred missions where I swooped in and saved the lives of Army grunts."

"No thanks. I'm good."

"You sure?"

"Positive!"

"You know what else I'm used to?"

"Sex with DJ?" Cobb joked.

"Beating West Point in football. Seriously, man, when was the last time the Cadets beat Navy? I think Roosevelt was president."

"Ouch. That hurts."

"*Teddy*," Payne stressed, "not FDR. I'm talking about *Teddy*."

Cobb tried not to laugh. "Are you done?"

"For now. But I reserve the right to tease you again later."

"Screw you. Permission denied."

"Really? Not even—"

"No," Cobb said as he grabbed the pitcher, "not if you want to keep drinking for free. My beer, my rules. Got it?"

"Fine. I'll play nice. But only 'cause I'm thirsty."

Cobb nodded and pushed the pitcher toward Payne, who quickly refilled his mug. Payne didn't imbibe often, but when he did, he could drink almost anyone under the table thanks to his size and remarkable metabolism. If he didn't consume eight thousand calories a day, he would lose weight.

"So," Payne said, "what kind of favor?"

"I need a job."

"Done! You're hired."

Cobb shook his head. "No, that's not what I meant."

Payne stared at him. "Do you have a job?"

"No."

"Do you need a job?"

"Yes."

"Well, now you have one. Welcome to Payne Industries."

"Jon, I'm flattered, but—"

"Can you type? How are your filing skills?"

"Jon—"

"Oops! I forgot. You went to West Point. You probably don't even know how to read. Not to worry. We'll find something you can actually do. How are you at mowing?"

"Jon!" Cobb blurted with a smile. "I'm flattered! I'm truly flattered by your faith in me. I can't stress that enough. But I wasn't asking for a job."

"You weren't? Because it sure sounded like it when you said, 'I need a job'."

"Well, I *do* need a job, but I wasn't asking you to give me one."

"Then what were you asking for?"

"A letter of recommendation."

"That's it? That's all you want? A letter of recommendation?"

Cobb nodded. "Considering my situation, I think a letter would open a lot of doors. As much as it pains me to admit this, your name carries a lot of weight in our industry."

"What industry is that?"

"Soldiering."

"Not to sound cocky, but it carries a lot of weight in other industries as well."

"I'm sure it does, but..."

"You want to be a soldier."

Cobb nodded. "It's who I am."

"I get it. Trust me, I get it. When I left the MANIACs to run Payne Industries, I felt like half a man—like I'd left a vital part of me behind. Some days I still feel that way, and when I do I find something to fill the void. Why do you think DJ and I are always running off on our little adventures? It's not because we need the money."

"I'll be honest, some adventure sounds pretty good right about now."

"Well, next time we stumble across something we'll be sure to give you a call."

"How often does that happen?"

Payne laughed. "More often than you'd think."

## Chapter 5

Never one to waste an opportunity, Jones left the blistering heat of the parking lot for the cool, white sand of Clearwater Beach. Though Payne was expecting him inside, Jones knew if his plan worked to perfection, all would be forgiven.

Dressed in a white tank top that showed off his arms and light-blue board shorts, Jones headed for a trove of ten beauties sprawled before him. Most were lying on colorful blankets or reclining on folding chairs. Other than sunglasses and bathing suits, the only other thing they were wearing was lotion.

The wind was starting to pick up, and the sky was turning gray. Thunder boomed in the distance, like it always did this time of day. Jones knew he could use all of that to his advantage. Still, he knew the odds were stacked against him. He had picked up women before, but never so many at the exact same time.

This would take some finesse.

He surveyed the scene for an opening—something to get the conversation started—when he spotted a peculiar item next to a stack of towels. One of the women had brought a shovel to the beach. Not a plastic toy shovel to build sandcastles, but a metal shovel with a large wooden handle that looked like it belonged on a construction site.

For the life of him, he couldn't figure out why.

He figured it would be a good place to start.

"Excuse me," Jones said as he jogged toward them. Most of the women glanced up. The few that didn't were wearing headphones. "I'm sorry to bother you, I really am. But I just ran over a tourist in the parking lot and was hoping to hide the body. Could I possibly borrow your shovel?"

"That's not funny," said a breathtaking blonde in a red bikini who was reading a book on her Kindle. "Tourist lives matter."

Jones laughed. "Sexy and sassy—that's a deadly combination."

"But not as deadly as you."

"Damn, girl, that's racist! Just because I'm black doesn't mean I'm deadly."

"True," she said with a smile, "but you just asked to borrow our shovel because you killed someone in the parking lot. If I'm not mistaken, *that* makes you deadly."

"Good point."

"I've been known to make a few. I'm a lawyer."

"What a coincidence!"

"You're a lawyer, too?"

"No, but I just killed someone in the parking lot, and I need a good attorney. Let me buy you a drink, and we can discuss my case."

She laughed as she shielded her eyes from the sun. "As tempting as that is, I'm here with my friends..."

"Me, too."

"I hate to break it to you, but you're standing there alone. Does that mean you have no friends?"

"Wow," Jones said. "You're relentless."

"I prefer 'tenacious', but 'relentless' will do."

“Hold on. Let me see if I got this straight: you’re smart, sexy, sassy, and tenacious? The hell with drinks. Let me buy you dinner. Or a car.”

She laughed. “What kind of girl do you think I am? I don’t even know your name.”

He immediately stuck out his hand. “My name is David Jones. But my imaginary friends call me DJ.”

She smiled and shook his hand. “Nice to meet you, DJ. I’m Nicole, but my friends call me Nicki.”

He glanced at the group. All of them were transfixed by the conversation. Even the ones with headphones had turned off their music to listen to the banter. To them, it was like they were on an episode of *The Bachelor*. “Nice to meet you all.”

The group waved in unison.

“Unfortunately,” Nicki said as she motioned toward her friends, “it would be wrong to leave a ladies’ day for dinner with a guy. We all ditched work to spend time together, and I refuse to bail on the group. That would be rude.”

“Then bring them with you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ladies,” Jones announced to the others, “my friends and I would like to treat you to dinner this evening. What’s the best restaurant in the area?”

A brunette answered, “The Island Way Grill.”

“Yep,” a redhead agreed. “Great seafood. Very expensive.”

“Sounds perfect!” Jones said with confidence.

Nicki stared at him, unsure if he was serious. “There’s, like, ten of us. Plus you, and, um, how many of your imaginary friends?”

“Two. They’re waiting for me in the Palm Pavilion. You can meet them if you’d like. I swear they’re real.”

“Unlike Emma’s boobs,” cracked the brunette.

A blonde, who had been lying on her stomach, immediately sat up to defend herself. As she did, her bikini struggled to hold her massive breasts in place. “Best alimony I ever spent. My ex cheated on me with a stripper, so I got tits bigger than hers. The bastard paid for my boobs but will never, ever get to touch them.”

Nicki smiled at Jones. “But your friends might, if they play their cards right.”

All the women laughed while the blonde nodded.

“I’ll let them know,” Jones said with a wink.

“Are they cute?” the brunette wondered.

“Very,” said the blonde as she jiggled her breasts back and forth.

The brunette rolled her eyes. “I meant his friends.”

“I know,” the blonde insisted. “I was *joking*.”

Jones answered the original question. “That depends, do you like muscular war heroes from prestigious families? If so, you’ll like my friends.”

“War heroes?” Nicki asked.

“Yes, ma’am. All of us served.”

“Where?”

“You name it, we’ve been there. And a whole lot of places you’ve never heard of. One of my friends—Jack—just left the service, and we came to Florida to celebrate his newfound freedom. Hopefully, you ladies will join the celebration.”

Nicki sighed. “When you put it like that, how can we say ‘no’?”

“You can’t—which is *why* I put it like that.”

She laughed. “Well played, Mister Jones.”

He bowed theatrically. “Thank you, Miss, um...”

“Bergen. Nicole Bergen.”

He bowed again. “Thank you, Miss Bergen.”

Just then thunder rumbled overhead, much closer than before. As if on cue, all the women started to gather their things.

“Can I help carry something?” Jones asked the group.

“Sure,” Emma said as she pulled a T-shirt over her bikini. “You can carry my shovel. I don’t want to get zapped by lightning on my way to the parking lot.”

“Me, either,” he admitted, “but I’ll carry it for you under one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“Tell me why you brought it.”

“See!” Emma said to her friends. “I told you no one would notice.”

All the women laughed at their inside joke.

“Notice what?” Jones demanded.

Emma grabbed her blanket and pulled it off the ground with a flourish. Hidden underneath was a twelve-inch trench in the sand. “Ta-da!”

Jones stared at the trench, completely confused. “I don’t get it.”

The women laughed louder as they continued to pack up.

Nicki shook her head. “C’mon, DJ. You were doing so well. Don’t disappoint me now. It’s not exactly the Riddle of the Sphinx.”

“Which I actually know the answer to,” he bragged.

“Then this should be simple!”

Jones crouched and stared at the sand before glancing up at Emma, who had been lying on her stomach on top of the trench. She smiled at him while pointing at her massive implants. He wasn’t sure if she was helping or flirting.

A few seconds passed before the answer came to him.

“Oh!” he practically shouted. “It’s a boob tube!”

## Chapter 6

Payne stared across the table at Cobb, whose body language had changed dramatically during their brief conversation. When Payne had first arrived, Cobb looked as if he were ready to climb a lifeguard tower and start shooting unarmed civilians. Now he appeared relaxed, like the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders.

Obviously the visit had made an impact.

Cobb had always been wound tighter than Payne or Jones. He had grown up in a strict military household where fun was off-limits. His mother had passed away when he was young, but his father refused to fly home for the funeral because he said he had “more important things to worry about in the Middle East”.

It was a slight that Cobb would never forget.

Or forgive.

Over the next decade, Cobb bounced from one military school to another. Not because he struggled—his grades and behavior were impeccable, no matter where he went—but because his father hadn't wanted his son to get comfortable in any one spot. According to his father, "comfort led to weakness".

Cobb kept his mouth shut and never complained because he knew it would fall on deaf ears. His father was a hard man—a Marine, through and through—who treated Jack like a soldier he was preparing for war because that's how he viewed the world.

To him, everything was a battle—including raising his son.

And winning was always his number one goal.

Cobb had let him have the upper hand until graduation when he finally made his move. His father had assumed Jack would join the Marines. That had been the master plan all along, and Jack had always followed orders, like a good soldier should. But Jack had gone behind his father's back and applied to West Point, a military academy for the Army, a rival branch of the service. He did this not only to get out from his father's shadow, but also to hurt him for his years of emotional neglect.

And Cobb's decision to join the Army definitely stung.

His father viewed it as a slap in the face.

Which was exactly how it was intended.

Since then, the two of them had barely talked.

Unfortunately, all of that moving around had affected Cobb. Though he was quite popular, he had found it difficult to make close friends because he was always the new guy in town. It wasn't until West Point that he finally let some people into his life. Slowly but surely he had bonded with two of his roommates and opened up to them about his upbringing and his hatred of his father. They were from military families, too, and understood him in ways that he never thought possible.

For once in his life, he didn't feel like an outsider.

Sadly, their friendship was short-lived.

Both men were killed in a training accident shortly after being commissioned as second lieutenants in the Army. The news had devastated Cobb and made him pull inward even further to protect himself. He knew deaths were common in his line of work and decided he couldn't do his job if he was emotionally attached to those around him. As strange as it sounded, Cobb was more than willing to risk his lives for others, but he wasn't willing to share his life with anyone.

He had his father to blame for that.

"You know," Payne said, "this is the first time I've ever seen you happy."

"Screw you," Cobb said with a laugh.

"I'm serious, Jack. I've never seen you happy before."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Payne relented. "Maybe 'happy' is a poor choice of words. I've seen you smile—once or twice—but I've never seen you with your guard down."

Cobb stared at his mug. "I guess the Reef Donkey is working."

"Maybe. Or maybe this is the first time since kindergarten that you can actually lower your defenses and be yourself. I mean, when DJ and I flew to Fort Campbell



to recruit you, we liked you a lot, but I'll be honest: you kind of seemed like a robot."

"No, I didn't!"

"Oh, yes you did. And not a cool robot. I'm talking C-3PO."

Cobb laughed. "You were interviewing me! I was trying to be professional!"

"Well, you came off as robotic. Don't get me wrong: you loosened up as the night went on, but in our eyes, you never made it past an android."

"That's it," Cobb announced as he pulled the pitcher of beer out of Payne's reach. "I'm officially cutting you off. Remember what I said earlier? My beer, my rules. And you just violated our terms of agreement."

Payne responded in the voice of a robot. "*You violated our terms of agreement. That does not compute. Must protect beer at all costs. Death to humans.*"

Cobb laughed and flipped him off with both hands even though he realized Payne's humor was grounded in reality. Cobb had been told on more than one occasion that his greatest flaw as a leader was his emotional distance. His troops always respected him—most even revered him—but they were reluctant to befriend him.

He simply preferred it that way.

"Granted," Cobb said, "I'm not gregarious like you. You're best friends with your second in command and probably still get Christmas cards from all your men."

"Not all of them. One guy is Jewish."

"And yet both our styles were effective."

"Maybe so. But we had a lot more fun."

"Which is why your squad's name was so appropriate." Cobb twirled his finger next to his head to suggest the MANIACs were crazy. "Do you know what the SEALs and Rangers called you behind your backs?"

"Awesome?"

Cobb shook his head. "They called you the hyenas—because you laughed so much on the battlefield."

Payne smiled. He had heard that nickname before. He took it as a compliment. "And yet, do you know how many SEALs and Rangers begged to join my squad?"

"Let me guess. All of them?"

"Not all, but most."

"That's because you were given the coolest missions."

"Only because we had the coolest leaders."

"Cockiest, definitely. I'm not sure about coolest."

"Coolest, biggest, strongest, sexiest. Pretty much all the '-ests'."

Cobb laughed. "Truth be told, I'm not sure how you did it."

"Did what?"

"Maintained discipline in your ranks while having fun."

Payne shrugged. "I didn't focus on fun. It wasn't like we were playing Scrabble in a combat zone, but I had to do things differently because our missions lasted a hell of a lot longer than anything you did with the Night Stalkers. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you tended to fly in and fly out. Everything was swift, violent, precise. You could afford to be hyperintense because your missions were over so quickly."

"True," Cobb admitted.

"I didn't have that luxury. Sometimes my guys would stay in the field for days at a time behind enemy lines, so we had to blow off steam when we could or we would burn out quickly. In my opinion, the best way to do that was through humor. We might've been laughing, but we never lost focus. In fact, laughing helped us *sustain* focus."

"Interesting," Cobb said, "I'll have to try that some..."

His voiced faded out before he finished his thought.

For a moment there, he had forgotten about his current situation. He was thinking about ways to improve his unit when he realized he no longer had one.

Cobb cursed under his breath.

Payne noticed. "That used to happen to me, too. I'd think of a great new tactic to try with my squad, then I'd remember I was a civilian."

"How long did that last?"

"Honestly? It still happens from time to time, but not nearly as frequent as the first year. Back then, I'd think about tactics constantly."

"Do you still teach? I remember running into you in K-town. You said you were giving a briefing on advanced weaponry."

Payne smiled. He had been in Kaiserslautern, Germany, on one of his adventures when he had bumped into Cobb on the street. He couldn't afford to tell him why he was there—meeting with a well-known smuggler named Kaiser—so he had lied about his presence to protect his friend. "That's what I said, all right. Wasn't the least bit true, but that's what I said."

Cobb raised his brow. "Color me intrigued."

"Well, I'd be happy to tell you all about it... cough... unfortunately, my throat... cough... is getting pretty dry from all this talking. If only someone would—"

Cobb pushed the pitcher of beer toward Payne, who grabbed it and filled his mug before Cobb could change his mind. He patiently waited for Payne to take a large sip of the amber ale before he said another word. "Better?"

Payne nodded. "Much."

Cobb raised his arms in victory. "For the record, let it show that a West Point grad just bailed out a Naval officer in physical and emotional distress."

Payne dropped his head in shame. "Son of a bitch!"

"Call me crazy, but it looks like the coolest, cockiest MANIAC of them all walked right into my trap. Maybe I should be the one teaching you a thing or two about tactics."

Payne groaned loudly. "I feel sick."

"Well, vomit somewhere else. This is Army country."

"Come on, man. You tricked me. How am I supposed to beat a robot?"

"C-3PO, my ass," Cobb said with a grin. "I'm the fucking Terminator."

## Chapter 7

Jones walked into the back room of the Palm Pavilion as Cobb celebrated his victory. The scene confused Jones, who was expecting to see a sad and somber Cobb.

Perhaps dinner wouldn't be needed after all.

Payne spotted his best friend and shouted across the room. "Where the hell have you been? I could've used reinforcements ten seconds ago."

Cobb turned and saw Jones. He leapt off his chair and greeted Jones with a hug. "Good to see you, DJ. How are you doing?"

"Great," Jones said. "How about you?"

"Better than before," Cobb admitted. "Thanks for coming down here. It means the world to me."

"My pleasure, man."

Cobb smiled. "Please, grab a seat. Can I get you a—"

Payne cut him off. "Seriously, DJ, where the hell have you been? You dropped me off, like, yesterday. What took you so long?"

"First of all," Jones snapped, "why'd I have to drop you off to begin with? I'm not your damn driver, and you ain't Miss Daisy. Or are you, you racist bastard? What, you couldn't be seen with a black guy in the parking lot?"

Cobb took a step back and laughed.

"Secondly," Jones continued, "you could have told me there was a back room to this place, but noooooooo! Instead, you made me spend ten minutes searching for you outside while Eminem's tone-deaf cousin butchered a song by Stevie Wonder. Stevie Wonder, Jon! Blind, brother Stevie Wonder! There should be a law against that—white people singing Motown. It just ain't right!"

Payne sighed. "Are you done?"

"Far from it!" Jones snapped as he glanced at the table. "Finally, and this pisses me off most of all. After flying a thousand miles from Pittsburgh and making my way from the hot-as-Africa parking lot through the douchebag surfers and the torturous wails of Billy Joe Jim Bob, I finally find you guys in the air-conditioned comfort of this back room laughing your asses off. And when I look at your table, I notice two—count them: *one, two*—mugs instead of three. What, am I not allowed to drink with you guys? Is there a bar out back for us Negroes? Or do you expect me to drink directly from your pitcher? Because I'd gladly do it, if the damn pitcher wasn't *empty!*"

Cobb glanced at Payne. "Is he always like this?"

"More than you can possibly imagine."

Jones flipped off Payne, who returned the favor.

Cobb smiled and put his hand on Jones's shoulder. "For the record, I started to say, 'Can I get you a drink?' when Jon rudely cut me off. And the only reason I didn't get three mugs is because I couldn't carry three and a pitcher by myself."

"What do you mean? Where was Jon?"

"He was saving us a table."

Jones glanced around the empty room. "From whom?"

Cobb grimaced. "That's a very good point."

"So," Jones said, "let me see if I got this straight: the billionaire made me drop him off at the entrance, then he made you—a guy who just lost his fuckin' job—buy the beer, and he didn't even offer to carry it to the table?"

"Nope. He even whined about it when I tried to save you some."

"The selfish prick."

Cobb glanced at Payne. "I have to admit, he has a very strong case against you."

Payne rolled his eyes at the theatrics. He wasn't the least bit offended by Jones's insults because they were completely unfounded. After all, Payne had paid for the private jet that had brought them there, rented their luxury SUV, and booked a large suite at the Grand Hyatt because Jones wanted to stay on the water.

But Payne was willing to play along.

"Fine," he said begrudgingly, "I'll buy the next round."

"And?" Jones prodded.

"And, what?"

"What about dinner?"

"Fine! I'll pay for dinner, too. But *I* get to choose the restaurant."

"No," Jones said, "*Jack* gets to choose the restaurant."

"Fair enough. We're here for Jack, so Jack chooses the restaurant."

Jones grinned. "And Jack chooses the Island Way Grill."

Cobb looked at him, confused. "I do?"

"Trust me," Jones said, "you'll love the scenery."

Cobb shrugged. "The Island Way Grill, it is."

"But that's later. In the meantime, Jon is going to buy us a pitcher of beer and fetch me a frosted mug while you and I catch up."

Payne gave him a mock salute. "Yes, sir."

"And bring me some nachos with cheese and bacon. I'm on vacation."

Payne saluted him again—this time with his middle finger—before he left the room. Jones quickly took Payne's chair because he knew it would piss him off.

"So," Jones said to Cobb, "why are you so happy?"

"Excuse me?"

"Don't get me wrong: I didn't expect you to be sobbing—because, as you know, robots can't cry. But I did expect you to be angry as hell."

"First of all," Cobb said, "enough with the robot shit."

"Sore subject. Duly noted."

"Secondly, I've been pissed at the world for several months now, and my trip to MacDill certainly didn't help my mood. Talk about humiliating."

"Yeah," Jones said as he cleaned the rim of Payne's mug with his tank top before taking a swig of beer. "Sorry you had to go through that, but look on the bright side: you can make a lot more money in the private sector."

"Doing what?"

"With your skills and training, you can work as a mercenary in any country in the world. Trust me, there are plenty of top-paying jobs out there for soldiers like you."

"Maybe so, but I think you're forgetting about my discharge."

Jones waved it off with a brush of his hand. "Believe it or not, some people will view that as a *positive*. Seriously, if you're looking for a merc, would you rather hire a squeaky clean cadet or someone who is willing to get his hands dirty?"

Cobb shrugged. "Depends on the job."

“True. If I’m hiring a bodyguard to protect my family, I’d choose Captain America. But if I’m looking for someone to kill a dictator, I’d hire the Winter Soldier.”

Cobb stared at him. “Who the hell is the Winter Soldier?”

Jones laughed. “You are, if you grow your hair out.”

## Chapter 8

Payne returned with a pitcher of beer and a frosted mug then waited impatiently for Jones to get out of his chair. “What’d I miss?”

“My nachos,” Jones muttered. “Where the hell are my nachos?”

“Relax, princess, I ordered them. I meant, what were you discussing?”

“Jobs,” Cobb replied.

Payne grinned. “Please tell me you’re reconsidering my offer.”

“What offer?” Jones asked.

Cobb laughed. “He wants me to cut his grass.”

“Dude,” Jones said, “you should totally do it. Jon’s yard is so large that mowing is a full-time job. By the time you finish the back, it’s time to start again in the front.”

“No thanks. I’ll pass.”

“Come to think of it, that’s probably a wise choice. I mean, who wants an asshole for his boss?”

Payne ignored the insult and chose to focus on Jones’s previous statement. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you just broke your code and referred to Jack as *dude*.”

Jones froze. “What? No, I didn’t!”

Cobb nodded. “Actually, you did. You called me ‘dude’.”

Jones cursed under his breath. “Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to use the d-word. I swear it won’t happen again.”

“No worries. I’ve been called worse.”

Payne laughed. “Actually, according to Martin Luther Jones over there, you haven’t. You’ve heard of the ‘bro code’, right? A list of rules that guys shouldn’t violate?”

“You mean, like, ‘bros before hoes’. That sort of thing?”

Payne nodded. “Well, DJ created an ‘Afro code’—a list of rules that he’s not allowed to violate for any reason.”

“Why?” Cobb asked.

“Because he hangs around so many white people he’s afraid he’s going to lose his blackness. And guess what?”

“What?”

“Rule number one involves the word ‘dude’.”

Jones nodded in shame. “It’s the whitest word in the history of the world. Unless we’re mocking a honky, there’s simply no reason a black man should use it.”

Payne shook his head in mock disgust. "You're right. There isn't."

"That said, if I needed an excuse, it would definitely be you."

"Me? What'd I do?"

"You failed to tell me about this back room, which forced me to mingle with surfers while being serenaded by Justin Bieber's uncle. No wonder I slipped. Osmosis."

Payne grinned. "Wasn't that a Chris Rock movie?"

"What?"

"*Osmosis Jones.*"

Jones laughed. "As a matter of fact, it was."

Cobb's knowledge of pop culture was severely lacking, so he quickly changed the subject. "As much as I'd love to hear you guys crack jokes about movies I've never heard of, I was hoping we could get back to the original topic."

Payne sat down. "Which was?"

"Work," Cobb answered. "I was getting ready to ask DJ the same thing I asked of you: a glowing letter of recommendation. Of course, if you guys are feeling extra generous, perhaps you'd be willing to call your friends to see if they had any openings for someone with my skill set. Preferably something involving guns."

"We'd be happy to," Payne said, "under one condition."

"Go on."

"Just admit a Navy man and an Air Force grad saved your Army ass."

Jones laughed. "And not necessarily in that order."

Cobb shook his head. "Screw that. I hear Walmart is hiring."

"I'd pay top dollar to see you work there."

"Me, too," Payne said before switching to his robot voice. "*Hello. Welcome to Walmart. I can scan your coupons with my eyes.*"

Jones joined in. "*To pay, slide your card between my cheeks. Wow, that felt good. Please pay me again. Oh no, here comes your change.*"

Cobb laughed at their antics. Though he was tempted to fight back, he knew if he argued with them, they would only gang up on him. So he did the next best thing. He defused the situation by making them feel guilty. "Fine. I admit it. My life is so fucked up right now I have no other option but to ask a Navy man and an Air Force grad for help. So that's what I'm doing. I'm asking you guys for help despite your mockery."

Jones grimaced. "Damn, dude, when you put it like that—"

Payne gasped. "DJ, you did it again."

"Did what again?"

A moment passed before Jones realized his mistake.

He had repeated the d-word.

To vent his frustration, he buried his face in his hands and unleashed a stream of obscenities that would make Samuel L. Jackson blush. While the verbal barrage continued, the door to the back room swung open and two women walked in. One was a server, carrying nachos. The other was Nicki, who had changed into a T-shirt and shorts.

Both approached the table with trepidation.

Payne elbowed Jones in the ribs to warn him.

But Jones continued. Unaware of their presence, he screamed a few more vulgarities before he finally looked up. Much to his surprise, they were no longer alone.

The server practically threw the nachos on the table before hustling away.

Meanwhile, Nicki stared at Jones. "Did I come at a bad time?"

Despite his brown complexion, his cheeks turned a deep shade of red. Normally fast on his feet, Jones tried to come up with an explanation for his childish behavior, but all that came out of his mouth was a slight murmuring sound. Payne felt so bad for him that he immediately rushed to his aid.

"Sorry about that," Payne said as he stood to introduce himself. "DJ just got some bad news from work, and we encouraged him to vent. Please don't hold it against him."

She looked at Jones, concerned. "Are you okay?"

Jones was still too embarrassed to speak, so he simply nodded.

Payne stuck out his hand. "Sorry, I don't believe we've met. My name is Jonathon Payne. And this is my good friend, Jackson Cobb."

Cobb stood and offered his hand as well.

"Such gentlemen," she said as she shook their hands. "I'm Nicole Bergen, but you can call me Nicki."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Nicki. Please call me Jon."

"And I'm Jack."

"The pleasure's all mine," she assured them. "Well, not all mine. My friends are going to be thrilled. They definitely hit the mother lode with you two."

Payne and Cobb exchanged glances. They were obviously confused.

And Nicki noticed.

"Awkward," she said with a nervous laugh. "You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you? I guess DJ got his bad news before he had a chance to tell you."

Everyone glanced at Jones, who simply shrugged.

"In that case," she said as she backed away, "why don't you guys pretend you never saw me, and I'll just sneak out of here before I make a bigger fool of myself."

Payne hustled after her. "Nonsense! Please, sit and have a beer with us. It'll be great. We can take turns making fun of DJ until he regains his ability to speak."

"That does sound like fun."

"Trust me, I'm his best friend. The less he says, the more you'll like him."

She glanced outside. "I wish I could, but we're trying to get out of here before the storm. I just wanted to make sure we're still on for dinner."

Payne pieced things together in his head. "Oh! The Island Way Grill. Now I get it!"

"So, he *did* mention it."

"In a DJ sort of way, yes. What time?"

"Let's say seven."

"Works for us. I'll make the reservation. How many total?"

"Counting you guys? Um...thirteen."

Payne glanced back at Jones, who shrugged again. Considering the number of women Jones had invited, Payne wasn't sure if he should be impressed by his audacity or pissed for the potential size of the check. "The more, the merrier."

"Great," she said with a smile. "We're looking forward to it."

“Me, too,” Payne said. “Sure you can’t stay for a drink?”

“Sorry. My girls are waiting for me.”

Payne pointed at his friends. “So are mine.”

## Chapter 9

They waited for Nicki to leave the room before a single word was said. The instant the door clicked shut, their emotions came pouring out.

Payne spoke first. “David Joseph Jones, I’ve been on countless missions with you around the globe and I’ve seen you risk your ass for me and our squad on a number of occasions, but I swear on Jack’s life, I have never been prouder of you.”

Cobb shook his head in amazement. “Did she say *thirteen*?”

Jones quickly found his voice. He put his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. “She certainly did. And I’m not talking about Snow White and nine ugly dwarves. I’m talking about ten tens. If my math is correct, that’s a hundred.”

“How in the hell did you do that?” Cobb demanded.

“Just multiply ten times ten and you get—”

“No,” Cobb said. “How did you ask out ten women at the same time?”

Jones scoffed at the question. “A magician never reveals his secrets.”

Payne grinned. “I’m thinking gunpoint.”

Cobb laughed loudly. “Truth be told, she did seem kind of scared when she entered the room, but if I had to guess, I’d say hypnotism and/or hallucinogenics.”

“Or all three.”

Jones shrugged off their insults as he reached for the nachos. He grabbed a chip and stuffed it in his mouth as sour cream smeared all over his lips. “Come on, guys. Is it really that hard to believe that women love me?”

“Considering the amount of food on your face, yes!”

Cobb stroked his chin in thought. “You know, there’s another possibility that we haven’t considered. But if you evaluate all the evidence before us and consider the sheer numbers involved, I think it makes the most sense.”

“What’s that?”

“They’re escorts.”

Payne laughed at the possibility. “How awesome would that be if we showed up for dinner and they handed DJ an invoice for their time?”

Cobb stared at Jones. “Serious question. Did you invite them or rent them?”

Jones wiped his mouth. “Guys, they’re not escorts. Nicki’s a lawyer!”

“And the others?”

“They’re, um... hot! I didn’t have time to ask for their résumés.”

“In other words,” Payne said, “there’s a chance they’re prostitutes. For the record, I agreed to pay for dinner—not companionship.”

Jones grabbed another chip. “Listen, if you’re so worried about the women, Jack and I will gladly go to dinner without you. Remember, we’re here to cheer him up, so quit being so selfish.”



"You're right. We're here for Jack. And if he wants to bang a hooker in a restaurant bathroom, who am I to stop him?"

"Exactly!" Jones said.

"The bigger issue is if I should stop you before Maria finds out."

Jones shook his head. "Maria doesn't matter."

"Oh, really? Does she know that?"

Jones quickly backtracked. "Now don't go putting words in my mouth. You know damn well Maria matters. Of course, she matters. But right now we're separated, so I can date whoever the hell I want."

"Including hookers?"

"Nicki's a *lawyer*. The hookers are for Jack."

"So they *are* hookers!"

Jones was done arguing. "Truth be told, I don't care if they are. They were sexy and seemed friendly, so I invited them to dinner. Quit being such a prude."

Cobb was confused. "Hold up. Who's Maria?"

Jones stuffed the chip in his mouth. "Can't talk. I'm eating."

Payne smiled. His best friend avoided the topic whenever possible. "She's an archaeologist we met on one of our adventures. The two of them hit it off and have been in a long-distance, on-and-off, incredibly perplexing relationship ever since."

"Define *perplexing*," Cobb said.

"Let me put it like this. Their dating status changes more often than DJ changes his underwear."

"So... once a month?"

"Give or take."

Jones kept chewing. "Who says I wear underwear?"

Payne and Cobb grimaced at the thought.

"Guys," Jones explained, "I'm wearing a bathing suit. It would be weird if I was wearing underwear."

"No," Payne said, "it's weird that you brought it up."

"I didn't bring it up! *You* brought it up!"

"But *you* made it weird."

Cobb ignored their banter and focused on Payne's original statement. "Next question. What type of 'adventure' were you referring to? You used that word earlier, and I got the sense you were talking about something more than a vacation."

"Actually," Payne admitted, "that one started off as a vacation. We went to Pamplona to run with the bulls but ended up in jail on some trumped-up charges. We were offered a deal by some agents from the CIA, who would vouch for us if we were willing to assist them with a case. Before we knew it, we were chasing a fugitive across Europe."

"And that's when you met Maria?"

Jones nodded. "Yep. In Milan."

"We also found an artifact of profound significance, but we don't like to brag."

"Actually," Jones said as he stuffed another chip in his mouth, "I love to brag, but I don't want to make you feel any more inferior than you already do."

"And you've gone on how many of these adventures?"

Payne shrugged. “A half dozen or so. Word kind of spread after our first mission, so we get contacted all the time.”

“By whom?”

“Historians, archaeologists, even some authors. Why, are you interested?”

“Maybe. How much money is involved?”

“We’ve made millions.”

Cobb practically choked. “Did you say ‘millions’?”

Payne nodded his head. “We’ve done quite well.”

“Not that Jon needs it,” Jones teased. “I’m not quite sure why a billionaire would risk his life for millions. Mathematically speaking, it doesn’t make much sense.”

“I don’t do it for the money. I do it to save your ass.”

“Why do you always talk about my ass? It makes me uncomfortable.”

Cobb ignored the comment. “Truth be told, I’m in a much different place than either of you. Thanks to my discharge, I’ve lost my pension, my housing, my insurance, and my reputation. At this point I’d do just about anything to make millions.”

“Anything?” Payne asked.

Cobb nodded. “Within reason.”

“If you’re serious, I’ll put you in touch with this businessman who has been nagging us for months. We’ve never met the guy—so we can’t vouch for him—but he seems to be a serious player in the world of antiquities.”

“Define *serious*.”

“He’s willing to pay top dollar to get what he wants.”

“Which is?”

“Beats me the hell out of me. Despite his persistence, he’s quite secretive.”

“Did he tell you his name?”

“Yep. It’s Papineau. Jean-Marc Papineau.”

“Sounds pretentious.”

“Well, he’s *French*, so that goes without saying,” Jones teased.

Cobb laughed. “Out of curiosity, why weren’t you interested in the gig?”

“Well, he’s *French*,” Jones repeated, “I can’t stress that enough.”

“Plus,” Payne added, “he hinted that multiple people would be involved. It didn’t sound like a one-time adventure. It sounded like a full-time job.”

“Which is what I’m looking for,” Cobb admitted.

“Great,” Payne said. “I’ll give him a call as soon as I get back.”

“Thanks, Jon. I’d appreciate that. Unless...”

Payne stared at him. “Unless, what?”

“Unless you think I’m being too hasty. I mean, so much has happened lately. Maybe I should take some time off to get my mind right before I return to the fray.”

Jones laughed at him. “Relax, Jack. It’s just a phone call. If you don’t like what he has to say, then turn him down.”

Payne agreed. “No harm in talking to the guy.”

Cobb nodded. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right. Considering what I’ve been through, I owe it to myself to talk to the guy.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Cobb smiled as a sense of relief washed over him.

Like most elite soldiers, he was a meticulous planner—someone who preferred to know the times and details of the weeks ahead long before they happened. Lately there had been so much uncertainty in his life he'd found himself adrift in a raging river of turmoil, unsure where the rapids may take him. But now, thanks to his friends, he found himself clinging to a life raft that may help him survive the storm.

All he had to do was hold on.

