

Alan Vandervoort

# Key Largo Summer

*A young man  
overcomes the depth  
of despair with the  
help of a beautiful  
woman with a secret  
and a troubled young  
poet in a threatened  
tropical paradise.*



## Key Largo Summer

by Alan Vandervoort

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Alan Vandervoort

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## Table of Contents

Chapter One - Leaving Tennessee.....	7
Chapter Two - Kaileigh by the Pool.....	18
Chapter Three - Red Gelatin .....	30
Chapter Four - Scarlet Pelican Habitat Tours.....	54
Chapter Five - Seafood Pizza.....	71
Chapter Six - Souvenir Philosophy .....	108
Chapter Seven - The Kristin Dialogues.....	122
Chapter Eight - Emotional Rescue .....	139
Chapter Nine - South Beach.....	152
Chapter Ten - Island Life .....	164
Chapter Eleven - Back to Lexington .....	175
Chapter Twelve - Hemingway's Cats .....	185
Chapter Thirteen - Understanding.....	196
Chapter Fourteen - Hurricane.....	207
Chapter Fifteen - Autumn in Ocean Garden.....	220
Epilogue .....	227
Acknowledgements .....	228

## Chapter Five

### Seafood Pizza

*Daydreaming eyes stare out the window  
Thoughts are of urges much closer  
Cool water is a beverage of preparation  
A reservoir detonated at the encounter  
To feel your soul and see your heart  
As a reflection of my need  
What is the meaning to be as one?*

Guests were expected in 30 minutes. Alex sat on the couch not able to move. Months in the hospital, a long car trip from Lexington, an afternoon on the ship, and now he must meet someone. Exhaustion nailed him. Five minutes with his head in his hands might be enough to catch a second wind. Alex had enough time for a fast shower and check the inventory of beer in the refrigerator.

“Ramon, is it normal down here to totally sweat through your shirt?”

Ramon looked at his soaked friend. “We’ll tell her you ran a marathon inside a sauna.”

“Thanks. I feel so much better. You realize a hand-cranked air conditioner is likely to have diminishing returns.”

“Change your shirt and pile on the deodorant.”

Alex took the advice and ran into the bedroom. He took his time to prepare. Getting ready too soon would supply time to sit and worry. Take your time and be

prepared for a long uncomfortable night. Do this for Ramon and Barbara. They're good friends and have good intentions. Don't drink too much beer even if you want to. A morning cruise is a few hours away.

Alex appeared in the living room at 7:59pm. In another minute they heard a knock on the door. Ramon opened the door and greeted his girlfriend Barbara with a quick kiss as she made her way into the cottage. She walked over to Alex and gave him a quick hug.

"Alex, it's so good to see you."

The mystery date followed chose behind. She walked into the room and stood as Barbara made the introduction. A young woman of above average height, short blonde hair, piercing green eyes, and deep dimples in her cheeks. She had a thin body, not super model sickly. Alex did not know what to expect, but he did not expect her. Beautiful or so darn cute or somewhere in between.

"Alex, this is Jeannie."

Stunned by what he saw, he thought words failed him. They should have. "Oh, my God."

Everyone in the room dropped their jaws as they reacted to his remark. Immediate embarrassment consumed Alex, "I said that out loud, didn't I?" He realized his social blunder and covered the top of his head with his hands. Jeannie let out a nervous little laugh and said. "I'm not sure how to take that."

Barbara and Ramon tried to hold in their laughter. Ramon stepped in, "You have to forgive my friend; he's been out of commission for a while."

Barbara smacked Ramon on the arm, “Ramon!” Annoyed he might have said too much.

Alex took his hands off his head and tried to make a comeback from the embarrassing moment, looking into Jeannie’s green eyes. “Please take it in every positive way possible,” turning to the rest of the crowd, “And who wants a beer?”

Everyone agreed on a beer. Barbara ran into the kitchen, wanting to be a good host and not wanting to miss any of the conversation. She hurried back into the living room with four bottles. Alex and Barbara sat on each end of the sofa. Jeannie sat in the chair next to Alex and Ramon sat in a chair next to Barbara.

Jeannie wore shorts. She crossed her legs in front of Alex. Intentional or unintentional, it had a positive effect. The entrance took a strange turn and her expectations changed along with the second hand on the clock. Is this a one-evening beer with friends? Could she be meeting the man of her dreams? Did she need to think of a quick exit line (I can see through the window that my cottage is on fire)? What would she do if he found her unattractive? What if his IQ fell somewhere below double digits? Only one strategy felt right now – face the evening and try to be as adorable as possible.

Alex appreciated the effort of his friends, though he questioned the chance of a pleasant evening because of his social awkwardness. He would be a gentleman and try not to stare at the nice pair of legs crossed in front of him. Some light conversation and some beers and he could put the evening behind him, concentrate on doing a good job on the ship, and try to avoid contact with

people on a social level. Alex's plan included surviving the night without looking more the fool.

After each person took a long drink Jeannie started the conversation. Turning her attention to Alex. "Ramon said you were out of commission for a while. Incarceration or inebriation?"

Alex said, "That sounds familiar. I plan to work on the inebriated excuse."

Her eyes lit up combined with a wider smile, turning to Barbara "A quick comeback. I like him already." With one statement, Alex felt less a failure - amazed to feel something unusual already. Maybe her eyes or her smile. He tried not to stare. He tried to concentrate on items in the room other than body parts.

Ramon jumped in to help his friend, "Barbara, tell us how you two met." Before she could speak, Jeannie told the story. "We met at a lesbian rally on campus. We found we have *a lot* in common."

All four laughed. "Not true," Barbara protested. "We met at the apartment complex. We both served on the governing board." Barbara kept going, "Alex is a graduate of the Tennessee Preservation University and Jeannie is a senior at the Ocean Garden College."

Jeannie commented, "Tennessee. I hear the hygiene courses are quite challenging."

"Jeannie," Barbara scolded.

Alex enjoyed the verbal abuse. "I don't have a comeback. I have Georgia jokes and South Carolina jokes, but no Ocean Garden jokes. I need to call some Florida friends."

"Oh, no you don't," Jeannie protested.



“I think it’s only fair.”

“I’ve claimed the high ground and I intend to keep it,” defiantly pointing the beer bottle toward Alex.

“You claimed the high ground by taking the low road? Is that physically possible?”

Everyone had a good laugh. Jeannie admitted, “I think I found a worthy opponent.”

The next obvious information to add pieces to the personality puzzles were college majors. Ramon – marine biology, Barbara – medical tech, Jeannie – social services, Alex – English.

Next hometowns: Bani, Santo Domingo, Charlotte, and Lexington.

Ramon inquired about another round of beers. Jeannie said, “Okay, if Barbara promises to drive.”

“We live a hundred feet from here.”

“I’m not a light person.”

Barbara started the evening’s activities. “I found a test in a magazine. It’s a series of questions to find out compatibility.”

Jeannie looked at Alex. “I guess this set up wasn’t obvious enough.”

Alex found it hard to concentrate. Okay, not staring at the eyes or smile. Could it be those legs in short shorts were so close?

Barbara said, “Come on, it will be fun. I name two things, you each select. For example, the first question is pickup truck or convertible?”

Both answered ‘truck’.

“Very good. Let’s keep going.”

“Lobster or steak?”

Being in an area noted for seafood, both agreed on lobster.

“Broadway or Classical?”

“I’m going with Broadway,” said Jeannie.

“I’ll have to go with Classical,” said Alex.

Jeannie protested, “I bet you would never admit Broadway even if you did like it.”

Alex said, “Good call.”

“So, you’re one of those macho assholes?”

“The test in progress will confirm.”

“Non-apologetic. Interesting.”

Barbara continued. “Amusement park or casino?”

Jeannie started, “Losing money has never been fun for me. I’ll take amusement park.”

Alex’s turn. “Some of our fraternity brothers have been to Vegas, and I’ll still take amusement park. It seems to be tilted toward the best of people and Vegas seems to cater to the worst in people.”

“A philosopher?” Jeannie discovered more about her new friend.

“Cruise or secluded mountain retreat?”

“Mountain retreat!” they said in unison.

“Newspapers or magazines?”

“Do they still print newspapers?” said Alex.

Barbara moved on. “We’ll skip that one. Singing or dancing?”

“I can’t sing very well, I’ll go with dancing,” said Jeannie.

“I can’t dance at all, I’ll have to take singing,” said Alex.

“How about belting out a few bars of Suwanee River,” said Jeannie

“Not without my banjo. How about you? We would all enjoy an Irish dance routine.”

“I’m Dutch. Totally different muscle development.”

A stunned Ramon remarked, “Have you two rehearsed this routine?”

Barbara moved on. “Last question: a movie or walk on the beach?”

“I wouldn’t mind watching a movie on the beach,” said Alex.

“Hey, good answer. I agree.”

Barbara said, “How can I score you if you don’t give the right answers?”

Jeannie gave Alex a sly look. “I didn’t think I would score on the first night.”

Alex joined in. “I’m totally unprepared. Do you have a 24-hour pharmacy nearby?”

Barbara and Ramon stared. They were amazed at the comic timing of the two people who met less than an hour ago.

Barbara, “I’ll consider the last question an agreement. By my calculations, and observations, you two are really compatible.”

Jeannie once again turned to Alex, “Does it mean I should drop my pants right now?”

“We’re playing ‘Twister’ later. That would be the appropriate time,” said Alex.

He noticed her smile. Her sly smile turned up more on the right side giving a look of a person with a secret – a secret about herself for her own amusement. To come

right out and ask a question might ruin the delightful game. The intimacy needed to uncover the message in her smile will take work – a conversation, a countering look, a touch, a kiss – dedicating yourself to unraveling the mystery. Accomplished by the gift of yourself – sincerity at its most powerful.

The talk moved to the ship and the restaurant. At midnight, the many activities, beers, and social stress led to fatigue. As the girls were getting up to retire for the night, Jeannie stopped at the door and turned to Alex.

“If you’re interested, I get off work tomorrow after lunch at 1:30.”

“I would like to continue our conversation.”

Jeannie leaned against the door jam, threw her head back, closed her eyes and whispered in a sexy voice, “Oh, you get me so hot when you talk dirty.”

Alex did not mind the joke at his expense. He enjoyed the attention from this very cute girl. “Meet you at the restaurant?”

Jeannie said a sweet little, “OK.” And walked out of the cottage.

As they walked through the courtyard to their cottage, Jeannie turned to Barbara, “Do you think he’ll show up tomorrow?”

“You know the way to a man’s heart is to trash his alma mater.”

“I was trying to lighten things up. Really, do you think he’ll show?”

“I know Alex. If he said he’ll be there, he’ll be there.”

“What did you do, set me up with a fuckin’ Boy Scout?”

“Maybe he is a Boy Scout.” Both laughed.

“Well, knot tying shit can come in handy late at night.” Jeannie pulling out a positive spin.

“You are awful.”

“Maybe we can rub something together and make a fire,” she said while moving her hips in an awkward, comical way. The action threw her off balance and she stumbled for a few steps.

“Be careful.”

“It must be the beers.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m fine.”

After a pause Barbara said, “So what do you think? Do you like him?”

Jeannie replied in an unusual soft voice, “Yeah.”

They walked inside the apartment. Barbara sat down on the sofa and Jeannie headed to her room. Barbara spoke as Jeannie walked. “Jeannie, how wild are you?”

Jeannie looked surprised by the question. She looked at Barbara to answer. “I notice a lot of seriousness behind your question. We spent a lot of time together at Ocean Garden. You should know me by now. Are you having regrets about getting us together?”

“I’m trying to look out for both my friends.”

“I admit, I like to have fun, but I don’t enjoy reckless fun. I want to share a joy for life with someONE. So, your Holly Golightly is more Carol Brady.”

“I don’t remember Carol Brady wanting to tie up her partner.”

“You must have missed the outtakes.”

Both men watched the door shut and waited a few moments, so their conversation would be in confidence.

Ramon asked the question, “Well, what do you think?”

“She stole my knees.”

“What?”

“The girl came right in here and stole my knees. I don’t know how I’m able to stand at all.”

Ramon caught on. “You are a weak-kneed motherfucker. And you’re going to meet up tomorrow?”

“Oh, yeah. And I suppose a ‘told-you-so’ thank you is in order. Another admission - I’m looking forward to it. And I’m going to bed. We have the morning cruise.”

Alex went up to the window in his bedroom and looked at the cottage down the lane. He felt good and felt like a young boy with his first serious crush. His tempered his good feeling with the truth of the past; always wondering how it would affect his future. He thought back to the counseling sessions over the past year; how the psychiatrist constantly reminded him about the power of his own mind – making decisions on the state of well-being. He thought hard and decided tonight to be happy.

Arriving early, Kristin prepared the bar for the morning cruise. “I heard you had to jump right in

yesterday. I appreciate you covering for me. How did your first cruise go?"

"The passenger losses were lower than normal."

"Good job. Ramon has told me a lot about you – some of it good."

"The good part is where he lied. Since you're the seasoned pro, I'll follow your lead."

"Sounds like a winner. We need more Bloody Mary supplies from storage. They sell big on weekend mornings. Since I'm seventeen, you have to sell all the alcohol."

"I'm guessing you're allowed to clean up the effects."

"Lots of experience."

A large tour bus roared into the parking lot. Kristin began her tourism lesson. "This is a tour bus cruise. Your job is to bring them down from the cattle-drive experience. They're accustomed to being herded from place to place with little time to enjoy anything. Being on a ship, they can't rush off to another attraction until we dock. So, try to get them to relax and enjoy the scenery."

"I will benefit from your wisdom, professor."

"Your sarcasm is noted and will be used against you at a later time."

Having stocked the bar with liquor, condiments, guidebooks, and toy fish, the two-person hospitality crew greeted the morning passengers. Alex noticed Kristin took the time to greet every passenger as they boarded.

Kristin gave her full attention to the tour. People paid for a nice morning on the ocean. They were eager to learn about the reef or drink beer. Kristin reminded Alex about the safety of the passengers as a priority.

Alex pushed the excitement of last night out of his mind. Those green eyes sparkling in his direction - so many smiles. The thought of Jeannie created excitement and anxiety. For now, he must concentrate on the cruise.

Kristin took the microphone for the welcome and safety speech. Her presentation differed from Ramon's. She displayed a more serious tone with less humor, taking command and asserting her authority so no one would question her instructions – something necessary for a young girl surrounded by people with varying temperaments. Alex had her back in any possible altercation. Ironically, Kristin thought the same thing about Alex.

A smooth ocean greeted the passengers. A courteous crowd helped Alex breeze through this cruise. He started remembering the names of the different fish and coral formations. He took great care behind the bar to give the passengers good service. His efforts were appreciated by the passengers and noticed by Kristin. "Have you done this before?"

"I worked at the horse park in Lexington for a summer. Similar people skills, although the horse park didn't move."

"I'm surprised you're able to concentrate."

"Why surprised?"

"I heard you have a hot date this afternoon."



“Aren’t you too young to be hearing about such things?”

“Another hint – don’t ever play the age card. I can hold my own with the passengers, with other crew members, and anyone else who wants to challenge me.”

Alex took a step back for safety. “I believe you can.”

The walk across the parking lot seemed longer than it should. He appeared at the restaurant a few minutes early, not so early to look needy, but enough to demonstrate dependability.

Jeannie arrived outside at 1:35 with a warm smile to immediately put Alex at ease. It took some effort on her part not to smile too wide, giving away her delight to see Alex again.

“Hi. I took a few minutes to change out of my uniform shirt.” An appreciated, though not necessary explanation.

He tried to play it cool with a medium, reassuring smile, “I assume you haven’t had any lunch?”

“I served a lot, but I didn’t eat any. I am hungry.”

“You’ve been here longer. Any culinary recommendations?”

“I know of a pizza place I’ve wanted to try up the road in the median.”

The conversation continued as they walked.

“How did you end up in Key Largo?” Alex said.

“I have to thank Barbara for the job this summer. I didn’t know what to do. Didn’t feel like another boring summer in Charlotte. It’s amazing how your friends

from high school scatter or change so much. The job gave me a chance to get away.”

“I have to thank Ramon for my job. He’s been trying to get me down here for years.”

“Why the resistance?” Before he could answer, “If I get too personal, let me know. Sometimes I can ask questions out of the comfort zone.”

“My life revolved around Chattanooga and Lexington. Didn’t think about going anywhere else.”

“And the break-up left you free to travel?”

“Jumping right on a comfort zone you talked about?”

Jeannie stopped and looked Alex right in the eyes, “I will apologize as many times as necessary to keep you as a friend.”

He smiled, “No apology necessary, and you’re right.”

They entered the brightly, yellow-painted restaurant and sat at a booth. The menus were stacked between the sweetener rack and salt and pepper shakers. They took a few minutes to review the offerings.

“You’re the new guy, you get to pick.”

“Well, we’re in Key Largo, what about the seafood pizza?”

“Excellent choice.”

They ordered and resumed their conversation.

“So, I assume you’re not seeing anyone at the moment,” said Alex.

Jeannie, taken aback by the question, recovered by batting her eyelids, staring right at him and said, “Alex, I’m seeing you.”

Once again flustered by his lack of cool, Alex motions for Jeannie to come closer to hear what he had say, "I used to be much better at this."

Jeannie reassuringly said, "I think you're doing fine."

"Your kindness will be rewarded."

"So, you're a graduate. Are you going to grad school like Ramon?"

"I have the degree. Eventually I have to decide what to do with it."

"What options are you exploring?"

"Tour boat guide is high on the priority list."

"I'm sure you'll use a lot of your college education passing out seasick bags."

"Possibilities include teaching, writing, or even grad school – especially if I want to teach in higher education."

"Don't you find a lot of people you encounter know English?"

"You can make bricks or design a building."

"You are really getting deep, professor."

The waitress walked over with their order - a large metal plate edged in crust and piled with the most enormous amount of sea-creature stuff they've ever seen. White chucks galore with a massive number of tentacles and suction cups intertwined throughout. The hot-bubbling cheese made selective tentacles move about, giving the allusion of living creatures trying to escape the pile of cooked meat. Their eyes widen and mouths dropped in unison. They kept cool in the

presence of the waitress. She said, “Enjoy,” and walked away.

Alex and Jeannie could not contain themselves any more. They tried to laugh softly, fighting a losing battle.

Alex said, “Maybe we should have been more specific.”

Jeannie said, “Yes, there are millions of creatures in the ocean.”

Alex waved his hand across the pizza. “Not anymore.”

They both erupted in laughter. The waitress came over and asked if anything was wrong.

They said, “No.” as they tried to settle down.

“I guess we should at least try it,” said Alex.

“I will if you will.”

They each picked up a piece without moving tentacles and took a bite. To Alex, the best way to describe the taste was rescuing a rubber band from a litter box, chewing it on a dare. The look on Jeannie’s face secured the pizza’s place in dreadful culinary experiences.

Jeannie whispered across the table, “I noticed an ice cream place around the corner.”

“Let’s go.”

Alex put enough cash on the table to cover the bill and a generous tip. He waved to the waitress, “Thanks.” And they bolted out the door.

“Less than one week here and there’s already an establishment where I can’t show my face again,” said Alex.

“You’re doing great. It took me three weeks.”

“You’ll have to tell me your story sometime.”

“I will, after some serious alcohol.”

They located the ice cream shop in a strip shopping center next to a surf shop. Jeannie got chocolate with a peanut butter swirl. Alex chose mint chocolate chip. They walked to a city park and sat down on a bench next to the tennis courts.

Alex caught Jeannie studying his face. Alex said, “Do I have ice cream on my face?”

“No.” Reassuring him of his ice cream eating ability. She looked deeper, “I noticed a sadness in your eyes.”

Alex reacted with a stiffening neck and wide-eyed surprise.

Jeannie noticed his discomfort. “I’ve sorry, it’s much too personal. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He tried to put her at ease. “We’ll talk about it someday.”

After a brief awkward pause, Jeannie came up with an idea to solve the quiet. “Alright, you get a free observation.”

“A what?”

“You get a free observation. I made an observation, now it’s your turn. It will make things even and it might give me an idea what you’re thinking.”

“Hmmm, a free observation.” Alex’s mind started to think on the task.

Jeannie qualified the request. “But it better not be about my tits.”

Another surprised look from Alex.

Jeannie explained, "I'm not augmenting so some jackass can have a bigger playground."

Alex tried to hold back what he thought would be inappropriate laughter. "It wasn't going to be about your tits. But I do appreciate the warning on the sensitivity of the subject matter."

An embarrassed Jeannie said in a sheepish voice, "My tits are sensitive."

"Ok," Jeannie brought the conversation back on track, "I'm ready. Let's have it."

"I think men find you either intimidating or enchanting."

Jeannie's jaw dropped. "Wow."

Alex backtracked, "Too much?"

"No, very deep. I thought you were going to say something about my hair or shoes. Wow. I must know more. Tell me about this 'intimidating' stuff."

"Well, I don't think you would fall for a bunch of bullshit and I can't imagine you ever being dominated by a man."

"Now the big question is," she reached out and touched his arm. To the best of his recollection, they touched for the first time. It felt better than he even imagined. Her warm hand sent a wave of energy through his arm and then to the rest of his body. He worked to stay cool despite the warm sensations.

She asked her question, "Alex, are you intimidated or enchanted?"

He looked into her eyes and said, "Jeannie, I'm seeing you."

“Oh, you are way too clever. I’m going to have to watch you closely.”

“I would not be opposed.”

Jeannie, again surprised. “Alex, I do declare, you’re flirting with me.”

“I can’t help myself.” Alex spoke again, “We should head back so I can get ready for the next cruise.” They stood up and walked out of the park toward home.

“Do you like the tourist trade so far?” Jeannie asked.

“It’s a real interesting experience. I never thought I could be a people person. The limited exposure is appealing. No matter how bad a person can be, the pain will come to an end in a few hours. With nice people on board, the trip can be a pleasure and not real work. You must have nearly the same experience with people.”

“You’re right. We see them all. Being a moderately priced restaurant, we can have a billionaire sitting at a table next to a table full of brain-dead lowlifes. They all get the same service and the same smile. We find people who struggle through life are more empathetic to the working waitresses and are more generous with their tips.”

When they arrived at Jeannie’s door, she turned and said, “Barbara said you and Ramon have a late-night cruise. She also said if it’s alright, we could meet you after.”

“Sure, though we may be very tired company.”

“I’ll see you then.”

Jeannie turned and stumbled against Alex. Thinking quickly, she put her arms around his neck and pulled

herself close to him. She gathered herself, stepped back and said, "That was sort of a hug."

"I liked it better than 'sort of'."

She opened the door and started in, "Enchanting. Very interesting." And closed the door.

Jeannie leaned against the closed door and fondly remembered the afternoon. She enjoyed the clumsy hug. She enjoyed holding onto Alex. Relief came by the fact Alex had to get to the ship and would not wonder why he wasn't asked to come in. She forgot to move the wheelchair into the bedroom.

A pleasant afternoon led to the night cruise. Kristin and Ramon returned to the ship as Alex arrived. They needed all three crew members to handle the crowd. The bar would be especially busy.

Kristin asked immediately, "Thumbs up on the afternoon?"

"Very interesting and enjoyable."

"You can do better."

Ramon went through some procedures for the cruise, "What do you think is the most important duty of the crew on a night cruise?"

"I can't guess," said Alex.

"Counting."

"I'm sure you're going to explain."

"Make sure we don't lose anyone overboard. Drinking kicks into high gear when the sun goes down. If someone falls over in the dark, and we don't know about it...."

"I get the picture. Count the passengers."



“Every fifteen minutes.”

Ramon turned the instructions over to Kristin.

“Kristin, give Alex the Party Cruise talk.”

Kristin jumped right in. “To keep a Party Cruise manageable, get the passengers interested in a new, exciting drink - special for this cruise. Of course, the drink has less alcohol than a weak beer. Be sure to add a slice of pineapple and a paper umbrella. They will still act like fools, but with less physical discomfort and lack-of-consciousness mishaps.”

A female, middle-age passenger with tight pants and too much makeup approached Ramon. “Would you be interested in continuing the tour after we get back in port?”

“As inviting as it sounds, I have to pass.”

Kristin gave the talk over the reef as they turned on the underwater lights to illuminate the ocean floor. She turned the microphone on high so the people in the viewing area could hear above the party noise on the upper deck.

The crew got together after the cruise next to the gangplank. Kristin started where she left off. “Alex, can we have more details on your afternoon?”

Captain Ed walked up behind them. “You’re too young to hear about adult relationships.”

“Bullshit and you know it.”

Ramon said, “We were hoping she could advise us on some sexual positions.”

“Ramon!”

Captain Ed said, “Really not funny. Come on Kristin. Let me take you home away from these bad influences.”

The Captain and Kristin walked away from the ship toward the parking lot with time enough for the young girl to turn around and stick out her tongue at her two crewmates.

A late-night full moon hovered over Buttonwood Sound. The girls waited inside with beer ready for each. This time, Jeannie and Alex sat on the sofa. Jeannie told of the seafood pizza story. During the story, Alex and Ramon drifted off. Jeannie took hold of Alex’s shoulders and pulled him down on the sofa with his head resting on her lap. Ramon slept in the chair.

“They warned us.” It gave Barbara and Jeannie a chance to talk.

“It looks like you two are really hitting it off.”

Jeannie said, “In fact, I look forward to having his face in this general vicinity many times in the near future.”

They both laughed, trying not to make enough noise to wake the sleeping men. Jeannie continued, “I’ve been receiving positive signs unless the sea air is making me delusional.”

“I don’t think you’re delusional. I think you two are in love.”

“Quiet. Don’t scare him away with the ‘L’ word.”

“Wait, I saw a sad look. What’s with that?”

“I hoped for a fun summer. I can’t expect anything else.”

“You may be underestimating yourself and Alex.”

“I can’t let unattainable hopes crush any chance for a good time, no matter how short.”

“Honesty is your best hope.”

“Yes, mom.”

“Stop calling me that.”

Alex rolled over on his side, keeping his head in Jeannie’s lap. The girls realized the end of the evening. They got up to leave, temporarily waking the boys.

Jeannie said, “You should get some more sleep. You’re going to have some very important passengers on your morning cruise.”

“Anyone I know?”

“You’re much too sleepy to be clever.” Their eyes met as each one looked deep to find an understanding of affection. Jeannie placed her hand on his chest and turned for home.

Alex took supplies on board the ship. Barbara and Jeannie walked by on their way to the ramp. Jeannie called out to Alex in a deep, sexy voice, “Hey sailor, going my way?”

Barbara reprimanded, “You said you would behave.”

Her shoulders slumped, “Alright!” Jeannie stomped off in a mock tantrum.

The ladies found a seat on the lower deck. As the ship pulled away from the dock, Alex grabbed the microphone and switched it on. He gave the opening speech to welcome the passengers along with the safety

message, using a traditional phrase to get the passengers' attention.

"We are headed out to sea and we want to dock later today with the same number of passengers we started with."

"On behalf of the Scarlet Pelican Habitat Tours, I want to welcome everyone to the morning cruise. My name is Alex, Ramon is on the top deck (Ramon waves) and we are blessed to have Captain Ed at the wheel. If you need something or have a question, please feel free to ask me or Ramon. Ask Captain Ed a question only after you have ascertained his mood for the day."

From up on the bridge, "I heard that."

"It will take about 20 minutes to reach the reef where we slowly move the ship for you to get a great view of one of the greatest natural wonders of the planet. The bar will open soon. The bathrooms are toward the front of the lower deck."

"If we experience an emergency, you will find personal floatation devices under the seats on this deck and the upper deck. Now, how will you know if we encounter an emergency? You will notice me running up and down the aisle, screaming like a little girl."

The crowd laughed at the corny line.

Barbara turned to Jeannie, "Hey, he's really good."

Jeannie said in a dreamy voice, "Oh, I hope so."

"Behave."

A short senior citizen sat next to Jeannie. She heard the line and saw Jeannie making eyes at Alex and Alex returning the glances with a smile.

“Excuse me, do we have a shipboard romance happening here?”

Jeannie said, “Yes we do.”

“How long have you two been seeing each other?”

“Two days.”

“New lovers. It’s so romantic. Did you hear what’s going on, Henry?”

“I’m looking at the view, Martha,” said the gentleman next to her.

As the ship entered the open water, an obnoxious gentleman started talking and talking and demanding. Alex looked at Ramon and tapped his right hand on top of his left hand. Ramon came over and started talking to the man. After 20 minutes as they neared the reef, Ramon tapped his hands at Alex.

Over the reef, Ramon and Alex shared the talk. Ramon started, “The bluegreen fish with the yellow trim is the queen angelfish. You might see the eggs of the angelfish floating in a water column. The adults stay in pairs, you might see a mate nearby.”

Jeannie nudged Barbara, “Am I detecting a subtle commentary on monogamy?”

“Let’s hope so for his sake.”

As the ship turned back to land, Jeannie walked around the deck and met Alex at the bow. “Tell me you haven’t pulled one of those ‘I’m the king of the world’ embarrassments.”

“Not in public.”

“For a rookie, you know your shit.”

“There’s still a lot to learn.” He turned to look directly at Jeannie. “Getting to know more will be a pleasure.”

“Nature can be an excellent teacher.” She swatted him on the butt and returned to her seat.

When the trip ended, Alex gave his goodbye, thank you, and come again speech. At the end he said, “Does anyone have any questions?”

Jeannie raised her hand and regretfully Alex called on her.

“Can you describe in detail the mating habits of bottlenose dolphins?”

Barbara hid her face in her hands.

Before Alex could answer, a group of small children ran up to him and waited for his response.

“I’m not sure of all the details, but I’m sure Champagne and Barry White music are involved.”

The passengers broke out in laughter mixed with sighs of relief.

After saying good-bye to all the passengers, Alex joined the group including Barbara and Jeannie.

Jeannie said to Alex, “Pretty slick, commodore.”

“I am a professional.”

Martha chimed in “I heard you two are an item. Here’s my address. I want a regular update. This so exciting. Isn’t this exciting, Henry?”

“It’s intruding, Martha.”

“Don’t listen to him. If you’re ever in Cape May, be sure to look us up.”

Alex looked bewildered by the exchange. Jeannie informed, “You meet the nicest people on a cruise.”

Barbara and Jeannie needed to leave and get to their shift at the restaurant. Jeannie said while walking away, “So you’ll meet us at the restaurant at 9:30?”

Alex replied, “I’ll come a little early. I know a waitress in dire need of some heckling.”

Jeannie turned back, “There’s a famous verse from the Book of Proverbs: ‘Don’t piss off those who handle your food’.”

“Excellent advice.”

Alex arrived at the restaurant at 9. He ordered a piece of Key Lime Pie and a cup of coffee from a very attractive waitress. Jeannie brought over a piece of pie and cup of coffee.

Alex leaned over to whisper, “Isn’t Key Lime Pie supposed to be green?”

Her astonished look turned to recognition and annoyance.

“I suppose I deserved that.”

Jeannie waited on a table across the room with three rough looking individuals of questionable hygiene and character in dirty t-shirts and dirtier jeans. Their baseball caps too old and too filthy to recognize the team logo on the front. The talk was loud, obnoxious, and crude. Jeannie started to clear their plates when the shortest, skinniest lowlife reached out and patted her on the butt.

“And what’s your plans for the evening, sweetie?”

Jeannie backed off with a very stern reply, “That is not appropriate, sir and won’t be tolerated here.”

He reached out again but missed, “Hey, we’re just having some fun. You look like you would be a lot of fun, too.”

The commotion caught the attention of everyone in the restaurant. Alex got up to his feet and started over to the table. Jeannie saw him and frantically motioned him to stand down without the offensive customers noticing. She hurried gathering the plates and disappeared into the kitchen. A few moments later, Dwayne, a tall and very large recent immigrant from Cuba, with a well-stained apron, approached the table.

“I hear you guys are giving my waitress a hard time.”

“Hey, we’re just trying to have some fun. No harm done, buddy.”

Dwayne pointed at the right arm of the skinny redneck. “Is this the arm that harassed my waitress?”

“Look, we were just having some fun. No big deal.”

“Let me put it this way. You can leave now with the arm or leave later without it.”

The customers threw their money on the table in a huff and stood to leave. Dwayne blocked the way and said, “And I expect a very generous tip for my lady.”

Each customer pulled out a few more bills and threw them at the table. They stormed out muttering obscenities and threats to never return.

Alex looked over at the door to the kitchen and saw Jeannie do a very silly victory dance. She stopped and stood straight when the manager of the restaurant asked her a question. When the manager moved on, she turned



to Alex and gave an open mouth grin and disappeared into the kitchen.

Jeannie came out of the restaurant and met the other three waiting. She told a very interesting story as the four walked to the movie theater. Once upon a time a brave young man challenged the dreadful customers from the swampland to protect her honor.

When they got to the front of the theater, Ramon spoke up. "You were going to take on three jerks? What the hell were you thinking?"

Alex explained, "I figured getting my ass kicked would be enough of a diversion for her to get away."

"Oh, good thinking."

Jeannie stood up for her man. "He's my knight in shining armor," she said while throwing her arms around his shoulders and kissing him on the cheek. She had second thoughts about her bold move and whispered to Alex. "Oh, was that alright?"

Alex replied in a similar whisper, "I'm not sure. Maybe you should try it again."

Jeannie, very happy with his answer, planted another kiss, much longer on his cheek.

Alex said, "It was fi.."

Before he could finish his sentence, Jeannie moved to face him and connected her lips to his. They kissed with enough lip movement to elevate the excitement to a level he never experienced. They held on for an uncomfortable time.

Ramon, caught off guard, expressed his embarrassment for his two friends. "Uh, guys."

Meaning: “You are making a spectacle of yourselves in public.”

Barbara knew the significance of the kiss. She said softly to Ramon “You’re witnessing a real moment. This is their first kiss.”

“Really?”

Their lips slowly moved apart, but Jeannie kept her hold. “Oh, my God, you must think I’m a slut.”

Alex whispered in her ear, “Thinking takes oxygen.”

She realized the meaning of his statement, which broadened her smile. After a couple of deep breaths, they all headed into the theater. After taking their seats, Jeannie directed a question at both Alex and Ramon. “When we were traveling toward the reef, you two did a signal by tapping one hand on the other. What did it mean?”

Ramon explained, “It’s the signal for ‘tag team.’ When you have a passenger so obnoxious you can only tolerate them for a short period of time, you call tag team. The other person takes over. The passenger is happy with the attention, and you don’t lose your mind.”

Ramon added, “The tag team concept has reduced on-board homicides.”

Alex and Jeannie paid little attention to the happenings on the screen. They knew how comfortable her head felt on his shoulder. She held onto his hand throughout the movie.

They walked back to the girls’ cottage. Ramon and Barbara decided to take a short walk down by the water to give the couple a little privacy at the door.

Alex looked into Jeannie's eyes. "I've tried so hard to be a gentleman. For days and days, I wanted to do the right thing and at the same time I wanted to grab you and kiss you all over."

"Right now, I don't want the gentleman, I want the kisses."

Alex and Jeannie showed their appreciation for the privacy by making out for a solid ten minutes. Both out of breath, Jeannie leaned back to talk.

"We have the last shift tomorrow. Do you want to get together late?"

Alex said, "I do."

The reply amused Jeannie. "Ooo, I like the way you said that."

She backed away in horror thinking about what she said and the possible ramifications. Her eyes widened as she placed a hand over her mouth. "Oh, shit. Oh, shit. I'm sorry. Please don't read anything into it. I should see a cartoon puff of smoke where you were standing. Oh, shit."

Alex didn't think anything of the comment. He reached out and gently held her arms and pulled her to him and kissed her for a long time.

They were tired and ready to part for the evening. Jeannie said, "Then I'll see you tomorrow." And gave him a little kiss.

Alex said, "Good night."

Jeannie went into the apartment and Alex walked home. Barbara came in later after Jeannie got ready for bed.

“I can’t believe you two. You are getting along. You must really like him.”

“I really do. There’s something about Alex I trust. I don’t know what it is. I can’t explain it.”

“He is a good guy.”

After a pause, Jeannie fidgeted in the chair next to the window. The words came out with no warning, “I’m going over there.”

“What? Tonight?”

“I have to go over there.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I know it’s a risk. I know it’s sudden. But I have to.”

She looked back at Barbara with a look requesting a blessing for her decision or some opinion about how Alex would react to a late-night visit.

“I don’t know what to say. If it were anyone but Alex, I would advise you against it.”

Jeannie wrapped a towel around her waist, opened the door and said, “Wish me luck,” and closed the door.

She walked up to the door and saw the light was out in Alex’s room. She hesitated for a moment, thinking she might be too late for an evening get together. She came this far, she had to try. She knocked softly on the front door. Soon, Ramon pulled opened the door. He saw the midnight visitor through sleepy eyes.

“Is Alex in his room?”

Ramon nodded yes.

“I want to sneak in and fuck him.”

Ramon, now fully awake, gestured with his right arm for her to come in and do whatever.

“Thanks.”

She hurried to Alex’s door and disappeared behind it.

Alex slept laying on his stomach with his head facing toward the door. She walked over and gently nudged his shoulder. “Alex.” A groggy Alex opened his eyes. Jeannie’s presence delighted beyond the inquisitive mind.

“Alex, can I stay with you tonight?”

Surprised by the question, he knew an immediate answer avoided any misunderstanding. Without hesitation, he answered, “Sure.”

With one word of affirmation, Jeannie dropped her towel, pulled her tank top over her head and dropped it on the floor, then pulled off her panties. She climbed into bed, laid next to Alex and started kissing him. Not the hard and frantic kissing of new lovers an hour ago. The kissing was much slower and softer. They were able to feel and explore every surface of their lips – up and down – across and back. Soft, wet, and electric - even in the hot Florida night, chills traveled through every inch of skin.

His joy held back questions about the encounter. Did he know what she wanted? Was it obvious? He pulled off his boxers to join his naked friend. The kissing continued soft, deep, and tender. His mind raced. Did she want hot, lusty sex? Did she want to cuddle naked tonight? Would any move he made be misinterpreted? Was he a moron for doing all this thinking?

Jeannie also thought. I trust him, and I want him. Am I making the right moves? Does he trust me? Can I live with any consequences of this evening? Am I a moron for doing all this thinking? Maybe he needs a little more encouragement.

Jeannie plunged a warm, wet tongue into his left ear. How many more signs did he need? He gently rolled her on her back. She presented an inviting and reassuring smile. He began kissing her neck and worked his way down her chest. Her eyes grew wider with every move to the south. When he reached her waist, her eyes grew larger. She thought ‘Would he.... I can’t believe he’s going to.’ When his lips touched her inner thigh, her eyes grew as large as possible. Her surprise changed to closed eyes and soft moans.

The warm Florida evening, accompanied by a less than optimum air conditioner, left them both drenched in sweat. Alex moved back up her body slowly and wiped his face on a towel he kept next to the bed, as any gentleman would. He pulled a condom package out of the nightstand and ripped it open.

“So, you did find a 24-hour pharmacy.”

“No, I kept this from junior high. Do you think it’s still good?”

She smacked his arm, “You’re not supposed to make me laugh during sex.”

Before she could let out a laugh, he moved on top of her and gently moved inside her.

“Oh, it’s good. It’s really good.”

Her eyes closed as he entered her. All thoughts disappeared by the simple rocking back and forth. As

the excitement reached the top, something unusual happened they did not expect, but both accepted as normal. They looked at each other and smiled.

Exhausted, they slowly slid apart. Alex felt the warm and humid room. He looked at the beautiful girl next to him. In the faint light coming through the window her whole body glistened. He believed a magical companion shared his bed. The heat intensified whatever fragrance she wore. He breathed deeply to catch his breath and enjoy the dizzying air all around them.

Jeannie felt him slide to her side. She wasn't ready to let go and too tired to hold on. Any rationale for her invading his bedroom left her mind. She appreciated Alex's move to lay his arm across her with unmistakable body language – wanting to hold on to the moment.

She moved her fingers through his sopping wet hair to move it out of his eyes in a low, soft, adoring touch. They shared the towel to dry off the dripping southern Florida humidity.

Jeannie avoided an awkward pause. “Alex, I know this is probably a stupid thing to suggest, I know it will break the mood, but I really need to talk.”

Alex turned away from her, put his feet on the floor and started moving away. She lowered her gaze at the covers thinking she might have driven him away with the suggestion of a heavy conversation. But this was Alex, the person she trusted. Her eyes came back up and a small smile came to her lips, knowing in her heart she hadn't made a mistake.

Alex, still a little dizzy from all the late-night activity, realized his move off the bed had been sudden and could be misinterpreted.

He turned to Jeannie and said, "I have a perfect wine for conversation." Her small grin turned into a beaming smile.

He came back with two ordinary glasses full of a cold Riesling wine. Why would you have warm wine in Southern Florida? She thanked him as he handed her a glass and joined her in bed. They both took a drink. Jeannie said, "This is good. But what makes this a perfect wine for conversation?"

"Well, we are about to have a conversation and it's the only wine I have."

Jeannie laughed, "I'm trying to be serious here."

She did get serious. "I barged in here tonight and I wanted to have sex. Well, obvious I wanted the sex. I want you to know you have no obligations. If this is a one-night stand, I'll remember it as a great one-night stand. But you need to know I want more. I want you. For some reason I trust you and I'm not sure why. I want to be with you. I want to know more about you. And I came over here because I couldn't stay away. I thought you should know."

During her talk, Alex kissed the side of her forehead for reassurance and because he wanted to.

"I don't want a one-night stand. I adore you. I have since the first time I saw you. I want you to stay. I hope you'll stay all night and as long as you want to."

They renewed the kissing but were too tired for a long makeout session. They settled down in the bed with



Jeannie facing the door and Alex behind her with his arm around her. Jeannie turned off the light.

Alex said, "You know Martha and Henry will want to hear about this."

"We should tell them every single detail," said Jeannie.

"I fear the word 'moist' will be used repeatedly."

Ramon didn't understand all the laughter coming from the other bedroom.

Alan Vandervoort

# Key Largo Summer

*A young man  
overcomes the depth  
of despair with the  
help of a beautiful  
woman with a secret  
and a troubled young  
poet in a threatened  
tropical paradise.*



## Key Largo Summer

by Alan Vandervoort

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