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Clothing Optional

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CLOTHING OPTIONAL

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10-Digit ISBN 1-59113-987-2

13-Digit ISBN 978-1-59113-987-4

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Printed in the United States of America.

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Booklocker, Inc.
2006

CHAPTER THREE

Key West was a haven for restored guesthouses. The old part of town was filled with them. Each with a clever name: Jasmine House, La Cassia De Lucas, La Te Da, and L'Habitation. The murder happened at a place called the Maison de Soleil. None of the names meant a damn thing to Conlan. Without an address, he couldn't find anything on the island. After locating the guesthouse, he parked his Hummer so far over the curb it took up most of the sidewalk. This car was great in Chicago but with the narrow streets down here, it was a nightmare. Setting the brake, he turned off the ignition and got out.

He stood and looked at the surroundings, and then walked the perimeter. Even though this town was filled with these restored old places, he'd never been in one. He'd been curious but heard most of them catered to the gay community. He wasn't homophobic, just not interested. The place was larger than he expected. It covered the corner of the block with a good-sized parking lot in the back. An eight foot white fence protected the place like a bouncer in a strip joint. The buildings matched the color of the fence. Lush tropical plants lined the walkway leading to the front porch.

A uniformed officer walked out to greet him. Conlan listened to his brief report, then walked into the lobby and looked around. To his right was the Registration Desk. Behind it was a white male, about 30, slender, blond hair with an expensive "do," wearing a skin tight, white silk tee shirt. He had his hand over his mouth and was sobbing. Just my luck, Conlan thought as he panned the rest of the room. To his left was the lobby. The room was open with white walls, and blond wooden floors. Maybe the guy behind the desk did his hair to match. In the middle of the room were a couple of beige, canvas covered

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chairs, end tables with lamps next to each, and a round wooden coffee table in front of an over stuffed light green sofa. An officer was sitting on it talking to a young woman wearing a Marlin's cap. Tears were flowing down her cheeks but she lacked the clamor of the guy behind the desk. Three yellow strips of tape barred the entrance to a door in the back of the room.

The young woman looked up as he approached. "I'm Detective Conlan Daily. I've been assigned to this case," he said looking directly into her dark green eyes. "You're Molly White, the manager. Is that correct?"

She looked up him, nodded, and then looked away.

"I've gotten some information from the other officer," he said attempting to get her attention. "But I'd like to ask you a few more questions. I realize this may be a difficult time. However, it is important that..."

"I've already told the other policeman everything I know," she said in a frustrated voice.

Conlan knew she was upset. He expected her to be. "Some of this may be redundant, Ms. White, but, it is necessary. Maybe," he said eyeing the guy behind the desk, "we could find a quiet place."

"Of course," she said as she wiped her eyes. "The porch is quiet and there's no one out there."

Conlan watched her as she walked towards the front door. She was petite. Slender but not skinny. Built like an athlete. Attractive. An auburn ponytail coming out the back of her cap. Her skin was freckled and she had a dark tan. She wore dark green shorts, a gray tank top, and sandals. The deep cut armholes in her shirt revealed perfectly shaped breasts.

She moved to the far end of the porch and sat down. Conlan pulled a chair over and sat across from her. The sun continued to rise, as did the humidity. Conlan tried to

concentrate as he examined her freckled nose and cheeks. “Why don’t you tell me everything you know about what happened here?”

Molly repeated the story she’d already given to the other policeman.

“Any ideas as to why someone would want to hurt Mr. Harris?” Conlan asked when she finished.

“No. I can’t imagine anyone doing anything like this.”

“How about enemies or someone he may have recently argued with?”

“As far as I know, everyone liked George... Mr. Harris.”

Why is it, people who get murdered never seem to have any enemies? Conlan was waiting for the day he’d have a case where everyone hated the victim. “Well,” he said looking into her dark eyes, “why don’t you tell me what you know about Mr. Harris. Maybe, something about his family.”

Molly gave him a puzzled look before she answered. “This is all so strange. You see someone everyday and you think you know him or her. Then, when you’re asked about the person, you realize how little you actually know.”

He felt sorry for her as she paused and look at him. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. We’re all like that.”

“Unfortunately, you’re probably right,” she said morosely. “I know he used to be married. George told me his wife died before he moved down here. And he has a grown child. A daughter. However, he hardly ever mentioned her.”

“Odd, don’t you think?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. Families are all different.”

Conlan looked at her and wondered what she meant. He was tempted to ask but decided to let it go. “Any idea on how I can get in touch with this daughter?”

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"She lives up North. Indianapolis? No, it's Minneapolis. I remember now because of the mall."

"A shopping mall?" he asked, thinking people remember the strangest things.

"Mall of America. It's the biggest one in the country."

"Really? Would you happen to have her telephone number or address?"

"Somewhere... I think I can find it," Molly said.

"That would be helpful," he said as he shifted positions. "Can you think of anything else?"

"We really didn't spend much time together. George worked nights and I work days. So, it was only in the mornings that we'd see each other."

"He wasn't around much?" Conlan asked.

"At first, he was here all the time," she said. "As the place grew, he was forced to spend more time on other things. He was also very involved in the community."

Conlan wondered how much time he'd want to spend here. But then, he couldn't see himself buying a business that catered to gays in the first place. "How about a list of the guests and employees?" he asked.

"That won't be a problem."

"I'd also like to talk with each of them as soon as possible."

Molly looked concerned.

"Something wrong with that?" he asked.

"A few of our guests may be uncomfortable being questioned by the police."

"I haven't lived here all that long but I have been here long enough to know about places like this," Conlan said confidently.

"I'm sure you do. I keep forgetting that almost everyone in Key West seems to know about us," Molly said. "So, you

understand some of our guests may be sensitive..."

"Don't worry. Over the years, I've talked to plenty of gays."

"Gays? What do gays have to do with it?" Molly asked with a bewildered look.

"Like I said, I know all about the guesthouses down here," Conlan replied confidently. "The guy behind the registration desk, what's his name Ron or John? He was pretty much a giveaway. A woman running the place, I have to admit, had me wondering."

Molly looked at him contemptuously. "I don't want to contradict your inductive reasoning, Detective; but, this is not a gay guesthouse. In fact, we are far from it. Our guests are men and women. Most of them married to one another."

His sense of pride quickly changed to one of stupidity. "So, what's the problem?" Conlan asked trying to recover.

"Our facility is unique."

If it wasn't gay, what the hell was it? Did he really want to know? "Unique?" He finally asked.

"Our guesthouse is 'clothing optional'," Molly said. "However, for the most part, our guests are nude."

At first, what she said didn't register. It wasn't what he expected. "Let me get this straight. The guests here, men and women, are naked?"

"That's correct," she said. "People here are naked. Believe me; it sounds more exciting than it really is."

Not exciting, is that what she said? Conlan wondered. He thought a whole lot of people would find it pretty damn exciting. Especially, the people who come here. Otherwise, why come? As he looked at her, he could see even more reasons why it could be exciting. Now, however, was not the time to discuss the virtues or vices of social nudity. If he were lucky, it would never be the time. "OK," he finally said. "How about that phone

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number and those lists?”

As Molly left to get the information, he sat and watched several people walk by. He wondered where this case was going to lead. They all seem to take on a life of their own. This thing had trouble written all over it: no witnesses, no motive, and a building full of naked people. How was this going to work? Not to mention Molly. There was something about those eyes of hers. As he continued watching people stroll by, he wondered why they were giving him such strange looks. When he realized what they might be thinking, he was tempted to stand up and shout, “I’m not one of them. I’m here on official business.” Instead, he got up and walked into the lobby.

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