

Prologue

The Dutchman watched the waves as they pounded the shore, intrigued as always with the destructive power wielded by something that appeared so soothing and beautiful. Controversies in nature intrigued him. As did all things he couldn't control; there were so few of them.

The tropical sun beat down as he shifted his gaze to the rocks below the cliff he was standing on. The Caribbean Sea and its endless need to pound his island and reshape the contour of the shoreline brought a smile to his weathered face.

His thoughts wandered to images of how, in the movies, a body falling from a cliff top would inadvertently bounce on the rocks and spin a couple of times in the air before disappearing into the sea.

The Dutchman knew that Hollywood didn't quite have it right, of course, having experimented with the concept a few times now. He leaned forward a little more, catching a glimpse of where the last body had landed. No bounce, just an insignificant thud. And the mangled corpse hadn't disappeared for several hours while the undercurrents and lapping waves licked at its prey in a monotonous courtship until finally drawing the prize into its depths. It had taken yet another hour before all the blood and body parts had slithered into the deep water for the sharks to feast upon. The Dutchman had sat in this very spot watching, just three months before, not sure what he was waiting for but confident that he was in the presence of something he simply had no control over. And yet he was enthralled. He was anxious to see it again.

Despite being fair haired and ruddy in complexion, the sun didn't bother him now. He spent a lot of time outdoors, ever since purchasing the island a few years ago. In fact, he rarely left what he had dubbed Shell Island now that there was no need.

A distant relative of one of the founding families of Shell Oil, the Dutchman had taken his nominal inheritance at age twenty-one and turned it into a multi-million-dollar enterprise by investing in start-up technology companies back when investing in internet projects was considered reckless and foolhardy. While attending a conference at Harvard, he'd met two bright young men who had what the Dutchman thought was an innovative plan. He invested a large portion of his portfolio with them on a hunch that they were on to something big. When Microsoft was finally allowed to purchase the company some years later, his YAHOO! friends had, indeed, created something quintessential to the emerging masses. But they had relinquished control and so the Dutchman was no longer interested. The sale, however, had made him a multi-millionaire overnight. Seclusion had been imperative, and Shell Island had become his haven. He felt a vibration in his pocket and took out his satellite cell phone, another wonder of technology that he wasn't able to control...unless he turned it off. He had been waiting for this call, however, and answered it quickly.

"Is she here?" he asked

A female voice replied. "The team is ready and in place. She will arrive in three days."

He smiled and stared out into the deep blue ocean, slow moving clouds etching their way across the near horizon. "That's wonderful," he said gleefully. "I'm looking forward to our time together."

"Yes, well I'll be expecting a deposit in my bank account before we go any further, correct?" she said.

The Dutchman frowned. This was his project and he controlled things. Lucky for her, the serenity of the moment calmed him quickly. Though he needed her for the next few weeks, she would be dealt with afterwards. This was, after all, his last project.

“Check your account in an hour or so,” he said. “When our charade is complete, you will be even richer. As long as all goes to plan.”

“Blind and deaf too, correct?” she said.

And arrogant, the Dutchman thought. But then, that’s why she was so good at this. A pity he wouldn't need her again. She would have made a lovely house pet. “You know the rules of the game, dear,” he said and grinned.

“The game,” she said and the Dutchman could sense disgust in the tone of her voice.

“Yes, my dear. Play the game well and you’ll never need to work again. Make an incorrect move and you’ll be shark bait before the month is through.”

There was silence on the other end. The Dutchman could hear her breathing and knew he had shaken her, not just from his words but by the tone of his voice. He knew she was aware it had been no idle threat.

“It will all go as you planned,” she resigned.

“Yes, it will,” he said and pressed the end call button.

The Dutchman watched the scene from high above for a few moments longer, leaning over the edge once more to burn an image of the rocks below into his mind. He wanted to recall it at will over the next few days.

He then turned and headed toward the golf cart that would take him down the hillside to the lagoon where his Japanese-style villa lay.

The sea and I will yet again be satisfied, he thought quoting some obscure seventeenth century poet sailor whose name he had forgotten long ago.

Chapter One

Natalie Grainger was applying a last line of pale pink lipstick when she caught the frown in the mirror from her lover.

“What’s up Benny?” she said, her eyes dancing between his eyes and her own lips, pouted and already glistening from Benny’s favorite rouge-colored gloss.

“That dress is pretty short isn’t it?” he said.

Natalie laughed. “Your wife wears shorter.”

Benny, or William Travis Benneton as the corporate world knew him, wasn’t accustomed to being argued with. Especially from underlings. Natalie laughed at the comparison. Yes, she was an underling alright, but she was no employee.

“You can’t be late tonight Nat,” he said, turning back to the living room. “You don’t want to miss the boat, so to speak,” he grinned.

“Cute” she said. She heard the front closet door open and a moment later Benny returned, raincoat casually thrown over his arm, a dark trilby hat in his other hand.

“I want you to meet someone tonight,” he said, staring at her reflection in the mirror.

Now it was Natalie’s turn to frown.

“I’ve told you Benny, I don’t need an escort to functions, I’m perfectly fine by myself.”

Benny bounced his hat off the edge of his elbow. He did things like that when Natalie questioned him. “You can’t keep coming to events alone when you have no apparent purpose for being there.”

“There are enough people there who know my, what did you call it... my purpose?” she said a little haughtily. “They talk to me, even if they’re only doing it to please you.”

“You need protection too,” he said.

She turned from the mirror, one hand pointing the lipstick tube at him.

“You’ve been bringing that up a lot lately,” she said. She moved closer to him, grabbed the hat and put it on her head at an odd angle. Benny smiled. “Is there something going on you’re not telling me about?”

“Come on Nat,” he said, straightening the hat on her head and pushing it forward to rest just above her eyebrows. “I’m the president of the second largest insurance conglomerate in the country; I’m always worried about security.”

“You have bodyguards following Emma around don’t you?” Emma was Benneton's wife. “I hear she’s difficult enough to contain.”

“Let’s leave Emma out of this,” he said. “I’m concerned about your safety and I want to hire someone to... well, to hang around.”

“You should buy me a Great Dane, Benny,” she said. “I don’t need some brain-challenged muscle beach type ‘hanging around’”. She smiled, took the hat off and handed it to him.

“Besides, you might get jealous.” With that, she gently nudged him aside and strutted toward the front hall closet. She could sense Benny’s eyes on her and she exaggerated her lower wiggle slightly.

“Just be nice tonight, okay?” he said, following her to the door, “and open to new friendships.”

Natalie let him help her with her light coat then turned and looked him in the eyes for a few seconds. Benny didn’t blink, or smile, or back away. He just stared back.

“You already have someone don’t you?” she said, suddenly comprehending.

“Just be approachable tonight, that’s all,” Benny said. “I’ll steal away some time after the cruise is in full swing. I’ll need fresh air anyway.”

“And Emma hates a strong, cold breeze, doesn’t she?” Natalie said flatly.

Benny just sighed and opened the door. "I'll see you on the top deck around ten or so," he said, then added. "I've ordered a cab for you. It'll be downstairs in ten minutes."

"Gee thanks," she said, blowing him a kiss as he approached the elevator. She knew his limo would be at the front entrance waiting for him. "And Benny?" she called just as he stepped into the elevator.

"If I fall in love with your bodyguard, it'll be all your fault."

Benny held the doors back for a moment and stared at her, his eyes revealing a pained expression. Natalie instantly regretted her flippancy.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'll be good, I promise."

She gave a short princess wave as the elevator doors closed taking Benny down to his awaiting car, his awaiting wife, and the dreaded three-hour cruise from Savannah.