Guantanamera

by cheshirecatstrut, CMackenzie

Summary

In the 1950's, the American Mob partners with Cuba’s President to create the world's first sovereign nation of crime. Cubans object, but Hollywood shows up in droves-- the playground for the rich that results eclipses Vegas.

It's the perfect small pond for a hardboiled private eye, who makes a living saving the downtrodden when the law won’t help. Plus life's high-stakes enough to entertain her thrill-seeking, playboy husband.
Logan gets an almost pornographic thrill, walking into the Tropicana with Veronica on his arm.

Not just because the club is paradise for a sensation-seeker, color and spectacle, sex in a spangled package, oozing secrets from beneath its lively, glamorous exterior. Not just because Ronnie’s the most finely-finished piece of work in the joint, fresh-faced American glamour in jewels, barely hinting at passionate hidden depths. But because he, and she, are at the center of a spider’s web, here; his wealth and charm open doors, setting the stage so they can pull strings.

And there’s very little, besides Veronica, Logan loves as much as pulling strings with flair.

He grins down at her, bouncing anticipation as they approach the entrance; she smiles back, cynically amused. She’s wearing a celestial blue number, strapless, embroidered lavishly in gold, wide-sleeved blond mink rolled back to display matching gloves—her delicate throat showcases sapphires and diamonds. She’s not a fan of the mix-and-mingle aspect of their detective business… it’s his job to cultivate contacts, thrust and parry with the debauched rich. She’s here to analyze, from behind a charming mask, while he lures suspects into her orbit. He’s a lucky son of a bitch, he feels—not only because she’s his, but because the career to which she’s devoted is FUN.

All eyes turn towards them as they saunter into the lounge. Veronica’s smile grows false, bright; Logan’s just grows.
“Remind me to burn this girdle later,” she murmurs, as the host leads them beneath the Arcos de Cristal, weaving between palms and white-clad waiters towards their always-reserved, stage-front table. “I have to tuck the edge behind my thigh holster, and it BUNCHES.”

“We can sneak into the ladies’ after our client’s tale of woe, take it off,” he murmurs back, flashing a flirtatious sideways glance. “You’ll be MUCH more comfortable without confining undergarments, and I promise I won’t breathe a word.”

“My husband the saint.” She smiles blindingly up at Manuel as he pulls out her chair. Logan sprawls beside her, checking the cuffs of his tux to make sure they’re aligned. “How much longer ’til this specimen of disillusioned womanhood shows?”

“Relax, muffin, we just got here.” He holds up two fingers and winks at the approaching waiter, who nods and makes for the bar. “On second thought, don’t. All wound up with no way to express it, and chafed by your girdle to boot? It’ll take HOURS to burn off that angst, at the end of the evening. I’m SHIVERING with anticipation.”

She snorts, indelicate, and he can’t help but smile in response. He turns his attention to the show, some elaborate number involving fake trees, spangled bikinis, and a leopard chained center-stage, while a mambo band plays Que Bueno Baila Usted. “Damn it, I was hoping for zeppelins again,” he says, with a faux-regretful snap. “Can’t anyone work up a genuine spectacle these days, to adequately entertain the huddled masses?”

“Oh, you want a SPECTACLE!” Veronica favors him with an utterly fake expression of shock, as the waiter returns carrying champagne. “Maybe Rita Hayworth will turn up again tonight, try to convince you one more time redheads do it better. I’d be HAPPY to squash THAT notion.”

“But how will Snowball play Papa Loves Mambo,” Logan begins, lifting his chin in greeting to Guajiro, who’s at his personal table to their right, “if you rip out piano strings to perform a garroting?”

“That’s HIS problem.” She sniffs, takes a dainty sip. “Who are you flirting with over my shoulder?”

Logan shrugs. “Just your admirer. He’s staring adoringly at the back of your neck.”

“Mr. Fox?” Veronica turns, employs her cutest smile-and-wave, inspiring the Tropicana’s owner to press a hand to his heart. “And WHY, pray tell, is our not-so-benevolent host giving three Hollywood agents the gold star treatment?”

“Probably shilling for La Bolita.” Logan winks and points at Marlon Brando, who’s slamming straight rums by the bar. “Rumor has it he’s deep in the numbers racket, and skimming ten percent of illegal lottery profits. Certainly it makes him happy when I lose big at his gaming tables. Or maybe he just enjoys looking at YOU.”

He feels rather than hears Veronica sigh. “Why must you always encourage him? It’s like you WANT rivals for my affection.”

“If they’re infatuated, they’re more prone to help you,” Logan says mildly, lifting her hand and pressing a kiss to the back. “But it’s not like any of them need ENCOURAGEMENT. You’re the most beautiful woman in the room.”

“Oh, pshaw.” She employs her coyly dismissive wave. “Save it for Rita. I’ve been immune to your charms since puberty.”
“You found me charming enough to stay in Havana, when Duncan went back to the States to beat Lilly’s murder rap.” He bobs his brows, challenging—this is his favorite fake argument. The one where he coaxes her into admitting she’s always liked him best. “SO charming, in fact, you never left.”

Veronica rolls her eyes, but once again indulges him. “It wasn’t you—it was your luxury suite. I’d never slept in a bed so soft.”

“So THAT’S why you left the ‘do not disturb’ sign up for a week.” He traces along the upper edge of her glove, contemplative, dips a finger inside. Strokes the pulse just below her elbow, watching her. “And here I thought it was my bedroom prowess.”

Her hand lands on his knee, claiming ownership, and Logan lets out a quiet, excited breath. “You’re just lucky my dad wanted me safely distant from trouble—and you not falsely arrested—while he proved YOUR dad was guilty. He would have dragged me away on the first plane otherwise, soft bed and…related enticements notwithstanding.”

“You wouldn’t have gone.” He settles back, smirking, shifting his leg to assist as she runs her palm up his thigh. “You’d never cook pot roast in pearls for some wet rag, when you could have action and adventure with a catch like me. Really, viewed pragmatically, YOU’RE the lucky one.”

She laughs—probably she thinks he’s right. But he knows better, because he’s got HER. “Just don’t start harboring happy-housewife fantasies,” she murmurs. “I’m the brains of our operation, I’ll never do dishes.”

“Not to worry,” he says. “I have better tasks for you in mind.”

She smirks at him, her hand FINALLY reaching its interesting destination; then quickly, disappointing withdrawing, as annoying twit Perry and his drag of a wife Joan approach.

“Well isn’t this a stroke of luck!” Joan, who never misses a chance to be seen with those worth seeing, crows. “You two haven’t shown up at the Club in months! I was starting to wonder if your membership lapsed!”

Logan rises from his chair to shake, kiss the air near Joan’s cheek, but sits without inviting them to join. Perry’s a cultural attache, and therefore useful, so he can’t openly alienate; but frankly, he AVOIDS the Country Club, because it’s littered with people like these. He settles for charming-yet-insincere, which he’s sure Veronica will appreciate. She loathes Perry and Joan, full stop.

“A man’s interest in fitness dwindles when he’s never in bed before dawn.” Logan lounges back, stretches an arm across Veronica’s chair. “Dice falling your way this evening, Per? Or is your game tonight roulette?”

Perry shakes his neat blond head, regretful. “The play’s ice-cold,” he says, with an insinuating glance at Joan that makes Veronica’s jaw visibly clench. “But at least I didn’t lose my shirt the way YOU did last week. I know your father left you a fortune, Echolls; but you’ll never keep your girl in jewels if you waste it all.” His gaze shifts to Veronica, who he clearly doesn’t suspect of a temperature problem, and he licks his lips. Logan’s tempted to hand him a napkin.

“Well you know what they say.” Logan kisses Ronnie’s bare shoulder, just to be a dick. “Unlucky at cards…” He shrugs. “Besides, not to worry. I have more blood money than I could EVER spend.”

“Just keep it handy.” Joan levels Perry with a look that wishes it could kill. “The Fidelistas are
marching in the hills again. If a revolution comes and we Americans need to flee, it wouldn’t do to have your funds tied up.”

“Nobody’s got as many guns as Santos Trafficante,” Veronica says, calmly. “If Castro gets a wild hair and starts shooting…which he WILL, eventually…the mob can cover the rich on the ride to the airport.”

“And just as an FYI,” Logan adds, toying with the rim of his champagne flute, “You shouldn’t discuss plans for the fall of Xanadu in public spaces. Martin Fox does his considerable best…but he can’t control the loyalties of all patrons and staff.”

“There are Commies everywhere, in other words,” Perry says, disgusted. “We blacklist them from the mainland, and they spring up here like mushrooms. Pardon my French, ladies, but the Cubans would be smart to throw every one of those bastards in jail.”

Logan can practically hear his wife’s teeth grinding—she’s likely seconds from a diatribe on corrupt prisons and poverty. He puts his hand on top of hers, and says mildly, “Who needs stricter laws when you’ve got friends in the Mafia? Lansky’s not particularly idealistic, or so I’m told. But I’m confident he’ll protect his investment, and us in the process.”

Perry nods, reassured this particular playboy could care less about politics. Veronica hisses, in his ear, “Get rid of them, stat. Client at three o’clock.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Logan spots a fresh-faced young girl in white, being led towards their table by an overzealous waiter; smirks, as Answer Me My Love begins to play. “Perry,” he says, slouching reluctantly upright to shake hands, “as much of a pleasure as it is to talk shop, and marvel at Joan’s coiffure…they’re playing my song. And my beautiful wife deserves the full court dining-and-dancing press, for being tolerant enough to marry me.”

Logan fake-kisses Joan again, while Veronica contents herself with a finger wave, then spins his girl, flourishing, onto the dance floor. “Tsk,” he tsks, bending to breathe in her ear, running a palm down her spine to learn the shape of the offending girdle. “You know better, pumpkin. Perry’d turn you in to the Senate Subcommittee in a hot second if he even SUSPECTED you harbored sympathies. His JOB here is to uncover high-profile Communists, real or imagined. And I’m positive you wouldn’t like it, if you couldn’t go home to visit Keith.”

“I HATE Perry,” she mutters, with a rebellious glance at Joan’s retreating back. “He’s a creepy ZEALOT. Somewhere he’s harboring a scandal that will send him packing in disgrace. And as God is my witness I will find it before this summer ends.”

“Well in the meantime, enjoy watching Julio snub them.” Logan turns her so she can witness Joan’s pointed rebuff by one of the wealthiest sugar barons in Cuba. “And give me the scoop on this cupcake client. Because she’s standing by the dance floor now, unless I miss my guess, on the verge of making a scene.”

“I don’t know much. She told Tina she needed help with a runaway sister.” Veronica maneuvers him into a spin so she can study the slight woman in silk chiffon, hovering and clutching a beaded handbag. The girl’s fingers curl before her throat, self-protective, then shift to pat a strawberry-blond curl; Logan’s secretly-a-marshmallow wife caves. “Come on, dip me, kiss me, and escort me back to the table. You know I can’t resist a damsel in distress.”

Logan does as instructed, lingering against the softness of her lips—he started fantasizing about Veronica’s mouth when he was twelve, and familiarity’s only bred fondness. But Veronica gets restless when Veronica’s not busy…and her restlessness can have life-threatening consequences.
So he kisses her knuckles and follows orders, sizing up the client as they go (older than her baby face hints, but not much. And sad the way his mother finally got, when she realized fairy tales don’t come true). “Miss…Smith, I presume?” he asks, as he hands Veronica into her chair.

The girl flashes a brief, bright, rueful smile. “That’s right,” she says, with a grimace at the obvious lie, and even her voice is sweet. He hopes she lives in Iowa or something, where expressive transparency’s an asset. “Janet Smith.”

“My wife, Veronica,” Logan helps Janet sit, parks himself; the girl holds out a forthright hand to shake. “Don’t worry, she’s discreet.”

“Loose lips sink ships,” V says, with her most adorable shit-stirring grin, then softens as she aims the smile at Janet. “So what unfortunate twist of fate landed you in Cuba? I recall mention of a sister, but the message you left Mr. Echolls was vague.”

“Bubbles,” the girl confirms, with another grimace. This one says ‘Bubbles’ suits her nickname—lacking substance, often found in hot water. “My sister’s always been a free spirit…happy-go-lucky, bluebirds on her shoulder. But ever since her husband died, she’s worn herself out playing life of the party. And now I’m worried she’s in a pickle she can’t escape.”

“You shock me,” Logan drawls, which earns him a kick under the table. “But never fear. We’ve extracted the happy-go-lucky from every sordid rat trap in Havana. How about you describe the pickle, and we’ll move on to the comforting taking-action stage?”

“Well,” Janet toys with the cameo at her throat self-consciously, “It all started when she came to Cuba on the Weekend Nightclub Tour. Then tangoed with a rose between her teeth in sight of Angelo Rossi.”

Logan stifles a groan. Rossi’s on Veronica’s shit list; he’s one of the mobsters she surveils when she thinks Logan isn’t watching. Because she knows he’s not in favor…Rossi’s dangerous as fuck. “And they lived happily ever after?” V asks, resignedly. “Until the day he decided he wasn’t a one-princess prince?”

“You’ve met him?” Janet seems surprised. Which she wouldn’t be, if she knew how small the circle-jerk of rich hedonists in this town is. “I guess it’s no surprise, then, that he’s not acting prince-like.”

“We last saw the guy a few weeks ago, maybe?” Logan casts eyes heavenward, thinking. “In a casino, with a honey on his arm, drinking Cuba Libres and losing heavily at craps.”

“The honey must have been Bubbles.” Janet frowns. “That’s around the time she called me from a friend’s house, to tell me Rossi took her telephone. Said he was through with her, but wouldn’t let her leave—he’s assigned two guards to watch her ALL the time. He used to be so infatuated with my sister, Mr. Echolls; he gave her furs, diamonds, anything she wanted, paid for luxury trips EVERYWHERE. But now she’s practically a prisoner. And she’s afraid if she makes him even a little bit madder, she’ll end up in a…bordello. Or maybe vanish. She says…” Janet pauses, extricates a handkerchief from her bag. Holds it to her eyes until she’s composed. “She says men like Rossi can break any law they want here, and get away with it. I just need you to separate the two of them before something terrible happens, so she can come HOME.”

Logan pours a glass of water from the carafe on the table, offers it. Janet accepts gratefully, still sniffling. Just as she swallows, Veronica pounces. “Do you know what, exactly, Bubbles DID to make Rossi so angry?”
Janet shrugs, looking down at the handkerchief in her hand. Becomes suddenly very interested in pleating it. “The man’s got a terrible temper. I doubt he needed a reason.”

She glances rebelliously at Veronica to punctuate, and Logan’s brows lift. It’s clear to him Janet Smith knows EXACTLY what went wrong— but her dislike of Rossi, and concern for her sister, are keeping her quiet. “Have you got a photo we could borrow?” he asks, gently, betraying none of these thoughts. “‘Bubbles Smith’ isn’t much to go on, when searching for a dame in Havana.”

“Oh, no, her last name is Ashten,” Janet corrects, rummaging again in her bag. She removes a worn snapshot and hands it over. “Because of her husband, the…dead one.”

He frowns, studying the image. It’s tough to tell specifics from a full-body shot, minus the color— but Bubbles is definitely pretty, curvy and fair, and her smile’s bright and guileless, as advertised. He gives the picture to Veronica, who barely spares it a glance before tucking it away in her own purse.

“I’m so glad you’re willing to help.” Janet smiles tremulously at Logan. “I’m terribly worried. And I feel like this is all my fault.”

“Why would your sister’s problems be your fault?” Veronica asks, zeroing in unerringly on this revelation. “Are YOU the one who ticked Rossi off?”

“Of course not!” Janet says, nonplussed. “I’ve never even MET him. I encouraged her to come to Cuba with friends, though. Have some fun, heal. She and her husband were so in love, and the year after he passed was…tough. It’s just, that turned out to be an awful suggestion. Even right after she arrived, I sensed a change. She still pretended to be a happy free spirit when we talked every week. But she wasn’t, really… not the way she used to be.”

Logan’s hand flexes under the table, curls into a fist, and he forces himself to relax. He’s seen variations on this theme so many times— it’s always the same sad song, when naïve girls swim with sharks. He can never resist helping, though it usually ends badly, and neither can Veronica. Despite her tough and suspicious nature, his wife is far too tender-hearted to let another girl suffer…even if she suffers herself, preventing it. “I’ll find your sister,” he assures Janet, in his most soothing voice. “I know just where to start. Is there a number where I can reach you, once I’ve learned something?”

“I’m at the Hotel Nacional,” Janet says, grateful. “Room 204. Just call the exchange, they’ll put your through. I don’t have a lot of savings, but I should be able to stay for a few weeks. Hopefully you can wrap this up quickly?”

“We’ll do our humble best.” Logan signals for the waiter—requests a car and driver, to be added to his tab. “Ricardo will arrange for a ride back to your hotel. If you’ll wait by the bar, he’ll escort you outside when it comes. You shouldn’t be walking the streets here at night by yourself— Havana’s a dangerous place for pretty young girls.”

Janet nods, smiling thanks, shakes hands, and follows Ricardo away, clutching her handbag tight to her chest. Logan turns to Veronica, who’s gazing off thoughtfully into the distance, in the general direction of the now-empty stage.

“Do you believe her?” he asks, toying with his napkin. “The specifics of her story, I mean? Because in my opinion, the girl’s an AWFUL liar.”

Veronica considers. “She’s clearly using a false name. AND there’s something fishy about Bubbles’ troubles. That happy, smiling party girl did something specific to make Rossi angry—this
is not about the rose of their love losing its bloom.”

“Maybe Bubbles wasn’t bubbly enough for the guy’s taste?” Logan offers. “What with the whole pesky undercurrent of grief? Man like Rossi feels entitled to be a woman’s one and only.”

“It’s possible,” Veronica says, doubtfully. “Or maybe Bubbles saw something she shouldn’t have. She might also be prone to flirting with other men--Rossi’s the jealous type. Hard to say, until we’ve seen them interacting first-hand, and meet the lady in question. That’s where YOU come in, sugarplum.”

“Why did I know you were going to say that?” Logan sighs, as the announcer re-emerges to introduce Celia Cruz. “Tracing gossip to the source always seems to be my job.”

“Well you ARE uniquely suited,” she says, with a quirk of her long, mobile mouth. “Seeing as you gossip like a schoolgirl. Locate their favorite haunts for me, and we’ll go on a fishing expedition tomorrow. You and your people skills can dig up dirt amongst their friends and associates. I’ll look extra-pretty while scouting for clues, and then we’ll follow Bubbles discreetly home.”

Celia struts onstage, decked out in a five-foot feathered headdress and leopard print gown with cape (leopard being, apparently, the theme of the evening). Flashes her brilliant smile and begins Caramelo, grooving sublimely in time.


“Hmmm,” Veronica muses, with that throaty intonation he loves. “Now that you mention it, the spot over my hip IS starting to chafe…”

“Forget it,” a voice says behind him. Logan turns, surprised, to see Vinnie Van Lowe, smirking with trademark insincerity as, uninvited, he takes a seat. “You have your whole married lives to indulge in romance. Right this very moment, what you REALLY want to do is talk to me.”

“Vinnie,” Veronica says disgustedly, not bothering to act cordial. “To what do I owe the…Logan, what’s the exact opposite of pleasure?”

“Awww, I missed you too, VMars.” Vinnie pats all the pockets of his outdated tux until he locates a pack of cigarettes. “You owe my potentially beneficial presence to the fact that I asked around, and learned you’re here making like movie stars, most nights. So I put on my penguin suit and came a’ calling; and now you behold me in all my majesty.” He indicates his sartorial mediocrity with one hand, strikes a match with the other.

“Alert the Paris fashion houses,” Logan says drily, proffering an ashtray. “Any particular reason you’ve favored us with your company? Because frankly, we’re busy, and it’s not my policy to whisper secrets to the competition.”

“I am hurt and offended,” Vinnie says, seeming neither. “You can trust me like you would your own mother. Well maybe not YOUR mother, Echolls, but a mother archetype, per se. Aren’t I the guy who brought you lovebirds back together, by tracking Mars down after she helped Kane flee his murder charge? Didn’t I escort Kane back to the U.S. personally, so Keith could help him beat the rap? Because of me, you have quite the sweet setup here, my friend. You should feel grateful.”

“Hey, I paid you,” Logan retorts, unfazed. “OVER-paid, as I recall. Besides, it was all a big misunderstanding. I should have known better than to think my best friend and my girl ran off into
the sunset romantically. It was just business…and Veronica’s plan to keep him out of jail worked
like a charm.”

“Be that as it may.” Vinnie leans back, blowing an elaborate smoke ring. “Your happily-ever-after
was in peril, until I swooped in to save the day. So since I’ve done YOU such an elaborate favor,
surely you can see you owe ME one. Professional courtesy, if you will. Reciprocity. That’s what
it’s all about, right?”

“Vinnie, the second you start behaving professionally and courteously, we’ll reciprocate,”
Veronica quips, and Logan doesn’t bother to stifle his laugh. “But we’ll help you if it doesn’t hurt
us, provided you’ve got cash on hand. What’s your favor?”

“I’m here on what you’d call a shoestring budget.” Vinnie squints slightly as he studies her through
the smoke. “I flew over with a day tour, can’t afford to stay and poke around. Beyond which, you
know I’m just a humble PI from California, and I don’t speak the language. But I was hired back in
Neptune to locate a gentleman name of Big Dick Casablancas. And while I’m pursuing the case
with my usual alacrity, I’ve run into some…difficulties.”

“Such as?” Logan crosses his arms, and hopes this doesn’t involve bail.

“Such as, I found the guy, no problem.” Vinnie sits forward to stub out his cigarette, as Celia
segues smoothly into Yembe Laroco. “Slight setback though—he’s been murdered. And I have no
idea who killed him, or why.”
CHAPTER TWO: VERONICA: TROPICANA CLUB, CUBA, 1956: LA OSCURIDAD LLEGA

Logan loved the glamour and pizzazz, but this was the world she understood - the dark place beneath the shine, where spouses cheated and people like Big Dick were murdered. “Why was he in Cuba?”

Vinnie shrugs, flashes the overly-bright, cheesy smile that usually precedes one of his lies and says, “My job was just to find him.”

“And you did, case closed, why do you need us?” Veronica sips her champagne, frowns at the glass, and sets it down. Dealing with Vinnie is going to require a clear head. He’s already being evasive, holding back information and calculating his answer to her question. Logan gives her knee a little squeeze, indicating he notices it too.

Finally Vinnie says, “I want to know how Big D got himself dead… call it curiosity.”

There are lots of ways she could describe Vinnie Van Lowe and ‘curious’ doesn’t even crack the top ten. “How did you track him down?”

Veronica doesn’t care, but dealing with him requires a certain finesse. If she presses the ‘why was Big Dick here’ issue, or goes right to the big question of ‘who hired you’, Vinnie will continue to deflect. Giving him a chance to exaggerate his skill and prattle on about his prowess will get him talking.

“The usual ways, talked to his associates, went through his trash.” Withdrawing a fresh cigarette, he gestures toward Veronica’s champagne. “Are you going to finish that?” She shakes her head and he downs the remainder in a swallow, lights his cigarette. Evasive and nervous.

“Have you told your client that you found him?”

“She knows.”

Logan notices the use of the pronoun at the same time and casually asks, “Is Sadie looking for him because she wants him back, or because he’s run off with the money?”

Vinnie smirks. “So he’s not just your front, huh, VMars?” He waves a hand around the room. “You may have fooled everyone else with your ‘I’m only a pretty accessory’ routine, but not ol’ Vinnie.” He taps his temple. “Don’t forget - I know you.”

“And I know you,” Veronica says. “So let’s cut to the chase. Sadie hired you to track down her errant husband, you told her he was in Cuba, and now you’re worried she got here first. Maybe you’re thinking she’s the one responsible for his present condition and you’re afraid of what that might mean for ol’ Vinnie?”
Logan sits back with an expansive grin. He enjoys watching her eviscerate someone --probably more than he should-- but it’s one of the things she loves about him, his appreciation of her.

“It coulda been anyone.” Cracking his jaw, Vinnie blows another lazy smoke ring. “A lot of people wanted him dead, not just his wife.” He turns to stare at the stage. The conga drums and trumpets accompany Celia as she sings *Me Voy a Pinar del Rio*; her hips roll with the beat, making her skirt sway.

Veronica uses the pause in conversation to glance at Logan. He arches his brows with a silent question- what do you want to do? She tilts her head and waits for him to realize the obvious answer. Vinnie might not have an inquisitive mind, but she does, and she’s intrigued. Logan’s lips twitch with amusement and he winks.

“Tell me about these people who wanted Big Dick dead?”

At her question, Vinnie turns back to the table, puffs on his cigarette and gives her an appraising look. He’s unsure of her motives. Does she want to help him or is she stringing him along? Keeping her expression neutral, Veronica waits him out. If he wants her help, he doesn’t have a choice but to trust her.

“He sold out the American Dream - a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage. He got people to invest —some with their entire life savings— in a bogus land development scheme. People gave him their money to build planned communities on land that was worthless or non-existent.”

Logan nods his understanding of the scam. “Swampland in Florida, like Charles Ponzi. ”

“Only on a much bigger scale; first there were the land investments and then he created penny stocks for his land-banking company and traded them over-the-counter.” Vinnie taps the empty glass in front of him, shooting a pointed look at Logan. “Think we can get another round? And make it the good stuff this time since you’re paying the tab.”

Logan’s lips thin with distaste, but he signals the waiter for another bottle. Veronica strokes his leg as a reward for his forbearance, and says, “I take it his scheme unraveled?”

“Collapsed like a house of cards.”

The waiter returns brandishing a new bottle of champagne, holds it up for Logan’s approval -Dom Pérignon vintage 1947. He nods. Fresh coupe glasses are set on the table and the cork is popped. Logan likes to say this champagne is her in a glass - elegant, complex, and intense. Smiling at him, she takes a sip, and he raises his drink in a toast.

Vinnie swigs it down in a single gulp, refills. “Big D had people on his payroll to help sell the con. One of his shady land assessors committed suicide, wife found some papers and turned them over to the police.”

“And Dick went on the run,” Veronica concludes.

“Took his money and mistress and set sail for friendlier climates.”

Logan’s champagne pauses midway to his mouth. “Mistress?”

“Don’t know anything about her. Not even sure she exists, but Sadie’s positive Big D wouldn’t be traveling alone.”

The suspects were adding up fast- angry investors, Sadie, the mysterious mistress. Veronica
“Sadie wasn’t his first wife, there was Dick and Cassidy’s mother… Barbara? Beth?”

“Betina,” Logan supplies the name.

Veronica nods, adding her to the growing list. Big Dick fleeing the country with his ill-gotten gains could leave her without spousal support. It would probably put a crimp in Dick Jr’s lifestyle too. Veronica knows the whereabouts of the younger Casablancas brother — Cassidy is buried in Neptune Cemetery, killed in an accident on his way to Shelly Pomroy’s Christmas Cotillion — but where is Dick Junior these days? It’s a question she’ll save for Logan, later when they’re alone.

“Did you find out where Big Dick was staying?”

“The Capri.” Vinnie tucks his pack of cigarettes into the pocket of his tux. “And that’s all I know.” He stands. “I’m heading back to Neptune tomorrow; I’ll wait for your call.” Picking up his full glass, he salutes her with it. “And I’ll tell your father you said hello, even though you didn’t.”

Veronica watches him depart, crossing the room and draining his glass; he dumps the crystal coupe in a potted palm. “Do you really think that’s all he knows?”

“Not even close.” Logan studies her face and sighs, correctly reading her expression. “I suppose this means our mission to relieve you of your chafing girdle is being put on hold?”

“You know me so well.” Veronica curves her fingers around his cheek. “But I’ll make the wait worth it.”

“You always do.” Logan covers her hand with his, turns his head and kisses the center of her palm.

“Can you find out where—”

“They’re keeping the body?” Logan finishes her sentence. With a kiss on her nose, he stands. “Back in a flash. Don’t miss me too much, Ronnie.”

“I’ll try to entertain myself somehow,” she says, drolly, watching as he flits across the room. He’s good at this. A social chameleon, he easily plays the role people want and expect from him, putting them at ease and loosening their tongues. He’s back in minutes with the information she needs.

“El Instituto de Medicina Legal de La Habana.” He announces it with a stage-whisper and a flourish of hands like he’s presenting the finale of a spectacular magic trick done just for her.

Veronica hides her smile. “Someone will meet us there within the hour.”

Holding out her mink, he waits for her to rise, and then gently settles it around her shoulders, kissing the side of her neck. At the exit, Veronica puts a staying hand on his arm and hides herself behind the same potted palm Vinnie used to discard his drink. She fixes the offending girdle, smoothing down its roll, and plucks the glass from the fronds, handing it to a passing waiter.

“Are there no wrongs too small for you to want to put right?” He says it with fondness, sliding an arm around her waist, drawing her to his side. Logan believes she’s his better half, but Veronica knows the truth about her husband. Beneath his sarcasm and wicked wit lurks a tender heart.

They have their own car and driver. The two-toned Chevy Bel Air convertible waits, third in a queue of cars, and their driver leans on the hood. He is less driver and more bodyguard for times when Veronica has to venture to unseemly places without Logan. As they approach, Clarence straightens to his full, impressive height, rounds the car, and opens the passenger door. “Did you see Vinnie Van Lowe inside?”
“We did,” Logan says, handing Veronica into the backseat. “He approached us with a case.” Without letting go of her, Logan joins her in the car, and rests their entwined hands on his lap. “And we have another stop or two to make before calling it a night.”

They’re free to talk about their work in front of Clarence. He, along with a majority of their staff, are transplants from Neptune. It is safer to surround themselves with people they can trust and Clarence is loyal to Veronica; Keith having saved him from prison when the Kane family tried to use him as the fall guy in Lilly’s murder.

Leaning between the tan leather seats, Logan gives him their destination. Veronica waits until the engine starts and they pull away from the line of cars before asking, “Do you know where Dick is these days?”

“Last we spoke, he was still in Neptune, spending his days surfing.”

Veronica nods, filing the information away for later. There was no love lost between Dick and his father, their relationship had become estranged in the months following Cassidy’s death. Time and money may have healed the rift, but she can’t discount Dick as a suspect.

Logan casually strokes his thumb over the back of her hand as he stares at the passing scenery. His mood leaving the club is vastly different than their arrival- subdued and reflective. Veronica wonders if it is their impending destination, the news of Big Dick’s murder, or the intrusion of Neptune on their life here. Possibly it is all three.

“Do you think he was involved with the mob?” She doesn’t need to clarify the ‘he’ in her sentence; Logan is used to her shotgun-style of conversation.

“It wouldn’t surprise me.”

She’d asked Vinnie, why Cuba, but the hedonistic playground of Havana was the perfect place for Big Dick to hide. President Batista was more concerned with the depth of visitors’ pockets than their strength of character. Construction was everywhere from the new Plaza Civica to the high-rise casinos, and someone with Big Dick’s shady background in real estate and land development would fit right in with the regime’s plans. Plus if Vinnie was to be believed, Big Dick came with enough money to pave his way.

“I’m going to call my dad in the morning- ask him to find the investors in Big Dick’s company- the ones with the biggest losses.”

“That’s a better idea than asking Vinnie for help.”

The car slows and pulls to a stop and Veronica gets her first look at the morgue. It is a two-story, gray concrete building surrounded by a high chain-link fence. A small sign near the gate tells her they’re in the right place. There are no windows on the first floor.

Clarence studies their surroundings before climbing from the car and moving to open the door for them. A soft, “Aquí,” sounds from the inky darkness to their right. A man in blue overalls and a baseball cap waits for them on the other side of the fence.

Logan pushes the agreed upon amount of pesos through the chain link. It is counted and pocketed before the gate opens just wide enough for them to enter. The man waves them through and the fence clinks shut behind them.

Through a series of hand gestures and whispered words, they follow their escort to a door in the back of the building and then down a long flight of stairs.
The morgue is dirty; the people who clean clearly not wanting to spend a lot of time in these rooms of death. This isn’t Veronica’s first dead body, not even her first this year, but she’s never been here. Stainless steel tables, sinks, and scales. Their surfaces are pitted and dull. Tiles cover the walls and floors. She guesses they were once white, but a film clings to them so they are now a dingy gray. Everything in the industrial room is able to be rinsed with a hose.

Veronica skirts one of the two big drains in the floor, trying not to think about the things that get washed into its depths. The attendant leads them inside a large walk-in refrigerator. Bodies are on rows of silver shelves covered with sheets ready to rise like ghosts.

It’s not the bodies that get to her, but the smell. Rotting meat like chicken that has been left out in the heat, chemicals, and, strangely… pennies.

Veronica doesn’t remember Big Dick Casablancas well. Maybe she met him once at a party at Dick’s house? But they were teenagers then, they paid little or no attention to their friends’ parents.

“Aquél.” The attendant gestures toward one of the sheet-covered bodies on a lower berth before leaving them alone.

She checks the toe tag and flicks off the sheet. The body doesn’t look real; more like an anatomically correct mannequin, albeit one with a hole and an incision in its chest. Leaning over for a closer look at the wound, the hem of her evening gown drags across the floor. Now she can burn it along with the hated girdle.

There are no bruises or marks on his face to indicate a fight. She picks up each of his hands, examining them for cuts or scratches. They are undamaged and soft- the hands of someone who has never known a hard day’s labor. “Help me turn him on his side.”

Logan steps forward, gripping the shoulders and lifting the body from its metal shelf. There is no exit wound from the gunshot. Parting his hair with her fingers, Veronica looks for injuries to Big Dick’s scalp and finds none. “I’m done.”

Relief at finishing this unpleasant task washes over his face as he lowers the body and spreads the sheet over Big Dick’s lifeless form. Veronica gives Logan’s arm a comforting squeeze. She might not remember him well, but there’s no doubt that Logan does. This isn’t just a nameless victim to him, this is the father of his childhood friends. Veronica’s sorry she asked him to come with her tonight. It could have waited until she was alone.

Reading her mind, he says, “I’m okay, Ronnie.” He starts to touch her face, stops, and looks at his hands. With a brisk stride, he leaves the walk-in, and uses one of the stainless steel sinks to wash; he leaves it running for her and locates a clean rag.

Their impatient escort barely waits for them to finish, checking the refrigerator door and switching off lights as they follow the same route in reverse-- up the stairs, through the back door, and past the fence. When he is gone, disappearing once again into the darkness, Logan asks, “The Capri?”

Veronica nods. “And then home.”

There is no need here, with only the dead as witness, to keep up the pretense of Clarence as chauffeur. Opening the car door himself, Logan ushers her into the backseat, and tells Clarence their destination.

“Did you get what you want?” he asks them, putting the car in gear and navigating through the streets toward the Gulf.
“I did, but I would really like to see the police report.” Veronica responds to the question, but she’s looking at her husband. Logan’s influence extends beyond the idle rich and vacationing celebrities; he has tapped into the web of corrupt officials, knows who will provide information and at what price. If anyone can get her the files she wants, it’s him.

“Diamonds would be cheaper” —he smiles— “but if files are what you want, then files are what you shall have.”

Clarence takes the Malecón, a wide esplanade with views of the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. Veronica knows that in the distance lie the Florida Keys. She waves toward the water. “Do ever you miss Neptune?”

“No.” Logan moves closer, sliding his arms around her waist and splaying his hands across her stomach. Holding her tight to his chest, he tucks her head under his chin. “Because you’re here, and wherever you are is home.”

She chooses not to tease him for his excessive sentimentality and leans into him, resting her hands on his.

Driving past the familiar turn that leads to their office, the Hotel Nacional comes into view. Tonight it reminds Veronica of an island prison, the Alcatraz of Cuba, and she’s thankful Big Dick wasn’t staying there. It is owned in part by Meyer Lansky and the mob mingles with guests as a matter of course. Which makes gathering information from the staff a chore.

They make a right and drive a few short blocks to the intersection of 21st and N and the Hotel Capri de Havana. The gleaming white structure with its big red lettering and a jaunty little star dotting the i, is just as depressing to her as the Hotel Nacional. Built with Santo Trafficante’s blood money, the morgue is more honest than this. At least it didn’t try to hide its ugly purpose beneath glitz.

Veronica takes Logan’s arm for the walk through the windowed lobby toward the front desk. There are two people stationed behind its counter- she wants the younger one, a bored-looking, just-out-of-his-teens boy. Disentangling her arm from Logan before they’re seen together, she whispers, “Distract the female clerk with some complaint about the last time you stayed here.”

With a quick nod, Logan leaves to do her bidding and she waits until he has fully engaged the woman’s attention in a conversation about sheets. Withdrawing all the bills she has in her purse, she heads to the desk. There are other ways they could do this -a bribe for the housekeeping staff or a conversation with the bartender and a lock pick- but she is tired and wants to go home.

“I need a key for my room please.” She slides the money across the counter, keeping her hand on it.

Eyes on the cash, he asks, “Room number?”

“It’s registered under Richard Casablancas.” It’s a gamble, but not a big one. If Big Dick was anything like his son, he wouldn’t see the need for subterfuge and an alias. In a place like this, surrounded by these types of people, he would want everyone to know who he was. She takes her hand off the money, watching it disappear into the boy’s pocket.

In exchange for the pesos, a key appears on the sleek, shiny counter. “Here you are, ma’am; have a wonderful evening and thank you for staying at the Capri.”

Veronica plucks the key from the counter. The room number is on the tag. She brushes past Logan
on her way to the elevator— he is discussing ‘pilling’ and insisting on ‘non-scratchy sheets’ in his most condescending, entitled tone. She smiles.

When he finally joins her at the elevator, she asks, “So how did it end?”

“With her assurance that I would have my best night’s sleep ever, and an offer of complimentary drinks for my entire stay.”

The elevator door glides open. Logan extends his arm, gesturing for Veronica to precede him, and he follows. With a glance at the key in her hand, he presses the button for the correct floor. “I then pretended to be insulted by her pedestrian offer and walked away in a huff.”

“Pretended?”

“She should have offered me a complimentary stay.” He seems wounded by the clerk’s lack of appreciation for his status and Veronica laughs in time with their arrival on the top floor.

Big Dick’s suite is one with direct access to the hotel’s rooftop pool. Of course. Why worry about cost when you’re spending someone’s stolen pension? Veronica lets them into the room, pats the wall, and locates the light switch.

She frowns. The room is spotless. Bed made, pillows fluffed, and no signs of any occupant. She starts with the closet and tells Logan, “Look in the dresser.”

There are no clothes hanging on the rod and no luggage on the floor. Big Dick could’ve checked out after finding himself a more permanent place to stay. Or the police could’ve taken his things when he wound up dead.

“There’s nothing here,” Logan says, closing the last drawer.

“Try the living room area and don’t forget to check the trash cans; I’ll finish in here and search the bathroom.” Following her own advice, she lifts the empty bag from the garbage and peers into the can— also empty. She searches the desk, pulling out each drawer to feel its bottom, repeats the steps with the drawers of the nightstands. Kneeling next to the bed, she sticks her hands between the mattress and boxspring on first one side and then the other. Nothing.

Still on her knees, she presses her cheek to the floor to peer under the bed. No forgotten shoe, or discarded sock, not even a noticeable piece of lint. Veronica rocks back on her heels, considering both the room and her alternatives. A check-out before he checked out, the police, or maybe the desk clerk conned her.

Standing, she moves to the armchair by the window, digs her fingers in the space between the seat and the arms and runs them along the cushion.

“This is by far the cleanest hotel room I’ve ever seen,” Logan says upon his return. He lounges in the doorway between the connecting rooms, leaning against the jamb and crossing his legs at the ankle. “Unnaturally so.”

Veronica is about to agree with him when her fingertip touches something cold, metallic. Reaching deeper, she squeezes the object between her fore- and middle fingers and slowly pulls it free. It’s an art deco chandelier earring. The dangle-style piece is paved with clear Austrian crystals and in its center is a faceted pink stone. She holds it up for Logan. “Maybe the mistress does exist? And she’s somewhere in the city, missing an earring and spending Big Dick’s money.”
Logan wakes to the sensation of sunlight hot on his cheek—suddenly and completely, holdover from a time when sleeping soundly was hubris. Relaxes, as his arm stretches across the big mattress, still warm in the hollow around which he’s curved…the place Veronica slept.

He smiles, stroking his palm contemplatively over Egyptian cotton, then sprawls along the entire width to stretch. *Another glorious day in paradise*, he thinks, gazing up at the maroon-and-gold canopy of their opulent four-poster. Faintly, in the distance, through the no-doubt-deliberate crack in the door, he smells coffee.

Lounging upright, he scratches his abdomen as he heads towards the bathroom to wash. Checks the clock as he passes; it’s noon, no surprise, after a night squandered searching hotels and morgues. Veronica’s doubtless hard at work already, weeding out truths from Vinnie’s lies. His wife is nothing if not brisk.

Yawning, he steps into the shower to scrub off smoke, then brushes his teeth lazily before the grey marble vanity. He messes with his hair for a minute, gives the effort up as futile—it never behaves without Brylcreem, and requires more than a dab. Selecting his loudest paisley smoking jacket—blue and orange, Veronica calls it the Sartorial Nightmare—he shrugs it on, belts it loosely, and heads off in search of caffeine. The prospect of arousing both irritation and lust in his wife is invigorating.

The raw-stone tile in the hall is chilly, as is the wrought-iron Art Deco railing on the stairs. He frowns, because usually this house runs like a fine-tuned machine; wonders if Remy’s turned down the thermostat again so the butter in his pastries won’t melt. The problem with hiring staff for loyalty rather than deference is a certain lack of...obsequiousness. Logan makes a note to look
unenthused, next time he dines in.

His staircase gives way to a large and airy living room, decorated in white and blue, gold etching the elaborate crown molding; a wall of blue-gauze-curtained windows lines one side. Through the fleur-de-lis-embossed glass he can just make out Corny, staring vacantly at Veronica’s favorite rosebush, clippers held forgotten in one hand. Logan snorts amusement, and heads through a carved archway into the kitchen.

Tina’s claimed the table for her scheduling schemes-- notebooks and calendars are strewn everywhere, and she’s stashed a pencil behind her ear to sip coffee. She’s sporting her usual hot-librarian look--grey skirt, white blouse, hair in the tidiest of buns—but the smile she aims his way when he saunters in is pure sunshine.

Logan feels smug about hiring Tina. She pays the bills, runs their lives like clockwork, and never manages to irritate him OR Veronica. Which is no mean feat.

She points with her pencil to a pot of steaming espresso, and he grins and wanders over. “How do you always know?” He pours a small cup and leans a hip on the counter as he sips. “I wake up at a different time every single morning, yet my coffee is perpetually hot.”

Laughing, she looks both ways theatrically, shields her mouth to mock-whisper. “Trade secret. Could be genies? Or me, consuming the lukewarm evidence and sweet-talking Remy into making more.”

“Ah yes, Remy. I gathered he managed to haul his carcass into the kitchen before three, based on the temperature in the hall. Did Veronica con some elaborate confection out of him, or was he struck by inspiration?”

“You know better,” she chides, with a faint but discernable eye roll. “He can’t be truly inspired until he’s kicked the hangover. But he left a buffet on the sidebar, on the off-chance you actually want to eat.”

Logan fakes a shudder of revulsion as he casts an eye over pastries and quiche, pours himself more espresso. “Breakfast is my wife’s particular fetish, ESPECIALLY breakfast involving sugar and cream. Speaking of which—have you seen the little woman, bustling about? Wreaking havoc, perhaps, as is her wont?”

“She’s in the study,” Tina informs him. “On the phone, for a good half-hour. She always notices when I pick up the extension, though, so I have no idea with whom.”

“I’ll brave the lion’s den and find out.” He pours one more cup for the road. “Wish me luck. Hopefully I’ll emerge with all limbs attached.”

“Limbs, possibly.” Tina smirks as she selects a bill from the pile. “But I’m not holding out much hope for the robe.”

“Keep the tailor’s number handy, just in case.” He winks, and sashays off to find Veronica. “This one HAPPENS to be my favorite.”

When he opens the door to the enormous, wood-paneled library Champ skitters out, racing in excited circles around Logan’s feet until he picks her up and cradles her against his chest. Stroking the tiny Italian greyhound’s head with one thumb, he leans a shoulder against the frame and surveys his wife affectionately.

She’s still in pajamas, pink and silk but cut in a man’s style (because Logan is a self-acknowledged
“Yes, because there must be a trail of swindled investors a mile long.” Her brows lift as she gets a good look at Logan, lounging. She grabs the Leica he bought for her birthday off the leather-covered blotter, cradles the earpiece between her cheek and shoulder, and frames him in her sights. He blows a kiss as the picture snaps, and her answering smile is naughty. “And I don’t need ALL the names, just the biggest losers. Sure, Dad, I understand it’s not a two-day job. But you can send the photos by courier, right? So I can show them to witnesses? And maybe check Betina’s alibi, for the night of the murder?”

Logan laughs at her, silently, because this is the girl who fought so hard against being ‘kept’; yet she’s willing to throw around their money to facilitate cases like it’s water. She bares her teeth in a fake snarl, but tells her father, “Dad, you’re seriously the best. Well of COURSE you do it because you love me! How could ANYONE resist this mug? Oh ha-ha. I love you too, you old codger. Thanks for your help, it’s a million times more reliable than assistance I’d get from Vinnie.”

She hangs up. Crosses her arms as Logan approaches with the squirming dog. “Must you look so irresistible in that abomination of a robe? It’s giving me a complex, I hope you know.”

“I’m counting on it,” he murmurs, leaning in to kiss her cheek. He transfers possession of the pet, then pats the camera as he seats himself on the desk. At least she’ll have fun developing in her darkroom later. “So how IS Keith this fine afternoon?”

“He’s almost as persistent a bloodhound as you.” Logan traces a finger along Champ’s nose, gets licked for his efforts. “But it’ll take a while to learn whether Big Dick KEPT records of his financial shenanigans, much less obtain copies. In Dad’s experience, old-fashioned con artists hide one ledger containing real vs. cooked transactions, and locating it is the dilemma.”

“Well if anyone can track down malfeasance, it’s former Sheriff Mars.” Logan traces a finger along Champ’s nose, gets licked for his efforts. “He’s almost as persistent a bloodhound as you.”

“And speaking OF tracking things down,” she murmurs, in a not-at-all-subtle segue. “I don’t suppose you made any early-morning headway, when you were drinking cognac and placing calls at six?”

He bobs his brows and springs up, crosses to the filing cabinet. Produces a sheaf of papers from its depths, which he hands over with a flourish. “I may not SEEM dependable,” he tells her, as she sets the dog on the floor and yanks the file from his grip. “But that’s just a clever ruse. A little gratitude would be nice, here, sugar plum. It’s like you love Big Dick’s case report more than me.”

“I can’t believe you got this thing so FAST,” she mutters, disregarding him to page rapidly through the document. “Cause of death MUGGING? Is the entire police force partaking of Corny’s stash?”

“Rafe was VERY accommodating.” Logan moves behind her to read over her shoulder. “They actually interrupted Castro Watch to do a cursory investigation, then filed PAPERWORK, because Casablancas was so rich. Our favorite Police Chief was ecstatic someone cared…had a copy driven over, to prove his professionalism. They want their wealthy transplants to feel safe so we’ll keep spending.”

“This report barely contains facts.” Ronnie turns a page with disgust. “The mugging was perpetrated by rebel factions looking to create civil unrest. Three assailants are in custody”. What
“Gee, sweet pea, sometimes I get the sense you lack faith in humanity.” He flips to the end, and taps a paragraph halfway down. “I did learn one thing reading this.”

“Ballistics?” She squints studying the page, because Veronica won’t admit she might need glasses. “158-grain lead bullet, round nose. Probably a Smith and Wesson revolver.”

“And also,” he says, “more importantly, the location. Big Dick bit said bullet on Zulueta, near Sloppy Joe’s Bar. Which is highly inconvenient, because in equally vital news, I learned this morning that Rossi haunts craps tables at the Sans Souci. Which is on the other side of town.”

Veronica snaps, faux-regretful. “Foiled again. And all because Big Dick hoped to share a scotch with Hemingway, like every other tourist. So it’s my case or yours tonight, then? And yours takes precedence, since it involves a girl in trouble?”

He smiles; of course V understands. “On the plus side, Rossi’s apparently quite the high roller—you can stake him out from a distance and gamble. And the only sacrifice you’ll have to make involves heels and uncomfortable underwear.”

“Only?” she demands, with an adorable grimace of fake outrage. “Clearly you have no grasp of the suffering involved in feminine glamour.”

“I promise to soothe your wounds.” He tucks back a stray strand of her hair. “I planned my strategy between calls and cognac, while you slept the sleep of the dead. And may I say…I think you’ll approve.”

Logan’s enjoying a Scotch by the fireplace, sipping with meditative slowness, when his wife appears at the top of the stairs.

She’s all in red—the new curve-hugging velvet dress he ordered from New York—with a wide v neckline that ends in rosettes, exposing swaths of pearly skin. The light from the chandelier gilds her, making diamonds at her throat sparkle, turning her up-do molten; she smiles at his expression and starts down. Her skirt, embroidered subtly in red flowers, swishes provocatively as she moves.

Like a flame, she cuts a path through the cool white space, arrowing towards him while he sets down his drink and stares. She splays a palm against his chest, gazing up coyly beneath her lashes and asks, “So tell the truth. Will I stand out?”

“Prepare to set the world on fire.” He settles his palms around the delicate curve of her waist. It’s tightly constricted—she must be wearing a corset—and his cock stirs in predictable response. “I have to say, though, I’m miffed. I put on a white dinner jacket so I’d draw eyes, but no one will spare me a glance next to you.”

“No one?” She traces a nail around the button over his belly, and he breathes out, a soft, happy huff. “Personally, I can’t tear my eyes away.”

He smiles, slow and dirty. Until a discreet throat-clearing from the doorway makes him turn his head.

It’s Clarence, in the elaborate chauffeur garb he insists on wearing, which Logan finds over-the-top; he seems unruffled as always, carefully straightening the edge of his glove. “Ready?” he asks,
ever-professional. “I’ve pulled the Rolls around, as requested. And my sources tell me Rossi’s at the Sans Souci, in the company of a woman.”

Veronica lifts a brow—she knows Logan bought the Rolls for one reason only. “Gosh, I hope this doesn’t mean it’s going to rain,” she murmurs, patting his cheek with one soft dark glove. Turns, so Clarence can drape her in opera-length black mink. “I spent almost an hour doing my hair.”

“Are you both armed?” Clarence offers Logan his overcoat, ignoring the innuendo, and discreetly checks his watch. “This particular faction of mobsters is unpredictable, and rumor has it Rossi’s been out of temper lately.”

“I wonder why?” Logan waves outerwear away; the mink’s purely for show, Cuba never gets cold. “If something’s needling him, knowing WHAT would be helpful.”

“Money is missing,” Clarence says, with a faint shrug. “My source wasn’t clear on whether it was stolen or owed. I’m working to find out more.”

He opens the door and precedes them out of it, into the warm, windy night. Logan follows, helping Veronica carefully down the steps, surveys the wide flat vista beneath the pale glow of the moon. Palm trees lining the boulevard sway, and carriage lights on either side of their Cantera door illuminate the Silver Cloud—bought new last year, as a Christmas gift to himself.

It’s a beautiful machine, almost as elegant as Veronica, painted a discreet silvery-blue that still arrests the eye. Most importantly, it has a privacy window to shield passengers from driver, and pull-down shades to deter other prying eyes. He leaves all of the above open as he hands his wife in…he needs to talk business with Clarence. And of course, they’re dressed to the nines this way because right now they WANT to be seen.

“So what do we know about Rossi?” Logan asks once seated, mostly to make Ronnie squirm. Clarence smoothly exits the drive onto Avenida 51, which leads out of town towards the Sans Souci. “Other than the fact that he’s REALLY bad at craps?”

His wife and Wiedman exchange a look in the rearview mirror. Which means their bodyguard’s both aware of her unsanctioned detecting, and willing to take the blame. “For one thing, he’s not a penny-ante member of the Organization,” Clarence says. “He took part in the Havana Conference. His piece of the pie seems to be trafficking—he owns several high-end bordellos in town—but he’s reputedly eager to expand.”

“In which direction?” Logan stares at Veronica, who’s pretending to examine her lipstick in a silver compact. “Drugs? Gambling? The devil’s in the details.”

“Unknown,” Clarence says shortly, and Veronica closes the compact with a snap. “He’s compulsive and superstitious about the way the dice fall. Carries a ‘lucky coin’ everywhere. And despite his patrician good looks, he comes from rough beginnings. Raised in Jersey, mother poor but religious, father unknown. When she passed away in his teens, Rossi was placed in an orphanage—he escaped and sought refuge with a mobster named Carmelo Trocani. Reputedly Trocani was his mentor, and integrated him into mob circles before getting arrested for tax evasion.”

“Just like Capone,” Veronica murmurs, and Logan decides to trick her into elaborating on Trocani later. “Convicted on all counts in California, two years ago. It was in the paper.”

“Hmmm.” Logan raises his brows in patent disbelief—he reads the news faithfully every morning. She narrows her eyes, challenging. But the turn onto the casino’s dirt drive stalls a promising
argument, and she turns her attention towards gathering her things.

“I’m going to join the chauffeurs’ craps game while you’re inside, fish for information,” Clarence says, as they pass beneath the neon-capped stone arch that proclaims this the ‘Sans Souci Niteclub-Casino’. He turns right between rows of palms towards the white one-story building. “I’ll check the car every hour on the hour, plan your exit accordingly.”

“Aw, Clarence, always so organized.” Logan climbs out, circles the trunk to help Veronica. “You need cash for betting?”

Wiedman shakes his head. “Took a few hundred from the discretionary fund,” he says. “Tina noted it in the ledger.”

“Be careful back there.” Veronica smirks, smoothing a wayward lock of hair. “I hear those chauffeur parties get rowdy. You may have to DRAG RACE.”

“Then it’s a good thing we brought the Rolls.” Clarence tips his cap and disappears into the darkness around the side of the building. Logan crooks an elbow for Veronica, and escorts her towards the entrance.

From the outside, the Sans Souci’s a serene hacienda, gracefully arched and pillared, roofed in red tile. Inside it’s all glitz and flash. Slot machines line the walls, operated by well-heeled partygoers in pearls; green baize tables fill the room, at which vest-clad croupiers hawk roulette and chemin de fer. Faintly, from the outdoor stage, come the strains of some elaborate mambo-musical, probably involving thirty dancers and salacious hints of black magic. Their prey’s no doubt indoors, though; so Logan orders drinks from a passing waiter, and finds Veronica a blackjack table to bankrupt.

V settles in with her most guileless grin, a ray of seemingly-incompetent yet adorable sunshine no one will see coming. Logan lounges against a pillar a few feet away, Scotch in hand--divides his attention between enjoying the carnage and searching for Rossi.

It takes a while, despite the guy’s height and vivid-auburn coloring…the room’s packed, the noise of the slots and competing croupiers just shy of cacophony. He resorts to flagging down a cigarette girl of the type rich men favor—young, fresh, legs for miles—and tips lavishly when she points out his suspect, predictably losing at craps.

Ramon Aviles is within striking distance of Rossi, holding court near a potted plant, busy reducing a Brit named Hamilton to helpless laughter. Logan saunters his way, as pretext, timing his approach to coincide with George’s back-slapping, still-chuckling retreat.

“Always bringing down the house.” Logan toasts Ramon with his drink as he settles in beside him. “If you ever get tired of the diplomatic corps, you have a promising future on the stage.”

“My handsomeness is a curse,” Ramon agrees, complacent, and Logan snorts. Turns his gaze back to Rossi, who’s considerably more Hollywood-perfect, and based on his scowls, more cursed. “Planning to pit your wit against the dice?”

“Trying to decide how much wit that crowd already possesses.” Logan gestures with his chin. “The redhead, for example, keeps throwing cash down like he knows how the game’s rigged.”

“Rossi?” Ramon rolls his eyes. “He’s a terrible gambler. Confuses superstition with skill and never calculates the odds. The stubborn determination that makes him dangerous in business is a handicap, here.”
“Angelo Rossi? I’ve heard about his businesses.” Logan drains his glass, sets it on a planter with a clack. “High-end and successful, wealthy clientele. Not the kind of place I’d take the little woman for a night on the town, though.”

“For the moment, no,” Ramon agrees, with a significant brow lift. “But a little bird tells me he’s branching out in more…respectable directions. Nightclubs, I hear. Knowing him, they’ll be lavish. Rossi likes everything he pays for to be the best.”

He glances significantly at a va-va-voomy blonde, approaching under the escort of two large and surly guards. She’s Mansfield-stacked and barely-clad in green satin, with a vivacious smile and disillusioned eyes. The emeralds at her wrists jangle as she gives Rossi a convincingly-cheerful two-handed wave, accepts his kiss on her cheek. But as soon as he refocuses on his game, her face settles into pensive stillness.

Bubbles, Logan decides, is Janet, disappointed. Just as fresh and pretty, but eons less innocent.

“Looks to me like that particular purchase has seller’s remorse,” Logan murmurs, thoughtfully crossing his arms.

“I sincerely hope you’re wrong.” Ramon pats his shoulder, uncharacteristically solemn. “If this guy’s displeased with a mistress, it’s curtains,” he draws a finger theatrically across his throat, “and not the kind involving encores and roses. Rossi’s got no qualms about making inconvenient women…disappear.”

Ramon winks and wanders off, probably in search of feminine company. Logan decides to use Veronica’s distraction to his advantage, and get an up-close-and-personal read on the enemy.

He checks his cuffs, deliberately relaxes his muscles, and saunters over like he’s got nothing but time, because the party of least interest is the party of most power. They’re playing money craps at Rossi’s table—betting against each other, not the house. The bored Cuban croupier has little to do but rake in his percentage. To make things extra-dull, the participants are idiots, throwing down cash on lucky numbers and snake eyes with no sense of strategy.

Logan’s always been bad at math, but even he knows better. His wife would empty every pocket in ten minutes flat.

Pulling out the diamond-studded money clip, selected to impress, he tosses down a wad of hundreds and bobs his brows at the croupier. “I’ll bet half of that against the line,” he says, with a wink. Lifts his finger to attract a passing waitress, and orders another Scotch.

Rossi frowns; it’s not a dumb play, but it’s ballsy…if Logan wins, the rest of the table loses. The guy studies Logan, analyzing, and it’s oddly disconcerting. He’s Leslie Howard handsome, the kind of heartthrob Hollywood loves, auburn hair swept dashingly off a high, noble brow--but Logan grew up looking into eyes like these. They’re dark windows onto a sucking void of ego. Everybody’s fodder to a narcissist. No one gets out alive.

Cowboy-without-a-hat to Logan’s left throws a six, and he accepts his Scotch and sips as half his chips disappear. Meets Cowboy’s guffaw of gratification with an aw-shucks snap.

“Too bad,” Rossi says insincerely as he stacks his winnings, donning a superior smirk right on cue. Just like the old man, he enjoys condescending to those he beats. “It’s a shame when noble risks fail.”

Logan shrugs, affecting disinterest, because egotists see that as a challenge. “Well like my daddy
once told me,” he crunches down on an ice cube, tucks the shards into his cheek, “when he announced his role as Prince Valiant, in what was SUPPOSED to be a swashbuckling epic for the ages…’Smile like you mean it, son’.” He shrugs, fake-self-effacing, and adds, “Of course that film was the biggest flop of the decade. Maybe I shouldn’t have listened?”

“Ah, yes!” Rossi nods, the lightbulb going on. “You must be Logan Echolls—I heard you’ve been rusticating here. Your reputation precedes you.”

“It usually does.” Logan chews up the rest of his ice. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

“Angelo Rossi,” the guy offers a shake, expecting reciprocal recognition; around them the table cycles through another bet. Rossi extracts a coin from his pocket and kisses it before putting a mountain of chips on Hard Eight. Logan manfully represses the urge to roll his eyes.

“And you are?” Logan turns to Bubbles with a flirtatious lift of brows, putting a halt to her attempts to fend off Cowboy. It’s high time he got a read on the captive princess.

“She flashes a bright, Janet-esque smile to punctuate. When she offers her hand he kisses her knuckles, just to test a theory.

“Charmed, I’m sure.” He smirks as, right on cue, Rossi looks daggers, and Bubbles does an impressive job hiding fear. “Seems like your gentleman friend’s got a good luck charm already. Maybe you’ll consent to be mine?”

Bubbles hesitates before replying, and the voice of doom at his elbow interrupts. “Aw, honey, stop before you give me a complex. I thought we established, way back during our wedding vows, that I’VE got all the luck you need?”

His shoulders tense again as Veronica pushes her five feet of velvet-clad temptation between him and a weedy Scot, bellying up to the table. She grins, her knife-bright smile a dare--like hell will you interrogate our witness without me. Grabs his chips without asking and makes a Pass Line wager, then turns with intent towards Rossi.

Logan scowls--can you NOT place yourself squarely in the psychopath’s sights? But his silent plea is, predictably, ignored. He nudges V, to force the issue, and gets kicked beneath the table. “Gee, honey, you’re right,” he says, with heavy sarcasm. “I feel more optimistic by the second.”

“Luck INDEED.” Rossi seizes the opportunity to revenge-flirt—big surprise, Veronica is catnip to assholes. “Mr. Echolls, who IS this vision?”

Bubbles shakes, unthreatened but worried, which makes the vein in Logan’s temple throb. He watches absently as Veronica’s bet wins (of course), then tries, without much hope, to divert her.

“Speaking OF our wedded bliss, I believe I promised you a dance. Didn’t I, sugarplum? And they’re playing your favorite song!”

V cocks her head, raptor-like, puts her heel on his instep like she’ll dig in if he moves. But Rossi says, “We have a table reserved by the stage. I insist you join us for dinner,” and her urge to crush is diverted.

“Keep up, you moron, Logan thinks, she mentioned wedding vows. But all he says is, “My wife, Veronica. Ronnie, meet Angelo Rossi and his lovely lady friend, Bubbles.”

Bubbles shakes, unthreatened but worried, which makes the vein in Logan’s temple throb. He watches absently as Veronica’s bet wins (of course), then tries, without much hope, to divert her.

“Speaking OF our wedded bliss, I believe I promised you a dance. Didn’t I, sugarplum? And they’re playing your favorite song!”

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“We’d be delighted!” she chirps, looping her arm through Logan’s and tugging when he proves recalcitrant. “You’ve never eaten dinner like they’ve got here, Mister. The Lobster Newburg is out of this WORLD!”
Logan sighs and lets her tug him along—he’s not risking cockblock-by-shellfish, after she wore that corset and he insisted on the Rolls. But he decides to make her beg in payback, later, because using his allergy to play him is LOW.

She steers him in Rossi’s elegant wake past the Nevada cocktail lounge, out onto the main patio, a table-packed space beneath twinkle-light-festooned trees. There are four round, canopied stages, on which an elaborate performance is kicking into gear; a girl in a gold bikini gyrates enthusiastically, while tropically-attired Cubans play bongos.

“This is *Bambo Iroko Bamba*,” Veronica informs Rossi in her breathless-bimbo voice as he pulls out her chair—apparently she’s appointed herself tour guide. “We’ve seen it THREE times this month already. It’s about VOODOO.”

“Clearly.” Logan slumps beside her and tosses back the rest of his drink. The girl on stage falls dramatically to the floor, and begins wrestling a taxidermied python. “And she does it so WELL.”

“I understand they hire many Americans to work at this club;” Rossi says, eyeing the dancer with a practiced procurer’s eye. He removes a cigarette case from his jacket pocket and offers it—lights one, when Logan waves them off, with a happy sigh. “Is that what tourists prefer, do you think? Or would they rather have an authentic Cuban experience, involving local artists and themes?”

“Depends on the American.” Logan gestures for a waiter and orders champagne, because he needs to keep his head clear if Ronnie’s planning to court danger. “A lot of big names come to Havana and clean up, but the popular small acts are mostly regional talent.”

Rossi turns to press champagne on an unenthused Bubbles—she fakes a smile and accepts. Veronica takes the opportunity to hiss in his ear, “TALK to her. Get her AWAY from him. That’s why we’re HERE.”


She gets the stubborn, calculating gleam in her eye he dreads, and then abruptly she’s all smiles, waving eagerly at a passing blade. “Alberto! Oh my gosh, over here!”

Alberto Alonso, the mercurial artiste behind the Sans Souci’s spectacles, stops at the table and smiles. He has no interest in women, generally, except as marketable commodities; but Veronica and Liz Taylor seem to be exceptions. “Mrs. Echolls,” he says, appraising her ensemble. “As always, your taste is ravishing. But why diamonds and not the topazes? How many times have I told you? ALWAYS the topazes, when your gown is deepest red!”

“One of the stones came loose,” she says sweetly, gesturing for him to sit, and flicking Logan in the leg to get him moving. “The necklace is at the jeweler’s. Alberto, have you met our new friend? Mr. Rossi is FASCINATED by your show, and asking all sorts of questions. Like, how does it work behind the scenes? And what elements of performances do audiences like best?”

Alberto glances at the stage, where Gold Bikini and the drummers have formed a conga line for the big finish, shaking maracas and miming coitus as she sings suggestively about huge snakes. He laughs, self-satisfied, and waves an expansive arm. “As you see,” he says, sitting so he can comfortably expound. “Light, color, movement. Sex and death. All the primal human urges should be on display, but TASTEFULLY, of course…”

Bubbles takes a desperate swallow of champagne, hides a grimace, and Logan leans towards her to murmur. “Has the bottle gone sour? I can order a different brand.”
“No, it’s just….I’m sorry, I hate to admit this, but I can’t STAND champagne.” She shrugs, flashing that bright smile again, and he gets a glimpse of the unaffected woman she probably once was. “I’m a fruity mixed-drinks girl. Give me something with an umbrella and a slice of pineapple every time, only in this crowd, that’s seen as...gauche.”

The dancers file off stage with much grinning and fan-waving, and the bandleader segues into Tito Puente’s newest groove, *Cuidado Con La Mano*. Logan smiles. “Tell you what. My wife hates to cha-cha—says it’s just ‘step, ball, change, repeat’ and she prefers a challenge—so she’d never cut short the chit-chat to dance. If you’ll do me the honor, I’ll cha-cha you over to the bar, buy you more palatable refreshment, and have you back before your boyfriend even notices.”

Bubbles glances longingly at the liquid courage, then checks out Rossi who’s picking Alberto’s brain. Straightens her shoulders, taking the bait. “I’m game, but quickly. And no funny business or wandering hands. I’m not in the market for a man, Mister Echolls. ESPECIALLY not a married one.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” He presses a palm to his heart in exaggerated innocence as he stands and helps her up. “You’re admittedly a lovely specimen, but clearly taken. And my wife is, in a word…irreplaceable.”

She smiles at this, eyes softening—Bubbles is a romantic, it seems--and lets him swirl her onto the dance floor. The girl’s curvy and tall, not so light on her feet, but less inclined to lead than Veronica; so he maneuvers her in spirals towards the bar without much trouble.

“You know, we have an acquaintance in common,” he says, spinning her out so they can cha-cha, tucking her back in. “I met a girl the other day who said Angelo Rossi was dating her sister.”

“My sister is HERE?” Bubbles tenses in his arms, face conveying pure exasperation. “Ugh, honestly! I TOLD her not to come!”

“Guess she didn’t listen,” Logan says drily. He leads her up to the bar, orders a daiquiri. “Not only is she camped out at a hotel she can’t afford, she seems terrified. Mentioned to me in confidence she couldn’t reach you by phone.”

“But I CALLED her!” Bubbles protests, accepting the hot-pink drink with a grateful grin and downing half in one gulp. “I TOLD her we might not be able to talk for a while, and she…”

Logan spots Rossi pushing through the dancers, predator-prowling with bodyguards trailing. He holds up a hand to stop Bubbles mid-sentence. “Our absence has been noted. Finish that, quick, and let’s rejoin the crowd before he worries we’ve run off.”

She gulps the rest, wipes her mouth with the back of one hand, and says, as he tugs her back onto the floor, “I don’t know why you’re being so nice, Mister. But if you’re willing…could you tell my sister I’m OK? Tell her I’ll figure out a way to get in touch with her soon.”

“If you want, I can help you arrange a meet…” he starts to say, then stops, as Rossi notices them and marches over. “You know, you really do dance divinely. Wings on your feet and a gleam in your eye--you’re practically a song by Doris Day.”

Bubbles frowns, but her brow clears in understanding as Rossi murmurs, “May I cut in?” She turns with a smile to accept him, putting Logan at her back. Sighing, he spins away, rubbing at the headache forming between his brows.

There’s no need to return to the table and collect his wife--she appears, like magic, at the edge of
the dance floor. So he beckons instead, smirking; then spins her into a mambo as the band strikes up Suavecito.

“Sorry.” Veronica executes an effortless twirl and shimmy, giving him nostalgic flashbacks to her high-school cheerleading days. “I tried to distract him, but he was like a guided missile once he noticed her missing.”

“See, you think our goals line up, here, yours and mine,” Logan says, letting his hand slide down her back to the bottom edge of her corset. Fights a surge of excited distraction as he notes she’s… unencumbered by garments below. “But au contraire. You weren’t SUPPOSED to distract him, Veronica. Talking to Rossi was MY job. YOURS was to clean up at blackjack while observing all suspects from a distance, so I could flirt with Bubbles and feel out her level of commitment. Now that nut case not only knows what you look like, he’s been formally introduced, and he’ll proceed to become obsessed with you, like EVERY awful criminal we meet. This is EXACTLY the scenario I was trying to avoid!”

“Oh, so I should have let her slobber all over you, until he got jealous enough to bribe a cop and get you thrown in jail? Have you forgotten that trophy wife who tried to frame you, Logan? Or the Minister of Agriculture’s revenge plot, after you accidentally stumbled across his sugarcane scam? You know full well our PLAN was for you to talk to HER, not HIM!”

“I just wanted to get a feel for the guy’s weak spots,” Logan says defensively, attempting to unknot his shoulders with a faux-careless shrug. “Ramon passed along some nasty rumors. It seemed like a golden opportunity.”

“Rossi is LOONY-BIN crazy,” Veronica says, succinctly. “His obsessions can’t be subdued by fists, even fists as effective as yours. Trust me on this.”

“And you know all about the guy how?” he asks gently, smiling as she realizes her mistake. “Considering we agreed six months ago that you would NOT spy on him, or follow him, or have anything whatsoever to do with MOB-AFFILIATED BROTHEL-OWNERS?”

“Clarence told me,” she lies, avoiding Logan’s eyes. “You know he sets his own agenda, he gave up all the details in the car. He was very convincing.”

“Uh-huh.” Logan infuses the word with patent skepticism, and she still won’t look at him, but faintly, she smiles. “Bubbles didn’t know Janet was here,” he adds, relenting. “She was shocked when I mentioned her sister, also scared. Whatever she’s involved in, she wants family safely distant.”

“I did notice one thing at the blackjack table.” Veronica pastes herself against him for a rapid spin, blinking bewitchingly up. “Those guards follow Bubbles EVERYWHERE. Before she appeared at your table, she was in the ladies’; they trailed her right to the door, then stood on either side. If we want to separate her from Rossi, we’ll basically have to kidnap her, then smuggle her out of the country. I decided we needed to approach her in the creep’s company. And he’d only let you close enough to speak if I provided a distraction tailored to a playboy.”

The song ends, and he says, “So you chummed the waters with yourself, wearing that dress. Wonderful, perfect. I’d like to go home now and lock all the doors. Also, I need another drink.”

She pats his chest, soothing. “Go ahead and fortify yourself, sweet cheeks. I’ll grab my clutch and wrap while Rossi and Bubbles dance; then we’ll head out to the car…maybe take the long way home?”
“I feel like I’m being conditioned to obey, a la Pavlov,” he murmurs, gazing down at her. “But I’m not sure I care. Three minutes, you meet me by the bar, and this leisurely drive needs to include one of my two favorite activities.”

“You only have two?” she asks throatily. Kisses his chin and moves off. Leaving him besotted and in a state on the dance floor, needing that drink more than ever.

He flags down a bartender, orders a double, tosses it back Bubbles-style with a snap of his wrist; then leans broodingly on his elbows to watch for his wife. Two minutes pass. Three. He begins methodically cracking his knuckles, one by one—and when he hits the four-minute mark, surges upright into action.

Sure enough, Veronica’s sitting at the table, chatting merrily away. Rossi’s there too, and Bubbles, plus a slight, dark-haired stranger—his date’s a fire-engine redhead whose coiffure, from the rear, involves Debbie Reynolds levels of hairpiece. Logan scowls, ready to give his wife an under-the-breath piece of his mind. But she glances up and spots him, and the dark edge to her smile makes his stomach sink.

“Darling!” she calls, waving him closer with a glittering glare of warning--the diamonds on her gloved wrist swing and sparkle. “Look who was just sitting down when I got back! Isn’t this the biggest slice of serendipity you’ve ever SEEN?”

He circles the table as she rests a hand affectionately on the redhead’s shoulder, and his indigestion doubles.

It’s Trina. With feathers in her hair, pink dress cut indecently low--wearing the glow caused by too much booze and admiration, which leads her into all her worst scrapes. “Surprise, little bro!” she chirps gaily, blowing a feather out of her eye. Then favors him with Look Number Forty-Seven, ‘wide-eyed enthusiasm’. “Isn’t this club just the most of the MOST?”

“What are you DOING here?” he asks, forgetting tact. Because no one turns him into a surly six-year-old learning life’s unfair faster than Sister Dearest.

“Well, hello to you too!” Her performance shifts overdramatically to ‘amused exasperation’, no doubt learned at their father’s knee. “I’ve got a job, of course. Headlining at Club Parisien, starting tomorrow. Manny and I are here to soak up atmosphere, you know, INSPIRATION. We artistes need to feed our muse! Lady music is a demanding mistress!”

Logan manages to contain his sigh, just barely, and sprawls petulantly beside Veronica. Flexes his hand beneath the table, because he feels like a frog in a slowly-warming pot.

“Well if anyone knows the truth about demanding mistresses…” he trails off suggestively with a smirk, which has the satisfying effect of making Rossi’s brows lift and Trina’s eyes narrow. “Who’d you have to ‘invest’ in to get the gig?”

“You forget, Logie Bear.” She crosses her wrists like a fussy old cat as she goes into battle mode. “SOME of us in this family have talents other than spreading money around. I’m going to be the FACE of a new club called the Riviera…they’re building it as we speak. This Cafe Parisien gig is just me…dipping my toe in the waters of international stardom. You’ll see…once this jewel has the appropriate setting, I’ll become a bigger household name than Daddy.”

“Let’s hope it’s for more savory reasons,” he says silkily, folding his arms. “Although certainly you’ve inherited his performative skills. Hot tip…Manny, I think she said your name was? Make sure the band is both talented and loud. And invest HEAVILY in elaborate costumes.” He grabs
Veronica’s coat off the back of the chair and stands. “Bubbles, thanks for humoring me with a
dance, even though you couldn’t WAIT to get back to your boyfriend. Rossi, hope that coin brings
you luck. Veronica, say goodbye now, it’s time for us to LEAVE.”

He helps her up with every appearance of solicitousness, then links her arm with his so she can’t
escape. Marches her through the casino and out to the car while she double-steps to keep pace,
breathing repeatedly and sharply through his nose.

Clarence is nowhere to be seen, but Logan boosts his wife into the car anyway, climbs in after and
locks the doors. Closes the sliding blackout divider, pulls down the shades, and then slumps into a
corner, crossing his arms. Stares at her and broods while his anger fades.

She mirrors his pose, fighting amusement, putting one knee on the seat so her skirt creeps
tantalizingly up her thigh. He doesn’t budge, because all this frustration has kicked his
determination to see her beg up to ten; she’s going to have to work for what she clearly wants.

“You’re not wearing anything under that, are you?” he asks conversationally, watching her face.
“Other than the corset, I mean. I couldn’t help but notice when we were dancing. It’s like you
ENJOY making me stew.”

“You certainly don’t need MY help,” she says, ever the realist. “Look at you over there, all worked
up into a state. My girdle and I last night weren’t a patch on all that clenched-muscle angst.”

“Take off your dress and show me everything,” he says. “I MIGHT be too mad after your little
disappearing stunt for even THAT to sweeten my mood, but it’s possible I’m wrong.”

“Not mad, worried,” she corrects, turning to present him with her back. “And scared by Trina’s
sudden appearance, smack-dab in Rossi’s clutches. Help me with my zipper? I’ll bet I can soothe
the savage beast.”

He gazes down at her delicate nape, his breath stirring the soft wisps of hair. She glances over her
shoulder, all cat-eyed calculation disguised as innocent, limpid query; he draws her zipper, hissing,
down her spine. Strokes the revealed bony shapes with his thumb.

She turns to face him, pressing a hand to her chest to hold the loosened dress in place. “Promise
you’ll still respect me in the morning?” she murmurs, batting her lashes, and he huffs an
involuntary laugh.

“Respect you, yes. The way Anslinger respects Luciano. Trust you? Enh.” He makes a see-saw
motion with one hand. “But I have to admit, I love the way you lie.”

“Why Logan Echolls!” she says, and lets the dress slip down. He finally gets a look at the corset,
black and threaded with delicate pink ribbons and bows; it presses her breasts together and up, the
fine, thin lace showing the shape of her nipples. “I do believe you PREFER it when I’m bad!”

The dress slides to the floor and she crawls right past it, bracing her palms on his knees. She’s
wearing black stockings with garters but no drawers—lust rises hard and fast, making his trousers
abruptly painful.

He watches her thighs as she shifts and straddles him, stroking her hands up his chest, unfastening
his tie. She stares directly into his eyes, unfazed, as she starts on the buttons marching down.

And this is why he loves Veronica, in a nutshell. The reason, beyond her manifold attractions, no
other woman will do. She’s never once been afraid of him, no matter how badly he’s behaved…not
because she’s naïve, but because she sees behind his masks.
Logan lets himself do what he’s wanted to all evening…shape her dainty waist with his hands, slide his palms over the curves of hip and thigh. He pushes his thumbs into the fine, moist curls at the apex of her sex and strokes there; her unbuttoning rhythm falters as she gasps and sighs.

“But are you, really?” he asks softly, adjusting her so she’s sitting on his cock, biting back a sound as she begins to writhe. “Bad, I mean? You look so much like a nice girl, I think I’ll need to be convinced.”

She loops her arms around his neck and kisses him, soft tug of greedy lips as she pushes forwards against his thumbs. He pulls away from her mouth to nuzzle her throat, her clavicle, run his tongue lightly across one nipple. It knots at the faint contact, she moans and he smiles. Reaches between them to unfasten his pants.

Grasping his cock in one fist, she’s got him lined up and penetrating before he’s pushed fabric to his knees. She sinks down slowly, mouth an o, head thrown back; he marvels once again that despite her daintiness, she takes him eagerly every time.

He palms her ass in one hand, squeezing as she settles and begins fucking him in earnest; keeps the other thumb in motion, delicately circling her clit. The view downward is gorgeous—the line of her cleavage, the lacy corset, his cock buried inside her, his hands on her skin—but it’s her face he prefers to stare at as she comes. Her plump, damp mouth, the kittenish determination and greed, the flush that comes over her. The way culmination makes her dreamy-eyed.

It’s all for him. The kid nobody loved. The son most of Hollywood was sure would meet a bad end. Even his own best friend thought nothing of trying to steal his girl, but Veronica…

She wants him, wholly and ferociously. She craves his touch in the most intimate of ways. Ronnie’s HIS, staunchest defender, true-blue confidante, and no matter how exasperating her unwillingness to bend, she gives him this. Her vulnerability, her surrender. Her bliss. She’s the most precious thing he’s ever been allowed to touch.

With a growl in the back of her throat, she comes all around him, and it’s ecstasy, so delicious, almost better than his own orgasm. He kisses her, then, tilts her backwards onto the seat, grasps her hips and rises to his knees. Two thrusts, four, and he whines low as release runs through him like a bullet, uncontainable, consuming. Love you he thinks, and maybe says at the peak. Love you love you. Because of you, I’m free.

He sinks down onto her and she allows it, cradling, legs twining loosely around his thighs. She strokes his hair, kisses his temple, and he forgives her everything.
Logan has decorated their office from the pages of a dime-store detective novel complete with glass-etched doors, pedestal desks, and a lazy, fat ceiling fan that does nothing to cool and only serves to annoy, ruffling the papers on her desk. Veronica smacks the paperweight down on the corner of the police report she’s trying to read.

The carefully designed space is window dressing. Logan thinks the clients who come here -- mostly fellow expats, diplomats, or tourists-- find the office comforting and familiar. Appearances are important, he says. That may be, but Veronica also knows they’re deceptive. Like now.

Her husband sprawls on the leather, button-tufted Chesterfield, watching her through heavy-lidded eyes. He lounges like a cat in sunshine, waiting for a mouse. Flicking his wrist toward the ceiling, he says, “You could just turn it off, you know.”

“And ruin your ambience? I think not.”

She hates this place. Their old office on Calle Obispo, above the Western Union, was perfect. It was convenient for sending telegrams home and it was a short walk to El Floridita for conversations with Papa over lunches of seafood and daiquiris. It was also close to Big Dick’s crime scene.

Sparing a glare for the fan, she resumes reading the police report and making her list. Big Dick was killed on the short stretch of Zulueta between Sloppy Joe’s Bar and the Hotel Plaza. They will be her first stops today, as soon as she gets her husband to stop brooding. “If you’re going to nap all morning, why don’t you do it upstairs?”

It’s one of the reasons he insisted on moving into the newly-constructed FOCSA - the residential apartments on the Y-shaped building’s upper floors. They own one of the seven, beautifully-appointed penthouses. It’s meant to look like their pied-à-terre, but they never stay here, using it only to hide the people who come to them for help. For a sum, Vincent, the building manager is discreet.

“I’m not sleeping; I’m trying to learn what has my beautiful wife in such a delightful state of pique this morning.”

“Only you would find it delightful,” she snaps. His answering grin is as slow and lazy as the fan, but it at least affects the temperature in the room, raising it by several degrees. Tossing her pen down on the desk blotter, Veronica stands to stretch, rubs the small of her back. “At the very least,
you could brood in your office and leave me to work in peace.”

“Am I a distraction?” he asks, impudent and cheeky, knowing full-well he is, and he enjoys being one. This time her glare is for him and he laughs.

The layout of the office is similar to her father’s, only here the name on the front door is Echolls Investigations and the private office is for Logan. She’s stuck out here in the waiting room, faking secretary and making coffee. Veronica eyes the wall of wood filing cabinets and waves her hand over the growing stack of papers in her inbox. “Why don’t you make yourself useful and file these reports?”

“Would love to, darling,” he drawls in a way that says he’d rather eat glass. “But I’m just waiting for Weevil.”

That information gives her pause. Logan tends to ask Weevil to accompany him when he’s up to something he wants to keep from Veronica. Something she usually finds out about after it’s a fait accompli. His telling her in advance is interesting. “Oh? What are you two doing today?”

Logan’s eyes don’t quite meet hers; they stare at the bridge of her nose as he answers, “The racetrack.” It could be innocent, but she doubts it, and her suspicion’s confirmed when he changes the subject. “What time does the courier arrive?”

“Late this afternoon. I’m going to the crime scene first, talk to the witnesses at Sloppy Joe’s and the Hotel Plaza, see what they know about Big Dick.”

He sits upright, dropping his feet to the floor. “You’re taking Clarence with you.”

“Was that a question?”

He sighs, gaze going sympathetic but shoulders squaring...bracing for the backlash. “You know it wasn’t.”

Veronica’s jaw clenches, forces herself to think before speaking. It doesn’t matter if she’s armed. Logan has become increasingly worried about her wandering the streets alone. In some ways Cuba is very much like Neptune - a place divided between the haves and have-nots. Logan straddles both these worlds, and he knows that while the bourgeois enjoy their lavish lives and non-stop parties, remaining oblivious to the political tension, the rest of the country talks revolution. He fears for her safety.

It is the ultimate reason why they moved offices. The FOCSA is in close proximity to the American Embassy.

He’s gone very still while he waits for her response, gaze wary. His childhood damage always surfaces in situations like this. Sympathy leaks through her irritation.

Veronica’s still chafed, but she puts him out of his misery. “Yes, I’m taking Clarence with me.”

“And you’ll call Tina throughout the day?” It is another one of their safeguards. They use Tina as a switchboard, leaving messages for each other and updating her as to their whereabouts.

“As long as you do the same.” He nods, relieved, and she rewards him with a smile, taking a seat on the couch and resting her head on his arm. Her hand lands above his knee, fingers stroking his leg. When his head bows to watch their movement with avid interest, she asks, “So who’s going to be at the races today… Rossi and Bubbles? Or your sister?”
Logan chuckles. “Minx.” He twists at the waist to face her and leans in for a long, lingering kiss. As a distraction technique, it’s more than enjoyable, but he knows her too well to think it will also be successful. He ends the kiss with a nip to her bottom lip and answers, “Rossi will be there; probably making foolhardy bets and losing obscene amounts of money. I don’t know about Bubbles.”

“Just be careful, remember LOONY-BIN crazy.” Her hand wraps around his neck, fingers in his hair, and she pulls him in for another kiss. He presses her into the sofa and his hand travels the back of her thigh, inching up the hem of her skirt.

A familiar throat-clearing interruption makes Logan huff in annoyance. “Maybe along with that ridiculous costume you insist on wearing, we should get you a bell.”

“Should I also address you as my liege?” Clarence deadpans.

“Ugh, don’t give him any ideas,” Veronica groans, plucking his hand from her thigh and straightening her skirt. Logan looks down at her, arches a brow, considering, and she shakes her head. “I won’t be calling you that...ever.”

His answering smile says *challenge accepted*. She pushes him upright so she can get off the couch and gather her things.

Taking extra rolls of film from the filing cabinet, she sits at her desk and pulls her purse from the bottom drawer. On the outside it looks like a fashionable black-leather bag, but it holds secrets. A relic from WW2, Veronica found the bag in a thrift shop. It’s from a time when women needed to carry gas masks and it’s her favorite accessory.

“Any word on Rossi’s missing money?” Logan asks Clarence, reminding Veronica to check the top compartment of her bag for cash. She counts, zips, and flips up the false bottom to reveal a hard rectangular space. She tucks her Leica and the extra film into this concealed hollow.

“Rumors at last night’s game are that it was stolen,” Clarence says, fixing his cuff to cover his check of the time. “Rossi’s on edge about it, thinks someone in his organization’s betrayed him.”

Logan gives him a pointed look and Clarence responds with an almost imperceptible nod. Veronica’s eyes narrow, sure the silent conversation is about her and her penchant for tailing a certain mobster. She knows Logan didn’t believe her when she said her knowledge of Rossi all came from Clarence.

“Ready?” she asks, looping her bag over her shoulder. Pulling on her short white gloves, she circles the desk, and pats Logan’s cheek. “Real Delight in the fifth race- you can use your winnings to take me to dinner.”

An amused smile quirks the corner of his mouth and he kisses her nose. “I’ve already gambled big on a real delight and it paid off handsomely so... sure, why not?”

“Did you just compare me to a horse?”

He doesn’t answer, but his smile widens. Bending his head, he gives her a tender kiss goodbye, and reminds her to be careful. “And don’t forget to call Tina.”

With a little finger wave for her husband, Veronica departs the office and follows Clarence to the car park. They own two spaces in the garage and Clarence has come to collect her driving the Bel Air. It sits beside Logan’s pale-yellow Porsche Speedster. She should’ve known he was going to the track when he decided to drive his baby. Veronica grimaces at the gleaming sports car and
climbs into the passenger seat of the Chevy.

“Wouldn’t you be more comfortable in the back?”

Veronica ignores the spurious request. His suggestion isn’t about her comfort, but appearances, and she’s already told him—at great length—when it’s just the two of them she will ride up front. “I think the bar first.”

The bar isn’t open now, having closed around dawn, but Veronica has calculated how long they spend cleaning up and timed this visit to coincide with the end of shift. It will be easier to talk to the bartender—the one cited in the police report—without his boss looming over his shoulder. The same goes for the maid at the hotel. Veronica can question her as she’s leaving.

Yawning, she closes her eyes and rests her head on the seat. Lack of sleep is why she’s extra irritable this morning. There was barely time for a nap in between gambling at Sans Souci and going into the office. She needs a night off soon. It won’t take much to convince Logan—her lacy black slip from La Perla should do the trick.

“What’s your plan?”

Clarence’s question startles her eyes open and, with another yawn, Veronica shares the details of Big Dick’s murder and the scarcity of facts in the police report. “They arrested three men who are probably thorns in Batista’s side and I’d bet they weren’t even near the crime scene.”

“I’m inclined to agree, especially since a smart man would never bet against you.” He deftly pulls the car to the curb outside Sloppy Joe’s. The bar has a neon sign bearing its name hanging from the corner of the building and another inside one of its arching porticos.

She stares through the window at the tall wood stools and black mahogany bar. There are a handful of people inside and she hopes one of them is Delgado. Getting out of the car, she tells Clarence who they’re here to see and he nods in recognition of the name. “He’s been tending bar here for a long time.” He joins her on the sidewalk. “Delgado —Fabio— is the one by the cigar case.” Fabio is a slender man with dark hair and the ubiquitous pencil-thin mustache.

It may be a bar, but during the day families come for the sandwiches made with ropa vieja, and they bring their kids for ice cream. It’s only at night when the tourists flock here that it becomes licentious, so Veronica knows Clarence won’t protest when she says, “You stay with the car and let me speak to him alone.”

Sometimes when she tries talking to people, having either Clarence or Logan at her elbow intimidates her witnesses into silence.

They don’t have long to wait. Delgado is the third man through the door. He walks in the opposite direction of where they’re parked and Veronica has to scurry to catch up with him. “Excuse me.”

Stopping, he turns around and Veronica gives him a disarming smile. She introduces herself, explains her husband is a detective, and she sometimes helps him in his investigations. Delgado looks askance at the information, clearly not believing a man would let his wife do such things. She stifles a sigh, takes a few steps forward, encouraging him to continue his walk, and tells him, “An American tourist was killed here a few days ago.”

“Sí, ya lo sé.” In two long strides he is by her side and they continue forward in the direction of the hotel. “Jose was afraid it would hurt business and the tourists would not come, but…” Fabio offers her an embarrassed grin and a slight shrug. There’s very little in Havana that would deter people
from having a good time. “Did you know this man, this tourist?”

“No, but my husband did.” He offers his condolences for Logan as they cross the street to the Parque Central. Sun glances off the dome of the Capitol building in the distance. “He would like to find the man responsible.”

Nodding in agreement, he says, “Sí, claro.”

“The police told him you witnessed the murder?”

“No.” He jerks to a halt. “Why would they say that?” A frown wrinkles his forehead and his lips purse. “I did not talk to the police.”

She believes him; he looks truly disconcerted that they would suggest he was a witness. “Did you see anything?” Delgado shakes his head and Veronica describes Big Dick —tall, over six feet, average weight, dark brown hair, blue eyes, cleft chin— asks, “Was Mr. Casablancas in the bar that night?”

He places his index finger alongside his nose and mouth while he thinks, strokes his mustache. She knows it is a generic description; he probably sees hundreds of tall American men come into the bar. Finally, he answers, “No, I’m sorry, but I do not remember him,” and he seems crestfallen that he could not help her.

“Would it be okay if I come see you again? Next time with a photo of Mr. Casablancas?”

Fabio readily agrees and Veronica thanks him for his time, watches as he walks away. Tomorrow, after the courier arrives, she’ll show him Big Dick’s photo, and maybe it will jog his memory.

“Learn anything?”

“Only that he didn’t witness the murder and the police lied.”

There isn’t a hint of surprise on his face at this news. Clarence understands the rules of this particular game all too well - cause trouble for rich, powerful men and they will make you disappear, one way or another. “Maid next?”

She will probably tell them the same thing as Fabio —she didn’t see anything and she didn’t talk to the police— but Veronica needs to kick over stones. “Her name is Marisol Alvarez,” she informs him as they leave the park, crossing to the correct side of the street.

The hotel features the same stone archways as Sloppy Joe’s. They walk through the one at the corner by the entrance and decide to part ways. Veronica heads inside while Clarence waits under the portico to catch any homeward-bound employees she may miss.

Marisol is harder to find than Fabio. The staff members Veronica questions either claim to not know her, or say she’s already left. One maid is especially unconvincing, insisting it’s Marisol’s day off. Leaning against a fluted column across from the front desk, Veronica keeps an eye on this maid as she chats for a moment with the clerk and then disappears through the doorway behind the counter.

Veronica strolls across the mosaic-tiled lobby, waits for the clerk to turn his back, and darts behind the desk. She’s through the same opening and in pursuit of the maid before anyone notices. The small anteroom is empty. An employee time clock and punch cards are hanging on the wall just inside the doorway. Veronica skims the names on the cards and finds one for Marisol - the ‘out’ time for today is only a few seconds ago. Veronica grins. Gotcha.
Opening the wood door to the left of the time clock, Veronica finds a coat closet. The next opens into another small room, this one filled with cleaning supplies. *Third time’s a charm.* This final door leads to a long hall and Veronica heads that way in search of Marisol. It takes her to an employee exit near the rear of the hotel.

Scanning the street, she spots Marisol. She is already down the block being questioned by Clarence. Veronica sprints in their direction, arrives in time to catch the tail-end of Marisol’s last sentence “—they lie.”

She is a tiny woman. The same height as Veronica she has smooth, clear skin still dewy with youth, doe-brown eyes, and black hair twisted into a loose bun atop her head. She’s toe-to-toe with Clarence talking in rapid-fire Spanish; her hands flutter like butterfly wings. Clearly, he does not intimidate her— a trait that earns Veronica’s respect.

Clarence asks her about Big Dick, describing him almost the same way Veronica did earlier for Fabio. She’s momentarily surprised, but then remembers that of course Clarence knows what he looks like. Big Dick was, if not friends, at least acquaintances with the Kanes.

Marisol takes a step back, allowing her to keep both of them in her sights, and gives Clarence a negative head shake.

Veronica takes over the questioning. “Did you see anything unusual that night? Anything out of place?” The inquiry makes Marisol’s shoulders hunch, her eyebrows slant upward and her lips part. She seems worried and Veronica feels a frisson of excitement travel down her spine. It’s possible she knows something.

Marisol gnaws her bottom lip, glances behind her, and then looks past Veronica as if she’s trying to find a way to escape, but something changes her mind. Her posture relaxes and she says, “There was a car parked there.” She points at a spot near the hotel. “Its engine was running, waiting for someone, yes? And then after the shots, it was gone.”

Clarence asks, “Do you know what kind of car it was?”

“No.” Her nose scrunches. “It was black? Dark.” She nods to herself. “And it had round lights up high near the trunk? With a bird on the—”

“Shots?” Veronica interrupts. “There was more than one?”

“There were two — *boom, boom* — and I ran inside the hotel. When there was no more shooting, I came out and saw the car driving away.”

A getaway car could imply a professional hit. Someone following Big Dick and waiting for an opportunity to kill him. But a professional wouldn’t miss at close range and there was definitely only one gunshot wound to the body. Veronica frowns at the contradiction.

“Was the bird an eagle?” Clarence steers them back to the description of the car, but whatever spell convinced Marisol to talk to them is now broken. She shakes her head, pushes her way in between them and hustles down the street. At the corner, she turns and disappears from view.

“What did she say when you stopped her? Who lies?” Veronica leans against the wall of the museum to take out her camera. Pulling up the lever on the bottom of the Leica, she turns it, and releases the base plate, which she passes to Clarence.

“The police. As soon as I brought up the murder, she started yelling that she knew nothing, and
when I mentioned they told us she was a witness…” He holds out a hand to indicate she knows the rest.

“Do you think she said anything to them about the car?” Veronica feeds the film onto the spool and loads it into the camera.

Clarence shrugs. “Possible, but they’ve already solved the case to their satisfaction.”

After advancing the film a few frames, Veronica closes the back, and reattaches the base plate. He’s right of course. The car doesn’t fit their narrative of the crime. If it did, they would have included it in the report.

Lifting the camera, she takes a photo of the spot where the car was parked, across and diagonal from the entrance to Sloppy Joe’s. If Marisol saw the tail lights, the car would’ve been facing away from the hotel and toward the bar. Watching Big Dick through the windows, waiting for him to leave?

With her head bowed, Veronica walks the path from the hotel to the bar. Stains on the concrete pinpoint the exact location where Big Dick was shot. She snaps more photos, then studies the position of the neon signs and streetlights. “It would’ve been dark here.”

Clarence looks at the buildings and agrees. “Too dark for anyone to witness unless they were standing right next to Big Dick.”

“Or next to the shooter.” Veronica takes her time photographing the scene from all the angles, returns her camera to her bag. “Lunch?”

Clarence doesn’t need to ask where, driving her to her favorite spot. Veronica gets sandwiches — ham, roasted pork, melted swiss cheese, and pickles with mustard— plus two bottles of Hatuey and they eat in the car. “Why did you ask if the bird was an eagle?”

“A lot of cars have wings in their emblems —Bentley, Buick Skylark— even the flying lady on the hood of a Rolls could look like a bird from a distance.” He sips his beer. “But the round lights on the fins? Sounds like a Chrysler Imperial.”

The car could be useful. Veronica takes another bite of sandwich, enjoying the crunch of the crust and the flavor of the mojo-marinated pork. She licks mustard from her finger, turns her head to watch Clarence as she says, “After we get the photos from the courier, you can drop me off at the Capri and pick up your tail on Rossi.”

He remains still, trying to reveal nothing, but there’s a little tick under his eye, and Veronica smirks. Logan definitely tried to dissuade him from discussing Rossi with her. Too bad this idea of his wasn’t going to hold water. Rossi will pay, with or without Clarence’s help, and her husband should know better than to try and stop her.

Clarence crumples the butcher paper from his sandwich, holds out a hand for hers, and leaves to throw away their garbage. He’s compulsive about keeping the cars clean and in good order - appearances again. When he returns, he starts the engine and asks, “Airport?”

“Okay.” It is not a long drive. Rancho-Boyeras Airport is only a few miles southwest of the city and they arrive early. The white stone building with its parapets and tower looks ready to defend itself against invasion. But if the blistering heat isn’t enough to scare away the tourists, Veronica doubts the airport will have much success. “I’m going to wait inside.”

Air conditioning and ceiling fans offer a respite from the heat. Veronica stands by the windows for
a clear view of the tarmac. The telegram from her father with the flight information did not include 
description of the courier, but she assumes he will find her. Keith probably showed him a photo 
or suggested he bring a sign.

The announcement for the National Air flight from New York propels her outside to watch the 
passengers disembark. She does a double-take when she sees the brunette with the short-cropped 
curly bob and checked shirtdress. “Mac!” Veronica envelops her in a hug and glances over 
her shoulder, expectantly.

Knowing who she’s looking for, Mac shakes her head. “He didn’t come. They *suggested* he take a 
separate plane and he… refused, but he sends his love.”

Veronica glares at the plane as if it is personally responsible for denying her a visit with her best 
friend. She hopes Wallace did more than refuse and then worries that he did. “He’s okay, though?”

“He’s fine.” Mac’s slight grin implies another meaning for the word fine.

Veronica pushes her shoulder. “That is NOT what I meant.” With a start, Veronica realizes the last 
time she saw them was at their wedding, almost three years ago, and gives Mac another impulsive 
hug. “I miss you, both of you.”

“We miss you too. Without you around we hardly ever find ourselves getting into trouble; life is 
smooth sailing.” The touch of sarcasm in her tone says their life is anything but smooth and 
Veronica knows this is true from Wallace’s letters.

“Well then, one adventure coming right up!”

Mac groans. “Maybe I should just give you the envelope from your dad and get on the next plane.”

“Pshaw.” Veronica tucks her arm through Mac’s and starts toward baggage claim. “I didn’t expect 
Dad to ask you to play courier.”

“He didn’t. I was in the office, helping him with paperwork, when he called the service; I 
volunteered to come instead.” She spots her valise and picks up the blue tweed case. “We wanted 
to surprise you.”

“Helping him in the office? Did my father lure you away from teaching? Promise you a lucrative 
future as a private eye? Because if so, he lied, there is no lucre.”

Mac grins. “But what about the glitz and glam?”

Veronica rolls her eyes as they cross the tarmac, heading for the car. “There’s none of that either… 
well, unless you’re Logan; it clings to him like plastic wrap.”

“How *is* Logan?”

“Currently in the doghouse, but I’m sure he’ll charm his way out somehow.”

As they approach the car, Clarence unfolds himself from behind the steering wheel in order to take 
Mac’s things. He dips his head in greeting, “Mrs. Fennel,” and moves to the trunk to store her 
suitcase.

Mac eyes the formal chauffeur uniform and looks to Veronica for explanation. Sighing, she 
gestures Mac into the backseat and climbs in after her. “It’s a long story, I’ll explain later. But first, 
give me the skinny on Neptune.”
Turning to face Veronica, she kicks off her heels and tucks her legs under her skirt, leans her shoulder on the seat. “I’m still teaching and so’s Wallace; he really loves working with the kids.” For a bare second, her smile slips. She quickly recovers, fixing a new fake grin on her face, but her eyes remain sad.

Veronica’s sure there’s a story here, something Mac isn’t saying, but she knows not to ask. An intensely private person, Mac will talk when she’s ready. Veronica gives her a reassuring squeeze and Mac’s smile warms, turns genuine once more. “We have a new counselor at the school, Rebecca, and Wallace thinks she’d be perfect for your dad.”

Hearing about her father’s love life wasn’t what she had in mind, she wrinkles her nose. “Spare me the details.”

“Are you sure? Normally, you want to know everything,” Mac teases.

“Keep it up, you’ll be sharing Champ’s doghouse with Logan. And, be warned, one of them slobbers and the other is an actual dog.”

Mac waves away the empty threat. “So Neptune? Uh, Lamb won re-election as sheriff, but only because he ran unopposed. Jake and Celeste still dominate the society column. Duncan finally married Meg… oh, and your nemesis left town.”

Clarence glances in the rearview mirror, asks, “Which one?”

And Mac laughs. “Good point. She does tend to make a lot of enemies.”

“Uh hello? I’m sitting right here.” Veronica scowls at Mac and then Clarence; neither of them look the least bit contrite. “Did she run away to join the circus? Come see Madison- the meanest woman on earth?”

“She can guess your weight and age and make fun of you for both,” Mac adds, and then shrugs. “I have no idea where she went. The rumor is she’s living with her aunt in San Francisco.”

As she finishes talking, Clarence stops in front of the Hotel Capri and waves off the over-eager valet. Getting out of the car, he opens the passenger door and holds out a hand to help Mac from the backseat. “Do you need your bag or should I bring it to the house?”

“I don’t know?” She pauses mid-exit, turns to Veronica. “Will I need my bag?”

“Just the stuff from my dad; we shouldn’t be here too long.” While Clarence opens the trunk for Mac to retrieve the envelope, Veronica waits under the awning, leans on the railing. “Before you go off to do the thing we discussed, can you let Tina know where we are?”

Clarence starts to nod, changes his mind. “I should wait here and drive you home.”

“That’s okay, you’re busy and I’m sure Logan will come fetch us later.” Without giving him a chance to argue, she takes Mac’s arm and starts inside. “Let’s get a drink.”

The restaurant and bar upstairs near the pool are the best places to start. She can mingle with the guests, flash some cash to the hotel staff, and show Big Dick’s picture around. If she doesn’t get a usable lead on the mistress, she can work her way down to the lobby bar and then the nightclub and casino.

Mac follows her to the elevator, hands her the button-and-string envelope. “Keith checked on Betina’s alibi for you. The night Big Dick was killed, she was chairing a charity ball; he sent the
newspaper clipping.”

Perched above the pool, the restaurant offers a stunning view of the city below and the Florida Straits in the distance. Mac leans over the railing to admire both. Veronica joins her, points out some of the sights. “That’s the FOCSA - tallest building in Cuba. Logan made us move our office there” —Veronica scowls— “Even though the old one was better.”

“Well, I can see why you didn’t want to leave Cuba; it’s beautiful.”

The setting was low on the list of reasons she’d stayed, but Veronica doesn’t correct her, merely nods, and takes a seat at their outside table. Unwinding the envelope’s string, she spills the contents onto her plate. “Are you hungry? We can order an early dinner?”

Taking the seat next to her, Mac picks up the menu. “Dinner and drinks by a rooftop pool? If this is your idea of an ‘adventure,’ you’ve mellowed.”

“This is just the prelude,” Veronica says with a grin.

There are two clippings from the Neptune Register. The first is about Betina Casablancas’ charity ball at the Hotel del Coronado. Sponsored by the San Diego Society, the fete had a dinner reception followed by a cabaret performance, and an evening of dancing with all proceeds going to the Children’s Hospital. Veronica sets aside the article and removes her from the list of suspects. Betina as killer was a stretch anyway. She was already done and dusted with Big Dick and, even post-divorce, her social standing seems to be intact.

A waiter arrives to take their order. Veronica waits for Mac to make her selection of black bean soup, then adds maduros, yuca frita, and two mojitos.

She slips the photo of Big Dick from the pile, shows it to the waiter. “Our friend was staying here at the hotel with this gentleman, have you seen her?” His blank expression turns to interest when Veronica takes twenty pesos from her purse and sets it on top of the picture. “Maybe you can ask around for me? She was in room 1806.”

With a nod and one more look at the money, he leaves them.

“So who is this supposed friend of ours?” Mac asks, relaxing into her seat.

“Big Dick’s mistress and potential killer.” Veronica picks up the photo of Sadie, frowns at the tall, cool, perfectly-coiffed blonde standing next to Big Dick. She has no recollection of ever meeting the woman, but this Mrs. Casablancas is at least ten years younger than the first one. If leaving his wife for younger versions was a trend, the current mistress would be close enough to Veronica’s age for them to be friends. “His wife thinks he wasn’t here alone.”

Picking up the other newspaper clipping, Mac says, “Well, he certainly had enough traveling around money for two.” Hands Veronica the article.

SWINDLED reads the headline and beneath that in smaller print, He Stole My Life Savings. It is a human interest piece on some of Big Dick’s victims. The article is scant on details. Rita, a widow, invested the proceeds of her husband’s life insurance policy, and is now destitute. Veronica skims. The last paragraph contains the line: all told, authorities believe Richard Casablancas, Sr. made off with eight million dollars.

“It was probably more,” Veronica says, sliding the articles into the envelope as their waiter approaches. He’s carrying a tray of mojitos and he’s brought one of the hotel porters with him.
“This is Ernesto,” he introduces, setting the drinks on the table. “Tell them about the woman, Nesto.”

The baby-faced porter offers them a timid smile, wipes his palms on the legs of his pants, and shifts his weight. “She was with him.” He juts his chin at the photo of Big Dick lying across Veronica’s plate. “I carried their bags.”

Leaning forward, Veronica reaches for her glass, but instead of picking it up, she tips it over, spilling its contents. With her other hand she knocks the envelope into Mac’s lap. “I’m such a butterfingers.” She glances at the waiter. “Napkins?”

He snatches up the glass and hurries off to get the requested napkins. When he’s out of earshot, Veronica asks Ernesto, “What did the woman look like?”

Confusion lines his face. “She is not your friend?”

“Not really, no.”

His frown deepens, but he answers anyway. “Tall, brown hair and eyes - beautiful.”

It’s not much, but apparently it’s all she’s getting from him. He moves away from the table as the waiter reappears with a towel and a new mojito. As he cleans, he asks, “Did Nesto tell you what you wanted to know?”

Veronica nods, hands him his money. When he departs, she looks at Mac who is wearing an amused expression. “With that description you should be able to find her in what… an hour? Two?”

“Very funny. This just means we have more work to do after lunch.” She takes the envelope from Mac, adds the photos, and slides all of it into the side pocket of her bag. “Tell me about your new house.”

“It’s near Market Street.”

Nodding, Veronica grits her teeth, and fumes to herself while Mac describes the two-bedroom bungalow. California may have been the first state to strike down laws prohibiting interracial marriage, but they still support segregated neighborhoods, and Veronica understands near Market Street means they weren’t allowed to buy anywhere else. “I can’t wait to see it.”

Mac arches a brow. “Are you planning a visit?”

Before she can answer, their food arrives, and they fall silent to eat. Veronica drags a piece of yuca through the small bowl of mojo. “Logan’s worried about staying here; thinks the time’s coming for us to leave.”

Her name —Veronica Mars— blares from the public address system and she knows Logan’s responsible for the page because only her husband calls her that anymore. Will Veronica Mars please come to the front desk?

“I’ll be right back,” she says, standing. On her way from the restaurant, Veronica pays the check for lunch, and then takes the slow elevator ride to the lobby.

Instead of finding Logan, Tina is waiting at the desk; a round hatbox suitcase and Mac’s luggage are at her feet, three garment bags are draped over an arm. She smiles when she sees Veronica. “Logan said you’ll need these for tonight, asked me to bring them to you.”
“Oh?” Veronica stares at the bags, wonders what he has planned. “Did you tell him Mac’s here?”

“I did and he asked me to rent a room here at the hotel-- in case she wanted to rest after her flight, and so you can get ready, of course.” Tina extends a key. The number on its tag —1803— puts Veronica next to Big Dick’s former suite and gives her a reason to be on the eighteenth floor.

“He just thinks of everything, doesn’t he?”

Tina is too sweet to detect the sarcasm in Veronica’s tone. She only nods and adds, “He’ll meet you in the lobby bar at nine.” She transfers the bags to Veronica’s arm, bends down to retrieve the suitcases. “Do you want me to help you upstairs?”

“No, I’ve got it, thanks. Uh, I hate to ask, but since we’re going to be out late”—she holds up her arms, offering the clothes as proof—“do you think you could make up one of the guest rooms for Mac?”

“Already done.”

Efficient didn’t begin to describe Tina and she’s glad she convinced Logan to hire her. Not everyone would be able to put up with Logan’s brooding and his grand gestures, but Tina handles it with aplomb, even when he interrupts her day with errands. “Remind Logan to give you a raise.”

She winks. “Already done.” One last check to ensure Veronica has everything and Tina waves her goodbye, saying, “Have fun tonight.”

It’s easier to carry it all to the room and get Mac afterward. The suite is identical to Big Dick’s, decorated in soft greens and pale yellows with a view of the water. She takes the luggage to the living room, leaving the bed free for Mac. Thankfully someone has turned on the air conditioner and it is blissfully cool.

Laying the bags across the sofa, Veronica unzips them. In the first bag, Logan’s favorite bespoke tuxedo. The next is a floor-length, navy silk with lace overlay she recognizes as hers. It’s a beautiful gown, but not what she expects Logan to choose for her. He would not squander his chance to dress her by selecting something so tame. **Must be for Mac.**

The second dress makes her smile. An off-the-shoulder black sheath with a long slit up the leg, she smooths her fingers over the soft, flowing silk, and knows this is the one meant for her. It would serve him right if she switched with Mac, but she won’t. Dressing for Logan excites her. She loves watching his gaze turn molten as his tongue glides across his lower lip. His desire for her is heady. **Tonight is going to be fun and she fervently hopes Tina put Mac in the guest room at the opposite end of the house.** Hanging the gowns and his tux in the closet, she leaves the suite to find Mac. Finished with lunch, she is sipping another mojito, and watching the pool.

“Sorry about that,” Veronica says, slipping into her chair. “Tina was delivering clothes for tonight. Apparently, Logan wants to take us out.”

“Were they hideous?” At her frown, Mac continues, “You obviously didn’t keep them, unless they’re invisible?”

Veronica’s expression clears and she puts the room key on the table. “They’re in our suite; Logan thought you might want to take a nap.”

“Nice. I can call Wallace, too, let him know I arrived.”
“I’ll wake you when it’s time to get ready.” She watches Mac leave, gets up from the table. There is little point in finding either the waiter or Ernesto; neither was going to give her more information.

Leaving the restaurant, she moves through the hotel, showing Big Dick’s picture to the staff and guests, asking about the woman with him. The ones who remember her—mostly male—add very little to Ernesto’s description: tall brunette; loose, wavy curls; a bright, wide smile. The young desk clerk, looking just as bored as he did the other night, goes as far as saying curvy, complete with the hourglass hand motions. Veronica sighs. All she has to show for her hours of legwork is a useless description, which matches more than half the women in Havana.

Mac is still sleeping when she lets herself into their room. In the dim light edging around the curtains, Veronica moves to the living area to get ready, closing the connecting door to allow Mac more time to rest.

Setting the round suitcase on the sofa, she snaps open the hasp locks. Logan has forgotten nothing. Her makeup bag rests atop a strapless corselet, along with the perfume he favors. There are black satin opera sandals that wrap around her ankles and have a stiletto heel. Sheer stockings, garters, and a black velvet pouch containing her diamonds are at the bottom of the bag.

The only thing conspicuously absent is underwear. She smirks. It’s clear he approves of at least one of her fashion choices.

Veronica does her hair and makeup, and goes to wake up Mac who’s sprawled across the bed. It takes her a full minute to shake off the remains of sleep. Blinking, she sits up and asks, “What time is it?”

“Almost eight.” Veronica gestures toward her case and lays the navy gown on the bed. “Logan’s meeting us in the hotel bar.” There’s more blinking and a loud yawn before Mac stands. Eight hours on a plane to New York and another five to Havana, she has to be exhausted. Veronica immediately feels bad for waking her. “If you want to skip tonight and go back to the house, Logan will understand.”

“And miss the rest of my adventure?” Mac shakes her head. “I need some wild stories to tell Wallace when I get home, or he’ll worry about you.”

“Well, we don’t want that.” Veronica leaves her, returning to the living room to finish dressing.

As suspected, the silk sheath clings to her body and exposes a daring amount of skin. A few heads turn as they cross the terrazzo-tiled lobby to the bar. But Veronica only cares about one man’s reaction and he’s not here yet.

She perches on the edge of the drum-style bar stool, crosses her legs, and orders two Cuba Libres. While the bartender fixes their drinks, Veronica puts the photo of Big Dick on the counter. “I’m looking for someone-a woman, brown hair, brown eyes, she was here at the hotel with this man.”

He places two highball glasses in front of them, glances at the picture, and leans an elbow on the bar. “Why do you want to find her?” he asks, leering at Veronica’s legs.

“This man’s wife wants to know who he’s shacking up with.” The blunt statement stirs interest in the woman cleaning a nearby table, she takes a few steps closer to see the photo. Veronica swivels in her direction. “Have you seen her?”

She doesn’t answer Veronica directly, instead saying to the bartender, “She’s asking about Round
Heels.”

At her use of the epithet, he exhales loudly. “The maids call her that because they think she looks…”

“Easy,” supplies the cleaning woman, her lips twisting with distaste. “Cheap, but expensive-entiendes?”

A woman willing to sell herself for the right price. Veronica confirms she understands and asks, “Do you know where she is now?”

They both tell her no and, losing interest in the conversation, the woman returns to her cleaning. The bartender makes Mac a fresh rum and coke, garnishes it with a lime wedge. She thanks him, takes a sip, and is putting it down when a loud bang startles her, causing the liquid to slosh over the rim of her glass. “What was that?”

“The canon at Fortaleza de San Carlos; it goes off every night at nine,” he answers, cleaning the spill while letting his eyes roam over her body. Tossing the rag over his shoulder, he steals another glance at the slit in Veronica’s dress.

His flagrant ogling prompts Veronica to ask, “Is there anything about her appearance that will help me find her?” She taps the photo of Big Dick to refocus his attention. “Maybe a beauty mark or—”

With a snap of his fingers, he says, “A tattoo. She had a small, green shamrock, right here.” He reaches across the bar and touches the top of Veronica’s left breast just as Logan walks up behind them.
LOGAN—THE ORIENTAL RACETRACK, CUBA, 1956—EL CABALLO QUE MONTA AL INFIERNO

Logan maintains his pose of amused negligence until the door’s shut, and the clatter of Veronica’s heels on the stairs fades. Then he crosses to the window, flings it open, and prays for a breeze. He doesn’t want to indicate, by word or deed, that he’s less than thrilled about this office, especially when he’s on thin ice with Veronica for demanding a twenty-four-seven bodyguard. But he deeply, viscerally loathes sweat-stained clothing, and today it’s a real-and-present danger.

God, he hopes the wall units he ordered from Sears-Roebuck arrive soon, before their persons and tempers reach melting point.

He picks up a random case file and fans himself, traitorously glad she’s gone with Clarence in tow, though normally he prefers her close and safe. Keeping things from his wife is exhausting. Logan’s fairly sure she bought his story about spying on Rossi, then got distracted by that brain-scrambling kiss; but his ability to see past her poker face is mixed. If she has any clue he and Weevil plan to kidnap Bubbles from the track, she’ll abandon her investigation and follow, gun in determined-yet-reckless hand.

Hopefully, Big Dick’s untimely demise will divert her long enough for the rescue to become a fait accompli. Because if there’s one thing he’s learned since marrying Veronica, it’s that he’d rather ask forgiveness than permission.

Tossing the file on her desk--she needs a bigger one, she does the real work--he begins a restless circuit of the room, examining paperweights, testing out squeaky floorboards. He can’t sit still when he’s amped on nerves and adrenaline. Maybe he and Weevs should have planned this
escapade better…but neither of them’s very good at waiting.

Logan’s letting fly his fourth paper airplane when the door swings open; Weevil Navarro, native-tour-guide-for-a-price, enters, dressed in the Guayabera and trilby he favors because it’s too fucking hot for linen suits. Cocking an eyebrow at the airplanes, he deliberately steps on one--Logan brightens, because no more sitting.

“It’s like you’re five.” Weevil plucks Logan’s suit coat off Veronica’s chair-back and tosses it in his direction. “You’re that kid who has to pick up everything in the room and mess with it. How do you fool people into thinking you’re cool?”

“I’ve got acting in my blood?” Logan studies his friend in the foyer mirror as he tidies up, smoothing an immaculate white sleeve. Represses a grin at the eye roll this elicits, and yanks open the heat-swollen door.

“BAD acting,” Weevil corrects, pivoting to exit, taking off his hat to examine the band as Logan locks the door. “You learned how to pull cons from the school of hard knocks, it’s got zero to do with genes.”

Logan shrugs, though this assessment pleases him, and leads the way into the gloom of the garage, where his pale-yellow Speedster is parked. “I only play one character anyway—Logan Echolls, semi-reformed dilettante. It’s best I confine my lying skills to THAT act, so they don’t blow up in my face.”

“Fighting with Veronica again?” Weevil unlocks the passenger door and climbs in. “She didn’t guess what we’re up to today, right? Because if so, I’m warning you now, I’m steering clear for at least a month. Last time I pissed her off, she replaced my special weighted dice with duplicates weighted to LOSE.”

“She’s just mad I insisted her bodyguard do his job.” Logan guns the engine, exiting the garage, and heads towards the Malecon on Calle 71. “Didn’t prevent her from kissing me goodbye; enough tender loving care and she’ll cave. On the bright side, my high-handedness distracted her from OTHER potential misdeeds. The breathing room won’t last more than half a day, though; so we need to wrap up our pleasant little adventure WELL before she and I have dinner.”

“You know what your problem is?” Weevil spares a squinting glance sideways as they speed down the road. Puts a hand atop his hat to hold it in place. “The biggest of your many problems. Not one of the women you mentioned WANTS protection. On the contrary, they all keep smacking the helping hand, despite clear-and-present threats. Also, Veronica’s MY trouble magnet; so watch what you say, or maybe I’ll mess with your dice, too.”
“Man, I am NEVER getting married.” Weevil gives up, taking off the hat and wedging it between seat and door. “The occasional very-grateful girlfriend is all the complication I need…especially when I’ve got you scheming schemes, plus a neighborhood up in arms. Everybody wants me to take steps--it’s exhausting.”

“Gang still pressuring you to rejoin?” Logan jumps at the opportunity to change the subject, before Weevil gets on some topic he REALLY hates…temper shortcomings, for instance, or fear of fatherhood. “I wouldn’t. Gangsterismo’s a failed system, unless you’re one of Masterrer’s Tigers. And they’re not so much a gang, these days, as a regime-supporting hit squad.”

“Yeah, that’s easy for you to say.” Weevil folds his arms and Logan smirks, because he’s no longer the one in the hot seat. “With your money, and connections, and handy American passport, which is your ticket out if things go wrong. The gang I can handle, man--it’s the politics mixed up in their business that’s getting tricky. People are throwing in with the government or the revolutionaries, you know? ‘Nother guy down my street disappeared last week. Five years or less, I’m guessing there’s gonna be bloodshed, and it’ll start in my part of town.”

“You know I rarely miss my single days, much less the associated drinking, and legal fiascos, and brawling,” Logan says, turning onto 106th street. “But sometimes, when I reflect on how this country’s a slowly heating crucible, I’m SO glad I know how to fight dirty. There’s a lot more at stake, once you have people in your life who really matter.”

“I hear that,” Weevil says, as Logan pulls into the circular drive that fronts the racetrack, parks haphazardly beside a manicured row of palms. “Luckily, our plan today is shitty. So you can brush up on your fighting skills, no problem, when things go straight to hell. You bring a gun?”

“Ankle holster.” Logan straightens his tie, checks his hair in the rearview. Circles to the trunk and removes an overnight bag, which he shoulders. “But hopefully, the plan’s not SO shitty I’ll need it.”

“Hope is for suckers.” Weevil dons his hat and adjusts it as he climbs out of the car. “Guns are for realists.”

The Oriental Park Racetrack, renovated just last year, is a long, narrow building that’s mostly grandstand, topped with a triangular grey awning; viewing towers perch atop at intervals like Kaiser Wilhelm helmets. On the left, the ground floor is enclosed for better betting, all windows currently open to admit a scant breeze. The right, and the entire second floor, are given over to seating. Off to one side sits the plantation-style Jockey Club, where overheated spectators can play roulette and craps in the cool, and brunch is served on Sundays.

Logan skirts an ornate flower bed. “So let’s recap said awful plan,” he says, starting up the ramp to the balcony. “Lest it contain yet more flaws. One, we somehow get Bubbles alone, then extract her before Rossi fits her for cement shoes. Two, we keep our ears open for the words ‘Riviera Club’; Trina will absolutely empty her bank account funding some doomed enterprise, then start vampiring mine. And three, NO ONE disappears under the grandstand to run a Cubolo scam, at any point during these proceedings. Today we have bigger fish to fry.”

They emerge onto the viewing floor, where coliseum-style risers are packed with well-dressed spectators. There’s a superb view of the wide, white-railed track, and the luxury neighborhood beyond; in the distance, Logan can just make out the Tropicana.

“Hey, the Louse Ring’s easy cash from suckers with jobs.” Weevil heads for the good seats in the third row to which Logan’s membership entitles them. “How can I say no? Besides, who are you to talk? YOUR money sure ain’t clean.”
“True, but it spends,” Logan says, following him down. “Look, Weevs, helping me’s by far the most lucrative option today. Veronica heard a hot tip on a horse that should beat petty grifting cold. Besides, ever since that Kefauver fiasco, Lansky’s been antsy about bunco games where suckers ‘can’t lose’. I’d rather not bribe you out of Cuban jail because you ran afoul of the track’s owner over some penny-ante scam.”

“Say no more.” Weevil selects an aisle chair and disposes himself comfortably, peering down at the standing-room-only crowd. “You had me at ‘Veronica heard a hot tip’. When money talks, everybody else shuts up.”

Logan sprawls beside him, squinting as he studies the crowd. Sure enough, in the shadow of the judge-stand’s orange-and-yellow umbrella lurks everyone’s favorite pickpocket, Arturo. He’s sipping a bottle of Coke and pretending innocence while he waits for the distraction of the fifth race.

“They here?” Weevil asks, and Logan scans for Rossi, in what his track connections inform him is a regular front-row seat. Sure enough, he’s seated near the end, and so is Bubbles; they’re dressed to the nines for a day at the races, flanked again by two burly guards. Rossi’s brooding and Bubbles looks glum, fanning herself dispiritedly with a program.

“As advertised.” Logan plants the bag in Weevil’s lap. “And I just figured out our angle. Stash this near the ladies’ room, would you? Somewhere nobody will spot and steal it. Then go round up Arturo from his shady spot under the umbrella, pay him to take something from Bubbles I can ‘find’ and return. Meet me back here when you’re done, and we’ll head down to place our bets.”

Weevil sighs, but accepts a wad of cash to lure the pickpocket and saunters off, bag in tow. Logan sees Meyer Lansky take a seat with his wife front-row center, then watches Rossi notice and plot a move.

When Rossi gets up and approaches, subservient and respectful, Logan’s sure he’s an employee—not part of Trafficante’s operation, then, where his aristocratic airs would better fit. Lansky greets him without rising…an unsurprising show of disrespect. Rossi’s a gambling fanatic. And Lansky thinks bettors are God’s original idiots, since his mentor got gunned down in a chicken-stakes, back-alley game.

It’s a never-ending source of amusement to Logan that the only true aristocrat in the Cuban Elite power circle is Castro.

He wonders, as he watches, if this conversation is just about ring-kissing, or has something to do with the stolen money which supposedly has Rossi on edge. Then again, would the guy really admit losing profits to his boss? It’s not like he WANTS to get rolled in old carpet and dumped in the ocean. Maybe he’s playing amateur detective, gauging via hints and innuendo whether the big man’s betrayed him?

Teddy Lansky, an assertive, tiny former manicurist very much in the Veronica mold, engages Rossi in conversation; Bubbles, momentarily ignored, casts around, as if for an escape route. Logan’s resolve hardens.

He looks for Weevil—who’s nowhere to be seen—and Arturo, also out of view. Then Lansky nods dismissal, his disinterest in prolonging conversation telling its own tale. Rossi slinks back to his seat to take his frustrations out on his girlfriend.

Logan feels his temper rise as he watches Rossi sulk and snipe, Bubbles charm and placate—she pats him the way dogs paw aggressive owners, cringing and appeasing. He’s intimately familiar
with this dynamic; magnetic in public, abusive in private was Aaron’s modus operandi. Nothing upsets Logan more than witnessing it. And aggression towards women makes him rash.

Cracking his knuckles, he watches and fumes, fuse burning down. But when Rossi shakes her and Logan hops up, having lost patience with Weevil’s dallying, he’s frustrated by Arthur Gardner’s approach.

“Echolls!” the American ambassador extends a friendly hand, mopping at his bald pate with a handkerchief. His wife, a middle-aged brunette who’s got a roving eye, poses coyly behind. Logan starts counting backwards from a hundred by five, because aggressive displays on his part only encourage her. “Missed you at the Tropicana last night! Thought for sure you and the little woman would put on dancing shoes for Carmen Miranda.”

“Unfortunately, we had an engagement elsewhere.” With one last fulminating glance at Rossi (who’s subsided, thankfully, arms sullenly crossed) Logan summons a smile for this important-to-cultivate pal. “But it was much less enjoyable than Carmen and cocktails with friends. Maybe Friday? My secretary booked ten tickets for Nat King Cole, you’re more than welcome to two.”

“I’d never miss a chance to enjoy your rumors and Veronica’s political analyses.” Art winks, both jolly and savvy. “And we’d never say no to tickets for a show like that.”

“Make sure to brush up on your mambo,” Suzy advises throatily, as Weevil approaches to join them…clocks the situation at a glance, and coughs to hide a laugh. “I’ve hired an instructor, and learned some FANTASTIC new moves.”

“Oh, Veronica and I mambo DAILY,” Logan says, with perfect innocence, and Weevil’s coughing devolves into a fit. “You’ll see how amazing she is, when you meet her Friday, Suze—nobody else compares. All right there, Eli? Need a lozenge?”

“Best of luck with the horses,” Art tells them, and ushers his wife away with a friendly wave. Weevs abandons pretense as soon as they’re out of range, and succumbs to gusts of laughter.

“I wonder how she got the impression I’m one step removed from a gigolo.” Logan folds his arms as he watches his friend wind down. “That woman is a constant thorn in my side.”

“Must be the way you dress.” Weevil shakes his head and breathes deep. “Nobody cares as much as you do about looking just right except actors and…professionals. Plus that one gangster with the gold glasses who has everyone running scared.”

“And speaking OF gangsters,” Logan says pointedly. “Arturo have any luck pilfering?”

Digging through his pocket, Weevs produces a betting slip, hands it over. “This is all he could get. She’ll have to visit the window to pick up a replacement, though, we can make our move then. Oh, and I hid your bag under the sink, in the powder room by the ticket windows--there’s a little cabinet that latches.”

Logan borrows a program from a nearby matron, compares it to the slip. “Excellent—this is the next race, and also the one Ronnie has a lock on, so we’ve got a built-in excuse. I’ll bump into Bubbles in line, ask her if she dropped this, strike up a conversation, etcetera.”

“You get a load of her bet?” Weevil points. “She’s gonna lose big…Aristocrat’s got a gimp leg. Word is he stepped in a hole training yesterday, and the owner took a payout to race him anyway. Pie in the face of this magnitude’s gonna make her boyfriend even angrier.”

“And he’ll blame her for his dumb choice.” Logan takes a deep breath, the embers of rage
rekindling. “This guy’s complete shit at all forms of gambling. No doubt he’d be broke, if he didn’t make bank mistreating women.”

“He keeps placing bets like this, he’ll be broke eventually regardless.” Weevil gestures with his chin, and Logan turns to see Bubbles headed for the first floor, bodyguards trailing behind.

“Oh, good, action time.” They fall in behind, leaving several bodies between--Veronica insists overzealous tailing fails. “Any bright ideas about creating a distraction?”

“Big, dumb slow one on the right?” Weevil indicates the more intimidating of the bodyguards. “That’s Oscar Montoya. Doesn’t think things through any more than you do, and really only cares about cash. I could have a word with him…maybe offer a bribe?”

“To look the other way?” Logan drums his fingers tensely on his thigh as they head into the dark, muggy chaos of the subscription room. “Is it too much to hope we’ll extract her today WITHOUT violence?”

“I said bribable,” Weevil corrects, with a head shake. “Willing to publicly fail his boss, probably not.”

“So what did you have in mind?” Logan turns impatiently towards his friend, arms crossed.

“I could pay the guy to take a fall.” Weevil shrugs. “Then occupy his partner, while you and Bubbles make your getaway. Five hundred should motivate him, you got that much on you?”

With a sigh, Logan fishes in a concealed interior pocket, pulls out a second wallet. Smirks at Weevil’s expression. “To deter Arturo and his ilk.”

He hands Weevil the bills, says, “You want to put anything on Real Delight in the fifth? Make this outing worth your time?”

“Sure,” Weevil says, handing two hundred back. “That should turn over enough for Ofelia’s ballet lessons AND Abuelita’s new couch.”

Logan makes an exasperated face, but accepts his own money and pockets it, because Ofelia the ballerina sounds pretty damn cute. Weevil purses his mouth to hide a smile, pats Logan’s back, and heads off to intercept the bodyguard.

Bubbles is already in line for the betting window, fishing through her purse for a vial of perfume, which she dabs absently on her wrists. Logan eases in three suckers behind her and does a sleight-of-hand with her ticket, bending as if to retrieve it, then squinting as he pretends to read. Stepping neatly around intervening good-time Charlies, he taps her shoulder—she jerks and the bottle goes skittering away across the floor. “Fancy meeting you here,” he says, as Bubbles surveys him with…annoyance? He extends the ticket in apology. “I believe you dropped this.”

She takes it, scrutinizing with a frown and then dawning suspicion, slips the card into her handbag. “Mr. Echolls,” she says, and not delightedly. “You’re always so helpful. Also, close at hand.”

He smiles, because he does have a soft spot for clever women. “I run a side business, just for kicks, as a private detective. Guess this is where I admit your sister hired me, to help you out of your current…jam?”

Her face conveys pure exasperation as she says, “I TOLD you to explain to my sister…”
“….because Rossi demanded it, I know.” He waves an impatient hand. Gestures subtly with his chin at Weevil, who’s offering a smoke to the mark. “I’m well aware your beau has you under constant guard. If you’ll look over there, though, you’ll notice my very capable associate shooting the breeze with your jailers.”

She pretends to scratch her cheek as she checks, and he notices a bruise along the orbit of her right eye, poorly hidden with makeup. Grits his teeth as she says, “And just what do you think THAT will accomplish?”

“You’ve got your ticket back,” he says, voice pitched low. “It’d be natural for you to step out of line, then refresh your makeup in the ladies’ over there. The cabinet under the counter contains a bag with a disguise inside. You can put that on while I place my bet, then meet me in the crowd under the grandstand; southeast corner, next to the guy with the craps-playing parrot. I’ll reunite you and your sister…then get you both safely out of the country before Rossi notices you’re gone.”

Her eyes go soft with longing--whatever’s fueling her obstinacy, it isn’t lack of desire to be free. But all she says is, “You REALLY think I’ll be safe in America from the likes of HIM?”

“I do,” he assures her, employing the tone that soothes even Veronica. “With enough money in the bank, anyone can disappear.”

They reach the window, he places his bet, and while he’s waiting for the form, she says, “It’s really very gallant what you’re doing, Mr. Echolls. But your plan’s not going to work. There’s nowhere I can hide the Mafia won’t find me--I need to make it back into Angelo’s good graces, not run. Please, tell my sister to go home, like I asked. And stop this knight-in-shining-armor nonsense, before you and the wife you love get hurt.”

She moves to walk away, and he catches her arm in desperation; realizes belatedly this is the signal he coordinated with Weevil…the moment the distraction kicks in.

Weevil swings smoothly into action, tossing away his cigarette and shouting epithets in Spanish; he’s better at playing surly delinquent than Logan, maybe HE should be the actor. Delivers two punches to the bodyguard’s face that look and SOUND convincing. Their fall guy goes over and lies still, adequately faking unconsciousness.

The partner, who’s been sipping from a flask and dividing his attention between Bubbles and race prep, springs to attention, revealing an unfortunate tendency to escalate. He pulls out a gun instead of joining the fistfight, and takes a potshot at Weevil which, thankfully, misses.

Weevil dives behind the cover of a large cement ashtray and yanks his own gun out of his waistband, while the crowd nearby reacts to the shot via screams and stampeding. Bubbles shrieks, directly in Logan’s ear, grabs his shoulders while he winces and tries to hide behind him. Apparently she’s not intrepid like Veronica, and also thinks his abs block bullets.

He shakes her impatiently off, shoves her behind the nearby bench that’s their only possible cover, then fishes out his own gun--fires a warning shot over the overzealous bodyguard’s head. It’s meant to make the moron take cover himself. Instead, the guy scans the room, spots Logan and Bubbles crouched together through the bench slats, and starts towards them at a run, expression telegraphing suspicion.

Great, Logan thinks, trying to line up a takedown shot that doesn’t endanger a bystander, why couldn’t this one be lazy and greedy too?

Apparently the announcer hasn’t cottoned to the chaos indoors, because his voice blares cheerily
over the loudspeaker. “Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the fifth race of the afternoon, hosted by the Jockey Club of Havana, here in lovely Mariano. Horses stand at the starting gate, tension fills the air, as we wait for the flag to drop and this Clash of Titans to begin.”

“Step away from him!” the overzealous bodyguard yells, flattening himself against the floor when Logan’s shot passes inches from his cheek. “You, fancy pants! Drop your gun and put your hands up, or it’s curtains!”

Bubbles makes a squeaking noise and complies with this cinematic request, scurrying from behind the bench before Logan can grab her, getting promptly knocked on her ass by a fleeing racegoer. Logan casts his eyes to the heavens, lunges out to drag her back, and is winged in the bicep by the moron on the ground.

_Shit_, he thinks, clapping a hand to his wound and falling backwards, _Veronica’s going to KILL me._

The bodyguard rises and aims, incensed by adrenaline past caution; but luckily, Eli was too stubborn to run. He emerges from behind the planter to tag the guy in his shooting arm. Bodyguard Two drops the weapon and goes over, yelling in Italian.

Logan fumbles his own sidearm back into its holster and grabs Bubbles, who’s sitting on the ground like a dumbass, hyperventilating. Curls his palms around her shoulders and says, “When shooting starts, you take COVER, got me? Jesus, let’s get you out of here before reinforcements arrive, or someone besides that asshole might get hurt.”

“And away they GOOO,” the announcer calls from the loudspeaker, while Logan hauls himself and Bubbles off the ground, hustles her, half-willing, towards the exit. “We’ve got Aristocrat in the lead as they round the Clubhouse turn, followed closely by Sledgehammer and Real Delight…”

“You’re bleeding,” Bubbles says, trying to shrug out of his grip. He hangs on grimly, determined to save her in spite of herself.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a flesh wound.” He steers her around a suspect spill, flinching as the double doors bang open and more security guards arrive. One guy kneels to give first aid to the troublemaker with the arm wound; another moves in to argue with Weevil (who stuck around, helping Logan, too long to make a clean escape). The conversation gets vociferous, reverts to Spanish. The Echolls name comes up, a bid to escape consequences via status and wealth.

He’d stash Bubbles to go back and help, but he’s fairly certain she’d run if released. And the freaking AMBASSADOR saw Logan with Weevs today—immunity-by-proxy will work in his absence.

They’re halfway to the door, wading through milling spectators, when Rossi blocks their path and yanks Bubbles’ arm away.

_Wonderful_, Logan thinks, rapidly calculating. _He must have watched me follow her downstairs, and eventually succumbed to his neuroses. Sloppy, Echolls—you’ve SEEN the guy run this pattern. So much for getting out of Veronica’s doghouse, ever._

“And it’s Sledgehammer by a nose along the backstretch,” the race caller intones as Logan and Rossi size each other up in silence, “but Aristocrat’s having issues with the right front leg, and Real Delight is coming up fast…”

“Mr. Echolls,” Rossi says silkily, hand in his coat pocket, probably stroking a gun. “You danced with my lady friend and I let it slide. But this…situation….seems suspect. Forgive me if I sound
paranoid, but are you trying to ABDUCT her?”

“More like rescue.” Logan adds a fillip of under-the-breath sullenness to sell the line. Shakes out a handkerchief dramatically for good measure, and presses it over his still-seeping wound. “We were both in line to bet when the fracas started, and her bodyguards were…otherwise occupied.” He gestures mockingly at the two unfortunates, both still on the ground, and says, “I couldn’t leave a lady stranded in the line of fire.”

Rossi narrows his eyes, considering. Logan hopes to God the guy just thinks he wants to screw Bubbles—he’d like to make it home more-or-less intact. Over the loudspeaker, the announcer cries, “And it’s Real Delight by a head, ladies and gentlemen! What a stunner! What an upset! Who could have predicted Aristocrat would stumble in the home stretch?”

Bubbles makes a soft sound of distress, gaze glancing off her ticket-containing bag. Rossi’s expression turns thunderous, but he manages a completely false smile.

“How chivalrous,” he murmurs. “It appears I owe you a debt of gratitude. Thank you for returning my girl unharmed. I’ll make sure she’s better guarded in the future.”

He yanks Bubbles away as the security team approaches, Weevil in tow. Logan sighs, and tells their leader, “Eli’s on the up-and-up. He came to the track as my guest.”

“See!” Weevs yanks his arm out of the guard’s grip and puts hands on hips, regrouping. His hat’s gone missing in the scuffle, and Logan’s positive he’ll have to purchase a replacement. “Guy went nuts just because Echolls talked to the lady! He’d be dead if I hadn’t taken that shot!”

“Yeah, you’re loyal as the day is long,” Logan says, sarcastic. Removes the spare wallet wearily from his inner pocket, hands off the rest of its contents to the guard. “Thanks for helping bring this matter to a speedy conclusion.”

The guy shrugs, winks and wanders off, cheerfully pocketing his largesse. Logan sinks onto the bench he previously crouched behind, and puts his head in his hands.

Weevil heads to the betting window, ever-mindful of winnings, as Logan ponders what form Ronnie’s revenge will take. He can feel the gunshot wound oozing, still, and he’s slightly dizzy—maybe passing out will earn him a reprieve.

“I couldn’t get Bubbles through the door,” he says into his palms, when Weevs sits back down beside him. Ignores the wad of cash thrust in his direction. “I tried my best, but people kept shooting, and she didn’t want to GO.”

“Hey, at least we had some fun.” Weevil tugs Logan’s lapel aside and sticks the bills in the inner pocket, gives the coat a pat. Logan starts to keel over sideways, gets yanked upright by his collar. “Shit, how bad were you hit? I thought it was just a scrape!”

“No clue.” Logan attempts to peer down at the wound, but it’s in an awkward location. “Doesn’t hurt too much, but it won’t scab. Even if it’s minor, though, Veronica’s going to freak.”

“What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.” Weevs gets a shoulder under Logan’s good arm and hauls him upright. Grabs the bag full of clothes, which he’s presciently retrieved along with their winnings, and heads for the door. “Come on, I know a guy who can stitch your sorry ass up. Shooting at people from behind a bench with SLATS? Mother of fucking God. Why are you such a moron, Echolls?”

“It was the only nearby cover I could find for Bubbles.” Logan stumbles, but manages not to fall.
“I was TRYING to be heroic.”

“Yeah, well, at least nobody died.” Weevil shoulders through the big double doors, into the still-smoldering early evening. “And I didn’t lose anything but my hat.”

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Two hours later, Logan dresses in the exam room of a private clinic, smoothing creases from the suit he keeps in his trunk. Weevil’s out front with his friend the doctor, recounting their adventure over shots of rum; comments on non-Cuban dumbassery filter back at intervals, accompanied by gusts of laughter.

Careful examination in the mirror confirms the bandage bulge doesn’t show; but Logan’s hair keeps falling in his eyes without Brylcreem, and he skinned his palm when he fell. The Havana grapevine’s no doubt buzzing already—Ramon, for example, likely has every detail of Logan’s teatime adventure. Veronica’s likely been too busy detecting to gossip, but distraction of a major nature will prove necessary.

Closing his eyes in resignation, Logan breathes for a beat, composing himself. Then picks up the phone and calls Tina, as promised.

“Perfect timing,” she says when he identifies himself, indefatigably cheerful as always. He can’t be sure, but it sounds like she’s chewing. “Clarence just phoned with an update. Veronica and Mrs. Fennel are having cocktails at the Capri.”

“But not Mr. Fennel?” Logan frowns, disappointed they’re not both surprise-visiting, then realizes Cindy must be Keith’s courier. “Well, regardless, it’s been too long. And coincidentally, a houseguest will make an excellent buffer.”

“Uh-oh,” Tina says, and pauses to drink. “I hope you’re not calling because you need bail.”

“Oh ye of little faith.” He smiles despite himself. “No, the favor I’m asking is of a more...sartorial variety. I had to leave the track abruptly, before I could ask around about the Riviera. So we’ll need to bite the bullet and attend Trina’s opening night.”

“Ugh,” Tina says, sympathetically, because she’s a pearl past price. “Let me guess. You want me to swing by the Capri with eveningwear?”

“As always, you’re a mind-reader.” He crosses to the bottle of purely medicinal Scotch left behind by the good doctor, pours a healthy slug. Tosses it back, because gunshot wounds hurt like a bitch, pours another. “Find something understated for Mrs. Fennel in Ronnie’s closet, she dislikes frills and favors blue, green and burgundy. I think the hourglass black satin will work for my wife. And you’ll find a bag containing new undergarments in my bottom dresser drawer—give V those and ONLY those, no additions or substitutions, please. I want the bespoke tux that just arrived from Paris...if I have to spend an evening being humiliated by my sibling, I may as well look my best. And Brylcreem, Tina, I’m begging you. Stash it in the coat pocket. I currently look like Rudy Valentino, pining.”

“You’ll need a place to change,” she opines, on a note of laughter. “Room or suite?”

“Suite,” he says. “Something on the eighteenth floor, to facilitate V’s detecting. And tell her I’ll meet her in the hotel bar at nine.”

“Good thinking,” she says, probably taking notes. “The room placement might earn you brownie points, which it sounds like you currently need.”
“Tina, you’re the best secretary a guy’s ever had. I’ll sign the payment slip when I arrive. Shouldn’t be much longer, I’m just…enjoying a few drinks with friends.”

“Right,” she says, and he’s fairly sure she’ll shake the grapevine herself once she hangs up. “Just don’t enjoy too many. After whatever you’ve been up to, surly drunkenness won’t play well.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” He tosses back the second Scotch and pours a third. “But your concern is touching.”

Logan signs off, strolls into the living room, smirks as the doctor snickers on sight of him. And proceeds to drink despite the warning, until the arm stops hurting entirely.

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“Not that it hasn’t been delightful,” he tells Dr. Suarez a few hours later, shaking the man’s hand, “what with all the needles and sutures and Monkey Blood. But I’ve got to meet the little woman and her clever friend soon; and if I do any more shots with you two, I won’t be able to speak in whole sentences.”

“I doubt that. You probably talk fancy in your sleep.” Weevil gets up to shake too, jolly and relaxed; inspects Logan’s arm, ensuring no blood has seeped through the bandage. “Want me to ask around about Bubbles, find out why she’s on Rossi’s shit list? Since it seems like the guy’s not your biggest fan? And in return, you don’t tell Veronica squat about my doings today. Because you know how she gets.”

“Deal,” Logan says. “One of us should emerge from this mess unscathed. But don’t blame me if she somehow finds out anyway.”

“Maybe I’ll take a trip along the coast, after we wrap this case up,” Weevs muses, opening the door for Logan and handing over his keys. “Beaches down south are nice this time of year.”

“Look, you saved me,” Logan calls, tossing and catching the keys as he skips down the steps. “And besides, this was all my idea. Probably you’re in for harassment at worst, and she’s not going to get you arrested.”

Speeding towards Old Havana with the top down, Logan inhales the briny sea breeze and tries not to think…about Bubbles and her poorly-concealed black eye, or the Italian standing over him with a gun. The sun’s sinking in the sky, gilding the pink-and-tangerine clouds, and music drifts faintly from a block party as he passes.

He turns off La Rampa onto 21st and parks near the Monseigneur, skirts the Casino in favor of the hotel’s main lobby. Speeds up as the cannon at the Fortaleza booms; that means it’s dinnertime, and Veronica’s likely peckish. He needs to feed her well and pamper her, maybe kiss her till she’s soft and sympathetic. That’s his best shot, provided he can find a way to distract Mac.

Logan hears Veronica’s girlish-yet-decisive voice when he enters the hotel bar, a contrast that always makes him smile. It’s dark and intimate inside Skippy’s Hideaway—the décor is black-and-blue, and the exposed brick walls absorb, rather than reflect, light—but he can make out a blonde and brunette at the bar, clad in evening finery. Smoothing back his hair with what’s probably a futile gesture, he waves away the greeter and saunters over. Watches Veronica lean forward and puts the screws to the serving class.

Then the flagrantly-ogling barback lays a hand on her, and Logan abandons all pretense of suavity. He’s got the oily-haired poor-man’s Errol Flynn by the collar, and has dragged him halfway across
the counter, before he’s even aware he’s in motion.

“Touch my wife like that again,” he says, in his softest and most deadly tone, “and you’ll be pouring drinks one-handed for the rest of your menial-labor days.”

“Now, muffin,” Veronica warns, resting a small hand on his arm; he tosses the guy backwards with a theatrical flick of fingers, entirely because she asked.

“Don’t mind me,” he says, fixing his gaze on the bartender until all fight goes out of the guy, and he retreats to the storeroom. “Just throwing away the garbage, I’m a supportive and helpful spouse.” He bends to kiss her cheek, fixes her companion with a smile. “Why, Cindy Mackenzie Fennel, as I live and breathe! May I say you look ravishing? And NOT just because I chose that dress?”

Veronica, whose eyes narrowed when he leaned in close, tucks back the lock of hair on his forehead and runs a frowning gaze that misses nothing over his person. “What happened to the suit you left the house in?” she asks before Mac can respond, her tone deceptively light.

“There was a mishap,” he says, with a dismissive hand wave. “At the track. Couldn’t show my face among ladies disheveled, ’s bad for my glamorous reputation. And we all know how important maintaining a reputation IS.”

“Uh, Veronica,” Mac interrupts. Nods towards the entranceway, where a burly man in a suit is conferring with the hostess. “I’m guessing the bartender telephoned security, to report a belligerent drunk?”

“Hmmm, to WHOM could you be referring?” V crosses her arms, toe tapping. “I KNEW it was a bad idea to let you spy on Rossi with Weevil. All right, let’s retire to the suite. We’ll order room service and cocktails and do our catching up in private. Logan needs to change into his monkey suit anyway, since apparently we’re going out on the town.”

She slinks off her stool in that dress…that DRESS he sent via Tina, and he knows what she has on under it too, which is exactly the right amount. Mac follows, making an apologetic face at Logan as he pulls her in for a hug. Between them, the girls steer him past the threat at the door, and safely onto the elevator.

The suite Tina booked is big and blessedly cool, and he sprawls across the sofa once they’re locked inside. Shuts his eyes and spreads his arms along the back, then wincingly retracts one.

Veronica says, “So it’s your shoulder that’s hurt, then.”

He lifts his lids to find both women studying him, Mac amused, Veronica compassionate, and he can’t help but ask, “How did you…?”

His wife ticks off items on her fingers. “You’re angry, frustrated and keep changing the subject. The suit you’re wearing hasn’t been pressed, and there’s a bandage around your hand. Under the Scotch you smell like Mercurochrome, and you were unforthcoming earlier about a Rossi-confronting outing with Weevil. What I want to know is, were you shot, beaten or stabbed, and if so, by whom? Also, are you just inebriated, or have you lost too much blood?”

“The former,” he says with dignity. “In both cases. And I’m deeply disappointed that Mr. Fennel couldn’t make it, because he’d defend me right now instead of laughing at my troubles.”

“Mr. Fennel is a noted softie.” Mac seats herself on the armchair with a smirk. “I’m made of less sentimental stuff. Now, who exactly is Rossi, and why’d he want to shoot a teddy bear like you?”
“Mobster. Big-deal one. And he didn’t.” Logan leans forward to let Veronica slip off his jacket, surrendering to the inevitable. She smooths her hand over the lump of bandage at his bicep and he manages not to alarm her by cringing. “Bubbles’ bodyguard did, when I tried to help her escape. But Weevs capped him in the gun arm, and then security came. This is just a glorified scratch, though, Ronnie, really. It needed stitches, but I’m not damaged.”

“I gather Bubbles didn’t?” Veronica pulls the arm in question onto his lap and takes his hand in both of hers. He closes his fingers around her smaller ones, feels the tremble she can’t disguise, and all his worry and anger leaks away. “Escape, that is?”

“She didn’t WANT to.” Logan lets his head flop back again. “I had it all planned out, but she wouldn’t LEAVE. And that son of a bitch has been hitting her, she had a big bruise caked with makeup on her face. Plus, you and I got…busy after we left the Sans Souci last night, and forgot to follow her home. So I still don’t know what caused her life to go downhill, or her real name, or even where she LIVES.”

“Oh, Logan,” his wife says, and rests her cheek against his chest. He lifts his arm painfully to wrap it around her. “Mac, will you order coffee and something substantial for him from room service? He needs to eat and bathe before he changes, so we can…where exactly ARE we going tonight, anyway?”

Steak, he mouths at Mac as she picks up the telephone receiver, a response to her cocked brow. She nods, and he turns to Veronica. “In your heart, sugarplum, you MUST suspect. What kind of brother would I be, if I missed my beloved sister’s opening night?”

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A few hours later, restored by a hot bath and coffee and once again adequately clad, Logan helps his companions out of the convertible beside the Nacional’s valet stand, then extends an elbow to each.

“Did we REALLY need the car, just to drive two blocks?” Mac tucks her arm through his, and watches Veronica gather up her bag. “I know, I know, you have a reputation. But surely this is a tad indulgent?”

“Indulgent is my middle name,” Logan says, kissing Veronica’s hand and then her temple, when she curves a palm around his forearm. “Look, you work hard all week, Mackenzie, educating young minds, trying to change old and vile ones—you deserve the gold-star treatment, when out with friends.”

“So riding in your cramped back seat to watch your tone-deaf sister perform badly is the gold STAR treatment,” she muses, as the doorman admits them past the velvet ropes, and they enter the club proper. “It’s a wonder you snagged any woman, let alone Veronica, with moves like these, Echolls.”

“Well, we can’t all be Wallace Fennel.” He follows the hostess to an arch beneath an elaborate papier-mache tree; it’s meant to be tropical, based on the giant pink blossoms and vaguely menacing monkeys. Helps Mac sit on the velour banquette while the server assists Veronica, winks when she wrinkles her nose. Mentions the thought that’s been nagging at him since dinner. “So…what do we think it means, exactly, that our erstwhile gold-digger has clover-enhanced cleavage? Anything significant, or just a youthful bad decision?”

“She’s hiding leprechaun treasure?” Veronica shrugs, consulting the drink menu. “Irish pride would be my guess, or naïve romantic tribute. It’s the kind of gift a woman gives a lover--a secret
only he’s meant to see.”

Her gaze meets Logan’s, so fiercely intimate it scorches. He doesn’t need to ask what she’d do, in support of the man she loves…whether she’s mad at the moment or serene, whether they’re blissful or wholly at odds. The answer is, almost anything, and the next day, more of the same.

“There’s only one Wallace,” Mac responds to Logan’s earlier comment, dismissing work talk to study them with a lurking smile. “Who’ll be HIGHLY entertained, I might add, by today’s events. But the way he looks at me, and the way you look at Veronica? Seem pretty much the same.”

As the lights dim, a waiter returns with a tray of Old-Fashioneds, a complimentary round sent by Trina’s choreographer—he waves from his spot beside the stage, and Logan detects an anxious quiver. “This is going to be a bloodbath,” he murmurs, hoping none of his friends are present. “We should order a second round now.”

Veronica gives him the jaundiced look that says you’ve had plenty of liquid anesthetic, but the lights go down before he manages to retort. So he just toasts her, mouths for those about to die, and drinks.

A vaguely Middle Eastern orchestral score starts up, the curtains slither back--and dear, sweet water-walking Jesus, things are even worse than he feared.

His sister’s lounging on a LITTER, balanced on the shoulders of four muscular dancers, all oiled head-to-toe, clad in loincloths and gold headdresses. She’s in a white number trimmed with gold, possibly ironically; fake orange hair’s piled inside an eagle-shaped tiara, and she’s wearing enough makeup to be seen from space. Red and gold gel spots illuminate her as she pretends to yawn and wake--then she smiles, that manic, “Someday I’ll be a STAR!” expression which precedes her worst offenses. Logan sinks lower in his seat.

Of course. Trina’s Cleopatra. And if he’s not mistaken, the musical selection she’s about to butcher is I Could Have Danced All Night. With Egyptian tonal flourishes added, for ‘authenticity’.

“Oh, THIS should be good,” Mac murmurs as two more dancers appear from the wings, to help the star disembark. Trina tries a Monroe pose, a la Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend, overbalancing one of her supporters--he staggers, and she lands with a thud. The audience laughs; Trina frowns, hurt, but plays it off with a ta-da pose…then begins, a beat behind the orchestra, to sing.

Logan’s painfully familiar with the nuances of her caterwauling, scarred by years of studio-mandated comportment lessons (at which he excelled, and she…did not). Aaron’s personal fixer tried, on numerous occasions, to steer her towards a career involving hostessing; but Trina never listened to anything she didn’t want to hear. The guy’s efforts only made her more determined.

She really hasn’t improved, since, except in terms of volume. Belting the words defiantly off-key—I could have SPREEEEEAD my wings, and done a thousand things I’ve never done BEFOOOORE-- she flits from one greased unfortunate to the next, mugging and copping surreptitious feels. It would play like burlesque comedy, if she weren’t so deadly-earnest. Logan wonders if that’s actually the stage manager’s strategy.

The guy listened to reason about costumes and orchestral volume; he clearly knows he’s on thin ice with this Late-Kingdom-Meets-Eliza-Doolittle schtick. Maybe encouraging Trina’s fondness for drama, all the way into camp territory, is the method to his particular madness?

If so, it’s working--Veronica winces at one particularly egregious missed note, but the audience
adores the routine. When Trina covers her mouth in faux-shock before rolling herself and ‘Julius Caesar’ into a carpet, laughter and applause fill the room.

She emerges, mussed, to do a King-Tut-Style dance routine, evading rubber asps tossed from the wings; grins as she whirls and staggers through the all at once my heart took flight bit, seduced, apparently, by the crowd’s enthusiasm. Her grand finale involves a pseudo-Shakespearean death scene, using a fake snake as a prop--conga drums throb provocatively in the background, to represent her slowing heart.

The number’s so asinine it’s accidentally hilarious—even Mac and Veronica snicker, when they don’t realize he’s looking. And Trina seems TRIUMPHANT… her ability to self-delude is epic. The only thing this show’s missing is backup singers who aren’t tone-deaf--and Logan’s sure that will soon be remedied.

His sister’s complete lack of talent has somehow been turned into an asset. Once again, she’s triumphed, in a situation that would neatly sink HIM.

“She’s the loser who never loses,” Logan murmurs, as Trina takes her fifth bow to thunderous applause. She accepts a bouquet with poorly-faked humility--notices he’s in the audience, beams and waves. “When I forget the world’s unjust, my sister always turns up to remind me.”

“Who cares about the rest of the world?” Veronica rests her hand atop his, entwines their fingers, gently caressing his wounded palm. “It can go to hell in a handbasket for all I care, as long as we’ve got each other. Now listen--there’s no way the Riviera is legit, if THIS is their headlining act. Mac can help me track down our Irish lass tomorrow, low-risk endeavors only. I want you to learn how those developers are scamming Trina, before she suffers a worse fate than mockery.”

“She doesn’t even realize the joke’s on her,” he mutters, stroking his thumb across dainty fingertips. Picks V’s hand up and presses it to his lips. Because, while patently untrue—his wife cares about the state of the world, passionately—her declaration of loyalty is priceless. He may have been fortune’s fool most of his life, blamed for others’ crimes, knocked around on a whim. But he’s got Ronnie--he won the important battle. “Which I guess is why she needs me. Come on, let’s show Mackenzie a good time, since she flew all this way to help us. Then we’ll go home, and you can model the foundation garments I so helpfully provided this evening. I paid an extortionate price…we need to make ABSOLUTELY sure they don’t chafe.”

“Perhaps we can put them through a stress test,” his wife whispers, and smirks at his expression. “Buy new ones, if the seams don’t hold.”
Logan outdid himself last night, assessing the durability of her expensive undergarments. They put the sheer lace corselette through its paces and, surprisingly, it didn’t chafe at all. *Too bad the seams didn’t hold.* Smiling, she leans over the bed, cards his hair with her fingers, and pushes it away from his brow to place a kiss on his temple. After their... *product testing,* she’d made him take a painkiller for his arm. She hopes it will keep him sleeping and out of trouble until she gets back.

Veronica frowns at the bandage, glaring white against his tan skin. A few inches to the left and... she grits her teeth at the thought. Stupid, darling man. Always putting himself in the line of fire - figuratively and literally- to save a woman in need, sometimes forgetting that SHE needs him safe and unharmed. So far she’s withheld the tongue-lashing he deserves, choosing to comfort and soothe for both his peace of mind and hers. But once fully rested, he’s in store for an earful.

And Weevil! He should know better than to encourage Logan’s foolhardy plans, especially now when... Shaking her head, Veronica tightens the belt of her dressing gown with determination. Sabotaging his loaded dice would be too easy. This time, she is going to pay a visit to his abuela and tell her a little story about the Louse Ring. It will be YEARS before Weevil is allowed to set foot at the racetrack.

The raw-stone tiles in the hall are ice under her feet. She thinks about turning back for her slippers, but is loath to wake up Logan; she soldiers on and makes a note to adjust the thermostat for him. He hates waking up to a chilly house. At the top of the stairs, the smell of bacon and coffee assails her senses and she wonders if Remy’s made pastries, too. Suddenly starving, she takes the stairs at a fast clip and goes straight to the dining room.

Remy’s brunch spread is a showstopper. A massive tray of fresh cut fruit garnished with mariposa flowers acts as centerpiece. Tiered trays display an assortment of pastries, and the line of silver chafing dishes hold everything from plain scrambled eggs to picadillo cua cua. Veronica’s first stop is the metal carafes of hot coffee and warm milk. She makes a cup of cafe con leche, adds sugar, and picks over the pastelitos de guayaba and banana rum custard tarts.

They should have overnight guests more often.

“Good morning,” Tina says, sailing into the room with a stack of mail and a brown-paper-wrapped
package. Setting it on the table, she gives a low whistle at the sight of the food. “Is all this for Mac’s benefit?”

Veronica shrugs. “Who knows?”

Remy is capricious. It’s either feast or famine depending on his mood. His temperamental chef routine ticks Logan off, which Veronica suspects is WHY he does it. Logan eats to fuel his body, not for pleasure, and Remy feels his creations go unappreciated by the master of the house. The only reason Logan won’t fire him is because he pampers Veronica.

She takes two of each pastry and puts her first plate on the table, picks up the waiting package. It is addressed to her, but bears no postage. “Where did this come from?” she asks, showing it to Tina.

Looking up from the chart with today’s schedule, Tina pokes her pencil through her bun and answers, “It was delivered by messenger this morning.”

“Hmm.” Veronica balances it in her palm, feeling its weight. Wonders if Logan thinks a present will save him from his misdeeds at the track. Turning it over, she uses her nail to break the tape seal and unwraps the paper. It is a square gift box of black velvet. She flips open the hinged lid.

A double-strand of Tahitian pearls rests on a pillow of white satin. There are silver spacing beads between each pearl and the twin ropes are joined in the center by a brooch of pearl flowers, black diamonds, and silver filigree leaves. While beautiful, it is a chunky piece, too large for her tastes, and definitely not something Logan would purchase.

Veronica slips the small envelope from beneath the necklace, snaps the jewelry box closed, and withdraws the note card: ‘You should have better gems than topazes for your red dress…Angelo R.’

“A gift from Logan?”

“No.” She drops the card on the table, folds the shipping paper around the case, and wraps and sent back to… Tina angles her head, waits expectantly for her to finish. Veronica taps the card with her nail, ponders. “Never mind, I’ll take care of it myself.”

It is common practice for mobsters to send extravagant gifts to the wives and girlfriends of potential business associates. However, she doesn’t believe this is an attempt to curry favor with Logan. Rossi is playing tit-for-tat and trying to use her as pawn in his game - a move that is sure to enrage Logan. But returning the pearls might only escalate things. Veronica needs to send Rossi a clear message that his gift was received, but not welcomed.

Leaving the package, she returns to the buffet. She selects two pieces of grilled Cuban bread, already lavished with butter, and creates a sandwich of scrambled eggs and bacon. Takes a bite and thoughtfully chews.

Another night on the town in full view of Rossi? She could wear the red dress again and accessorize with the diamond necklace Logan bought her. It’s a delicate strand of diamonds with a black pearl teardrop and matching earrings. The combination of dress and pearls that are not his should put Rossi on notice.

She has another bite of sandwich, decides it needs cheese, avocado, and habanero peppers.

“Don’t let Remy catch you altering his food or we’ll never have eggs again,” Logan says from the doorway. He’s lounging on the jamb in another of his hideous smoking jackets; this one a sharkskin pattern of deep burgundy and iridescent gold. It’s vexing how good he looks in the nightmarish fashion choice.
He also seems alert and focused. She’s obviously underestimated his tolerance for painkillers, belatedly realizing she should have made him take two. “He would never do such a thing; Remy -- like you-- loves me.”

Logan crosses the room and slides his arms around her waist. Bending his head, he kisses the side of her neck. “Remy better not love you like I do.” His knee slips between her thighs as he pulls her closer and kisses her. “You taste spicy.”

“Like my temper.” She gently touches his wounded bicep, watches him wince. “You should be in bed.”

His eyebrows bob. “Care to join me?”

“No.” Her gaze darts to the table and the poorly concealed package. “But if you go lie down, I’ll bring you breakfast- toast, fruit, and coffee?” Smiling, she bats her lashes at him. “I may even stay and keep you company while you eat.”

“Tempting, but alas, I have things to do today.” Placing a kiss on her nose, he releases his hold on her, and turns to the carafe of coffee.

While his back is turned, she uses the few seconds she has to conceal Rossi’s gift, dropping the pile of mail on it. Witnessing the subterfuge, Tina gathers up her things, and beats a hasty retreat with a muttered, “I need to go check on Corny.”

Veronica stares after her, wishing for her own easy escape, sighs, and looks to Logan. To assist with her mail-diversion, she says, “I hope, for your sake, those things you have to do today don’t involve Weevil.”

“They don’t.” Logan takes the seat across from her, sips his espresso. “Low-risk endeavors only, remember?” Taking another long swallow from his mug, he stares at her over the rim, assessing. “Did something happen this morning?”

To avoid answering, she picks up a pastelito de guayaba, takes a healthy bite, and drinks her cafe con leche. The sweet coffee mixes with the flavor of cream cheese and guava, eliciting a soft, “Mmm,” from her.

Logan smiles at her reaction. Reaching across the table, his hand hovers over the mail and the flaky pastry turns to dust on Veronica’s tongue, making it difficult to swallow. She chokes it down with more coffee as Logan’s fingers alight on the gift card. Color leaches from his face. “What the…” Logan focuses on the mail; he pulls the box from the pile and flicks it open. “That son of a bitch.”

“It’s not a big deal; I’m going—”

“Not a big deal? CRAZY PEOPLE are sending you jewels!” All the color rushes back to his face, suffusing his cheeks till they turn the same shade of burgundy as his smoking jacket. He drags a hand through his hair. “This is EXACTLY what I told you would happen when you dangled yourself in front of Rossi like a PRIZE!”

Veronica’s temper flares. “ME? This has NOTHING to do with the other night, and everything to do with your harebrained scheme to kidnap Bubbles OUT FROM UNDER HIS NOSE!”

Pushing away from the table, his chair scrapes across the tile floor. He stands and starts to pace. “If that bastard thinks he can just send my wife GIFTS——” He snatches the velvet case from the table. “I’m going to settle this RIGHT NOW.” Spinning on his heel, he strides toward the door.
“Logan Echolls,” Veronica barks, stopping him mid-stride. “You will NOT confront a connected mobster and make me a widow.”

He looks at her, undecided, and she glares him into submission. Jaw clenched, he comes back to the table, drops into his chair and returns her angry stare.

The silent duel is interrupted by Mac’s arrival in the dining room. “Good”—sensing the mood, her inflection rises, turning the greeting into a question—“morning?”

With visible effort, Logan loses his sullen expression, and pastes on a smile to answer Mac. “Sleep well?” He stands to refill his coffee, fixes a cup for Mac.

Veronica uses the distraction as cover for her departure, taking the necklace and leaving the dining room without a word to either of them. And he accuses ME of being rash and impulsive. She stalks across the house to the study. Champ greets her arrival by jumping off the couch and racing for her feet; her tail thumps against Veronica’s leg. Bending at the waist, Veronica gives the dog a quick scratch behind the ears.

How am I going to keep Logan away from Rossi and still save Bubbles?

Unable to settle, Veronica roams the room, fluffing throw pillows and straightening books on the shelves, while Champ dances around her feet like this is a fun new game. Maybe Clarence should be LOGAN’S bodyguard instead of mine. At the very least, he could protect her husband from himself.

The room is spotless, everything is in its place, and she’s making busy-work when she should be doing actual work. Big Dick’s murder isn’t going to solve itself. She sits at the desk, shoves the gift box in a drawer and takes out a legal pad.

Champ scrabbles onto the chair with her, walks circles on Veronica’s legs, and then curls into a ball on her lap.

She absentely pets the dog and starts compiling a list of hotels. The first name on the pad is Ambos Mundos. American tourists come to Havana obsessed with Hemingway so it’s a good place to begin her search for the mysterious mistress. She taps the pen on the lined sheet of yellow legal paper. Did Big Dick bring his stolen money to Cuba in cash? And, if he did, where is it now? Does the mistress have it? If so, eight million dollars bumps her up to first-class establishments and makes this easier for Veronica.

Picking up the phone, she dials the operator, asks to be connected to Ambos Mundos. While waiting for the connection, Veronica adds more names to the pad: Inglaterra, Sevilla-Biltmore, Hotel Nacional.

A perky voice answers the line, starts to run through the standard spiel. “Good morn--”

Doing her best haughty-Celeste voice, Veronica cuts her off. “I’m looking for one of your...guests.” She infuses the word with a touch of disgust. “Also known as the tramp who ran away with my husband.”

“Um...I’m...uh.” Gone is the perky as the desk clerk flounders for something to say. An audible deep breath and she recovers her professionalism. “If you give me her name, I will ring her room.”

“I don’t know her name, but you can’t miss her. Tall brunette, curvy, wide smile. Cheap clothes, costume jewelry, flirts with all the men.”
“I’m sorry, but--”

“YOU’RE sorry? I’m sorry I ever married that bastard. Runs off with my money and a floozy half his age.”

“If you--”

“Oh, and she has a tattoo.” Veronica makes a blech noise in the back of her throat. “A tiny shamrock on her left breast.” The added bit of description is met with silence. Before the woman can think of a polite way to refuse help, Veronica continues, “If I must speak to your manager, I will, but it’s in YOUR best interest to help me. After all, this tramp IS spending my money at your hotel, and I’m sure you don’t want the authorities involved.”

“Hold, please.” A rustling sound travels across the line as she covers the mouthpiece. Veronica waits out the muffled conversation that takes place. She hopes the clerk is passing along the description to nearby staff, asking if they’ve seen a woman fitting this description. Minutes pass until she returns to the line. “We don’t have any guests who match--”

Veronica hangs up on her mid-sentence as Logan enters the study balancing a tray one-handed, using his uninjured arm, she notes. Champ’s head pops up; she sniffs the air and bounds off Veronica’s lap toward the smell of bacon.

“You didn’t finish eating breakfast.” He palms a piece of bacon from the tray before setting it in front of her and crouches next to the desk, feeding the stolen treat to Champ. “I thought you might be hungry.”

“Are you talking to me or the dog?” she asks, tartly, not ready to accept his display of good will.

“You, of course.” Logan sits across from her, wearing a penitent smile, but the tense set of his shoulders and steely-eyed stare say he’s prepared to continue their fight. Veronica recognizes his predicament. Rossi’s gift-giving-ways are not something he’s willing to brush off, but he doesn’t want to raise the subject and risk incurring her wrath. Because, while he may love their sparring, he hates having her be truly mad at him. He’s in a definite pickle.

Veronica lets him stew, picks up the phone, and calls the next hotel on her list. By the third one, she has perfected her angry, wronged-woman routine and the clerks are more forthcoming-- but none of them are able to identify the mistress. She hangs up and draws a line through the Sevilla-Biltmore, studies Logan. “Don’t you have something else to do?”

“Yes, but it’s not as entertaining as watching you play jilted lover.”

Rolling her eyes, she has the operator connect her to the next name on the list. A pleasant voice thanks her for calling the Hotel Nacional de Cuba, introduces herself, and asks how she can be of service. Veronica launches into her routine and Miranda listens to her plight, making sympathetic noises. When Veronica gets to the part about the tattoo, Miranda interrupts, “Is it a green shamrock?”

“Yes” —Veronica underlines the Nacional on her pad, punctuates it with an exclamation point— “The sacrilege of that hussy putting a shamrock on her… well, it’s enough to make Saint Patrick turn in his grave.”

Logan’s grin prompts her to cover the handset and mouth the question, too much? He shakes his head.

“She’s not a registered guest” —Miranda lowers her voice— “But she might be staying with one?
I’ve seen her with the same man a few times, and she spends most of the day at the pool. I think her name’s Priscilla.”

So the mistress --Priscilla-- already has a new guy? Did she line up Big Dick’s replacement before, or after, she shot him? “Do you know his name? The man she’s staying with?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay, you’ve been a big help, Miranda, and it won’t go unappreciated.” With a smile, Veronica hangs up.

“Take it you found Big Dick’s mistress?” Logan sits upright, dropping his feet from the edge of the desk.

“I did, and now it’s your turn to make yourself useful.” She pushes the bulky, rotary phone closer to him. “First, you need to reserve a room for me, and second, I want you to reach out to your banking contacts to see if Big Dick deposited his money here in Cuba.”

He arches a questioning brow.

“Eight million is a lot of walking-around money. Even if he showed up with cash, I doubt he kept it that way. I want to know if he put it in the bank and, if so, how much he deposited.”

With a nod, Logan picks up the receiver. “I’ll start with Banco de Creditos- the destination of choice for felons, fugitives, and cons.” He smirks. “That might even be its slogan.”

His choice is a smart one. Located in the basement of the Sevilla Biltmore, Banco de Creditos launders the casino skim for Meyer Lansky. If Big Dick was looking for an introduction to the mob here in Havana, a large deposit in Amleto Battisti’s bank was certainly the way to get noticed. Amleto would’ve been on the line to Lansky seconds after Big Dick left the building.

Veronica listens with half an ear as Logan calls the hotel first and makes her a reservation for today. Depressing the phone’s plunger with his thumb, he disconnects, and starts to dial another number, presumably his contact at the bank. He stops when Veronica withdraws Rossi’s necklace from the desk drawer. “What are you doing with that?” he asks, dropping the receiver in its cradle with a thunk.

“Sending it to Miranda- anonymous appreciation for today’s help.” Logan’s lips part with surprise and Veronica smiles. “You didn’t think I’d actually KEEP it?”

“No, but I…”

“Yes, I know what YOU wanted to do with it, but it’s NOT happening.” Stymied, he watches her wrap the necklace in fresh paper and address it to Miranda care of the Hotel Nacional. “Now I’m going to put this in the post, collect Mac, and go find Big Dick’s mistress.”

Scheming gaze still on the package, he innocently asks, “Should I have Clarence bring the car around?”

“I’m going to drive myself.” Before he can protest, she holds up a silencing hand. “It’s only to the pool for lunch and then home - I won’t go anywhere else.”

His eyes spark and she knows he wants to argue, but the scales are tipped in her favor. His high-handedness of yesterday, coupled with his misadventure at the track plus their fight this morning, leaves him on shaky ground. Resignation slumps his shoulders. “Just be careful.”
Veronica smirks. “Maybe you should take your own advice.” Standing, she circles the desk to his side. She cups his cheek, leans over, and kisses him. “Call the banks, look into Trina’s deal with the Riviera, but” —she holds his gaze— “please stay away from Rossi.”

With a groan, he pulls her onto his lap. “How can I say no to you when you look at me like that?” Cradling her face in his palms, he kisses her. “I love you, Veronica.”

She lays her head on his chest, lightly touches his wounded arm. “Then stay safe for me.” She takes the kiss he presses on her forehead as acquiescence and gets up from the chair. “And NO Weevil, either.”

“I don’t think you need to worry; Weevil has probably fled the country by now to escape your wrath. My guess, he’s living under an assumed name in a tiny hut, praying a novena that you won’t find him.”

“He should be so lucky,” she says, leaving the room with Champ at her heels.

Mac is no longer in the dining room, but the food is, and Veronica helps herself to another pastry. Holding it between her teeth, she opens the door to the backyard for the dog. Hearing voices, she follows. Corny, Isabetta, and Mac are on the veranda, drinking iced coffee. Corny is regaling them with some tale that has them both smiling.

As she approaches the table, Isabetta looks up and asks, “You had Logan arrested?”

“Not recently.” A downside to hiring friends as staff- they know your history. Not wanting to take a trip through the halls of Neptune High past, she turns to Mac. “Are you ready for day two of your adventure?”

“Will it be as entertaining as Trina’s death by rubber asp?”

“Probably not, but you get to wear a bathing suit.”

XXXXX

An hour later, they’re BOTH wearing bathing suits, standing beneath the green-and-white-striped awnings surrounding the pool area. There are a lot of people dispersed across the oval-shaped patio. Some are swimming; the others are either seated at umbrella tables or lounging on white, slatted-wood deck chairs.

“Let’s split up,” Veronica suggests to Mac. “I’ll take the right side, you take the left, and—”

“I’ll be in Scotland a’fore ye,” Mac mutters, adjusting the pale blue strap of her suit. “For future reference, skimpy attire is not a selling point when you want me to help you.”

“But I didn’t think you’d blend wearing a parka and snow boots.” Veronica gives her a once-over. “I’m sure Wallace will appreciate the look - I’ll have to send him a picture.” She dons her sunglasses, steps out from beneath the shade of the awning. “If you see Priscilla, find the closest seat to her, and wave me over.”

“Do you want me to talk to the staff?”

Veronica surveys the scene. Tray-carrying waiters navigate through the crowd, delivering drinks and snacks to the guests, while towel boys hand out white, rolled bath sheets imprinted with the
hotel’s logo. There are bartenders behind the bar at the opposite end of the pool. Cigarette girls mill about selling Lucky Strikes, cigars, and tanning oil. At least one of them has seen the mistress, knows who she is, and can identify the man she’s staying with.

“Sure, see if you can get her last name, and maybe the room number she’s using to charge her drinks.” Veronica starts to move away, hesitates. “But Mac? Avoid the cabanas.” The exhortation is met with a raised, questioning eyebrow. Veronica leans in, whispers, “You might stumble into the wrong one.”

Her answer does little to clear Mac’s confused expression, but she nods agreement.

Meyer Lansky meets with his mob ‘associates’ inside the poolside cabanas, and Veronica doesn’t want her friend overhearing, or seeing, something she shouldn’t. She watches as Mac heads toward the first grouping of chairs, knowing she doesn’t have to worry. Unlike her, Mac won’t disregard the warning to satisfy her curiosity; she’ll stay clear and ask for an explanation later.

Strolling along the edge of the pool, Veronica searches the tables and lounge chairs. One of the women has potential. She’s wearing a large sun hat and is turned away talking to a man in a pair of swim trunks dotted with palm trees and tropical flowers. Veronica circles the couple for a glimpse of her face. Eyes that could be brown, a toothy grin, and lush curves make her move closer, gaze dropping to the woman’s ample cleavage. There’s no tattoo. 

Rats.

Next stop is the towel stand. Veronica approaches with her most disarming smile, and greets the attendant with a cheerful hello. He hands her one of the rolled bath sheets. “Thank you.” She starts to turn, stops. Tapping a finger to her cheek, she says, “I’d better take two. I’m meeting my friend Priscilla for lunch. Have you seen her? Tall brunette with a little tattoo right here.” She leans forward giving him a peek down her swimsuit.

Averting his eyes, he shakes his head no.

Veronica uses the same looking-for-my-friend bluff on a passing waiter with no luck. Ditto for the nearby cigarette girl. Almost at the end of the patio, she puts her towels on the rim of the kidney-shaped pool and slips into the water. Wading toward the ladder, she checks the faces of the swimming women. None match.

She climbs up the ladder and crosses to a different towel boy. This one gives her a head-to-toe appraisal as she approaches. It’s a good sign. Flashing him her most enticing smile—the one that always works on Logan—she takes the proffered towel and glides it down the front of her swimsuit. His eyes follow its path.

“I’m looking for a friend of mine; perhaps you’ve seen her?” Raising her foot, she balances it on a chair, and bends over to dry her leg. “Her name’s Priscilla.” Veronica leans lower, points to her chest. “She has a small shamrock tattoo right here?”

“Oh” —a lecherous grin spreads across his face—“Señorita Banks.”

“Yes. Is she here?” Veronica pretends to scan the crowd. “We were supposed to have lunch together.”

“Sadly, no. She and Señor Fitzpatrick have left the hotel.”

She bolts upright almost knocking over the chair. “Fitzpatrick?”

It’s a common surname. There’s no reason to assume a connection between Big Dick’s mistress and the Fighting Fitzpatricks - Neptune’s first family of crime. She’s getting ahead of herself. Or
Veronica frowns. A common surname in Ireland, but not so much in Cuba. The coincidence of Big Dick and Priscilla, both from Neptune, being here with someone named Fitzpatrick, is just too strong to ignore.

“Sí.” The towel boy is staring at her; an odd expression on his face. “Her fiancé, Cormac?”

“Of course,” Veronica covers. She doesn’t know which piece of news to focus on first. Cormac Fitzpatrick? Fiancé? Big Dick’s mistress is engaged to a member of the Irish mob? Could this be what Vinnie was hiding? Keeping details of the mistress secret with the hope Veronica wouldn’t find Priscilla and uncover her liaison with Vinnie’s criminal cronies?

Wrapping the towel around her shoulders, she scouts the area for Mac; spots her at the bar sipping a mojito and hurries to join her. “I could get used to this. Maybe I SHOULD quit teaching and join Keith in the PI business, instead of just helping him with the occasional paperwork.” Lifting her glass to take another sip, she pauses with it halfway to her mouth and hands it to Veronica. “Here, you look like you need this more than I do.”

“I can wait.” She signals for the bartender. “Did you find out anything?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Mac juts her chin at one of the waiters. “He remembers her. Compared her to an apple - polished on the outside, rotten at the core. Says her last name is Banks.”

“I got the same information from the pervy towel boy.”

“Yeah, you put on quite a show for him. Good thing Logan wasn’t here to see the way he was watching you, or there’d be one less pool attendant in this world.”

Veronica shrugs indifference, orders her own mojito. “That’s not all the letch told me - he said Priscilla was staying here with Cormac Fitzpatrick.”

Mac’s eyes widen. “THE Cormac Fitzpatrick, from Neptune?”

“I can’t be sure until I see him, but… yeah, I think so.”

“Huh… now that makes sense,” Mac muses. Veronica’s jaw drops —NONE of this makes sense— and Mac grins at her confusion, elaborates, “When I was talking to the waiter, one of the guests overheard our conversation and asked if Priscilla had conned me too. Apparently, she’s a grifter working out of the Montmartre night club.”

Veronica’s familiar with the place. Montmartre used to be famous for its ‘razzle-dazzle’ - shills would lead gullible tourists to the tables, egg them on until they were broke, and then receive a split of the profits from the house. Lansky put a stop to the practice when he bought a piece of the club; it is now a serious casino for serious gamblers. If Priscilla and Cormac are running cons there, it won’t be long before they end up on the wrong side of Lansky. Or maybe they already did and Big Dick paid the price?

Or, was Big Dick one of their marks? Priscilla, acting as roper, lures him in with promises of a huge payday, while at the same time plotting to steal his money? Veronica appreciates the poetic justice of it. A con conned by a better con. She smirks.

“Uh-oh, I recognize that look - it’s the Veronica-plots-revenge smile of evil.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not plotting anything, just appreciating the effects of karma.” Picking up her drink, she inclines her head toward an open table. “Lunch?”
After they’re seated, Veronica shares her ‘Priscilla and Cormac running the game on Big Dick’ theory. Tells Mac her suspicions about Vinnie. “You think he was in on it?” she asks.

“Anything’s possible with Vinnie. He could’ve introduced Big Dick to Priscilla in exchange for a share of the profits.”

A waiter brings them menus and glasses of water. Mac waits until he’s gone before asking, “So what went wrong? Why did they decide to kill him instead?”

“It was easier?” Veronica peruses the menu, decides on the bistec de cerdo. “They start the con in Neptune, but things go sideways when Big Dick’s crimes come to light and he has to flee. If he brought all his money in cash...or maybe bearer bonds? It would be faster for them to shoot him and steal it.”

“I suppose, but would Big Dick be stupid enough to SHOW her the money?”

“Men don’t always think with their head.”

“True.”

The waiter returns for their order, bearing fresh drinks. Mac gets the pargo entero frito —a whole fried red snapper with mango sauce— and Veronica asks for her pork steak. She adds empanadas, a fruit and cheese platter, and maduros. The fried, sweet plantains were the only thing missing from Remy’s brunch spread and she’s been craving them since.

When he departs, Veronica says, “Thanks for helping me today...and, if I haven’t mentioned it lately, thanks for checking up on my dad.”

“No worries, I like going over for his chili surprise and Wallace LOVES his television. They watch basketball, and I entertain myself by typing up his bills.” Dropping her gaze to the table, Mac fiddles with her napkin. “He misses you though. I think if you don’t move back soon, he may turn up here.”

Veronica wrinkles her nose. “Somehow I doubt that. When he comes for a visit, he’s usually ready to head home before the week is over.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing you did.”

“Hey!” Veronica runs her finger up the side of her glass, collects the condensation and flicks it at Mac, who pretends to duck. “I’m an excellent hostess.”

“When you’re not fighting with your husband, maybe.” Her expression remains doubtful as to Veronica’s hosting skills. “Were you giving him the business for his shenanigans at the track?”

“No, we just...disagree on a course of action for our case. He’s pushing for a shoot-em-up, in-your-face approach, and I think it requires a bit more... finesse.”

“Well,” says Mac. “Not to be disloyal, but the ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ angle might have its merits in a town where even poolside cabanas are dangerous.”

“Pssht, danger is my middle name- I can handle Havana.”

“But what about--”

Their food arrives, cutting off Mac’s question. The first plate the waiter sets down is the
empanadas stuffed with picadillo. Without waiting for the rest to be served, Veronica takes one of the golden, fried pastries, and bites into it. The fire of the spicy beef is balanced by the tomatoes and the briny tang of manzanilla olives.

Her next bite is bigger and her mouth is full when Mac asks, “But what about kids? You couldn’t have any in a place like this, right? It wouldn’t be safe. What with their parents chasing down mobsters and occasionally getting shot.”

“It’s not like that happens every day, you know- maybe just once on Tuesday and every other Thursday,” she quips. “Apparently, Logan gave up common sense for Lent.”

Mac frowns. “Do you and Logan even WANT kids?”

The emphatic nature of her question gives Veronica pause. She suspects there’s more to this conversation than Havana being an unsafe place to raise children. Mac has the same sadness in her eyes as yesterday at the airport. “We’ve never talked about it. I don’t think either of us ever saw ourselves as parents, but--”

“Wallace wants us to have one.”

*Tread carefully, Veronica.* “And you don’t?”

“I do, but…” Her gaze falls to her plate. Stabbing a piece of snapper with the fork tines, she brings it to her mouth, then lowers it without eating. “It wouldn’t be fair to them.”

“What wouldn’t be fair? Having two great parents who love them?”

“You know that’s not what I mean.” Mac drops her fork, giving up all pretense of eating. “How can I bring a child into this world? Where they still have the brown paper bag test? Am I supposed to hope that they’re light-skinned so they can ‘pass’? Doesn’t being a great parent mean putting your child first? Life would just be too hard for them.”

“Life IS hard.” Veronica can’t pretend to understand the difficulty of this decision and how it weighs on her friends. She and Logan could just move somewhere safer, make a few changes to their lifestyle, and their kids would be fine. It isn’t so easy for Mac and Wallace. She changes tack. “Ultimately it’s up to you, but I’d hate to see you let the racists win, giving up something you want in the face of their ugliness.”

“That’s how Wallace feels,” she says on a sigh.

“Besides, how can you deny the world a cute little Mackenzie-Fennel? With your dimples and Wallace’s beautiful eyes?”

Said dimples appear as a slight smile teases the corner of Mac’s mouth. “Maybe you should focus on your own husband’s eyes. And not just when he’s getting punched in one of them.”

“See, now that’s just wrong. Logan hardly EVER gets punched in the face - it’s usually the other way around.”

“My mistake.” A full-fledged grin. “But speaking of your mad-bad-dangerous-to-know husband, shouldn’t we head back to the house? Make sure he hasn’t gotten into more trouble in our absence?”

*XXXXX*
Trouble is likely.

Veronica reads the note again — Dick’s in town. Went to pick him up from the airport. Will check in with Tina later. Love, L. Unfortunately, she can’t decide if Logan will get in MORE trouble with Dick than he does with Weevil.

“Uh-oh,” Mac mutters, echoing her thoughts. “Looks like more hot water for Logan.” Backing up a step, she glances at Veronica’s face. Whatever she sees makes her move further away from the desk. “I don’t want to be him when he gets home. In fact, I don’t even want to be standing NEXT to him when he gets home. So” —her eyes alight on the shelves— “on that note, I’m going to help myself to one of these books, then indulge in my own hot water in the form of a relaxing bath.”

“Chicken,” Veronica scoffs.

“I think you mean SMART.” Mac takes down Ira Levin’s A Kiss Before Dying, grins at the title. “Make sure you offer Logan one before you kill him.”

“Oh, I’m not going to kill him, but I may torture him a little.” The choice of dress for tonight is now clear. It’s one she hasn’t worn in a while because of Logan’s reaction to it —they never left the house— and she’s been holding it in reserve. Tonight seems like the perfect opportunity to make him suffer.

Now for a suffering of a different sort. Picking up the phone, she tells the operator she wants to place an overseas call, and gives her the number.

The man himself answers, cocksure and jovial. “Vincent Van Lowe, private investigator extraordinaire.”

“Vinnie,” Veronica says, squeezing as much disdain and loathing as possible into the two syllables. “Why didn’t you tell me--”

“Glad you called, VMars, because good ‘ol Vinnie has been doing your job for you - not that you’re not capable,” he says in a way that implies otherwise. “And I’ve closed the case. Mrs. C didn’t off her henpecked hubby. Like all women who’ve been thrown over for a younger model, Sadie was getting some work done when Big Dick bought the farm.”

She blows the hair from her forehead and counts to ten, trying for patience and failing. “How exactly does that solve the case?”

“My client is innocent.”

Self-interest is Vinnie’s guiding principle. If Sadie’s not a killer, he’s not an accessory. “Which means you’re off-the-hook and no longer care.”

“Mucho correcto, VMars, so you can consider yourself fired. Pleasure doing business...check is in the mail... yadda, yadda, yadda.”

He’s getting ready to hang up, but before he can, Veronica stops him with, “I found Big Dick’s mistress.” A strangled choking noise barks across the line. She smiles at his discomfort. “And here’s the interesting thing, she’s shacking up with a friend of yours, Cormac Fitzpatrick.”

“Friends is a little extreme.”
“Not as extreme as life in prison.” Reclining in the chair, she puts her feet on the desk and crosses her ankles. “How did it go down, Vinnie? Sadie hires you because she thinks Big Dick is cheating, and you see a chance to fleece him? Run a honey-trap with Cormac’s moll?”

“Whoa, slow down there, blondie. I MAY have mentioned Big D to Cormac in passing, but what he did with that information, who can say?”

“They were conning him and you know it. What was your cut, Vinnie? Ten percent? Twenty?” She resists the impulse to bang the receiver on the desk. “I can’t BELIEVE you had me spinning my wheels for DAYS, searching for his mistress, and you’ve known who she is this ENTIRE TIME.”

“She’s a real looker, isn’t she?”

“As usual, you’re missing the point. If it turns out they shot Big Dick for his money, don’t think I won’t mention your name to the police.”

“Eh, I’m not worried. Been reading up on that place you call home...frankly, you could do better...and I don’t think they give a fig. It’s Cuba, Veronica - bad guys kill bad guys every day of the week.” Sadly, he isn’t wrong. “But good for you, being all glass-half-full.”

“Yeah, that’s me, a regular optimist.”

Vinnie chuckles. “Now don’t take this the wrong way, but DON’T let me know how all this turns out, okay?” A loud click sounds in her ear.

“Goodbye to you, too,” She grumbles, replacing the receiver.

Of course, Vinnie is lying through his teeth about his involvement in the con. Veronica’s sure he introduced Big Dick to Priscilla for a cut of the action, but is he fabricating Sadie’s alibi? Now that he knows the police don’t care about pesky things like the truth, there’s no reason for him to lie.

Trust, but verify. Ha, she doesn’t trust Vinnie AT ALL. The proverb, when it comes to dealing with the Van Lowes of the world, should just be - verify. Veronica asks the international operator to place another call, this one to her dad.

“Two times in the same week? If you miss me this much, you should just move home.”

Veronica rolls her eyes. “But where would you put all of us? Me, Logan, the dog, and let’s not forget our staff - you know Logan would be upset if his morning espresso wasn’t waiting for him, and his Brylcreem didn’t magically replenish itself.”

“I’d find the room, if it meant having you back in Neptune.”

“It sounds like you’re the one who misses ME,” she teases.

“I do, every day.” Heartfelt and sincere, her dad’s words cause unexpected tears. Veronica blinks them away, swallows hard. Oblivious to her sudden bout of melancholy, Keith asks, “How are you feeling? Getting enough sleep? Or is that son-in-law of mine still taking you dancing every night?”

“These are the same questions you asked me on Sunday- I think you need a new routine.”

“I could bring back an oldie-but-a-goodie? Hmm... What about - did you eat all your vegetables? Or, have you finished your homework, young lady?”
Veronica laughs. “If by vegetables you mean cake, then yes. And I’m not the one with homework, old man. YOU’RE the one who’s supposed to be tracking down copies of Big Dick’s ledgers.”

“I’m working on it. But you might have to face the fact that Richard Senior took the books with him, honey.”

She’s already considered it. Why would Big Dick leave his records —evidence of his crimes— back in Neptune for an eager prosecutor to find? It’s logical that they traveled with him to Havana. “If he did, they're with the rest of his missing things.”

“Any luck finding his secret mistress?”

“Her name’s Priscilla Banks, and get this, she’s” —Veronica almost says ‘living with Cormac Fitzpatrick’ and quickly changes her sentence— “not a big mystery. Vinnie’s known who she was since the beginning.” She gives him an abbreviated version of her earlier phone call, leaving out words like ‘mob’ and ‘con artist.’

It’s not that Keith is unaware of the dangers of Havana in general, and her job in particular, but his worry for her is a visceral thing, and Veronica doesn’t need to make it worse. If he notices the gaps in her story, he doesn’t comment. Instead he says, “Vinnie has a loose definition of the word truth; do you want me to double-check Sadie’s alibi?”

“Could you? Please?”

“Anything for you, Number One Daughter who lives too far away.”

“And is coming to see you soon,” she decides on the spot. “When this case is over, Logan and I are on the first plane to California for a visit.” Logan won’t mind her making plans without consulting him. For some reason, satisfying her whims makes him happy.

Keith is surprised, but pleased with her pronouncement, sharing his ideas for daddy, daughter time. Veronica good-naturedly rejects each of his suggestions until a client walks into his office and he has to go. Reluctantly, she hangs up, leaves the study, and wanders into the kitchen.

Tina is at the table reading one of Remy’s notorious shopping lists. Veronica can tell from the paper —a heavy bond— and the flamboyant script. “He’s letting you go to the market? Does that mean he’s forgiven you for the great cheese debacle?”

The ‘eyes’ in the Swiss were NOT big enough for Remy’s liking, and he spent at least an hour educating Tina on properly-aged cheese.

“Not entirely,” Tina says, pointing to the note at the bottom: do not buy blind cheese, never mind I will get it myself.

“Where is he anyway?” Veronica asks, opening the fridge to stare at its contents.

“He had to rush off to meet his new lady-friend; I don’t think we’ll see him again until tomorrow. But” —Tina points to the oven— “he left you a preprandial snack.”

Remy’s idea of a snack and hers are the same so she eagerly heads for the stove. Using a mitt, she takes out the large covered bowl and removes the lid. Tender pieces of gnocchi float in a parmesan cream sauce with thin slivers of prosciutto and shaved truffles. Veronica leans over the bowl and eats it standing at the counter.

When the phone rings, she lets Tina answer. “Echolls residence.” Tina slides the cord through her
fingers as she listens. “Do you want to tell her yourself? She’s right here.” Holding out the receiver, she mouths the word, *Logan*.

He’s still talking to Tina when Veronica puts the phone to her ear. “--tell her Dick’s going to stay with us for a few days, and we’ll be home before nine.”

“Afraid to tell me yourself?” she asks around a mouthful of dumpling.

“Uh, no, of course not... I just didn’t want to get in between you and your food, Dollface.”

“You didn’t even know I was eating,” Veronica says, shaking her head at his pathetic attempt to cover. He’s usually faster on his feet. Briefly, she wonders how much he’s had to drink. “Why isn’t Dick staying in a hotel?”

“For you, my sweet, I thought you’d want to squeeze him for information on his dad.” That was a quicker response and Veronica decides the answer to the drinking question is, not much.

“Don’t come home.” She spoons in more pasta. “I—”

“Now, Ronnie, you know if the choice is be with you or stay with Dick, I’m going to ditch him this instant.”

Swallowing, she says, “Good to know, but what I want is for you to meet me at Montmartre. Rumor has it, Big Dick’s mistress does business there.”

“You’ll need to bring me a tux.”

And she knows exactly which one. The Veronica-plots-revenge smile of evil spreads across her face. “Yes, darling; I’ll see you at eight.”
Logan sits on the veranda in immaculate white linen, flicking pebbles systematically into the garden, and broods about Rossi and the pearls.

He gets the sense, sometimes, that Ronnie thinks he’s just jealous, or crazily overprotective because family’s involved. And it’s not like those emotions don’t factor in, when he’s cocking back a punitive fist. But the problem that keeps Logan up at night, that evokes a cold sweat when evil men notice his wife, is her DISMISSIVENESS.

Veronica doesn’t give a good goddamn about her own safety…it’s barely a factor in her decision-making, and only because he insists. What preservation instincts she has are wholly focused on preserving him.

And while Logan can’t lay claim to his wife’s steel-trap, clue-dislodging, stubborn-as-dirt brain? He HAS got a hundred-ninety pounds of muscle behind his well-aimed fists. And he doesn’t restrict his gunplay to warning shots.

Tossing back another sip of Cuba Libre, heavily iced in deference to the heat, he isolates another pebble from the pile, centers it on the table, and angrily flicks.

Distantly, he hears the doorbell chime, which means Ramon’s arrived. They’ll be discussing Banco de Creditos employees susceptible to bribery--Logan confirmed the existence of Big Dick’s account by telephone, before hitting an uncooperative wall.

Scooping up the remaining pebbles, he spills them carefully into a planter…no sense revealing a juvenile habit to a gossip who prizes suavity. A sparkly bit of fabric in the pot’s shadow catches his eye, and he picks up a sequined glove.

It’s got blue feathers stitched around the upper edge; Logan recognizes the thing at a glance as part of a Montmartre showgirl’s costume. Carmen’s, no doubt. He noticed her and Tina canoodling out here in the wee hours, while Veronica slept the sleep of the dead.

He shakes his head and tosses the glove into a bush, squints to make sure it’s hidden from view. Nobody would suspect the efficient Tina of conducting an illegal liaison sloppily. But Ramon
might conclude LOGAN’S got a mistress, and gleefully spread the word. And while Veronica would wave off rumors—she’s secure, with good reason—the ‘sympathy’ of local catty types might be hard for her to bear.

Ramon emerges onto the patio, sets his hat on the table to shake Logan’s hand. He’s in a linen suit too, a slightly darker, creamier shade, and he wears it with the relaxed brio that’s part of his charm.

“Your so-delightful secretary let me in,” he says, disposing himself comfortably in a chair, nodding acceptance of a drink poured from the pitcher. He selects a ham croquette from a tray of noshes and adds, “Such a serene and lovely residence…and charming company when solitude grows boring. Life in Cuba suits you, acere.”

“What can I say? I was born to be a well-heeled expat. If a free-spirited existence can be lived with flair…” Logan shrugs, toasts his friend with his drink. “Count me in.”

“Certainly you indulged free spirits yesterday.” Ramon crosses his legs and leans back, preparing to be entertained. “If the rumors I’ve heard are true. I hope you sustained no injuries during the dashing rescue?”

“Just to my pride.” Logan grimaces, charmingly self-effacing…but frankly, the Bubbles debacle still rankles. “Luckily, the lady escaped unscathed.”

“If only she could escape more permanently.” Appropriating the pitcher, Ramon adds more ice to his glass. “To Idaho, perhaps. But fortunately, for her and for you, discussion of your racetrack peccadillo has been muted. A café in Chinatown was bombed last night, and a businessman from Oriente Province killed.”

Logan frowns. “Mob or guerillas?” he asks, and Ramon shrugs. “How many explosions is that this year, five? And it’s only MARCH.”

“The revolutionaries are sneaking down from the hills again.” His friend tears open another croquette and dips half in a bowl of garlic sauce. “They’re hungry, angry and hot, and these hotels springing up to lure tourists fan the flames. My family has benefitted greatly from enthusiastic Americans with always-full wallets. But I wonder, sometimes, if our bargain with the Mafia is Faustian.”

“Can I propose a deal that’s not at ALL fraught?” Logan asks, because discussions of paradise lost make him antsy. “A trade, and I’m open to terms?”

“You intrigue me.” Ramon grins, smile lines creasing his cheerful, chubby face. “What would you like to trade?”

“You’ve heard about the murdered tourist?” Logan traces the ring of condensation spreading beneath his glass. “Richard Casablancas, who failed to flee his sordid past?”

“Hasn’t everyone?” Ramon lifts his brows. “A flashy man, Senor Casablancas, so they say, with a taste for high living and glamorous women. Are you investigating his death?”

“I’m a friend of the family,” Logan demurs, because it piques Ramon’s interest when he won’t confirm or deny. “I traced his funds to the bank in the Sevilla-Biltmore, but they proved…unforthcoming about details. It may be necessary to grease the wheels of commerce.”

“And you need to determine where to apply lubricant?” Ramon smirks. “I know a clerk, a distant cousin—he’ll help, for a reasonable price. In return, I ask only tickets to the exhibit of the lovely Isabetta’s so-talented father. A lady of my acquaintance is eager to attend.”
“How many do you need?” Logan feels his own mouth quirk in response. He loves doing business with people who know the score.

“Four,” Ramon says, decisive, and toasts Logan with his glass. “I wish the rest of your countrymen were as adept at the civilized art of barter.”

Logan clinks beverages, sips. Tina chooses this moment to emerge with the telephone, trailing a cord.

“Call for you from the States, Mr. Echolls.” She turns a wink on Ramon, who flirts up at her in return. “He wouldn’t give his name. But I’m pretty sure it’s the guy who shared your suite at the Grand.”

Lifting his brows, because she means Duncan or Dick, Logan presses the receiver to his ear. “This had better not be about the blackmailer who owned that donkey.”

Ramon laughs, but Dick, on the other end of the line, just slurs, “Man, you have got to let that go. It was vacation, I was blitzed, no one cares. Besides, I’m pretty sure Duncan bought all the negatives before he announced his run for office.”

“Aw, I love a happy ending,” Logan drawls. “I assume I owe this trip down memory lane to your recent personal loss? My condolences, by the way. Need help arranging shipment of the body?”

“Probably,” Dick says, then cackles at some ruckus in the background. “I don’t know shit about funerals, other than there’s booze and everyone cries. But right now I’m about to board a par-tay plane in Miami; I mostly need a place to crash when it lands.”

Logan sighs and closes his eyes—he hates allowing houseguests of whom his lovely wife’s not fond. She’ll be mad if he fobs Dick off, though, before she’s pinned the guy down and grilled him. “Try not to drink too much en route,” he says at last, which elicits mocking laughter and a hang-up. Then sits back, acknowledging defeat.

Removing a pad from his pocket, he scribbles one note about Carmen’s glove, and another to warn Veronica Dick’s in town; hands both to Tina, who’s stroking a suspiciously-dusty Champ. Turns his best smile on Ramon, because his guest’s avidly feigning unconcern.

“Want to continue our tete-a-tete at the airport bar?” he asks, folding his arms and surrendering to the inevitable. “Pretty sure I’ll need help carrying my friend off the plane.”

Dick defies expectations, however; an hour-and-a-half later, he staggers down rolling stairs onto the tarmac under his own power. His pompadour’s mussed, his powder-blue ensemble crumpled, and he’s carrying a hot-pink daiquiri. When he spots Logan, he drains the drink, tosses the cheap airline glass aside, and yells, “Yo, man, rev your engine and grab your wallet! The party has officially ARRIVED!”

“Grief takes many forms,” Ramon says, amused, with a conciliatory back pat. Logan watches Dick’s stumbling progress, and tries not to wince. “We’re fortunate his isn’t immobilizing, because your friend looks uncooperative. And heavy.”

“You have no idea how right you are.” Logan offers a hand as Dick approaches, finds himself engulfed in a hug. His high-school partner in petty crime smells like flop sweat and grenadine, and there’s a fine tremor of exhaustion beneath his too-relaxed drunkenness. “Hey, now, man, take it easy, you know I’ve got you covered. I’ve dealt with every dead-dad crisis you could name.”
Dick pulls back, sniffs—wipes his nose with the knuckles of one hand. “What an unreal fucking week,” he says, and extends the same hand to Ramon, who takes it as briefly as possible. “Dick Casablancas, Junior. Where’s my bag and where’s the bar? And where’s Ronnie, for that matter? I figured she’d be waiting at the gate to rattle my cage, in case I felt too welcome.”

“She went for lunch and a swim with Cindy Fennel,” Logan says, leading the way towards the luggage cart. “You’re not our first unexpected guest this week. Dick, this is Ramon Aviles, a good friend and occasional business associate. He kept me company over drinks while we waited for your plane.”

“A pleasure,” Ramon says, though Logan seriously doubts he means it. At this point he’s just storing up details for the story he’ll tell friends over dinner. “My deepest sympathies for your loss. If it aids in processing grief, the revolutionaries who committed this atrocity have been executed.”

“I’m just shocked Pops got killed by random strangers,” Dick says, with the smirk that punctuates his more outrageous statements. “I figured somebody who hated him would eventually punch his ticket.”

He wanders off to collect a lemon-yellow luggage set, and Ramon murmurs, “I’ll catch a cab and leave you to your hosting duties—this guy wants to unburden his heart. Shall I telephone you tomorrow, after speaking with my cousin?”

“Please do.” Logan shakes. “I’ll arrange for the tickets soon. And I hope the lady in question enjoys her outing.”

“How could she not?” Ramon asks, tipping his hat. “She’ll be escorted by me.”

Logan sighs, watching Dick attempt to pick up four cases and drop two, ambles over to help. Veronica would be considerably less annoyed, no doubt, if she knew how little fun he’s currently having.

XXXXX

“So WHERE are we headed, again?” Dick asks, once they’ve crammed all his luggage into the trunk and merged onto the highway. “Are you seriously gonna make me do BUSINESS MEETINGS right now? We haven’t seen each other in three years!”

“I just want to eyeball a construction site, maybe talk to the guy in charge,” Logan says, clinging stubbornly to patience. “Ramon told me they’re building a new, and possibly lucrative, hotel nearby. Surely you can spare half an hour of your time, since I’m giving up DAYS of mine to help you?”

“Come ON, hombre,” Dick slurs, not noticeably less soused than he was at the airport. He shoves Logan’s shoulder, causing the convertible to swerve, briefly, into oncoming traffic. “Quit being such a square, you live in Fat City. Let’s hook up with senoritas of the showgirl variety and get our drink on, before all the good ones find dates for the evening.”

“Dick, it’s four in the afternoon.” Logan pushes his friend unceremoniously away. Dick slumps against the door, arms crossed to better pout, and his unkempt tie flies up to smack his face. “Also, I don’t cheat with showgirls, or with ANY girls, for that matter. Literally everybody knows that about me. Except you, apparently.”

“Don’t have a cow,” Dick mutters, clawing the tie away and tucking it inside his collar for good measure. “Guess if I was married to Ronnie Mars, I’d be worried about the safety of my Johnson,
too. Tell you what, I’LL bang all the mambo dancers, out of concern for its well-being. Your only job is to keep the good times coming.”

“Wow, your generosity astounds me.” Logan turns off the Malecon onto Calle Paseo; it’s the main road through a high-dollar residential neighborhood, an unlikely site for luxury businesses. “Keep in mind, you DO, at some point during your visit, actually have to deal with his death.”

“Whatever, I’m just letting off steam.” Dick peers out the windshield instead of meeting Logan’s eyes. “Like you weren’t glad when your old man bit the bullet? Before he managed to drag you down with him, and you ended up in a father/son cell?”

“Fair point.” Logan sighs, angling into a parking spot along the curb. “Look, I just need to take care of this one business item, as a favor to my sister. Then we’ll head over to La Floridita for merienda, and you’ll have your chance to get soused with Hemingway.”


“Probably both, at some point, but let’s not borrow trouble.” Logan gets out of the car and leans a hand on the fender, surveying the fenced-off traffic island; there’s a frowning man walking the site, blueprints in hand. “This is just the garden-variety dilemma for my estranged flesh-and-blood. She wants to be a star…and the vultures love to drain her bank account, while pretending to oblige.”

“Still not seeing the connection between that and some empty patch of dirt,” Dick calls, as Logan smacks the hood decisively and rounds it to talk to the architect. “You used to be fun before you tied the knot, man! And started doing weird shit to help Ronnie for no REASON!”

Logan considers flipping Dick off behind his back, discards the impulse as unseemly. Straightens his lapels and cuffs as he leisurely approaches his prey.

The architect is a thin, well-dressed ascetic type, with a hawk nose, wide, narrow mouth, and a wave to his hair as un-subdue-able as Logan’s. He’s clad in a dapper tweed suit, in defiance of the heat, and examines a smear on his shoe with disfavor. “It’s the humidity,” Logan offers, which makes the man glance up and smile. “You’ll get used to damp, eventually. Nothing around here stays clean and dry for long.”

“You seem to be managing.” The man’s voice is guttural, with a faint Russian accent, and he extends a slender hand. “Igor Polevitzky. Ironically, a designer of tropical habitats, despite a youth misspent in colder locales.”

“Logan Echolls.” He shakes, gestures expansively at the lot. “I’m intrigued to see a club going up here. Are you looking for investors?”

Polevitsky smiles, with irony. “Funds, in this instance, are not lacking. I’ve been told my budget is eleven million, guaranteed by BANDES. It’s the time frame that has me concerned—the management company wants all buildings finished in six months. And it’s difficult, you know, to plan a complex until one has studied the environment extensively…the way the light moves across the topography throughout the day, the direction from which wind and rain come. A true creative challenge—and this client has VERY particular tastes. In fact, I understand I’m the third poor soul to attempt this challenge.”

“My sympathies.” Logan smiles, disarming. Spares a glance for Dick, who’s fully reclined the
passenger seat, swigging morosely from a silver flask. “So the president of the hotel company’s a harsh taskmaster?”

“On the contrary.” Polevitsky rolls up the blueprint, seemingly willing to gossip indefinitely. “Mister Smith is a charming individual, and quite an astute businessman. I understand he recently renovated a nearby racetrack, to great success?”

“Good old Harry.” So the Riviera’s a mob endeavor, Logan decides; approved by Batista, too, since funds are guaranteed by the government’s public-works project. And Lansky’s most trusted property manager is ensuring the build-out goes smoothly.

The Boss of Bosses has been talking for a year about debuting a luxury, no-drama casino-hotel, or so the scuttlebutt goes. Although whether the project will earn out, before revolutionaries storm rich neighborhoods and burn them to the ground, is an open question.

“If he’s in charge, the goose won’t ever stop laying golden eggs.” Logan nods at the blueprints good-naturedly. “I’ll let you get back to your analysis. It just never pays to let a lucrative opportunity go uninvestigated.”

“A pleasure, Mr. Echolls.” Polivetsky touches the end of the paper tube to his forehead, as if tipping a hat. “Come back in the fall, enjoy the fruits of my labor.”

Logan nods, shakes again, returns to the car. Knocks Dick’s feet off the dash, where they’re desultorily crossed. “Try for a little decorum on a public street.”

“Get bent.” Dick offers the flask to Logan. Smirks when he accepts, and takes a restorative sip of what turns out to be brandy. “Is it too early to make the scene at the Shanghai Theater? I heard they do some crazy shit up on that stage. And the place is crawling with friendly wahines, if you know what I mean.”

“You need to wait till nighttime for that level of hedonism.” Logan hands back the flask and puts the car in gear. “And the fact that your preferred destination involves a guy with a huge cock, who does sex shows and calls himself Superman, concerns me.”

“I heard the girls in the audience VOLUNTEER,” Dick marvels, unfazed by this criticism. “I heard he screws like twenty a NIGHT.”

Logan stops at a stoplight, closes his eyes briefly to summon patience, and turns towards Belgica and La Floridita. “Again, Dick—I have a wife with whom I would like to continue living. How about we grab some food instead? You can call a cab and venture out alone later, if the urge to debauch yourself and get mugged becomes too strong.”

“See, this is why a ball-and-chain is NOT on my agenda.” Dick turns the flask upside down over his mouth, scowls when only a trickle dribbles out. “No matter what anyone ‘insists’. I’d rather hang in Timbuktu until I’m old and grey than put my nuts in a vise for some little blonde gol… blonde to squeeze.”

Logan forebears to deck his so-called friend, since he made the extraordinary effort to curb his insults. “We’re going to the birthplace of the daiquiri, man. Don’t think of it as compromising your chrome-plated ways. Think of it as enjoying a little bit of history, in the possible company of famous personages.”

La Floridita’s a smallish corner bar near the walled Old City, not far from the site of Dick’s father’s murder…a fact Logan tactfully neglects to mention. He locates a reasonably safe parking
spot, and leads Dick down the edging-towards-twilight street, to the door beneath a blue-and-white neon sign.

Inside, the restaurant-bar is all opulent Colonial luxury, polished dark wood with gold accents, wicker chairs and creamy linens. Star-shaped chandeliers gild art-deco colonnades, and a painting of the Havana harbor covers one wall. The other’s dominated by an enormous mahogany bar, to which Logan leads his already-unsteady companion.

Gesturing for the bartender, he orders a daiquiri for Dick and a less-sweet Papa Dobles for himself, then requests use of the phone. He promised to check in about possible evening plans, and he should do so before Veronica gets home. He sells bad news better in person, preferably when he’s naked and she’s sleepy.

He watches Dick chug the daiquiri and order shots, while explaining recent events to Tina— then, reluctantly, to his wife, hoping she can’t tell by his voice he had four Cuba Libres in the airport bar. Watches Dick down two rums and shove a third his direction, wondering why his tux request made V smug.

“Ever been to the Moulin Rouge?” he asks Dick with a lift of brows. Extends his shot glass in toast, efficiently drains it. “Ronnie and Mac want to meet at the Montmartre, it’s an imperfect replica. Showgirls, booze, gambling and kicks, as requested…and all you need to gain access is formalwear free of rips and stains.”

“Got a tux in my bag.” Dick accompanies the statement with a belch; Logan flags down a waiter to request a table. Ronnie’s on a schedule, and Dick’s continued consciousness requires food. “Here’s what I want to know; where IS good old Ernie, anyway? You said I could meet him, that’s false advertising, man. Least you didn’t lie about the beautiful babies.”

Dick leers at a gaggle of young women as they’re led across the dining room. Logan sighs and counts to ten. “Hemingway doesn’t LIVE here, Dick, it’s a restaurant. Relax, have a meal.” He sits, accepting a menu from the black-clad waiter, gives it a cursory glance. “How long has it been, anyway, since you consumed calories that weren’t liquid and alcoholic?”

“Food’s for the weak.” Dick sprawls into the chair opposite, balancing his open menu on the table like a tent. “Hey, can I get another one of these pink drinks? That thing was tight.”

The waiter nods, strides off, and Logan says, “Well, I’m starving, so just…cool your jets a while. Everything our chef makes for company has forty-five ingredients and a cream sauce, and this morning I couldn’t cope.”

“Fine,” Dick says, petulant. “Get me a burrito or whatever. And how about we buy a bottle?”

“Boliche,” Logan decides, ignoring this, and closes the menu with a snap. “It’s close enough to pot roast that you can probably deal, and there’s lots of starch to soak up booze.”

The waiter returns carrying another daiquiri, and Logan orders, with a murmured instruction to refill drinks slowly. “What?” he asks, in response to Dick’s stare.

This elicits a snort and slow headshake. “Man, it’s just too much…seeing you all comfortable in a suit, instead of raising hell in your T-Bird with some starlet. Do you even speak English anymore, when I’m not around?”

“At home,” Logan says, nonplussed. “And with Americans. Come on, man, people grow up…MOST people, anyway. I chose this life, I’ve got it made in the shade. Besides it’s not like I left
anything behind in Nowheresville worth missing.”

“Not even Caitlin Ford and her poodle skirts?” Dick shrugs. “Seriously man, I don’t get the appeal. Ronnie was always up to her neck, AT LEAST, in trouble back home—and it was never the fun kind. I can’t believe she’s behaving now, when you’re the only one around to scold her.”

“Once things went south for me,” Logan says, flipping the menu open and closed with one finger, “after my mom took a swan dive, and Aaron kicked me out? I learned who my real friends were. Duncan, because he gave me a place to stay. You, which is why I’m sitting here now, while you drink yourself stupid over a loser dad. And Veronica and Keith, who saved me from getting framed for my own girlfriend’s murder. Why would I go back to that Mickey Mouse town? Just to have my ass kissed by people who hoped I’d fry? I’d a million times rather be the face of Ronnie’s business, and everybody’s all-right-for-a-gringo friend. I’ll only consider returning if it’s what SHE wants. Or if I have to, in order to keep her safe.”

“Memory lane blows,” Dick says, with a shrug. “For all of us. That’s no reason to avoid Cali forever.”

“You’re one of two childhood friends who’s never been in jail,” Logan tells him, tossing the menu aside. “I’m honestly not crazy about those odds.”

“Do you…” Dick picks up a fork and tests the tines with one finger, as if to estimate how much stabbing himself would hurt. “Do you think ALL parents screw up their kids like ours did? I mean, is it fate?”

“No clue,” Logan takes the fork away, gently. “There’ve been a dearth of decent parents in my life. Veronica’s mom was bent, before she ran off, but her dad’s OK. And Cindy and Wallace’s folks seem nice.”

“You know what the fucked-up part is?” Dick asks, before chugging half his drink. “Ripping off all those old ladies wasn’t even the worst thing Pops did. Compared to how he screwed up Cassidy, that con was small potatoes.”

“What, because he ignored the kid, called him a wimp?” Logan scoffs. “I WISH my dad had just ignored me. I’d’ve acted fragile in a hot second, if it made him keep his distance.”

“Beav wasn’t acting,” Dick says, morosely. Drinks deep. “He was a...you know. Sissy. It’s why he...anyway. I’m not clear on the details, but Pops found out about him and some older guy, and just completely lost his mind. Screamed about how Beav was an embarrassment, spread money around covering it up. Big Dick felt like his word should be law...although none of his rules seemed to apply to HIM.”

“Huh. I’m familiar with the syndrome.” Logan shakes his head, because what is there to say? Bad things happen all the time to kids raised in Neptune. “You know what’s crazy? That cotillion Cassidy missed, the Christmas he...died? It’s the first time I ever kissed Veronica. Duncan drove you to the police station while I was in the bathroom--and she waited by the door to fill me in. We had a knock-down drag-out, about Lilly, the whole shebang. And then everybody we knew was gone, so I had to drive her home.”

“I’m so stoked you enjoyed your evening,” Dick says sarcastically, draining his drink. “Myself, I got the royal shaft. You play back-seat bingo the night my dad died, too?”

“Okay that was insensitive.” Logan takes a deep breath, puffing out his cheeks, then slowly exhales. “Sorry, man. It was a weird fucking full-of-opposites night.”
“What’s WEIRD is how much you dig bitchy women,” Dick says. “Me, I prefer my ladies stacked and without claws, like those classy chassis over there. Oh, and by the way, I’m sick of little-girl whining. Can we get back to having fun?”

The meal arrives and Logan digs in, though Dick’s clearly lost patience with sitting. He should’ve bit the bullet and eaten Remy’s brunch; but choking down overly-elaborate food is torture. The echoes of Aaron’s Crawford-esque stunts sour every bite—even the scent of dear old Dad’s ‘specialties’ makes him nauseous.

Veronica suspects, probably, because Veronica notices everything…she’ll take steps if he gets too thin. But she loves her rich diet so much, especially lately, he’d rather go hungry than deny her.

“Eat,” he urges Dick, maybe to compensate, gesturing with his fork. His friend makes a you-must-be-kidding face and drains his drink. “ Seriously, pass out now and you’ll miss the evening’s entertainment.”

With an adolescent huff of exasperation Dick slumps and tries a bite—curls his lip, probably at the hint of bitter orange. Orders a round for the women at the next table, plus another daiquiri. Logan scoops up the largest possible spoonful of sofrito, and polishes off his own cocktail.

Thanks to the slow-service-warning, plus this bar’s fondness for his tips, he’s just finishing dinner when the drinks arrive. Dick toasts the giggling recipients of his largesse, sashays over to converse; Logan tosses a fifty on the table, in preparation for hasty flight.

“What’s your tale, nightingale?” Dick asks the soon-to-be-disillusioned woman he prefers, as Logan wipes his mouth fastidiously and fishes for keys. “You look like a million bucks, and also REALLY athletic. Are you ladies some kind of team? Like maybe super into group sports?”

“Time to go.” Logan grabs his friend, who’s still clutching the lurid cocktail, and steers him towards the exit. “Ernie can make your acquaintance later, once you’re sober.”

XXXXX

They take the long way to Montmartre, Avenida Reina to Menocal, in hopes the rapidly cooling evening will chill Dick out. The city’s nightlife is gaining steam, neon signs atop buildings glowing as the sky fades to indigo. Well-dressed people stroll La Rampa arm-in-arm, laughing and chatting; Logan circles the Nacional’s lot twice before he finds a place to park.

He unlocks the trunk for Dick, checks his watch as his friend rifles cases, shoving clothes into the boot’s dark corners. Eventually, he locates a not-too-rumpled tux and dress shoes; Logan breathes a quiet sigh of relief.

Pointing, he herds Dick past the Monseigneur, relieved the Casa Marina brothel is out of view. Enjoys the chance to stretch his legs as they approach the carport, set beneath Montmartre’s white, Neoclassical central tower. The club’s already doing brisk business—the murmur of a crowd drifts out, every time someone opens the door.

“Why the hell did we park and walk when they have a valet?” Dick demands, clutching his clothes crossly to his chest. He swipes a lock of hair out of one eye. “If you’re trying to sober me up, cool it.”

“There was an incident.” Logan folds his arms defensively, casting around in vain for his wife and her friend. “Involving an unfortunate scratch. The drivers here are unqualified to breathe on machines as choice as my Speedster.”
“Looks like Ronnie split,” Dick says, and he doesn’t seem disappointed. “Either that or she went inside without us; both ways, you’re screwed.”

Logan opens his mouth to reply, then shuts it as his Rolls rounds the corner. It pulls up under the awning as a Chrysler sputters away, and Clarence climbs out with a nod.

“Hey, isn’t that the guy who shot…” Dick starts, goes silent with a startled, “Ouch!” when Logan punches his arm. Then, as Clarence hands out the ladies, “Oh, I get it, he’s Ronnie’s bodyguard now. Good, ’cause if anybody needs one…”

Logan ought to deflect and defuse, since Dick’s bringing up dangerous topics. But frankly, he’s too busy staring.

Veronica’s in that dress she ought not to wear near fallible men…and vamped to the nines, besides. The gown’s green, his favorite color, a deep verdant shade like a rainforest at night; it’s Scheherazade-style, made of layered gauze, opaque only when stacked. Her bodice is fitted and cut low, with thin straps tied in bows to accentuate their uselessness—below the waist, it flares and sparkles, showing tantalizing glimpses of her legs. Her heels are high, her evening gloves velvet, her cat-eyes and red lips pure temptation. The smooth chignon she’s fashioned begs to be mussed; and the emerald drops he gave her dangle from her pretty lobes.

She smiles crookedly when she spots him, saunters over, flirting slyly up through her lashes in a way that makes him abruptly hard. “Hey, stranger,” she says, spreading a manicured hand across his chest. “Come here often?”

Logan gazes down at her, his own smile slow and hot. “When there’s life, there’s hope.”

Veronica laughs, tilts her face up for his kiss. He obliges, pressing his lips softly to the spot beneath her ear where the scent of ambergris is strongest. He nips, she shivers, and screw the stupid case. If he doesn’t get her alone soon, he’ll implode.

“I never thought I’d say this, but thank God you’re here,” Mac tells Dick, moving up beside him to study Logan and Ronnie like specimens. “Sometimes I get the feeling, while playing third wheel, that they don’t even realize I’m present.”

“They’re like rabbits,” Dick says, with a brief sideways glance. “Or he is, anyway. I’m always a little afraid she’ll eat him after they screw.”

Clarence approaches as Logan straightens; hands him a garment bag, breaking the spell. He says a quiet goodbye to Mac while Logan shoots Dick an admonishing look, then returns to the car and drives off.

“He’ll be back in an hour—he’s just got…errands,” V says, noticing the direction of Logan’s gaze. “Go clean up, maybe I’ll let you kiss me on the mouth.”

Logan unzips the vinyl shell, to check for a pouch containing cufflinks and Brylcreem…smirks as he registers the contents. “My too-tight Armani? Veronica, for shame. What am I, a piece of meat?”

“Grade-A premium beef.” She pats his cheek. “Chop chop, case to solve, time’s a-wastin’. The coat check girl’s amenable to bribery, if you need a place to change.”

“You heard the lady, Dick.” He offers V an elbow, and she crooks her arm around his; they pass through the double doors, onto the waiting elevator. “Tonight we cosset Veronica like the treasure she is, and do anything and everything she wants.”
The Montmartre’s on the third floor of what was once an indoor dog track, repurposed for debauchery in the thirties…excessive Modernist flourishes conceal its humble origins. As a result, it’s an Ayn Rand novel writ large; heroic, nude statues exalting labor loom over the cavernous dining room. On stage, a Parisian cabaret act with a cast of fifty is beginning to get risque.

Logan ignores it, because the casino’s their destination, and turns his attention to the uniformed coat-check girl. She’s balanced, both palms on the counter, lost in daydreams; it’s Havana, so coats are rare. He slips her a twenty under his palm, says, “I’d like to show my friends around, but I’m not properly dressed. Mind if we use your room, make ourselves presentable?”

She shrugs, waves an indifferent hand. Logan grabs a chair from the foyer and lets Dick precede him, then shoves the battered Bentwood under the knob.

“No more cracks about my wife,” he says, stripping efficiently, careful with the gunshot wound—the painkillers have worn off, and his bicep hurts like a bitch. “And no scenes that get us evicted, or it’s knuckle-sandwich time. Veronica’s trying to figure out why Big Dick was killed, which SHOULD inspire gratitude. But she can’t if you’re drawing attention with dumbass drunken antics.”

“I thought the police…whatever, man, learning who shot my dad won’t make him any less dead.” Dick tosses his suit on the floor and shakes out tuxedo trousers. “What I want to know is where the money went. The Feds are up everybody’s ass.”

“That, I’ll be investigating tomorrow.” Logan shrugs painfully into his shirt, slowly fastens the buttons. “Very little’s legal here, so there aren’t paper trails—following cash takes patience, guile and bribes. If you’d like my help…I’d advise cooperating tonight.”

“Knowing Ronnie, she’ll try and pin the murder on me,” Dick mutters. He dons his jacket, rolls his eyes at Logan’s expression. “Don’t worry, I’ll make nice with the little woman. I could even romance the hot friend if you want, get her out of the way while you make time. I mean it’s a sacrifice, because she’s not a showgirl…but a real wingman knows his duty.”

“Dick.” Logan snaps his bow tie to straighten it, knots it beneath his chin by feel. “The ‘hot friend’ is Cindy Fennel. Mackenzie? We went to high school with her. And she’s very, very married to Ronnie’s best pal, so just…try not to piss the lady off.”

“Oh, that makes sense.” Dick examines his own tie like it’s an alien object until Logan sighs, appropriates it, and gestures for Dick to pop his collar. “I was wondering why she acted like she knew me. Sure, man, I’ll do my best. But my track record, when it comes to impressing girls like Ronnie is…let’s say checkered.”

Logan fastens his cufflinks, the gold palm trees Veronica bought him for Christmas, and scoops up Brylcreem. “Just remember the axiom ‘silence is golden’,” he murmurs, fishing a comb out of the bag. “God, I wish I had a mirror.”

“You look like a dad,” Dick says, appropriating pomade and comb to arrange his own pouf. “Or Clark Gable. Your fade was boss, it’s lame that you cut it off.”

“Dick, I’m turning twenty-six on the thirtieth.” Logan eases into his coat, buttons it, checks his cuffs carefully. “Can’t run around mimicking Sinatra forever.”

“Whatever.” Dick transfers his wallet, shoves his blue suit carelessly into a corner. “You brood more than any other person I know.”
Logan hangs his daytime ensemble carefully and moves the chair, not deigning to reply. When they emerge, Veronica and Mac are waiting; and regardless of his lingering teenage tendencies, his wife, at least, seems impressed.

Her fingertips trace lightly over his bicep, which strains the broadcloth past the point of sartorial correctness, and low in her throat, she purrs. “You,” she pronounces, giving him an adult-rated once-over, “are a menace to respectable women. Come on, Tina gave me Carmen’s glove, and we need to return it before she dresses for the second act.”

“Whoa, wait, a showgirl?” Dick straightens, looking around; but Logan’s clocked Carmen in street clothes by the bar, so he’s pretty sure his friend won’t notice. “You know DANCERS, and you’ve been holding out?”

V casts a significant glance at Mac, who’s watching the performance in the dining room, and their guest starts guiltily to attention. Says, in a slightly-rehearsed lilt, “You know what? I’d much rather gamble than search for clues. I find calculating odds relaxing. Care to escort me to the casino, Dick? I hear you’ve got a way with a pair of dice.”

Dick casts a plaintive look at Logan, who shakes his head, just slightly. He sighs, nods silently at Mac (remembering the axiom) and extends an arm to lead her away. To Logan’s left, Veronica quietly snickers.

“Carmen’s having a tough day, according to Tina,” his wife explains, twining herself around his arm like the snake from the Garden of Eden. “And you know if Dick got wind of her…proxivities, he’d be too stimulated to keep quiet. Mac and I decided discretion was key.”

She leads him, ready and willing, to the big mahogany bar; Carmen’s sipping a blue-curaçao cocktail, demure in a flame-colored dress. Leaning in for a hug, V removes the glove from her bag and hands it over, which engenders near-tearful relief.

“Thank you SO much,” Carmen says, flashing a brilliant smile as she stashes the glove, dabbing daintily at one dark eye. “These costumes are expensive to replace, and I’m saving to buy a house.”

“You need to be more careful when you stay over,” Logan murmurs, low so they won’t be overheard. “Ramon Aviles almost spotted this instead of me. I’d rather you and Tina not get arrested for perversion; she’s indispensable, and we’re kind of fond of her girlfriend.”

“I’m so SORRY,” Carmen says, sincere, and curls both hands around her drink. “We were having champagne on the patio, it was sunset, it was romantic…I guess I lost my head. Honestly, I’ve been a mess since the Green-Eyed Man developed an interest—I can’t figure out how to discourage him. Zenia says he’s coming in every night to watch the second show. I got so nervous, I had to have a drink.”

“Next time he interacts with you, stumble,” Logan advises. “Belch, let your bra strap show. The guy loathes sloppiness and lack of glamour; I promise he’ll immediately switch targets.”

“Oh, THANK you!” Carmen sets down her drink to hug him impulsively, and Logan pats her back. She’s close to them in age, but seems much younger, and he feels a protective, paternal impulse creeping in. Maybe Dick’s right, and he IS getting old. “I’ll try that tonight, when he sends flowers. Enjoy the show!”

She rushes off in a flutter of skirts, and Veronica says, “Takes a fastidious fashion plate to know one?”
Logan shrugs, trying not to smile. “Trafficante’s a terrible person, but you must admit, he dresses well.”

“Oh dear.” She widens her eyes outrageously as he leads her back across the hall. “Is that sartorial envy I detect?”

“Hardly,” Logan says with a snort. “His tailor just cuts a nice suit. I’ve got three from him myself.”

They enter the casino, a cramped white room with an arched roof, fluorescent-lit and paneled in square tiles. It’s packed, at this point, with the crème de la crème of the local elite, because doors have been open since four; the croupiers in white tuxes rest against their dark, round tables, flagging but in for a long haul.

“The guy’s influence has shrunk anyway, since Lansky came on the scene,” V says, pointing out Mac and Dick at the roulette table, but continuing across the room. “He’s just a mob boss now, not THE mob boss…weapons stockpiles notwithstanding.”

“Mmmm.” Logan hands her onto a stool at a blackjack table, lays down a couple hundred for chips. “I’m sure that distinction will comfort her if she gets shot in the head.”

Veronica adopts her bashful, all-teeth fake smile as her second face-up card is dealt; shows Logan the soft seventeen that results, so he can pretend to indulgently ‘help’. In reality, she’s sussed out the game and its players, and is scanning the room for her suspect. Whereas he’s worrying about Carmen, keeping an eye on Dick, and sneaking peeks down the front of his wife’s dress.

Taking a deep, fake-apprehensive breath, Veronica leans forward to place a bet and taps the table—her bodice and skin separate, just slightly, and Logan’s flagging erection revives. He runs a knuckle down her spine, smiles as goosebumps rise in its wake. Leans towards her ear to murmur. “See the mistress anywhere yet?”

“No,” she says shortly, tracing the edge of a card with one finger. “And quit staring like you want to eat me, or you’ll blow my innocent-rube cover.”

“But peaches,” he says, planting a hand on the table to shift closer, his breath stirring the fine hairs at her nape. “I DO want to eat you. Repeatedly, and with great attention to detail.”

“A little less flirting, please.” Her voice is breathy, but she manages a sweet smile as the dealer busts and she rakes in her winnings. “And a little more searching for the mistress. Honestly, I’m starting to wonder if we’re in the wrong club. She ought to be here scamming someone by now.”

He smirks, because Ronnie’s been known to pull all-night stakeouts, hardened by resolve, impossible to budge. If she’s this impatient, he’s clearly got her flustered. “Hey, now, we’ve only been here five minutes. Maybe she hasn’t made her grand entrance. Or maybe she’s cornered some poor sucker elsewhere. Want to take a look around, check out the bar?”

Gathering her chips daintily for later cash-out, Veronica nods agreement. He helps her off the stool, ogles discreetly from behind as she strides with purpose through the doors.

The only patrons at the bar, however, are an elderly couple—the man bald and dapper, the woman artificially blonde. Veronica huffs frustration, turning in a slow circle, and he decides she needs a distraction.

“You know,” he drawls, taking her hand. “We COULD check inside the coatroom. Maybe our target’s there now, plotting. Priscilla might suffer from NERVES.”
Veronica narrows her eyes, but a smile appears at the corner of her mouth. “It’s the thorough, responsible thing to do,” she agrees, squeezing his fingers. “We’d be shirking our duty, otherwise.”

Grinning, he palms another twenty, which the beyond-bored coat-check girl accepts with a smirk. He gets the door shut, installs the chair, then lounges against the wall, neglecting to fake a search.

“Curses,” he says. “Foiled again. However will we console ourselves in our darkest hour?”

“You’ve been planning this all evening, haven’t you?” she asks, crossing her arms. “You and your elaborate, yet seemingly-spontaneous, plot.”

“Mmmm.” He shoves off with one shoulder and stalks closer, strokes a fingertip down her throat. “You, in that dress, all disheveled against the wall. Me, peeling back layers until I find girl underneath.”

“Well, I DO believe creativity should be encouraged,” she says, slightly breathless, as he dips two fingers into her cleavage and nuzzles her cheekbone. Complies as he gently spins her, and walks her backwards towards the door. “I’m an enthusiastic patron of the arts.”

“Oh, good,” he says, untying one of the bows, just for the satisfaction of watching straps fall. He kisses the spot he’s bared, unknots the other, then bobs his brows and sinks to his knees. “Because it just so happens enthusiasm is my FAVORITE quality.”

He starts gathering up fistfuls of gauze, smiling into her eyes as she shivers, impatient and eager yet still somehow, subconsciously, shy. Her legs are smooth and pale, skin gleaming in the dim light, no stockings because she loves to drive him nuts. He licks behind her knee, massaging one dainty ankle with his thumb, and she makes a soft sound. Then a slightly louder one as he uncovers black silk panties, and opens his mouth over the gusset.

Logan’s learned her thoroughly, her preferences and turn-ons, so he’s not surprised to find her wet; Veronica LIVES for illicit makeouts, and enjoys them even more when he teases. So he takes his time getting rid of her underwear, withholds the contact she seeks. He craves this, though, the dense, concentrated heat of her, the way she twists and moans. It takes him twenty seconds to abandon games and grow absorbed, licking into her with consuming ardor, gripping her ass in both hands.

She comes on his tongue, pussy clutching and contracting, and he slides three fingers into her as he rises for a kiss, drawing circles around her clit with his thumb. She yanks at his jacket, tongue stroking rough against his, pulls his shirt out of his waistband to slide her hands beneath. Jerking his trousers open, he lets them fall, slides her up the door so he can push inside.

“Oh God,” she says, as he rocks carefully deeper, locking her legs around his waist. “Oh, Jesus, be quiet, she can hear us through the door.”

“Hmmm, no,” he says, seating himself to the hilt, sealed against her cervix by her still-pulsing flesh. He closes his eyes at the sensation; his mouth falls open as he starts to thrust, because fucking Veronica is the kind of bliss that changes lives. She never stays passive, writhing towards completion even trapped against the door. Her hands are everywhere, soft and clutching, small and imperative; her mouth seeks his tongue like it feels as good as his cock. “She’s been bribed. And anyone who doesn’t realize you’re addictive isn’t paying attention.”

Ronnie laughs, and he shifts her in his hands so he can drive harder. It’s too good in this thin-walled cloakroom, with her half-wearing that dress; he’s never going to last. Her nails dig into his neck when his thumbs meet at the apex of her sex—abruptly she’s coming again, on a soft, low
moan she can’t contain. He grunts and gushes into her, shuddering. She takes it like she does everything he gives…hungrily, eager for more.

“Love you,” he murmurs, in the sweaty, shaky aftermath. Presses butterfly kisses across the arcs of her face, along the bow of her moist upper lip. She puckers, without the energy to follow through…but her palms stroke down his spine and squeeze.

“I used to wait for these moments to lose their allure,” she murmurs, as he sets her gently down, smooths back a wayward blonde strand. Locates a handkerchief in his pocket, and uses it to carefully clean her. “I thought marriage would eventually get boring, and sex this good couldn’t last. But nine years later, it’s better than ever. They should write novels about you and your bedroom skills.”

“No, thanks. I’m notorious enough as it is.” He re-pockets the linen square, and helps her don her panties; then turns her, unresisting, towards the door so he can pin her hair. “Besides, you’re my muse. My charms are tailored to suit you exclusively.”

She exhales against the wood while he pulls up his pants--then spins, fiercely, to embrace him, small but persistent, clinging tight. He loops his arms loosely around her, kisses the crown of her head. “All right?” he asks, after a minute, and she nods against his shirt.

“Ready to resume the hunt?” he asks. “I, for one, feel MUCH more relaxed.”

“Ditto.” She disentangles, reluctantly, smooths his shirt front with both hands. Starts tucking the tails, neatly and precisely, an act not designed to cool him down. “But before we go back, I should warn you…the mistress isn’t working alone.”

“Is she part of a scam?” He sleeks both palms along his scalp, glad the pomade’s fresh enough to hold. “A band of thieves, perhaps, like in Oliver Twist?”

“Rumor has it she’s engaged.” Veronica turns away, apparently unconcerned, patting fastidiously at her coiffure; Logan grows instantly suspicious. “To Cormac Fitzpatrick.”

His fingers clench in his hair, and he has to force them to relax and tidy. “Of Neptune Irish mob fame?” She nods, and he flings up his hands, exasperated. “Of COURSE! Because why run afoul of one group of gangsters, when you can go for broke and piss off TWO? Jesus, Veronica, I’ll bet Vinnie knows--what am I saying, of COURSE he does, he must be mixed up in their games to his eyebrows! And he had the temerity to rope YOU in too?”

Logan begins to pace, exercised—she plants herself in his path, curls her palm around his jaw. “Now, sweetums,” she says. “You promised you were feeling relaxed. Let’s not ruin this moment by having a fit about some minor, complicating detail.”

He frowns down at her, head cocked, rapidly calculating. “I’m starting to wonder just whose idea this cloakroom seduction WAS,” he says, crossing his arms. “Did you lure me in here hoping if I got my rocks off, it would soften the blow? Just how did you know the coat check girl takes bribes, anyway?”

“A detective never gives away trade secrets.” She goes on tiptoe to press soft lips to his cheek. He relents as she continues to his mouth, pulls her close to better kiss her back. And has to admit…holding her DOES make him calmer.

“You’re a menace,” he says when she breaks free, stroking a thumb along her small, determined chin. “Come on, fix your lipstick, let’s get this over with. But my stipulation is, you do surveillance...
ONLY, and never identify yourself. I do NOT want these people knowing your name.”

She pulls out a compact and repairs her makeup, hands him a tissue so he can wipe his face. Blots her lips, closes the gilded object with a snap. “Are we presentable?”

“ Barely,” he says, after one confirming glance downward. “Although I can’t vouch for my hair. YOU, however, are impossibly gorgeous when you’ve just been thoroughly screwed.”

“Satisfaction adds a glow,” she quips as he shifts the chair, then takes his hand in hers. “Come on, let’s go solve the case Vinnie won’t.”

He swings open the door, gesturing for her to precede him, and is confronted with the sight of a pacing Mac, purple skirt swishing with the force of her strides. “Oh thank GOD,” she says, as Veronica sheepishly emerges. “It WAS you in there, I felt like a perv. Listen, you guys need to come with me, pronto. Cormac Fitzpatrick just showed up in the casino, and he’s flashing some serious cash.”

“Oh, of course, MAC knew all along,” Logan says sarcastically. “SHE didn’t need to be softened up for the ax.”

“Because I don’t punch everyone who looks at Veronica crosswise,” Mac says, with a ‘duh’ intonation, as they cross the hall. “See him over there? Table by the window? I recognized his face from an article in the Neptune Register. You can probably keep him in view if you play roulette with Dick.”

Logan studies the burly, sandy-haired poker player. His back’s to the door; but he’s dressed expensively, wearing a diamond-studded watch, and the stack of chips before him is considerable. Ripping off other criminals pays big, apparently.

Turning towards the roulette table, Logan frowns. “Just one problem with this plan-- where IS Dick?”

Mac’s gaze follows his, and she mutters something under her breath. “Wreaking havoc, no doubt,” she says, on a sigh. “I’ll go round him up. You and Veronica finish your crime-fighting, fast, before his drinking and showgirl-harassing sends us all to the slammer.”

“You’re the one with experience in shady locales,” V reminds him, waving off Mac and crossing to the roulette table. She extracts her bag of chips so they can bet. “Think you can figure out what kind of con this bozo’s running?”

“Anything for you.” Logan presses a kiss to her temple. “I expect a reward for my forbearance later, though. And the effort involved may be substantial.”

“But isn’t the gentleman supposed to do all the work?” she purses her delectable mouth, ostensibly in thought, but really provocatively. He shakes his head at her, smiling, and pinches her ass through the skirt.

Veronica appropriates two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, hands one over. Then studies the table and places a pile on red, while Logan lounges beside her and surveys the room with fake boredom.

Fitzpatrick looks like what he is, a wolf in sheep’s clothing--a freckle-faced bruise in fine linen. He grins sheepishly each time he loses, which, consistently, he does…but his eyes stay hard and calculating throughout.
“This is stage one of the con,” Logan decides, leaning close to Veronica to murmur as Fitzpatrick folds a great hand. “He’s setting himself up as a sucker, to lure opponents into riskier bets. You need a fair amount of bank to pull this one, make yourself look like a target for fleecing. The partner’s job is to help you cheat on large pots, so you can act overjoyed when your luck turns.”

Fitzpatrick checks his watch, enjoys a sip of whiskey, and Veronica says, “Looks like the partner’s late to the party.”

She lifts her purse, a fan-shaped green silk number embroidered in gold lilies, as if to rummage through; faintly, from its recesses, come a series of clicks. Hidden camera, Logan decides, suppressing a grin, as she removes her compact and powders her nose. And the round decoration center-front must be the lens.

Cormac loses another big bet with apparent good cheer, and Logan says, “He sure seems comfortable spending Big Dick’s cash.”

“Well, there’s a lot of it,” Veronica says. “Or, at any rate, there WAS. Which reminds me--manage to track down the account today?”

“It’s at the Banco de Creditos, like we thought.” He hands over her champagne, gestures for her to bet. “Ramon’s cousin’s on the case. He’ll call with details tomorrow-ish.”

“Your ever-reliable network of scoundrels scores again,” she says, with affection. Frowns, as voices raised in altercation filter faintly through from the hall. “Trouble,” she murmurs, tilting her head to better hear. “Right here in River City, who’d have thought?”

“Dick’s been gone a while,” he says slowly. And as if the words have power, Mac appears in the casino doorway, hair in disarray, beckoning frantically. “Shit, I KNEW that unhinged yelling sounded familiar!”

Exchanging a mutual look of panic, they rush after their friend into the main room, where, sure enough, trouble’s in bloom at the bar. Dick’s got a burgundy-gowned bombshell cornered against a stool, her cocktail and possessions spilled everywhere; he’s screaming into her face with a level of fury Logan’s never seen him show.

“If ANYBODY fucking knows where it is, you do,” he shouts, lifting a hand that has Logan worried until he points an accusing finger. “You’re in all his schemes up to your eyeballs, and you have been for years and YEARS! You think I don’t know you helped cover up his suicide, Kendall? You think I’m not aware of ALL the things you did?”

“Somebody help me!” the woman cries, shoving back a hank of dark curls. And yep, upon her heaving bosom Logan spots the telltale shamrock, just barely visible at the inner curve. “I have no idea who this person even IS!”
CHAPTER EIGHT: VERONICA: HOTEL SEVILLA BILTMORE, 1956: LA MENTIRA CORRE PERO LA VERDAD LA ALCANZA

It’s the mistress. The telltale tattoo reveals her identity, even if Dick’s words confuse the matter. In his schemes for years and years? Suicide? Kendall?

Lifting her purse, Veronica roots through the bag for a handkerchief while her finger taps the button at the apex of the fan’s gold ribs, snapping several photos of her elusive quarry.

Logan leaves Veronica’s side, sweeping between the arguing duo to grip his friend’s arm. “You need to calm down.”

The command goes unheeded.

“I’m gonna tell the Feds you’re here,” Dick threatens Priscilla/Kendall as Logan manhandles him toward the door. “And that YOU have the money!” His voice escalates the further away they move. “You’re gonna be real popular in prison!” he shouts over Logan’s shoulder.

More casino patrons spill into the hall to see what’s causing the commotion. It’s turning into a spectacle— the kind Logan deplores, crass and unseemly. His jaw clenches and he leans into Dick. Veronica can’t hear him, but whatever he says makes Dick go silent. With a shove, Logan gets him out of the bar, and they disappear from view.

The mistress clutches her neck and adopts an expression of horrified innocence, but her eyes are calculating as she takes in the scene. Veronica half-expects her to drawl, ‘Well I never!’ and faint like a Southern belle having vapors. Instead, she offers a tremulous smile and announces to the room, “I’m okay.”

Vinnie was right, she IS a looker. A strange mix of girl-next-door wholesomeness and sexy bombshell, she is multiple male fantasies rolled into one package. Before any of the gathered men can act on their impulse to charm and seduce, Veronica rushes forward, handkerchief in hand. “For your dress,” she says, holding out the delicate cotton square and tipping her head toward a blossoming stain.

“Thank you.” Priscilla folds the hanky, dabs ineffectively at the sweetheart neckline. “He came out of nowhere and grabbed my arm, making me spill my drink… he must’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

Sure he did. Veronica nods sympathetically and studies the woman’s festoon necklace. Tiny drops
set with faceted pink stones and clear Austrian crystals hang from the delicate filigree chains draping her collarbone. It is the same art-deco style as the earring from Big Dick’s room.

“Maybe some club soda before it sets,” Veronica suggests loud enough for the bartender to hear and he scurries away from them to get a glass. She drops her voice anyway and asks, “So you didn’t know him at all?”

Priscilla shakes her head. “A complete stranger.”

“He certainly seemed to know you… Kendall, was it?”

She looks up from her drying to stare at Veronica, gaze hard and unyielding, all traces of innocent victim gone. “Priscilla,” she corrects. “Priscilla Banks.”

Following HALF of Logan’s—surveillance only and never identify yourself—edict, Veronica withholds her own name and says, “Well, no matter, he’s gone now.” She glances at the floor and the spilled contents of Priscilla’s purse. A brass key winks up at her; its tag hidden beneath the hem of the woman’s burgundy gown. “There’s still time to salvage your evening. I’ll just help you gather your things and—”

“No need.” Priscilla stoops down faster than Veronica thought possible in the body-hugging dress and begins to cram everything into her envelope-clutch.

Veronica moves over a step, adjusts the layers of her skirt. She’s about to join her on the floor when Logan strides across the room, clearly unhappy to see her standing next to Big Dick’s mistress. “I came back to make sure you were okay.”

“I am now,” Priscilla answers, under the impression he’s talking to HER, and maybe he IS because he smiles, and extends his hand to help her up. She slips her fingers into his palm and stands, swaying close enough to brush her chest against his. “Thank you for rescuing me from that boor.”

There’s a hair’s breadth of space between their bodies, but Logan doesn’t step back, merely murmurs, “It was my pleasure.”

Veronica shoots daggers at his head, but he seems oblivious to her indignation, which is impossible. Logan is ALWAYS aware of her moods. Her gaze narrows. If he’s attempting to make her jealous as payback for ignoring his request to surveil only, it’s… WORKING, damn him.

Priscilla’s hand lands on his arm and she tilts her head, bestowing him with a wide smile that’s indecent in its obviousness. Predatory, almost. “Will you join me for a drink?”

“Normally,” Veronica starts, possessively wrapping her arm through Logan’s, “my HUSBAND and I would be DELIGHTED to join you, but we’re entertaining guests from out of town.”

His mouth quirks with amusement at her jealous display. “Indeed we are,” he says, neglecting to mention that one of those guests is the ‘bore’ who assaulted Priscilla. “Thank you, dear, for reminding me of our obligations this evening.” He lifts Veronica’s hand to kiss her fingers and then tucks it safely back into the crook of his elbow.

“Of course, darling.”

Their exchange dims the wattage of Priscilla’s smile, but she remains undeterred. “Would it be too much to ask for an escort into the casino?”

Veronica smirks, wonders how he plans to keep up his just-a-Good-Samaritan ruse without being
rude, and what will happen when Dick gets a load of him sashaying into the club with Priscilla on his arm.

“No trouble at all,” Logan says, offering her his other elbow. “But are you meeting someone inside? Because I have to warn you, that unsavory gent is still here.”

That information makes her hesitate. With pursed lips, Priscilla stares toward the casino. Veronica can almost see her internal debate. She won’t be able to run her con with Cormac if Dick is calling her out for being a thief and threatening her with jail. But without her, Cormac can’t recoup the money he’s been losing at the tables.

While this poses a problem for HER, it presents Veronica with an idea. “Perhaps we should fetch you a cab?”

Priscilla shakes her head, eyes Logan with regret, like he’s a winning lottery ticket she can’t claim, and says, “I’ll have the valet hail one for me.” Now that he’s of no use to her, she hasn’t a cause to flirt, or be polite. Not sparing them another glance, she skirts past Veronica and stalks from the room.

“Well, she’s clearly disappointed,” Veronica says, waiting to make sure Priscilla’s gone before lifting her foot. “She was probably tallying your net-worth from the moment you stepped in to help her.” She angles her head to glare at him. “And maybe a few of your other assets, too.”

“You’re the one who put them on display with this tux.” He strokes his knuckles across her cheek and kisses her nose. “But you know you’re the only one who shakes my sheets… or do we need to revisit the coat room so I can prove it to you?”

“Hmm.” Pressing herself flush against him, she smooths a palm over his lapel. “Why don’t you prove it right here?” Using his body as a slide, she sinks to her knees, and his jaw drops. She grins and scoops up the wallet she’d hidden under her foot, brandishes it for him to see.

Logan looks at first disappointed, then a little relieved, and finally he smiles in admiration. “Any other tricks up your… skirt?” he asks with a suggestive bob of his eyebrows.

“A few.” Standing, she lets her fingers graze his inseam. “Play your cards right and maybe I’ll demonstrate them later.” His soft groan is gratifying and her smile turns smug. “But for now, you need to go rescue Mac from Dick. Where’d you stash him anyway?”

“He’s back at the roulette table with orders to stay in his seat under threat of grievous bodily harm.”

She arches a brow. “And he really believed you’d beat him up?”

“Not me, kitten, I threatened him with YOU.”

It’s not the words, but the besotted look in his eyes that floods her with warmth and makes her breath hitch in her throat. Curving her palm around his cheek, she stands on her toes to kiss him. “You just changed that maybe later to a definite yes.”

“I’m suddenly feeling very lucky,” he murmurs, brushing a loose strand of hair from her forehead and tucking it behind her ear. “Should we join Dick and Mac at the tables, try to beat the house?”

“Not tonight. I want to talk to him, and he’s easily distracted by shiny objects and ringing bells.” She points toward one of the unoccupied four-tops at the far end of the room. The corner seat has poor sightlines, which will keep Dick from ogling the stage. “Meet me over there.”
His lips brush her cheek, and he leaves to collect their friends.

Veronica crosses the floor, takes the only chair with both a view of the stage and the door. Keeping her hands in her lap, she uses the linen tablecloth to hide the purloined wallet as she picks through its contents. American dollars in small denominations, totalling two hundred bucks; three traveler’s cheques; some change; and, a Diners Club card bearing the name Richard Casablancas, Sr.—best not to let Dick see that—she returns it to the billfold.

In the lone plastic insert is a Tennessee driver’s license issued to Priscilla Banks - brown hair and blue eyes, five foot eleven, and one hundred and thirty-five pounds. The birth date puts her age at thirty-six. She frowns at the information. No way was Priscilla that tall and her eyes were not blue. Veronica wiggles the license free from the clear sleeve… along with three others.

“Well hello, fake IDs.”

They are all driver’s licenses. One from Arizona has her name as Lacey Shifflet; it shaves three years off her age, drops her weight by ten pounds, and correctly identifies her eyes as brown. The remaining two are both from California. The first is also for Lacey, but she’s changed the spelling—Lacy Shiflett—and has shrunk by four inches. The second makes her Kendall Lacey Shiflett.

“If I gotta talk to Ronnie, I’m gonna need another drink, man,” Dick slurs as he stumbles up to the tufted bar, and waves an arm at the bartender. “Two of those daiquiris, pour-fay-vor-aaa.”

Several heads turn to stare at the loud drunk and Veronica’s eye twitches. She shoves all the ID cards into the wallet, snaps it closed, and watches Dick try to navigate his way over without spilling his drinks on himself, Mac or Logan. They are wisely giving him a wide berth.

As they get closer, Logan frowns and intervenes; he pries the pink concoctions from Dick’s hands and carefully sets them on the table. “Don’t want to ruin that dress,” he says, touching Veronica’s shoulder. “It’s fast becoming my favorite.” He fingers the bow, gives the tail a light tug.

Mac shakes her head. “I don’t know which is worse, babysitting a drunk Dick, or watching you two canoodle,” she says, pulling out one of the slat-back chairs.

“Before you sit”—Veronica touches her arm—“will you do me a favor?”

“A favor?” she croaks, shoulders slumping. “Oh boy, now I’m sorry I complained. Can’t I just keep an eye on Dick? Maybe get him some food? A zillion carbs MIGHT soak up… ” She glances at Dick who’s busy slugging his way through drink number two. “Never mind.”

Logan smirks. “You know she’s relentless. You should just surrender now and do as she asks- it’s easier that way.”

The slurping stops. Dick looks up from his drink, opens his mouth like he’s about to say something, and Logan glares him into silence. He shrugs, mutters, “Whatever, man,” and returns to sucking on his straw.

“Fine,” Mac agrees. “I’ll do your favor, but only if you promise me an afternoon of sightseeing tomorrow. No chasing murder suspects, or crafting wily plans to rescue the hapless.”

“But wily plans are my specialty,” Veronica says with a mock-frown. Mac crosses her arms, unwilling to budge, and Veronica sighs. “Okay, you win. I’ll take you to Morro Castle and we can tour the Trocadero Distillery while we sip banana cocktails - I’ll even let you sleep late.”

“And the art museum.”
“You should make her drive you to Cojimar - it’s the setting for Hemingway’s Old Man and the Sea. You can have lunch at La Terraza,” Logan suggests, while Mac nods in agreement.

“You’re NOT helping, DEAR.” A glance at her husband’s relaxed, smiling face tells Veronica that he thinks he’s being VERY helpful… to himself. Hours of her playing tourist with Mac means he will have a worry-free afternoon. Of course, he’s sorely underestimating her penchant for trouble-she attracts it, like a magnet. Her eye twitches again. Before either of them can suggest any more items for their itinerary, Veronica holds up the wallet. “I need you to turn this in to the lost and found.”

“That’s it?” Mac asks, incredulous. “Sure you don’t want me to steal all the balls from the roulette wheels and rappel out the bathroom window?”

“I’m saving that as a backup, in case we need a distraction later.”

“If we do, I’m pretending I don’t know you and HIDING in the bathroom until you’re gone.” Mac plucks the leather billfold from Veronica’s fingers and heads for the front hall.

When Kendall tries to pay for her cab and discovers the missing wallet, she’s going to remember the helpful blonde at the bar. Hopefully, having Mac be the one who ‘found’ it, will throw her off the scent. If she questions the casino, she’ll get a description of Mac. A slender, pretty BRUNETTE- one who’s winging her way back to California tomorrow night, safely out of Havana.

And, speaking of people she wants OUT of town… Veronica shifts in her seat to focus on Dick. Barely upright, he’s splayed across the chair, pouting and twisting a straw through his fingers. “Was Kendall involved in your dad’s real estate scam?”

“Probably,” he says with a shrug. “She’s had her hands down his pants and in his pockets for YEARS.”

Veronica frowns. When exactly did Vinnie ‘mention’ Big Dick to Cormac? Was Vinnie also getting a cut of the land fraud and penny stocks? Could Big Dick have been the face of the operation? Then, when he got busted, all THREE of his partners—Kendall, Cormac AND Vinnie—decided he was a liability and needed to be axed?

“How many years?”

“Don’t know.” Dick’s laconic answer makes her growl frustration, and he stops trying to peer around the horse statue for a glimpse of the stage. “What? I don’t KNOW. They were doing the deed back when he was married to my mom, but after Beav’s… accident, she just sorta disappeared.”

Is that when she hitched her wagon to Cormac, leaving Neptune to run bigger and better cons? Only to be lured back when she saw that her old Sugar Daddy was making a fortune stealing life insurance money from widows? Perhaps a phone call from Vinnie had them returning to California and Kendall once again inserted herself into Big Dick’s life?

“When did she reappear?”

“Six months? A year?” Attempting to stand, he loses his balance and grabs for the table, knocking over the empty glasses. The dregs of his cocktail spill onto the white linen, creating a pink puddle that slowly seeps into the cloth. “I need another drink.”

Logan gets up, hauls him back into his chair. “You’ve had enough.”
She expects Dick to argue, but he only folds his arms over his chest and grunts in Logan’s direction. This is not good. Dick’s sulking, Logan’s ready to be DONE with this evening, and the overall mood at the table is sour. Veronica holds in her sigh. The next question is dicey and she can guess at the answer, but Veronica needs Dick to confirm her suspicions. “Whose suicide did Kendall help cover-up?” she asks, softly.

“Beav… Cassidy’s.” The pain on his face is palpable. “His death wasn’t an accident, he drove his car off the cliff on purpose.”

“Because he was gay?” Logan asks, surprising Veronica with the revelation.

“Yeah.” Dick pauses, reconsiders, and shakes his head. “No”—his eyes flare with anger—“He offed himself because of our FATHER. When dear-old Dad caught him with his… with that older guy, he humiliated him. Called him names. Told him he was no longer his son.” His expression is morose as he adds, “I was there.”

“Was it the same night as”—Veronica almost says ‘the crash’ and quickly changes course—“Shelly’s party?”

Dick nods. “Merry fucking Christmas.”

The reason for Dick’s estrangement with his father is now clear. Blame and guilt are a potent mix. Add in the anger and Dick had plenty of reason to want Big Dick dead. But now wasn’t the time to say so. “It might’ve still been an--”

“No, there was… Beav left a note.” Dick digs the heels of his hands into his eyes like he’s trying to unsee the past and block out the memory. He drops his arms, pats his jacket and pulls out a flask.

“I’m back, and I come bearing food,” Mac says, waving toward the approaching waiter. “I figured it couldn’t--” Sensing the less-than-festive mood, she abruptly stops talking. She scans their faces and raises an eyebrow at Veronica, who dissuades her with a slight head shake.

The waiter is not that intuitive, asking if they’re having a good evening and if they enjoyed the show, as he sets down platters of chorizo skewers, empanadas, corn fritters, and croquetas made with chicken and avocado. His final item is a large cup of black coffee, which he places in front of Dick. “I’ll be right back with your drinks.”

Dick perks up at the word, but apparently, he’s unwilling to wait. He upends his flask into the coffee. Neither Veronica nor Logan attempt to stop him.

This conversation has left her with more questions than answers. Her curiosity wants to know what Cassidy said in his letter, how Kendall helped cover-up the suicide, and what part Dick played in the humiliation of his brother. Because Veronica is POSITIVE he chose a side in the confrontation and she doubts it was Beaver’s. Yet none of those are relevant to Big Dick’s murder, except to provide Dick with motive. She SHOULD be concentrating on her case, but…

“Was the note in the car with him?”

“In his pocket,” Dick mumbles, eyeing Veronica’s fresh mojito. She pushes it closer to him, ignoring Logan’s disapproving stare. Picking up the highball glass, he takes a large gulp and wipes his mouth with his sleeve. “The sheriff found it, gave it to us when we got to the station.”

“What did it say?”

“That he didn’t want to live a lie and he was sorry for disappointing us.” He meets Veronica’s
gaze; his expression mournful and beseeching as if he’s looking for absolution. “HE was sorry, but WE were the ones who…” His lips twist with disgust. “My father was a PRICK and I’m glad he’s dead.”

The sentiment is nearly identical to Logan’s feelings about Aaron. Veronica hazards a glance at her husband. His face is placid, giving nothing away, but she can see the tension in the rigid set of his shoulders. Time to change the subject. Or at least ratchet it down a notch.

She fixes two plates of appetizers, one for herself and one for Dick. “Eat something,” she tells him, moving the—she sniffs the contents of the mug—brandy-laced coffee out of his reach. When he takes a bite, albeit reluctantly, of an empanada, she pops a corn fritter in her mouth, thoughtfully chews.

The accusation Dick hurled earlier at Kendall is interesting. *If anybody fucking knows where it is, you do.* Was he only talking about the money? Did he mean Big Dick’s ledger? Or, was he looking for something else? She reminds him of what he said, then asks, “What do you think Kendall’s hiding?”

“His STUFF, everything he took when he skipped town.” *Way to be specific, Dick.* He pours the remains of Veronica’s drink down his throat and stands. This time he manages to get himself upright with only a few staggering steps. “I’ve gotta hit the head.”

Veronica watches Dick totter away, frowns as he snags two flutes of champagne from the tray on the bar. “Maybe you should go with him?” she suggests to Logan. His lower lip slides forward in a brief pout, and she smiles at the glimpse of the teenage boy she fell in love with. “He’s liable to hurt himself.” Given Logan’s current mood, it’s not a convincing argument, so she adds, “Or someone else.”

That gets him moving. Rising from the table, he circles it, stops at her chair, and bends to kiss her shoulder before ambling after Dick. Once they’re alone, Mac leans in, asks, “Was that about Cassidy?”

“Yes, and the accident that wasn’t an accident.” Veronica fills her in on the conversation she missed. “You knew him, right?”

Mac nods. “We were in the same math class sophomore year, until he… died.” Her smile is rueful. “He asked me to the homecoming dance, but I’d already agreed to go with Vincent.”

“Vincent?” Veronica taps her nail against her bottom lip, trying to place the name. “Vincent… Clemmons? YOU dated Howdy--”

“Not dated - DATE, as in one. He did me a favor, and going to homecoming with him was the price I had to pay.” Mac shudders at the memory. “Worst night ever, but this one”—she juts her chin toward the bar—“is running a close second.”

Veronica follows the gesture to the sight of Logan struggling to keep Dick on his feet for the walk back. His shoulder’s wedged into Dick’s armpit; one hand keeps Dick’s arm in place around his neck, and the other is splayed across his chest in an effort to keep his friend vertical. They’re engaged in an intricate two-step of lurch and list and making little progress.

She stretches out her palm, indicating that he should stay there, and pulls some bills from her purse to settle the check. “I think Logan might agree with your assessment of tonight as awful,” Veronica says under her breath, as they draw closer to the bar and she sees the damp front of Dick’s tux. “What happened?”
A look of disgust passes over Logan’s face. “He threw up and passed out in the toilet.”

She squints her right eye to prevent the oncoming twitch. “We’ll help you get him downstairs.” Even with heels, the height difference between her and Dick poses a problem. Taking position on his right side, she grabs hold of his belt, hitching up his pants, and slips her other arm around his waist. Together they manage to walk-drag him out of the club and onto the street.

Their Rolls is idling at the corner with Clarence at the wheel. Mac steps to the curb to wave him over, but the car’s already in motion. He pulls up to the valet stand and gets out to help Logan with Dick. Wrestling a semi-conscious and struggling Dick into the car is like trying to bring a drowning person to shore. They abandon the idea of getting him in the back and pour him into the passenger seat. “We’ll follow you home and—”

Veronica touches Logan’s arm, silencing his offer with a slight head shake. “Can you handle him on your own?” she asks Clarence. “We’re going to the Sevilla for dinner.”

Logan’s mouth quirks in surprise, but he doesn’t contradict.

“If not,” Clarence says, shutting the door with a decisive thump. “I can always let him sleep it off in the car.” Dick slumps lower, head lolling to the side.

“Good idea,” Logan mutters. He takes Veronica’s hand—still resting on his arm—and laces their fingers together. “What about you Mac, hungry?”

“Stuffed.” She eyes Veronica’s slight frame with a wry grin. “Are you sure you don’t have a tapeworm?”

“I do; his name’s Charlie, and he wants lamb stew.” She feels Logan’s shoulders shake with a suppressed chuckle. “Mmm…and maybe some dulce de leche cheesecake.”

“Well, I’m going back to the house to call Wallace before it gets too late.”

They watch as she circles the hood of the Rolls to where Clarence stands. He opens the door for her, hands her into the backseat. When they drive away, Logan asks, “Do you want to wait inside while I pull the car around?”

“I’ll walk with you.” Veronica rests her head on his arm.

“If you’re tired, I’m sure Remy has something waiting for you in the kitchen.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Probably just a cold plate of meat and cheese.”

“Heaven forbid.” He kisses the top of her head, letting loose the chuckle he was keeping contained. Logan guides her down Avenida 23, beneath the shadow of the Hotel Nacional. “What’s your plan for Prisc… Kendall?”

“I wanted to follow her home tonight—see where she’s staying now that she’s left the Nacional—but Dick happened.” Veronica shrugs. “I’ll show her picture around, and try to find out if she has an alibi. Cormac, too. She didn’t strike me as the type to get her hands dirty; my guess, she leaves the heavy lifting to him.”

When they reach the yellow Speedster, Logan opens her door, and waits until she’s settled before moving to the driver’s side. As he slides behind the wheel, he says, “But you still think they’re the ones who offed Big Dick?”
“Cormac WAS flashing around a lot of cash tonight, but… Dick seems pretty mad at his dad.” She turns her head to see how Logan reacts to the idea of Dick as potential murderer. Their relationship is different now, but they used to be close friends. “I’m not saying he did it.”

Her husband’s face is grim and his mouth is compressed in a tight line. “But you think it’s possible.” Logan downshifts, turns onto the Malecon. “Because of Cassidy?”

Learning that Cassidy’s death wasn’t an accident, but a suicide, shifts things in her mind. Events viewed through one lens take on a different perspective now. Is Dick’s descent into drunken debauchery an attempt to cope with the guilt, and not just a playboy life of excess? Was the darkness beneath Cassidy’s seemingly sweet-nature a result of his torment at the hands of his father and brother?

“I think he blames Big Dick for Cassidy’s death.”

“And himself,” Logan says, making a left on the Prado.

“It’s sad.” Instead of accepting Cassidy for who he was, Big Dick shamed and disowned him, costing him both sons. One to suicide and the other to grief. But did it also cost him his life? Did Dick commit patricide? Relationships between fathers and sons were complicated, but was this one fraught enough to turn deadly?

At Calle Trocadero, Logan slows to let a rowdy group of tourists cross the street. His eyes track them until they are safe on the opposite corner before he makes the turn, driving to the main entrance of the Moorish-Revival hotel. The colorful facade of pink stone and gold is adorned with crenelated arches above windows trimmed in turquoise. A line of cars waits in front, and Logan joins the queue.

“We don’t have to use the valet; I can walk, you know. Besides, you need to look after”—she pats the dashboard—“your BABY. The last thing we want is another unfortunate INCIDENT.” He frowns at her mocking tone, and she grins. The supposed ‘scratch’ it received during their last visit to Montmartre was invisible to everyone but him. “In fact, isn’t it past her bedtime? Will she be okay staying out this late?”

“Maybe I should take YOU home and put you to bed.”

“Well, if your plan is to join me, you’re going to need to feed me first.” She ignores the outstretched hand of the valet and gets out of the car under her own steam. When Logan steps onto the curb, she adds, “Unless you WANT to sleep in the Rolls with Dick?”

He places a palm to his chest as if wounded by her suggestion. “Now, snookums, you know I’ll indulge your every whim, including food as foreplay.” The inquisitive tilt of her head elicits a wolfish leer. “Watching you eat gets me hot. You derive such pleasure from it.” He dips his head bringing his lips to her ear, whispers, “And sometimes you make the same delightful sounds as when I’m eating YOU.”

Her cheeks go warm and that familiar tingle starts in her belly, spreading in waves down her thighs straight to her toes. She stumbles on the step into the lobby, and Logan catches her, snaking an arm about her waist, and pulling her to his side. A kiss lands on her temple, and… maybe the cold plate of meat and cheese waiting at home isn’t such a terrible idea. They can eat it in bed, together, after…

“The Rooftop Garden?” he asks, tearing her away from decadent thoughts of him naked, and her stomach growls in perfect timing.
“Yes.” The other restaurant in the hotel’s arcade—Longchamps—is populated with shady characters, looking to buy poms of cocaine, and she has no desire to watch their desperation, as they exchange their souls for the long thin tubes of white powder.

They cross the airy lobby with its high ceilings and slender white columns toward the closer of the two elevators. She studies the blue-and-green pattern of the glazed Cuerda Seca tiles as they wait. “Speaking of indulging my whims, I promised my dad we’d visit after this case wraps.”

“Will it be safe for—” One glance at her face and he cuts himself off, nods. “I take it he was overjoyed at the news?”

“He’s already making plans,” she says, preceding him into the lift.

“Let me guess - the zoo? Maybe some mini-golf?” She laughs at his accuracy and he smirks. “He can have your days, but remember the nights are all mine, and I have this sudden urge to make out with you in the backseat at a drive-in.”

“Why, Mr. Echolls! You’re going to have to COURT me, before proposing something so forward.”

“Says the girl willing to flip her skirt over my head in a sundry of semi-public places.” Finger hovering above the stop button, he gives the empty car an appraising glance, and winks at her. She lifts her chin, daring him to do it just as the doors slide open. Logan swings his elbow, snapping his fingers in an aw-shucks gesture. “Maybe on the way down?”

“Hope springs eternal in the human breast,” she says, swishing past him into the restaurant. Her heels clack on the marble floor; the noise in counterpoint to the mellow jazz trilling from the black grand piano. “Table for two, please.”

“By the balcony,” Logan adds, coming to stand behind her, surreptitiously tipping the tuxedo-clad maître d’ in the guise of a handshake. The man takes menus from the stand near the balustrade which separates the two levels of dining, and escorts them to a table in front of the bi-fold glass wall. Its panels are pushed open, allowing a gentle breeze to tease the edge of the tablecloth.

It is quieter here, set apart from the music and dancing, and the view of Havana Bay is spectacular. She directs a malevolent glare at Morro Castle, perched on a rock across the water. “Thanks for suggesting I take Mac to Cojimar.” The words are laced with sarcasm.

“It’s her last day in town,” Logan says, flipping open his menu. “And you owe her for making her babysit Dick.”

“ME? You’re the one who…” Her voice trails off. They BOTH saddled Mac with chaperone duties tonight. Relenting, she says, “Okay, but Cojimar is a waste of my day. I have bigger fish to catch than marlin.”

Logan tips his menu down to stare at her. “Do you mean a certain brunette bombshell you were SUPPOSED to stay away from?” Veronica waves off his concern, raises her face to study the coffered ceiling as if it suddenly requires all her attention, and settles in for his lecture about her safety. “Why do you insist on finding new ways to make me lose sleep?”

“Hey now, some of those ways are VERY entertaining, and”—she bats her lashes—“mutually satisfying.”

Whatever his retort, it is lost with the arrival of their waiter. “Good evening,” he says, placing a basket of bread between them with a smile. “What can I get for you?” Pen poised above paper, he waits expectantly for Logan, and is slightly flustered when Veronica answers.
She asks for the chilindron de cordero, adds a side of black beans and rice, and requests boniato con mojo - mashed sweet potatoes made with a mojo of garlic and lime. The waiter blinks, his confusion growing, when she proceeds to order for Logan. “My husband will have the steak, medium-rare, no sauce, and the papas asadas.”

“Very good,” he murmurs, collecting their menus.

Logan watches him depart with a smirk that reads: asshole. It turns to amusement when his gaze shifts to her. “I wasn’t planning on dinner.”

“I know,” Veronica says, taking a sip of her water. The sirloin and potatoes she ordered for him are the plainest things on offer, and should appease his palate. She makes a note to tell Remy to cool it with the rich food and try a simple, roasted chicken the next time they dine at home.

Logan puts his hand on the table and Veronica slips her fingers into his open palm. Softly stroking his thumb across her skin, he picks up their conversation and asks, “So what did you find in Kendall’s wallet? And why’d you try to push her out the door with the suggestion of a cab?”

“The wallet was a bust.” She outlines the contents for him. “I suppose the Lacey Shiflett alias might help me locate her, but it didn’t tell me anything new.”

“What were you hoping for?”

She shrugs. “A receipt for the purchase of a Smith & Wesson revolver might’ve been nice.”

“Too easy,” he says with a laugh. “You would’ve been VERY disappointed if it were that simple.”

There’s no argument to be made because he knows her well and he’s right. The more complicated and confusing the puzzle, the happier she is. “As for the taxi, I was hoping she would let you play hero long enough for me to see the driver and get the name of the cab company.”

“Then tomorrow you could hunt him down and find out where he dropped her off… if you weren’t sightseeing, that is.”

She loves that he can follow her thoughts… even while she hates him sidelining her ALL DAY with a dumb trip to Hemingway’s fishing hole.

Their waiter returns with the food and a busboy, who refills their water glasses while he serves. Veronica doesn’t wait for him to finish, skewering a piece of tender lamb with her fork and popping it in her mouth. The cumin gives it a little kick, and she lets out a soft ‘mmm’ as it melts on her tongue, which makes Logan smile.

To stave off his teasing, she quickly swallows and asks, “What did you find out about Trina’s Riviera?”

“A lot, and none of it good,” he says, grim. Veronica eats while he talks, relating his conversation with the architect. “I’m sure on paper, its ownership’s hidden behind front men and bogus companies, but Lansky’s the guy- he’s got Harry Smith overseeing the build.”

“Leave it to Trina to get in bed with the mob.” She points at his plate and he dutifully cuts and eats a piece of steak. “And not just any mobster, she had to reach for the brass ring. What, are low-level hoods not good enough for her?”

“Well, she IS the daughter of the great Aaron Echolls, undisputed star of the wartime propaganda films.” He stabs a potato, breaking it in half. “With not one, but THREE Oscars to prove it.”
If Aaron wasn’t already dead, Veronica would take those three Oscars and shove them down his throat.

Her gaze falls to Logan’s plate; he’s poking at his food, moving it aimlessly around. Clearly, a distraction, and change of subject, are in order. Kicking off her shoe, she tucks her foot under the cuff of his pants, strokes his calf with her toes. “Did you see Graham Greene over there in the corner?” She inclines her head toward his table. “He’s writing a new book.”

“Fotsie and an English novelist? Are we going to discuss the weather, and the win/loss record for the Havana Sugar Kings next?” he snaps.

Veronica doesn’t react to his testiness. Talking about Aaron always makes him irritable, but it has been worse as of late; she doesn’t need any special insight to know why. She waits him out, finishes her stew, and starts on the boniato.

It doesn’t take him long. “I’m sorry, Ronnie.”

“For making me eat alone? You’re forgiven, but chop-chop— I’m almost ready for dessert.”

His tender gaze caresses her face. “You are the best thing to ever happen to me.”

“And don’t you forget it.” She blows him a kiss and licks her spoon. “Now do you see our waiter anywhere? Because I’m thinking profiteroles with ice cream and chocolate sauce.”

“What happened to the cheesecake?”

“Oh, I’m still getting that.”

“Of course you are.” He raises a finger to catch the attention of their waiter. When he arrives at the table, Logan orders her desserts, and an espresso for himself. Veronica tacks on a large glass of milk, chilled. After he departs, Logan asks, “So why the Sevilla? Did we really come here for the dulce de leche, or do you have some kind of plan? Because this isn’t my ‘let’s break into the bank’ tux— not enough give.”

“Darn, guess we’ll just have to wait for Ramon then.” Sidestepping his actual question, she changes the subject, and asks one of her own. “How long should I expect Dick to be staying with us?”

“With any luck, he’ll be on the plane to New York with Mac tomorrow night and safely back in Neptune by Thursday.”

“Is that where he flew in from? New York?”

Logan shakes his head. “His incoming connection was through Miami.”

The flight between Florida and Havana was a much shorter one. Quick enough for Dick to come here, kill his dad, and return to Miami to await the ‘news’ of Big Dick’s death. “Did he happen to mention how long he was there? Or where he’s been the past week or so?”

His mouth opens, then closes, and his brow furrows. “No, I don’t think he did, but”—Logan smirks—“he did worry you’d try to pin Big Dick’s murder on him.”

“Symptom of a guilty mind, perhaps? There’s always a bit of truth behind—” She is interrupted by dessert. The cheesecake is lavished with the caramel-flavored sauce and garnished with shaved pieces of toffee. A porcelain spoon with a wide, flat bowl shares the plate, and has extra dulce de
leche in case she needs more. Veronica drags a piece of toffee through the velvety cream and pops it in her mouth. “Is Dick really going to leave town before he finds the missing money?”

Logan shrugs. “It’s not like he’s destitute; he has a trust fund, and he was a beneficiary of Cassidy’s life insurance policy.” Sipping his espresso, he watches her over the rim as she fits an entire mini-profiterole into her mouth. “Although, he does spend cash as fast as you eat dessert, sooo… I’m not sure how much is left.”

Dabbing the melted chocolate from her lips, she pokes out her tongue at him. She considers the life insurance, tilts her head and asks, “A beneficiary? Who else inherited?”

“You’d have to ask Dick.”

**Great, another conversation with Dick.** “I will- hopefully, when he’s sober.”

“Good luck with that,” he says, toasting her with his coffee cup.

Most insurance policies contained clauses stating there would be no payout in the event of a suicide. Staging Cassidy’s plunge off the cliff as an accident MIGHT have been about preserving the Casablancas’s good name—she smirks at the irony—but she doubts it. Defrauding the insurance company is a better bet, especially if Kendall was involved in the cover-up. Why would she care about protecting Big Dick’s reputation unless something was in it for her? Did she get some of the proceeds? Is that what she used to flee town with Cormac?

“How, sir… uh, Mr. Echolls?” The uptick at the end of the maître d’s sentence turns the name into a question- *do I have the right person?* Logan gives him a short nod, confirming his identity, and encouraging him to continue. “There’s a Mr. Navarro downstairs in the lobby; he asked if you might join him for a moment.”

Logan starts to rise from his chair. “I’ll be right--”

“Think again,” Veronica says, tossing down her napkin. There’s no way she’s going to let them hatch more hare-brained schemes without her. “Pay the check and we’ll BOTH join Mr. Navarro.”

Resigned, Logan settles the bill with the maître d’, and moves to pull out Veronica’s chair. He makes another attempt to ditch her. “Are you sure you don’t want to stay and finish your dessert?”

“Positive.”

Their ride to the lobby is different than she’d planned. Veronica eyes the stop button with regret. *Stupid Weevil.*

He’s waiting for them at the front desk wearing his usual Guayabera—this one in banana yellow—and a Panama hat tipped low over one eye. “Uh, hey V,” he starts, clearly unsettled to see her with Logan. He rubs the back of his neck. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your dinner.”

She meets his words with stony silence, letting him worry after her thoughts. He visibly swallows, Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, and she hides her grin. Logan lets him off the hook. “We were almost done.”

Relief relaxes his posture. With a glare at the eavesdropping desk clerk, he says, “Let’s take a walk.” He heads outside and they tag along behind him. Down the stairs, through one of the ogee arches, and a few paces away from the valet stand he comes to a stop. “The walls in there have ears.”
On the street, the night air carries a chill, and Veronica shivers. Logan removes his coat, drapes it over her shoulders. She tips her head back to thank him and sees his jaw clench, eyes focusing on the street behind her. Veronica follows his gaze to a group of women making their way into the hotel. It’s not their form-fitting clothes and heavy, kohl-lined eyes that tell their story, but the two men shepherding them inside.

Prostitutes.

Amletto Battisti likes to brag about the weekly shipment of girls to his hotel, and how much he makes hiring them out as high-priced ‘escorts.’

“You can’t save everyone, amigo,” Weevil says.

Despite the sentiment, both he and Logan look like they’re willing to try, sizing up the opposition. To deflect and defuse, Veronica asks, “How did you find us?”

“Went by the house first; helped Clancey haul your drunk gringo inside.” Veronica takes exception to the ‘your’—she wants no ownership rights to Dick—and she’s pretty sure Weevil didn’t call Clarence Clancey to his face, or he wouldn’t be standing here. But she keeps silent on both counts, waits for him to continue. “So anyways, I talked to Bubbles’s bodyguard, Oscar - he says the only time she’s away from Rossi and allowed out of the house is for ‘woman stuff.’ Hair, nails, dress shopping, that kind of shit.”

Logan turns from the hotel and the lost women inside, stares across the street, and rolls his neck to release the lingering tension. “Is there anything coming up on her schedule?”

“Nat King Cole is at the club this Friday,” Veronica reminds him. “Rossi will be there, probably with Bubbles.” His head whips around, eyes sparking with worry that she knows this information, and his shoulders go rigid once more. She smiles, touches his arm reassuringly. “CLANCEY told me.” Doubt raises his right eyebrow, and she pretends not to notice. “Bubbles might need a new dress.”

“Right”—he’s still frowning at her—“Nat King Cole; I promised to send tickets to the ambassador and his wife, Suzy.”

“The brunette from the racetrack?” Weevil asks. “The one who wants to MAMBO with you?”

Veronica scowls. “Suzy?”

Logan briefly closes his eyes like he’s praying for patience, even as his hand curls into a fist at his side. Noticing the reaction, Weevil falls back a step and says, “Yeah, that’s not gonna be awkward AT ALL after you shut her down.”

“Maybe she’ll finally leave me alone,” Logan grouses, unfurling his fingers to touch Veronica’s cheek. “Once she sees how enamored I am with my wife.” He leans in close and lands a soft kiss on her nose. Instead of straightening, he stares over her head at the hotel. His warm breath ruffles her hair as he says, “All the best-dressed ladies buy their clothes at El Encanto.”

Weevil smirks. “Is that where you shop?”

“Yes… for VERONICA.” His countenance turns cagey, and Veronica knows he’s plotting something screwy. He snaps upright. “Can you convince Montoya to bring Bubbles to the main store on Galiano and San Rafael, say tomorrow around two? And ask him to make sure he’s the only bodyguard with her?”
Veronica sinks her teeth into her bottom lip, gnaws at it, and warily asks, “What are you thinking?”

“That they have big and private dressing rooms.”

Her cheeks flush at the memory of their last shopping trip. Pressed up against the wall, her legs wrapped around his waist, and her head turned to watch them in the full-length mirror. The shiver that dances down her spine has nothing to do with the night air.

“Still cold?” Logan asks; his tone gently mocking even as he pulls closer, sheltering her against his side. Weevil clears his throat, bringing him back to the subject at hand, and Logan outlines the plan. “I’ll wait near the fitting room for Bubbles to go inside and then follow her - convince her it’s time to leave Havana.”

Weevil nods along. “It’s gonna cost you… another five hundred pesos.” As an afterthought he tacks on, “For Montoya.”

Lips thinning, she watches her husband hand over the money. It’s guaranteed that Oscar will see less than HALF of the quoted sum, but Logan doesn’t care; he winks at her as Weevil pockets the cash.

Veronica softens, nestles closer, and lays her hand on his chest. All solid and hard muscles on the outside, but underneath her husband is tender with a generous heart. He knows his friend is the sole support for his abuela, three sisters, and assorted nieces and nephews, AND that he’s too proud to accept charity from Logan.

“You planning to take Bubbles right from the store?” Weevil asks. “’cause we’re gonna have to do something to Oscar - maybe rough him up a little.”

She snorts at the suggestion. “You can’t beat him up inside the store without calling attention to yourselves.”

“What if you hit him over the head with the butt of your gun? Then we can tie him up and leave him in one of the stalls.”

Before she can voice her concern with Weevil’s idea, Logan says, “No good. I don’t want to give him a concussion… or worse, hit him too hard and kill him.”

“Just put him in a sleeper hold; you’re certainly strong enough.” Veronica smooths her hand down the front of Logan’s shirt and over his abs, cranes her neck to openly stare at his chest. Taking advantage of her upturned face, Logan ducks his head to kiss her.

“Oh my God, STOP - I’m surprised the two of you don’t already have six kids, the way you’re always going at it.” Weevil walks a few paces away, putting some distance between them and him. “I’ll go make arrangements with Oscar - you guys go home and do the rest of whatever this is where I don’t have to watch.”

“Come by the house around one; we’ll go to the store together,” Logan calls after his rapidly departing friend. Weevil raises a hand in acknowledgment, steps off the curb, and jogs across the street. “Well, he definitely had one good idea.”

“Oh?”

“Me, taking you home to finish whatever this is.” He nuzzles the side of her neck, pinches her ass, and then grabs her hand for the short walk to the valet. “Even covered by my jacket, that dress is
too… arousing.”

“Well, IT will be more than happy to keep you company tonight; I, on the other hand, want to spend some time in my darkroom.” She raises an arm, dangles her purse in front of him. “I took a few shots of the spilled contents of Kendall’s purse, and there was this hotel room key…”
With a disgusted flourish, Logan hangs up the phone—tosses back a lukewarm cup of espresso, and takes a moment to massage his throbbing temples. “Done,” he says, voice raspy from all the talking. “I’ve bought plane tickets, paid your dad’s morgue storage fees, and had him transferred to a funeral home. They’re embalming the body as we speak.”

“Whatever.” Dick, who’s sprawled over half the breakfast table in conscious-but-not-happy-about-it rebellion, doesn’t bother to lift his head. “If it was up to me, I’d let the jerkoff rot.”

“Yeah, that’d go over well with customs.” Logan smiles at Tina as she bustles by, replacing his empty espresso pot with a full one. “My indispensable Girl Friday’s escorting you to the Consulate, I’m handling an even bigger emergency. You’ll meet with an English-speaking attache, who’ll give you a mortuary certificate, a report of…” he trails off when Dick groans, since the odds he’s listening are poor. “Let’s just say a bunch of paperwork. Tina’s got a list.”

“Do I HAVE to be there?” Dick makes it upright, then slumps backwards, like posture takes too much effort. He’s in Logan’s robe—the yellow-and-purple, art-deco-fishes number—because apparently he forgot houseguests pack pajamas. It gapes open at the chest, revealing sunburned skin; to Logan’s left, at the counter, Tina averts her eyes. “I need like fourteen more hours of sleep.”

“Dick,” Logan says, wearily, “you’re the legal heir. To put this in the most venal possible terms… if you want any non-frozen assets of Dick Senior’s, you need to prove to the U.S. government that he’s dead.”

“ARE there any assets?” Dick asks, spinning his coffee cup in morose circles. “Frozen or
otherwise? You still haven’t told me squat.”

“Because I don’t KNOW yet.” Logan checks his watch. It’s one o’clock--if Ramon doesn’t call soon, he won’t be home to answer. “I sweet-talked a teller into admitting your dad made a deposit, but she got scared and clammed up when I pushed for details. Any clue what he might have done to inspire fear?”

Dick shrugs. “Pops was a shithead con man, but he didn’t go around threatening strangers. Just, you know, his SONS.”

Logan nods, changes the subject; this topic is at the bottom of his fun-conversations list. “Next you’ll visit the funeral home, once you’re done at the Consulate. The mortician will give you MORE paperwork, which Tina will add to a file. Then she’ll bring you back here to pack.”

Tina salutes Dick with her coffee; she’s leaning against the counter, perusing a stack of documents. Logan continues, “You’ll accompany the body to Neptune, since the bill of lading’s a no-go. Mac’s booked on the same flight, she’ll keep track of said file till you land.”

Tina smirks. Mac has no idea, thus far, she’s been conscripted--Logan’s still mulling ways to charm her into it. He’s been keeping an eye on Dick so she and Veronica can sleep late, but somehow that doesn’t seem like enough.

“When you arrive in Neptune,” Logan continues, although Dick’s watching Corny smoke dope and tie up rosebushes, “Keith Mars and an American funeral director will meet your plane. They’ll take the Cuban paperwork, and the body, off your hands. Then they’ll introduce your brand-new, very capable, personal assistant—who Keith just hired today—and hand her yet MORE paperwork. She’ll make sure it gets filed, and help you plan the funeral.”

“Since what’s-her-name’s flying home tonight anyway, can’t SHE deliver the coffin?” Dick pushes his coffee aside, rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands. “I’ve got things to do…WAY cooler things than organizing wakes in Neptune.”

“Dick,” Logan says, striving for patience. “A family member has to accompany the corpse. You don’t get a choice, it’s U.S. law.”

“Fuck the law.” Dick shoves away from the table. “What’s it done for me lately? Look, I’m gonna go stand under the hot shower until my brain stops hurting. How about you just make a list of all the hoops I’ve gotta jump through today? Use small words, print in crayon, maybe I’ll manage to understand.”

He wanders off, and Logan directs a middle finger at his retreating back. Sighs, because he really SHOULD make a list, all sarcasm aside.

This drunken douchebag act isn’t doing Dick any favors --his attitude’s got Veronica suspicious, and Logan can’t blame her. He hates wondering whether his friend wants to flee due to unpleasantness looming, or because of some sinister motive. It’s tough to believe loyal, uncomplicated Dick could plot murder. But admittedly, Logan’s not the world’s best judge of character…whereas his wife can spot moral failings at ten paces.

“Don’t worry.” Tina sits in Dick’s vacated spot, arranging papers. “He won’t wake Veronica singing in the shower when he’s this hung over.”

Logan laughs, pours himself more coffee, proffers the pot. She extends her cup, which he fills. “I’m just glad Mac insisted on a tourist day. My afternoon will be SO much less stressful if
Veronica’s innocuously occupied.”

“Knock on wood.” Tina raps the table for emphasis. “Oh, before I forget—I messengered those Nat King Cole tickets to the Ambassador this morning. His wife’s thank-you note came back via the same guy—she made him wait while she wrote it.”

Logan’s presented with a pink, heavily-scented leaf of stationery, which he waves away in distaste. “Ugh, no, her epistolary advances stink from a DISTANCE. Any luck getting invites out of Isabetta? I know her dad’s exhibition’s exclusive.”

“I should leave this lying around for Veronica to find.” Tina sets the pink paper on the sideboard, out of smelling range. “I guarantee you’d never get another. Then again, it’s best not to alienate the ambassador.” Tapping a nail against her teeth, she ponders. “As far as passes for Ramon, those were a piece of cake. I’m collecting them over cocktails with Isabetta, once I’m done babysitting your houseguest.”

“Tina, you never cease to amaze me.” He toasts her with his cup. “I have no clue how you manage.”

“I persuaded Remy to model in Senor Enriquez’s class—he’s admired our chef’s Brooding Romantic Visage for years. Remy’s price was three Iberico hams. Apparently, savory dishes lose that je ne sais quoi when pork’s not used as a base.”

Logan grimaces, contemplating Remy’s butter-laden definition of ‘savory’, and Tina misinterprets. “Hey, for once you’re not the target of someone’s impassioned designs. Be thankful.”

“Oh, if you want to throw Remy to the wolves, have at it. You won’t hear any argument from me.” Logan makes a ‘be my guest’ gesture. “He’s been getting awfully high in the instep lately, with his meals-for-twenty and ‘vacation days’, not to mention turning our entire house into a freezer. If he doesn’t cool his jets, I’ll knock him down a peg myself.”

“Just don’t mock him until he quits,” Tina cautions. “Veronica wasn’t happy, last time, and I had to pay through the nose to get him back.”

“He’ll turn up like a bad penny, no matter what I do,” Logan says pessimistically. “Or a cat with unlimited lives. You just watch.”

“Remy make fish pie with béchamel for breakfast again?” Clarence asks, entering the kitchen; he’s nattily clad, for once, in street clothes. Crossing to the sideboard, he checks the chafing dishes. “Even Veronica hates that…too many vegetables. You’d think he’d learn.”

Logan shudders as Clarence chooses sausage, cheese and dried fruit, pours himself a cup of coffee. “If he has, I beg you, keep the lid closed. And what’s with the threads? Is your Prussian general’s uniform at the cleaners?”

Clarence favors him with the patient, blank look that’s his version of an eye-roll and says, “Actually, Veronica gave me the day off. Insisted she could drive herself to Cojimar, and if you didn’t like it you could ‘forget about the demonstration’. Please don’t explain what that means.”

Logan nods, aware this translates to ‘Veronica ordered me to tail Rossi, since she’s stuck cooling her heels’. But since his wife’s not the one risking life and limb, he just says, with irony, “I’m sure you’ll find that restful.”

“Nothing I can’t handle.” Clarence nods, gives a finger-to-the-temple salute. Carries his food to the patio, shoving Champ to one side of the chair to make room.
Logan settles back with a sigh, shuts his eyes—sustained effort takes a toll. Tina says, “I notice the one person in Cuba you HAVEN’T called this morning is your client. Might want to get on that before you rescue her sister, so she can pack, check out, and make plans.”

He makes a face. He’s been putting off updating Janet for days, because he’d much rather report success than failure. “Fine,” he says, keeping his lids shut a blessed moment longer. “Let me practice not sounding like a moron who can’t rescue one medium-sized girl for a minute, and then I’ll get right on that.”

“Don’t forget, the girl in question played a role.” Logan looks at her, reluctantly, and she flashes a sympathetic smile. “If a damsel in distress refuses to be rescued, it’s not like the knight should force her.”

“I’m willing to tarnish my armor, if it keeps that woman from dying,” Logan says, grimly.

“Just be careful.” Tina rises from the table, sets her cup neatly in the sink. Pats the phone as she walks towards the door, to emphasize his duty. “You know how you get when situations go bad and ladies are in the line of fire.”

Logan takes a deep breath, palms flat on the table, lets it out slowly. Mans the fuck up, and lifts the receiver to his ear.

When the operator connects them, Janet’s breathless, near-tearful relief is guilt-inducingly palpable. “Oh, thank GOODNESS! Mr. Echolls, I’m SO glad you called, you can’t imagine how WORRIED I’ve been!”

“Well fret no more.” He lets none of his misgivings affect his brisk and cheerful tone. “I’ve got your exodus planned. I’ll bring your sister to you today, by hook or by crook—so pack your bags, because you’ve got first-class tickets on a plane leaving for California tonight. From there, my friend Keith will book your passage to anywhere your hearts desire.”

“When are you meeting?” Janet asks, talking so fast she trips over her own words. “Can I come? I need to SEE her, make sure she’s all right.”

“Not a chance.” He shakes his head for emphasis, realizes she can’t see. “It’s too dangerous, your sister’s always watched. You know the FOCSA building, on Calle M and Calle 17? There’s a ground-floor restaurant called El Emperador—meet us there, three on the dot. I’ve got a safe house nearby where you can hide, until it’s time to leave for the airport.”

“I’m so RELIEVED!” she says, on a deep sigh. “It’s wonderful this is over, because I’m afraid… oh Mr. Echolls, I did something stupid.”

“How stupid?” Logan checks his watch again, because Weevil’s late—applies the heel of one hand to the headache mid-forehead.

“It’s just that you didn’t call, and didn’t call; and finally yesterday, I…went to visit Mr. Rossi. Tried to bargain. He laughed at me, Mr. Echolls. It went BADLY.”

Logan presses his lips together to hold in an expletive, then abandons restraint. “So Rossi knows you’re in Cuba now, trying to rescue your sister? Janet, what were you THINKING?”

“I’m so sorry!” She sounds genuinely distressed, and he grits his teeth. “It’s just that I got a phone call from my mom—my father’s in the hospital again. And I…darn it, I want Bubbles to see him before he goes!”
“Okay.” Logan exhales slowly as she starts crying, which helps exactly none. “Okay, just…don’t go anywhere or talk to anyone, or open the door to knocks. Meet me at the restaurant, like we discussed, and bring your bags. Hopefully we can get you out of the country before Rossi decides to pounce.”

“I promise,” she says, and he thinks, you also promised to wait for my call. “I’ll be there. Thank you, Mr. Echolls, thank you SO much!”

He hangs up instead of replying, presses fingertips against his closed lids. The phone, idle for the first time this morning, interrupts his brood by ringing. He answers with a bark. “Echolls.”

“Ah, behold this man of the people, doing his delightful secretary’s work.” It’s Ramon, florid of speech and unimpeachably cheerful as always. “How democratic you Americans are. I just called to discuss progress on our bargain.”

“The tickets were obtained,” Logan says, in no mood for banter. “I’ll take possession this evening. Should I messenger them to your house, or would you prefer to meet?”

“Please, don’t trouble yourself, a courier is perfect. As for my part, I’ve spoken to my cousin—he proved agreeable for a small price, not worth mentioning. I’ve given him your number. He’ll telephone as soon as he gets home from work, so he can speak freely in private.”

“Perfect.” Logan’s head lifts as a horn blares, loudly, outside. “Listen, Ramon, I hate to deal and run but I’ve got an engagement, and my chariot awaits. See you at Nat King Cole on Friday?”

“I look forward to an interesting evening,” his friend says, slyly. “In the meantime, it’s hot and growing hotter—stay in the shade, my friend.”

Logan hangs up, smooths his hair, straightens his cuffs and heads outside; winces when he opens the front door, fumbles for his sunglasses. Weevil’s waiting by the curb in his (probably stolen) new Continental, which he’s fitted with chromed fenders and painted cherry-red.

His partner in crime’s clearly anxious about Veronica-proximity, so Logan takes his time sauntering down the steps. Adjusts his tie before opening his door, and grins at Weevil’s expression.

“She’s not here, right?” Weevil asks. Logan settles comfortably into the seat and shrugs.

“Sleeping,” he says, with a trace of malice. “You probably just woke her up.”

Weevil peels out with a squeal as Logan’s smirk grows, and he proceeds down the avenida at a spanking pace. “She hasn’t gotten even yet for the racetrack thing—it’s starting to make me nervous.”

“She actually wasn’t that mad,” Logan says, relenting. Offers a shrug when Weevil shoots him a dubious look. “Turned unexpectedly nurturing instead. Maybe I’m just that winsome?”

“Yeah, I doubt I’ll earn a similar pass.” Weevil squints into the sun and flicks on his blinker. “It’s amazing how much crap you get away with. You must be magic in the sack or something.”

“Well, I THOUGHT it was my talents at…prestidigitation, keeping her mood positive.” Logan adjusts his sunglasses, flips up the passenger visor. “But after last night, I’m concerned she’s the one playing ME.”

Weevil snorts. “And that’s a surprise? I hate to break it to you, but V’s had you outmaneuvered
since the day we met.” He shakes his head, mouth curving nostalgically. “Seventeen years old, drunk off your ass, cheating mob-veteran moonshine-runners at poker in some port bar. All because she refused to marry you until you cleaned up your act.”

“You only got involved because you wanted to scam them yourself,” Logan opines, stretching out and crossing his legs.

“Hey, I had mouths to feed,” Weevil says. Snorts. “Whereas YOU were doing it for kicks. Literally.”

“Luckily, Ronnie relaxed her standards before I ended up dead,” Logan says, and fairness compels him to add, “thanks, in part, to you, and your facility with bullshit-slinging.”

“Damn straight.” Weevil lifts a brow. “And I would have convinced her sooner, if you’d played along like I told you.”

“You wanted me to beg her to save me!” Logan protests. “As if I’d stoop that low.”

“Hey, sometimes you got to go with what works. And that WOULD.”

Logan’s smile softens. “I have no doubt. The one thing Veronica Mars can’t resist is a cry for help.”

“Yeah, but you chose to be stubborn.” Weevil shakes his head. “Moaning about ‘my pride’ this, and ‘she failed my secret test’ that. Smart enough to count five decks of cards, but you’re still a dumbass when it matters.”

“Luckily, you had no such scruples,” Logan says dry. “I still can’t believe you spilled the beans about my shitty birthdays. Then convinced her she’s the only gift I ever wanted.”

“Man, you should be grateful I had the balls,” Weevil says. “You’ve been hitched HOW long?”

“Eight years this month,” Logan says. “And I’ve expressed my gratitude repeatedly since, by keeping you employed.”

“Yeah, well,” Weevil says. “I owed you, you owe me. And one thing we have in common is, we pay our debts.”

Logan folds his arms, resisting the urge to go snide, because he’s uncomfortable with sentiment unless drunk. “How about we review our plan?” he says, instead. “Maybe if it’s more thorough than our LAST plan, it’ll actually WORK.”

“It’s not like things could go worse,” Weevil says, turning off the Prado. “You got SHOT.”

“Wasn’t the first time.” Logan waves a dismissive hand. “Probably won’t be the last. How receptive was Montoya to our offer?”

Weevil shrugs. “I gave him money, he said no problem getting the girl to your store…it’s her favorite. Made no promises about time--apparently she’s not punctual--but he was happy to ditch the other guard. Sounds like he can’t stand the guy.”

“And who could blame him?” Logan smirks. “Haven’t seen a performance that gung-ho since my dad led the fake Invasion of Normandy in ‘A Hero’s Last Stand’.”

“Yeah, well, I doubt this is the first time Oscar’s found the asshole inconvenient. Hinted he food-
poisons narcs, when he doesn’t feel like being spied on. By my watch, Mr.-Shoot-First-Ask-Later’s probably puking his guts out right now.”

“Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy.” Logan straightens as they turn off Galiano, points to the best available parking spot. “Under the street lamp, corner of San Rafael.”

El Encanto is an imposing, triangular building, which takes up a whole city block in the Galiano shopping district. The exterior is white, decorated at intervals in geometric bas-relief, and boasts a candelabra logo that looks a lot like the Neptune High Trident. Weevil squints suspiciously at the facade as they approach, as if unsure of his welcome. But Logan feels a sense of peace descend, as they enter its spacious, orderly environs.

The interior is also white, with columns supporting each side of the ground floor. Goods are elegantly displayed behind glass, lit by bright fluorescents. Along the store’s midline, wall-hugging cases give way to footed round columns, glass-shelved and evenly spaced across the shining white tile. Logan secretly loves cool, organized spaces where serene music plays. He’s used shopping for Veronica as an excuse to wander El Encanto’s calming aisles.

“I’m drawing too much attention.” Weevil checks his watch, keeping pace with Logan, who has the floorplan memorized. “If we’re stopped by some guard ‘cause I’m too poor to buy stuff here, it’ll stall our rescue at the starting gate.”

“Unfortunately,” Logan says, lengthening his strides, “There’s nobody rich I can trust. Turns out Big Dick was universally loathed, even by his own family, so his one surviving son might be a murderer.”

They reach the Salon Frances, recently featured in Vogue; it’s Logan’s favorite spot to sit while Veronica models evening gowns. Expanding on the all-white theme, the Salon incorporates blush tones, plus French furniture upholstered in Swiss-dotted peony. Soothing Art Deco wall designs accentuate jewelry displays, and white flowers overflow delicate tables. Large fitting rooms line the back, in which Logan’s spent enjoyable time. Also well-lit, they’re walled with mirrors, and discreetly curtained in the same blush shade.

He takes a seat, gestures for Weevil to do the same--the only way to lurk successfully in a place like this is to act like you own it. “Any clue how you’ll neutralize Oscar without actually hurting him?”

Weevil settles dubiously on a delicate chair. “Sleeper hold,” he says. “Like V suggested. Get behind him with my arm around his neck and squeeze. It’s more reliable than cracking him over the head, and makes a lot less noise. Maybe I’ll punch the guy a couple times while he’s down, tie him up, so it doesn’t look like he cooperated.”

Logan nods…switches on his persuasive grin as a salesgirl approaches. She’s a small, sturdy martinet, dressed discreetly in blush; the smile she manages, while handing them champagne, is tepid.

“Are you…waiting for someone?” she asks, her English accented but clear.

“My wife.” Logan tips the glass to his lips--the vintage is mediocre. “You wouldn’t by chance have any girdles in a size two that look beautiful but never roll?”

“Of course,” the girl says, and strides off—across the store and up two floors, Logan’s asked for something from a far-flung department. Weevil shoots him a mocking look and he shrugs. It never hurts to multitask.
“No way is Rossi’s mistress a size two,” is all Weevil says, though. “She’s taller than I am, with serious curves. You better hope that saleslady doesn’t see you together, or you’ll have to quit shopping here.”

“Is that the sum of your research about Miss Bubbles?” Logan ignores the insinuation and crosses his legs. “Her vital statistics? I’m much more curious about deep, dark secrets, in case I wasn’t clear.”

“She’s a music fan,” Weevil says. “And a widow. Really likes to party, and has a taste for cigarettes of the...relaxing variety. Turned up in Cuba maybe six months ago, but didn’t get with Rossi until January—I doubt he’s the reason she came. Guy’s not even her first escort; she was seen, before he made his move, on several high-dollar Good Time Charlies’ arms.”

“And when, exactly, did their love turn sour?” Logan sets down his glass and steeples his fingers, thinking. This scenario sounds like strangers in the night gone wrong--not a premeditated long game, on the part of either party. Whatever Bubbles did to piss off her sugar daddy was probably accidental, or unplanned.

“Sounds like it took a while. Rossi got jealous and possessive soon after he locked her down--but the twenty-four-seven guards are a recent development.” Weevil shrugs. “Maybe he found proof his suspicions were true?”

“Somehow I doubt she’ll explain.” Logan sits up straight as Bubbles appears in wristwatches. She’s decked out in lemon-yellow, which makes her look like a sunbeam, and trailing a single guard, as hoped. “Act lively, man, it’s show time. Meet me by the purses once you’ve dispatched Oscar. We’ll walk her out together so she doesn’t cut and run again.”

Weevil gives a thumbs-up and ambles away, taking a spiral path around the pair so he’ll come up behind. Logan rises, straightens the crease in his trousers, and approaches the girl with a dour smile.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” he says, halting beside her. She glances up from her perusal of the glass case, and her surprised expression morphs rapidly to fear. Turning, she searches for the guard who’s no longer there; Logan uses the moment of distraction to catch her arm, and hustles her rapidly towards the dressing room.

“I thought I told you to back off,” she hisses, once he’s got the curtain pulled. She seems more terrified than angry; crossing her arms, she spins in an agitated circle. “Mister, you’ll get us both killed!”

“Look, the situation’s changed since last we spoke.” Logan reaches up to run a hand through his hair, thinks better of it. “Apparently your dad’s in the hospital, and agitation led your sister Janet to do something unwise. She approached Rossi on her own initiative, tried to bargain for your freedom. Needless to say, that didn’t end well.”

“Oh, my God.” Bubbles’ face contorts, and she buries it in her hands. When she emerges, there are tear tracks--so she’s either genuinely upset, or a better actress than she seems. “JANET hasn’t got a lick of sense. PLEASE get her out of here, Mr. Echolls--TODAY. Ask her to tell Dad I love him, and I’m so, so sorry. But I can’t go home at the moment...or, probably, ever.”

“I have money,” Logan says, exasperated. “Lots of it, I can help you disappear. It’s not necessary to sacrifice yourself nobly, when I’m right here, right now, to rescue you.”

“Angelo doesn’t need to know my whereabouts,” Bubbles says ruefully. “He’s willing and able to
ruin me whether or not I’m hiding. I never should have come to Cuba, Mr. Echolls. I thought I
might...I was so stupid. My grand plans seem like kids playing make-believe, now.”

“I don’t see what you could possibly have done that was so...” Logan begins; then the curtain’s
ripped aside, and the blush-clad salesgirl glowers up at them, girdles clutched in her fist.

“Listen, Senor.” She points a furious finger at Logan, shoving the undergarments into his hands.
“Maybe you think you’re sly--but this is a RESPECTABLE store. No hanky-panky in the dressing
rooms, ever. At El Encanto, we have RULES.”

Bubbles laugh-sobs and takes off at a run, evading Logan’s attempt to catch her. He turns to
pursue, but his self-appointed nemesis blocks his path, grabs the front of his coat. “No,” she says.
“No trying to make time with ladies who aren’t interested--not on my watch. I don’t care if I get
fired, you leave NOW. Or I’ll call a guard who’ll MAKE you.”

Logan huffs exasperation, gently removes her fingers from his lapel. Extracts his wallet to hand her
a hundred. “For the girdles,” he says, when she pokers up. “And just for the record? That tete-a-
tete wasn’t romantic. I’m trying to RESCUE the girl, not kiss her.”

He holds up his hands, empty palms out, to show he means no harm; the saleswoman lets him pass.
Unfortunately, Bubbles is long gone, and Oscar’s missing, too.

Weevil, at least, is right where he’s supposed to be—lurking near the exit, examining purses, while
a guard watches him, suspicious. He frowns as Logan approaches and asks, “What happened to
Oscar?”

“He’s indisposed, like you told me to make him. Where’s BUBBLES?”

“She ran. Again,” Logan admits, and Weevil snorts. Heads immediately and rapidly out the door.

“Maybe we should give up,” Weevil murmurs as they emerge into the sunlight. Scans the street
like he’s searching for Bubbles, but Logan’s checked, and she’s not in sight. “Two strikes already,
and you know what happens when we hit three.”

“If we give up, that girl’s as good as dead, and my client loses a sister.” Logan opens the passenger
door with a jerk, apologizes by patting the windshield. “I’m not quitting unless stopped by a
bullet.”

“You know that’s a real possibility, right?” Weevil climbs in beside him, dons his hat, and tips it
down to shade his eyes. “Mobsters love guns like you love pocket squares. They block out murder
on their weekly schedules.”

“Jesus, how do I tell Janet I failed, again?” Logan shoves the girdles in the glove box, morosely
fiddles with the latch. “She’s just a dumb, sweet kid who’s in way over her head. And I’m running
out of ideas to save her sister.”

“If doing the right thing was easy,” Weevil says, putting the car in gear, “a lot more people
would.”

With a spin of the wheel, Weevil swerves into traffic, drives silently all the way to the FOCSA.
Parks carefully in the underground lot and reclines his seat to nap, gesturing for Logan to go in
without him.

Beating up bodyguards can’t be the easiest way to spend a weekday afternoon, Logan reflects, as
he takes the stairs to the ground floor, dragging his feet. Although punching someone right now
might be highly therapeutic.

The bell over the door tinkles as he walk into the red-curtained, lamp-lit restaurant; Janet, the only customer in the joint, jerks her head up to meet his gaze. She’s dressed to travel in pale-pink, a matching coat slung over the chair; there’s a worn, brown suitcase beside her, a small and lonely teacup by her plate. As she registers he’s alone, her eyes fill with tears.

“I’m sorry,” Logan says, stopping in front of her, resisting the urge to offer an embrace. “I’m SO sorry, she ran again. I can’t seem to find the words to convince her staying’s more dangerous than going.”

Janet sinks bonelessly into her chair, begins sobbing into her palm. He sits across from her, tentative, and offers his handkerchief. She surfaces enough to take it and wipe her eyes. “Why won’t she LEAVE, Mr. Echolls? What has that monster DONE to her?”

“I don’t know,” Logan gestures impatiently for a waitress. “But I’m going to find out. In the meantime, let’s get you something to eat. Then we can discuss our next step.”

He orders the special—Cuban meatloaf, which seems homey enough to appeal—and she waits until the waitress is gone to say, “IS there a next step? Do you even know where my sister went?”

Logan exhales through his nose slowly, because the answer to that question is no. “I was actually referring to the next step for YOU,” he says. “Even though your sister’s not ready to leave…you should. Or at least hide somewhere, until the two of you can go together. The Nacional is a mob hot spot par excellence—it’s no place to stay if you’re hiding from gangsters.”

“Well you can forget me heading home,” Janet says, tart as he’s ever heard her. She gives the waiter a bright smile of gratitude as he sets down a basket of Cuban bread. “And I don’t see how I can hide, either. My sister won’t be able to find me.”

“She can give ME a call,” Logan says. “She knows full well you and I are working together. And I have a great little hideout all set up, with a stocked fridge and plenty of books, everything you could possibly need. You’ll be snug as a bug, et cetera, while I iron out this…temporary setback.”

“I’m sure it’s very nice,” she says, buttering a large slice. “But I’m sorry, I can’t accept. It sounds like house arrest, and Mr. Echolls, I’m not the criminal…Angelo Rossi is.”

Logan manfully resists the urge to bang his head against the wall. “You can’t just parade around all over town!” he says, patience strained. “You crossed swords with a MOBSTER!”

“Well then, I’ll stay at a different hotel.” Her face goes soft with pleasure as her meal is set before her. She digs in with her fork; Logan can tell she’s out of cash by the way she inhales her bite. “Only it will have to be inexpensive, because…well, I need to keep cash on hand to pay YOU.”

“The Vedado is relatively close by,” he says, hand-waving the prospect of payment. “But not on the strip—Rossi’s cronies are less likely to spot you and turn you in. Let me put you up there, my treat. And please, I beg you, Janet…try to stay in your room.”

“I’ll do my best,” she says, in a way that makes him doubt her. “But if I was the kind of girl who’d play Solitaire while her sister’s in trouble, I never would have come to Cuba.”

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He’s sprawled in his library, brooding, Champ on his lap and a bottle of Scotch at his elbow, when the unmistakable ruckus of Veronica returning filters through the door. Faintly, he hears her husky
kitten voice quipping as large objects are set down, sacks of spoils laid to rest. Logan would rather not inflict his mood on her, just at present—his surliness isn’t her fault. But solitude’s no longer an option…she’ll search him out first thing.

Sure enough, she’s tracked him down within a minute, bustling into the library, smelling of sun and sea. A fetching touch of pink across her cheekbones complements her coral dress. Champ, though unwilling to leave his lap, begins to dance in place with excitement; Veronica smiles, and curls up on the sofa beside them.

“Bad day?” She rests her head on his shoulder, stroking Champ gently until the dog subsides. She’s warm from time spent outdoors--he drapes an arm around her, kisses her fragrant hair. “And is it strictly necessary, from a dramatic perspective, to sulk both alone AND in the dark?”

“I wasn’t alone.” He indicates the dog with his glass, swallowing a mouthful. “And by the way, she’s been digging in the garden again. Have you noticed any small items missing?”

Veronica levels a fake-miniatory look at the unrepentant animal, switches on a nearby lamp. “I’m guessing your plan to abscond with the strangely reluctant Bubbles took a turn?”

Logan doesn’t ask how she knows…Veronica understands everything he wishes she didn’t. He just sighs, and cuddles her comforting, slender warmth closer. “Why won’t anyone, ever, do any simple thing I ask?”

“Poor baby.” She pats his belly with a small, capable hand, kisses the side of his neck. “How about I give you a back rub? Or better yet, a front rub, like I promised last night?”

“Mmmm, I need an hour to sober up before I can perform to standards.” His voice slows as the pleasant image takes hold. “In the meantime, tell me about your day. Did Mac enjoy her Hemingway adventure?”

“We bought some linens and knick-knacks for their new house, plus a second suitcase to pack them in.” Veronica abandons her stroking of a now-dozing Champ to toy with the buttons on his shirt. “She finds the heat and late nights here tiring…but still less strenuous than her normal schedule. Mac and Wallace work WAY too hard.”

“Says the hardest worker I’ve ever, personally, met.” Logan presses his lips to her temple, feels the first stirrings of arousal as Veronica slips a hand inside his shirt placket. Then a thought occurs to him, and he places a palm over her fingers. “Wait a minute. How was Mac able to buy a whole suitcase full of housewares in a quaint and rustic seaside village?”

“Um.” Veronica suddenly becomes very interested in a painting of the ocean. “We MAY have decided we’re not fond of rustic villages, and opted to be touristy…elsewhere.”

“Hmmm.” Logan removes her hand from distracting locales, holds it firmly between his own. “Let me guess. Directly adjacent to Priscilla Banks’ new residence?”

“Hey, the Hotel Inglaterra HAPPENS to have an excellent café.” She flirts up at him in obvious misdirection. “I couldn’t let my friend leave Cuba without people-watching downtown—how else will she absorb the culture?”

“Veronica,” he chides, the lack-of-control panic he’s fought all day leaking through the blanket of alcohol, “You’ve already SPOKEN with that Black Widow, and you are…memorable. Don’t you think she’ll notice you lurking, ask questions? Everybody worth knowing in this town has met us, she’ll ID you by nightfall!”
“Priscilla dropped her purse!” Veronica protests, uncowed. “It was a golden opportunity! What was I supposed to do, land at the end of the rainbow and NOT pocket the treasure?”

“You couldn’t consider the speed with which you’re turning my hair prematurely grey?” he asks, dry.

“Oh you’re one to talk.” She crosses her arms in the annoyed, combative gesture that never fails to rouse his interest. “Mister ‘I just went to the races, pay no attention to my SEEPING BULLET WOUND’.”

Logan opens his mouth to engage, the tickle of lust turning sharply eager, but is interrupted by a knock on the door. Before he can shout ‘Go away,’ Clarence enters; his flinty expression dampens Logan’s interest in foreplay.

“What now?” he asks wearily, removing his arm from his soft-yet-prickly wife.

“Bad news.” Clarence sits on the ottoman opposite them, hands clasped between his knees. “Remember the missing money I said I’d investigate? Rossi suspects your sister of taking it. His mentor Trocani’s out of jail, and showed up today to take back the reins. He thinks only a…non-planner with money troubles would be foolish enough to steal from the mob.”

Logan tilts his face towards the ceiling-- he knows by ‘non-planner’ Clarence means ‘moron’, and he can’t, in all honesty, argue. Veronica squeezes his fingers, takes charge. “You know this for a fact?”

“I heard them talking through the bug,” Clarence admits, which is a whole other can of worms. Then quickly adds, with a glance at Veronica, “The one I planted in Rossi’s den. I caught the entire conversation.”

“What’s their evidence?” she asks, crisp, no-nonsense.

“Trina’s spent some time with Rossi and his mistress lately,” Clarence says, “or so I’m told. The theory is, she learned about a suitcase full of cash over drinks, then shared the information with one of Rossi’s bodyguards. He proceeded to steal it, and presumably split the proceeds.”

“Which bodyguard?” Logan asks, hoping against hope it’s the asshole aspiring actor.

“A local named Oscar Montoya,” Clarence says, and Logan closes his eyes. “I just heard via police band radio on the way home; his body was found in the dumpster behind El Encanto. Sounds like they offed him right after the discussion…but it’s unclear whether they found any cash. Regardless, his murder bodes ill for Trina.”

“God.” Logan reaches for the bottle, pours another drink. Montoya’s dead because Weevs left him trussed like a Thanksgiving turkey for Rossi’s goons to find. “Did you happen to spot Bubbles, at any point after three?”

Clarence straightens. “I thought you had her secured at the FOCSA.”

“She ran away,” Logan says, wearily, and tosses back the Scotch. “I tried to pursue, but was foiled by a very small pit bull in heels and pearls. We searched the street for her after, but she’d vanished.” He sets his glass down with a clank. “On the plus side, I DID manage to buy Veronica some better –quality foundation garments.”

“I’ll put out feelers,” Clarence says, disregarding this. “But my guess is, if Montoya was watching Bubbles, Rossi found them together.”
Logan rubs at the returning headache between his eyes. Veronica says, in her hardest pretending-to-be-jaded-but-actually-furious voice, “I wonder how Rossi feels about Trocani turning up in town, after all this time? You think he’s happy about being demoted?”

“Probably not,” Logan says. “But Trocani’s a much bigger fish, right? So what, realistically, can he do?”

“Hard to say,” Clarence muses, shooting Veronica an approving look like she’s his star student. “But my instinct, based on the tone of conversation, is that their friendship’s fraying.”

“Which would be fine—LET them shoot it out to decide who’s in charge—except my sister’s caught in the crosshairs.” Logan reaches for the bottle again, and Veronica grabs his wrist. He spreads his fingers, demonstrating his hand’s empty, and she twines her fingers through his. “I’m starting to loathe this case.”

“You’re about to hate it even more,” Veronica says, with a ruefulness mirrored in her expression. “Our restful evening in just got cancelled. We need to track down Trina before we take Dick and Mac to the airport, warn her she’s in danger.”

“Uggghhhh.” Logan covers his face with a throw pillow. “You’re right, we’re still approaching rock bottom.”

“On the bright side…” Veronica nudges him with her shoulder as Clarence clears his throat, probably to hide a laugh. “Trina’s a girl who will ALWAYS let you bail her out of a jam. ESPECIALLY when you use your checkbook to do so.”

Backstage at Cabaret Parisien it’s dark and crowded, a gamut of teetering prop towers and smoking, chattering showgirls. Logan runs it, leading Veronica by the hand, while she clutches her poufy skirt close to keep from knocking anything over.

There are only two dressing rooms; one’s left casually open and packed with yet more showgirls, adjusting costume straps and headdresses, painting lips. The other bears a nameplate covered with masking tape, on which ‘Trina Echolls’ is written in marker. Logan smirks, reading it, and lifts a hand to knock.

“Entrez!” Trina calls gaily, and Logan rolls his eyes and opens the door. He’s confronted by the Crawford-esque sight of his sister in green silk bathrobe and turban. She’s applying glue to a row of false eyelashes, to further adorn her painted face.

“Twice in one week?” She widens her eyes in mock amazement, patting the lashes into place—the infuriating smirk that scarred his childhood purses her bright red mouth. Pressing a palm to her chest, she says, “Careful, Logie, people might think you CARE.”

He turns an exasperated look on Veronica, who makes a keep-going motion with her hand. He crosses his arms, obstinate, and she nobly takes the reins. “Trina, we have reason to believe you’re in danger,” she coaxes, smoothing her crumpled skirt with both palms. “Associating with Angelo Rossi isn’t wise…and taking advantage of that association? Even less so. He’s a powerful person, and he’s not safe to cross.”

“What are you TALKING about?” Trina smooths her drawn-on brows with one fingertip and selects a large powder puff. “Angelo and I are the BEST of friends! When I mentioned I was coming to Cuba, he sent his own private plane! And met me at his own private AIRPORT!”
“Trina, SOMEONE stole from the guy, and he thinks that someone was you,” Logan interrupts, trying not to think about his sister climbing willingly onto a trafficker’s plane. “We need to get you out of the country before he calls in a hit.”

“Are you KIDDING?” she demands, powdering her incredulous face. “I’m not going anywhere, I’m a STAR! You saw yourself how much the audience loved me, night before last. Besides,” she waves the puff to emphasize, then returns it to its bejeweled box. “You’re being ridiculous—I haven’t stolen anything. I don’t NEED to—I’m an ECHOLLS.”

“It doesn’t matter what you DID,” Logan tries, as she removes the turban to reveal sleeked back, short hair; selects an impossibly elaborate red wig from an assortment on the table. “It’s what they THINK you did that counts. And they THINK you took mob money!”

“I’m on in ten minutes.” Trina consults a diamond-studded watch. “And I really need to do my breathing exercises so I’m in the right headspace to entertain. I had dinner with Angelo and his… whatever-she-is last night, and he was perfectly delightful. You just take your silly suspicious out to the club proper, drown them with a few drinks—or more than a few, since that’s your favorite coping mechanism. I’ll be out in a few minutes; and I promise to make you forget your troubles with the magic and mystery of song!”

Logan flings his hands wide in I-give-up exasperation, strides out of the dressing room; Veronica double-steps in heels to follow. Reluctantly he slows, taking her arm so she won’t teeter. “So what now? Get a table, kidnap her later when she’s flushed with success? She may enjoy mocking my drinking, but she’s always willing to let me buy her one.”

“We can’t,” Veronica reminds him, rerouting them towards the exit. “We have to take Mac and Dick to the airport. And if we leave the task to our staff, Dick will bolt. You’re the only person in Cuba he obeys.”

“Oh, you noticed he’s not thrilled about showing his face in California?” Logan releases a deep breath of aggravation as she tows him outside. “I have to say, I sympathize. Who WOULD enjoy being the focus of that much attention from the Feds?”

“We WILL have to do something about Trina, though.” Veronica shepherds him into his car, then speed-walks around the hood to take the wheel. “Tonight, or tomorrow at the latest, because right now she’s a sitting duck. I’ll talk to Clarence when he gets home, see what he’s able to arrange.”

“God, she’s a menace.” Logan buries his face in his hands, so frustrated he doesn’t mind someone else driving. “She’s got the Echolls attitude down cold—but bad she’s adopted, and didn’t inherit BRAINS.”

He sulks halfway back to the house, and spends the rest plotting solutions to the Trina Issue…plots that involve his wife as little as possible, and don’t require his sister’s cooperation. Heads straight for the phone upon arrival to call Weevil—only to have it ring the second he enters the library.

Picking up the receiver, he answers with his name, and a cultured, rushed voice speaks over him. “Senor, this is Carlos Aviles? My cousin Ramon says you’re expecting my call?”

“Of course.” Logan perches on the edge of the desk, switching gears. “From the bank. He told ME you uncovered details your colleague couldn’t?”

“I’m not sure ‘couldn’t’ is the right term,” Carlos says, voice calming as he shuts a door. The background noise behind him fades. “My associate wasn’t sure how many…important friends the account holder in question had. She didn’t want to speak out of turn.”
Logan waves a dismissive hand. “Luckily you don’t suffer from the same fears.”

“I can confirm there is an account, containing the equivalent of two million American dollars.” Carlos says. “It was opened by… the party in question personally, using cash. There’s a safe deposit box as well; but I can’t list the contents, because my job doesn’t grant me access. The beneficiary is not your party of interest’s son, however—Ramon tells me that’s what you wanted to know.”

“Let me guess.” Logan leans back on one hand, jadedness creeping into his tone. “He left his ill-gotten gains to a woman of questionable repute? Maybe his mistress, Priscilla Banks, AKA Kendall ‘Lacey’ Shiflett?”

“Well, it is, in fact, a woman,” Carlos says, hesitant. “But neither of those. He supplies Logan with a VERY familiar name and asks, “Could she be the mistress in question?”

“I wouldn’t put it past her,” Logan murmurs, at his driest. “Many thanks to both you and Ramon, this was exactly the information I needed.”

“Of course,” Carlos says. “I’m always happy to be of assistance to Ramon’s generous American friends.”

Logan hangs up, saunters out to the living room; Veronica’s sorting mail and chatting with Mac, who’s marking a place in her magazine with one finger. He leans a shoulder against the wall, folds his arms and smirks. This factoid is going to go down like a dose of cod liver oil.

“What?” Veronica asks, noticing him idling. “Wait, the phone rang… was that the call we were expecting?”

He nods. “There’s a beneficiary on the account, in the event of Big Dick’s untimely demise.”

“Is it Priscilla?” she demands. And in response to his grin, “I KNEW it! I KNEW that woman took him for a ride!”

“Probably more than one,” Logan says, momentarily forgetting his troubles because this is glee-inducingly awful. “But Peaches, the truth is SO much worse. You will never, ever guess who gets the filthy lucre, now that Big Dick’s enjoying his heavenly reward.”

V lifts her brows, challenging, and he gives in to the impulse and laughs.
“Madison Sinclair?” Veronica drops the pile of mail on her lap. “WHY would Big Dick…” The disgusting thought of the two of them as a COUPLE crosses her mind. She tries to dismiss it, FORCE it—and all-accompanying mental pictures—from her brain, but it persists. “Do you think they were…”

A loud ‘eww’ comes from Mac at the same time Logan shrugs and asks, “Would it surprise you?”

Not surprise, but DISGUST, most certainly. Big Dick sleeping with his son’s girlfriend is an Aaron Echolls redux. Veronica studies her husband’s face for any sign of upset, but he seems fine. Either he hasn’t made the connection—doubtful—or he’s relishing the potential flip to the story. Instead of Madison being the VICTIM à la Lilly, she’s the KILLER.

The idea has merit. Veronica is NOT just trying to pin the crime on her nemesis. Woman kills lover for cash. Or, even better, JILTED woman shoots ex for… “How much money was in the account?”

“Two million dollars.” Logan pops up two fingers for emphasis, waves his hand in the air with a flourish. Giddy with the news, he’s practically bouncing on his feet. Playing detective amps him up, and he loves being able to help her. When he sees she doesn’t share his excitement, he deflates a little. “There’s also a safe deposit box linked to the account, contents unknown.”

Worry edges out the glee in his eyes, probably remembering how much she dislikes Madison and why. Veronica smiles up at him, reassuringly. “But you’re going to work on getting me a peek inside that box, right?”

He grins at the challenge. “Of course.”

“Ugh, Madison Sinclair,” Mac grouses. “She’s such a pill.”

That was putting it mildly. Veronica had TRIED to befriend Madison after Lilly pulled her into the same social circle, but it was a non-starter. Madison didn’t associate with people she considered beneath her. To her, Veronica was like gum on her shoe- Keith’s position as sheriff no more important than chimney sweep. Madison put on a good show in front of Lilly, but it didn’t stop her from spreading rumors. And after Lilly died… well, all bets were off.

Veronica shakes off thoughts of the past. “Where’s Dick? He might have some answers.” And she
still needs his alibi.

“He mentioned packing,” Mac says, skeptical. “But, after you left, I saw him head upstairs with a bottle of Logan’s favorite scotch.”

“Great,” Logan mutters, curses under his breath. “I’ll go get him.”

Another string of curses attend his exit and Veronica sighs. Logan’s having a rough day. First dealing with Dick and his assorted issues and then failing to rescue Bubbles AGAIN. Then, if that wasn’t enough, Trina delivered the coup de grâce by being too stupid to listen to reason. Her husband’s in definite need of a little pick-me-up. Tonight, after they drop off Mac and Dick, they will have the house to themselves, and Veronica can soothe and pamper.

“So what do you think? Was Madison doing the horizontal tango with Big Dick?” she asks, returning her attention to the mail in her lap, and the waiting envelope from her dad.

Mac screws up her face in revulsion and makes a gagging sound. “What I know is that I DON’T want to think about it. Although…” She pauses, tilts her head in contemplation. “Madison did go live with her aunt. Maybe Big Dick broke things off with her and she fled town in humiliation?”

“I suppose it’s possible, but if there’s one thing I can say about Madison, it’s that she doesn’t back down.”

The letter from Keith has more news clippings and a handwritten note: Still searching for the ledger but in the meantime, I’ve culled a few names from the papers. Will keep you posted. Take care of yourself, honey. Love, Dad. Stapled to the stationary is a lined sheet torn from a steno pad with a neat list.

“You might like being at Veronica’s beck and call, but I don’t,” Dick says, making no attempt to be quiet as he stomps into the room. “What is it now, your highness?” Logan cuffs the back of his head, and Dick winces, tossing his hands up in surrender. “Yeah, yeah, I get it; I’ll play nice.”

Refolding the letter, Veronica returns it to the envelope, and sets it aside with the rest of the mail on the end table. “Logan tracked down some of your dad’s money today.”

He looks interested for all of two seconds and then his eyes dim. “Some?”

She nods. There’s no point in mentioning the safe deposit box until she knows what’s inside. It could hold the rest of Big Dick’s stolen loot, but it might just be the ledger, and Kendall has the missing millions. Veronica frowns. Or maybe Big Dick put money in another bank? “He set up an account and left it in trust for Madison - any idea why?”

“Sonofabitch.” Dick drops into the chair across from her and cradles his head in his hands. “He did it because he wants me to MARRY her.”

“Huh?” Veronica’s not alone in her confusion; both Mac and Logan are staring at Dick, open-mouthed. Was Big Dick trying to get his son to make his mistress an honest woman?

“I knocked her up,” he says, miserably. “And dear old dad got wind of it, said I needed to do the right thing if I wanted to keep living high on the hog. He was trying to convince my mom to take away my trust fund.”

Yet another reason for him to want Big Dick out of the picture. “So he was trying to force your hand by putting Madison in charge of the purse strings?” Dick jerks his head up, and then lowers his chin to his chest. Veronica takes it as a yes. “And I’m guessing you don’t want to marry her?”
“Would you?” Dick jumps from the chair. “I’ve been traveling all over, trying to stay away from home AND her. Why do you think I’m here? I thought I could get his money and fly back to Biarritz.”

“And avoid your responsibilities,” Logan says at the same time Veronica asks, “Is that where you were when Big Dick was killed? Biarritz?”

“Yeah.”

It could be the answer to her question, or agreement with Logan. Veronica puts a pin in it, and asks, “Did Madison know your dad was going to leave her money?”

Dick shrugs. ‘He said he’d take care of her and the kid.” Not, MY kid, just ‘the kid.’

Logan gives a snort of disapproval, and Veronica glances at her husband. His body is turned away, and his fingers worry at the upholstered piping of his chair. They are very different men. Logan who puts himself at risk, taking responsibility for people he doesn’t even know, and Dick who is shirking his duties to his own child. It’s like watching the end of their friendship unfold before her eyes.

“I can’t believe this,” Dick whines. “Now I have to go back and get hitched.”

“Did you ever consider”—Logan starts in his deadly quiet tone—”that Madison might not want to marry YOU? And once she gets her hands on your dad’s money, she won’t have to?”

Dick appears completely gobsmacked by this possibility and then recovers. “Nah man, she’s gotta get married, you know, for her reputation.” He directs a pointed look at Veronica, and Logan bounds from his chair, ready to pummel him.

Veronica holds out a staying hand. “It’s okay.”

Logan pauses, fists clenching and unclenching at his sides, unconvinced. She shakes her head, and he drops back in his chair, anger emanating off him in waves. It’s sweet that he feels the need to protect her reputation, but Veronica couldn’t care less. She knows what vile stories were told about her when she—underage and unmarried—fled the country with Duncan. Most of them started and retold with delight by Madison herself.

She expects to feel glad at this turn of events. Madison being thought of as a ‘fallen woman’ and losing her place in polite society, but she doesn’t. It just makes her sad. She can’t wait to be done with this case and these people.

“Did Madison’s family kick her out?” Mac asks, revising her theory on Madison’s move to San Francisco, and, unintentionally, outlining a motive for murder. As an abandoned, unwed mother with no visible means of support, she had two million reasons to want Big Dick dead.

“They sent her to her aunt to have the kid.”

Mac blanches at his cavalier attitude. The unfairness of it makes Veronica mad. Here sits her friend who longs to have a baby with her husband, but is holding off because she wants to do what’s best for this non-existent child. While Dick, doesn’t have a shred of concern for his VERY REAL baby.

“It’s possible, this isn’t about you, Dick. Maybe your dad left the money to Madison, not so you’d marry her, but to provide for his grandchild.” Even as the words leave her mouth, Veronica doubts Big Dick was that altruistic.
Dick’s smirk indicates he has the same low opinion of his dad. He sprawls out on the loveseat close to the bar cart, pours a straight shot of tequila, and kicks his feet onto the coffee table.

“You know,” Veronica says, frowning at him. “For a guy who claims to have been out of the country, ‘travelling’, you have a lot of information. How is that?”

“Ever hear of a phone, Miss Hotshot Detective?” He casts worried eyes at Logan, loses the sarcasm. “Dad kept tabs on me. Whenever I took money outta my trust, his bank buddy would let him know, and he’d call.” Another look to Logan- the same eager expression on his face that Champ wore when she wanted attention and affection.

It makes her feel bad for him. Dick’s just being Dick, and he doesn’t have a clue why Logan’s this mad. The big dumb dog. Tonight while providing succor to her husband, maybe she could also do a little mending of his relationship with his oldest friend.

“What did he…” Veronica fell silent. That wasn’t the right question. She didn’t need to know the what, but the where. Neither Dick nor Madison could be suspects if they didn’t know WHERE to find Big Dick. “Did he call you from Cuba?”

Dick tosses back another shot of tequila. “Not on this trip, but he was only here a few days before he bought the farm, right?”

“This trip?” Veronica sits up straight. “He was in Havana before?”

“Yeah, bastard called to wish me a happy New Year, said the holidays made him think about Cassidy and how we should let bygones be bygones.” Dick slumps low in his chair, cradling the bottle of Gran Centenario to his chest. “Tries to use Beav to soften me up while he’s here partying with Kendall and planning his escape from the Feds. A real piece of work, my dad.”

“Wait… he TOLD you his land deals were a fraud?”

His eyebrows seesaw, one raising, the other lowering, as he screws up the corner of his mouth in an are-you-kidding-me expression. “The only people who didn’t know my dad was crooked were the schmucks who invested with him… and the police.”

Did Big Dick sense his scam was coming to an end? Making advanced preparations to flee would certainly suggest so. “Was his escape plan always Havana?”

“I guess,” Dick says, dispensing with a glass to swig directly from the bottle. “Ever since Kendall showed her face, she started pushing for it.” He sneers, raises the pitch of his voice to mimic his dad’s mistress. “We should go to Cuba, baby, and play with the big boys.”

Maybe Big Dick’s portent of doom wasn’t just being caught, but of his own demise? Did Kendall’s prodding make him leery of her motivations? It might explain his sudden urge to make things right with his only living son. “Who else knew he’d come here?”

“How the fuck should I know? It’s not like we hung out drinking tea and talking about our feelings every Wednesday. I hated the guy.”

The lower the level in the bottle, the surlier he was bound to get, and the resulting scene would not be pleasant. Logan’s barely hanging on to his temper as is. Veronica glances at Mac in her lounging pajamas, and stands. “Come on Mac, let’s go upstairs and I’ll help you pack.”

“I’m alread—”
Veronica talks over her protest. “I have some things I want to send home with you for the new house, and a few pictures for my dad.” She threads her arm through her friend’s, tugs her from the room.

Mac shoots questioning glances at her the entire way, but doesn’t say anything until they’re on the second floor landing. “I’ll take my arm back now, thanks.” With a sheepish grin, Veronica lets her go, and Mac rubs her elbow. “Why the headlong rush upstairs? Where’s the fire?”

“I need a few minutes alone in Dick’s room.”

“What are you-- never mind. “ She tosses up her hands, shakes her head. “I don’t want to know.” She takes a step in the direction of her room, pauses, and turns back. “Do you really have stuff for me to bring home?”

“Yes, but it’s already packed and waiting in the trunk.”

“Of course it is,” Mac says with a grin. “I’m going to call Wallace, tell him we’re leaving soon, and get dressed. Call me when it’s time to go.”

Veronica gives her a thumbs-up before slipping inside the guest room. Conveniently, Dick has left the light on - all the better to see the mess he’s made. It’s clear he was doing more drinking than packing. His lemon-yellow suitcases sit open on the mahogany bed, their contents ravaged. Clothes are tossed over the bed’s arched footboard and strewn across the floor.

She wades through the sea of unwashed shirts and suits. The man needs serious help. And not just from a personal valet.

There are four cases of varying size. Veronica starts with the smallest, judging it the most likely to act as a carry-on. It has gathered pockets on the inside lid and along all four sides. She searches those first, and then shakes out the clothes. Nothing. Moving to the next, she repeats the steps, and comes away empty-handed.

The passport is in the final and largest of the cases. She flips open the green cover, embossed with the seal of the United States, and stops at the black-and-white picture of a smirking Dick. He’s even obnoxious in a photo. She twists and turns the slender 4x6 book, trying to read the colorful, different-shaped stamps. New York, Southampton, Roma. The word entrée catches her attention.

Squinting, she sits on the edge of the mattress and holds the page under the bedside lamp. Logan might be right about her needing glasses, but she’s not ready to give him the satisfaction. She leans in closer.

A red rectangle reads Paris-Orly. The entrance date has Dick arriving in France three weeks before the murder, and the corresponding ‘sortie’ stamp keeps him there until after Big Dick was already dead. She’s ambivalent with the discovery.

Returning the passport, she leaves the room, and passes Dick on the stairs; he doesn’t say anything, only grunts in her direction. Veronica rolls her eyes, rejoins Logan in the living room. The remains of the tequila have been returned to the bar cart, and Logan’s pouring a glass of club soda.

“What I want is for you to come to the kitchen with me; I’m hungry,” Veronica says, holding out a hand to him. His smile is soft and slow and he puts down the gin without making his cocktail,
crosses to her, and threads their fingers together. Veronica squeezes tight. “Dick didn’t kill his dad.”

“You got that from your conversation?” he asks, as if he missed something earlier.

“No, from his passport when I searched his room. He was definitely in France.”

There’s a plate of cold chicken in the refrigerator, fresh fruit, vegetables, and assorted cheeses, but none of it appeals. She peels back the foil on a silver tart pan, uncovers a quiche. Wrinkling her nose, she leans her head on the door, and stares at the shelves. “There’s nothing to eat.”

Logan does an exaggerated double take at the filled-to-overflowing refrigerator. “Absolutely barren; shall I fire Remy first thing in the morning?”

“Gee, don’t sound too excited.” She continues to poke around until she finds a bowl of leftover spaghetti carbonara, and an antipasto platter with chunks of salami, marinated artichokes, and thin strips of asiago cheese. “It’s looking more and more like Kendall and Cormac are our killers, but…” Frowning, she carries the food to the kitchen table, and eats an artichoke heart.

“But?” Logan prompts, getting her a fork.

“What’s our endgame? We find the evidence that proves their guilt and then what? It’s not like the police are going to admit they executed the wrong people.”

“I have no doubt you’ll find a way to get justice,” he says with a smile, feeding her a bleu-cheese-stuffed olive. “Because you’re Veronica Mars, and that’s what you do.”

Grinning, she takes the fork from him and twirls it through her cold pasta. “You’re right, I’ll come up with something.”

The bang and clatter of suitcases hitting the wrought-iron railing and glancing off the walls is followed by a loud crash, and a shouted, “Fuck!”

Logan winces, turns his head toward the sound. “Guess Dick’s done packing.” He leans forward and kisses her forehead. “You finish eating and I’ll load the car.”

“The Bel Air,” she says around a mouthful of spaghetti. Watching him leave, she chews, savoring the crisp pieces of pancetta hidden in the creamy cheese sauce.

She’s rapidly losing suspects. Betina at the charity ball, Sadie—if Vinnie isn’t lying—getting plastic surgery, and Dick off surfing in Europe. Madison has potential, but only if she knew Big Dick was in Havana. Like Sadie, she could’ve hired an investigator, but Veronica doubts she’d have the resources.

A poor Madison. It’s hard to imagine. People often got the verse wrong. Money isn’t evil, it’s the LOVE of it, and Madison ADORES both her bank balance and status. Her parents abandoning her would mean the loss of the former, and the stigma of being an unwed, pregnant woman would leave the latter in shreds. Did her reversal of fortune make her humble? Or did it make her desperate enough to kill?

“That looks good,” Mac says, entering the kitchen. Veronica pushes the antipasto toward an empty chair, sets aside thoughts of Madison and murder. The silent offer of food has Mac crossing the kitchen for her own fork. “Wallace said hi and that you owe him a phone call.” She joins Veronica at the table and puts down the folder she’s holding.
“I’ll call him tonight.” She jerks her chin at the buff-colored file. “What’s that?”

“The paperwork Dick got from the consulate today; Logan asked me to hold onto it.” Skewering a piece of meat with her fork, she smirks, when Veronica helps herself to the documents.

Mortuary certificate, transit permit, affidavit from the funeral director… she stops flipping the pages when she reaches the inventory of personal effects. The list itself is not interesting—pack of cigarettes, lighter, monogrammed handkerchief, and passport—but what catches her attention is the ABSENCE of expected items. No wallet, money, or hotel room key.

“A compelling read?” Logan asks, and her head snaps up; he’s lounging in the doorway, arms folded over his chest and legs crossed at the ankles. “Dick and his luggage are locked in the car—are you ready to go or do you need more time to snoop and eat?”

“Wow, you were able to stuff Dick AND all his bags in the trunk? I’m impressed,” Veronica says, shoving the last forkful of carbonara into her mouth.

With a sad shake of his head, Logan sighs. “It was tempting, but at the last minute, I decided to let him sit in the backseat.” He uses his shoulder to push away from the jamb. “But I might change my mind, if he talks too much on the ride.”

Mac starts to clear the table and Veronica stops her by saying, “Leave them; I’ll take care of it when we get home.”

They follow Logan outside and take their places in the Chevy. The atmosphere inside the car is subdued. As he pulls from the drive, Logan glances at Mac in the rearview. “So how’d you let Veronica talk you out of Cojimar?”

“You know your wife, she’s very persuasive.”

“Yes, but I doubt she used the same tactics with you that she uses on me.” Whatever Mac’s expression, it makes Logan chuckle. “Did you at least make it to the art museum?”

Veronica half-listens to Mac tell him about their day of sightseeing and shopping. Her acerbic wit turning simple people-watching into an adventure that keeps Logan entertained. Veronica turns her face, rests her cheek on the seat and stares at the darkened scenery they pass.

“—to ask Veronica.” She starts at his use of her name. Caught not paying attention, she has no idea what she’s being called on to decide. Logan clarifies. “Mac wants to know how long we’re planning to stay in Neptune.”

Twisting around, she peers over the backrest, but only has a clear view of Dick. His eyes are closed, but the tight grip he has on his flask says he’s not sleeping. While she watches, he takes a sip. It’s not going to be a pleasant flight for Mac if Dick drinks the entire way.

“A week, maybe two,” she says in answer to Mac’s original question. It’s been a long time between visits and, while she’s looking forward to seeing her friends and Keith, the truth is, Neptune chafes. A week of playing dutiful daughter and obedient wife might be more than she can stand.

The ride to the airport feels almost as short as Mac’s trip. As soon as they pull up to the white building, a skycap pushing a luggage cart materializes next to the car. Logan unlocks the trunk, supervises the transfer of bags and generously tips the young steward, who grins appreciatively at the folded bills before tucking them in his pocket. They follow him through the terminal to the check-in area.
Dick blinks under the bright lights, moves his head from side to side taking in his surroundings, and then saunters up the counter with Logan. They’re standing close enough to hear the sounds of conversation—the rise and fall of their pitch and the occasional word—but too far for Veronica to decipher what they’re saying.

“Call me when you land in New York,” Veronica tells Mac, giving her a hug. Over her friend’s shoulder, she watches the ticket clerk leave, but Logan and Dick remain by the counter, talking.

“I will.” Mac hugs Veronica a little tighter. “And thanks for listening to me; I think that maybe…” Stepping back, she shakes her head. “Let’s just say I’m reconsidering things.”

“Good,” Veronica says, decisively. “Because if anyone deserves to be happy, it’s you and Wallace.”

An announcement for the flight to New York bleeds through the PA system, but neither Dick nor Logan move. Logan’s reclining against the counter, nodding his head as he listens to Dick. Veronica waves to catch his attention and he holds up a give-me-a-second finger, turns and says something to Dick. Whatever it is makes Dick frown, and then he surrenders his flask.

They bump shoulders, grin, and saunter over as another boarding call is made. “Funny, it doesn’t sound like a funeral dirge, but it feels like one,” Dick says, leaning over to kiss Veronica’s cheek. “Take care, Ronnie; see ya in Neptune.”

The friendly goodbye leaves her nonplussed so she remains silent. Her lack of response goes unnoticed by Dick, who shakes Logan’s hand and then extends an elbow for Mac. She takes his arm, but not before shooting a questioning glance—what gives?—at Veronica. With a shrug, Veronica gives Logan the same look, but he only says, “You two have a safe flight.”

As soon as they are out of earshot, Veronica asks, “What were you and Dick talking about so intently?”

“He apologized in inimitable Dick fashion.” Logan cradles her hips, pulls her closer. “He’s not that odious when he’s sober and serious- too bad it’s a rare state of being for him.”

“Well maybe he’ll grow up now that he’s going to be a father.” She shudders. “Dick as a dad, boggles my mind.” Resting her head on his chest, she stares through the window, watching the passengers board.

Logan offers a noncommittal, “Hmm,” and then changes the subject by asking, “Do you want to wait for their plane to takeoff, or should we leave?”

“We can go home,” Veronica says, lifting her head. “I still need to talk to Clarence.”

Their walk back to the car is a quiet one. Logan holds open her door, waits until she’s settled, and then leans inside. Brushing his knuckles down the curve of her cheek, he kisses her nose. “I’m sorry it was such a short visit, but you’re going to see her again soon.”

Veronica smiles, presses her fingertips to his lips, amazed again by how easily he reads her moods, and knows her thoughts. “I love you,” she whispers, placing a kiss on his jaw. The rare admission splits his face in a wide grin, and she immediately chastises herself for being so stingy with the words. Logan may know she loves him, but she sometimes forgets how much he needs to hear her say it. “I’m very glad you came to Havana to find me- even if it meant doing business with Vinnie.”

“I’d do business with the devil himself in order to be with you.” He kisses her nose again, ensures
her seatbelt is fastened, and backs from the car, closing her door. There’s an extra bounce to his step as he circles the hood and climbs in behind the steering wheel. Turning the key in the ignition, he says, “But you know, you’re being very presumptuous, assuming I came here for YOU- perhaps I just wanted to make sure DUNCAN was okay.”

“Oh? Then maybe you should’ve shacked up with HIM for a week in your hotel instead of me.” She primly smooths down her coral skirt, tucks it around her knees. “I’m sure he wouldn’t have objected.”

Logan laughs. “I think I made the right choice.”

“You only THINK?!”

“Sorry, Dollface, I meant to say KNOW - your charms are way more enticing than Duckie’s.”

“Meg might disagree with you; Mac says they finally got married.”

“Their courtship has to be the most protracted in history.” Avoiding the autopista, he takes the long way around the terminal, and makes a left on Rancho Boyeros. “I wonder what made Celeste cave and give her blessing? Because you know Duck wouldn’t get hitched without Mommy’s approval.”

Ugh, thinking about Celeste and her near-obsession with her PERFECT child is enough to give Veronica a headache. The Kane family represents everything she hates about society. Duncan, with his very obvious flaws, being lauded and cosseted. His ambitions supported without question, simply because he’s a MAN. While Lilly was an embarrassment just for speaking her mind.

“I don’t want to move back to Neptune, Logan,” she says, shifting in her seat to face him. “If we have to leave Cuba, I want to—” Blinding headlights bathe the interior of the convertible, cutting off her words. “That driver’s kind of close.”

Logan doesn’t answer; his gaze already moving from the road to the rearview mirror and then back. He tamps down on the gas pedal and the car shoots forward, putting some distance between the Bel Air and the idiots behind them. Veronica peers over the backseat. The gap allows her a glimpse of the other car. Its lights are still bright, but she can see the wide, egg-crate grill and winged hood ornament.

Her stomach sinks. Is this the same car Marisol described outside Sloppy Joe’s the night of Big Dick’s murder? Dark, bird on the hood, and—she forces herself to look at the fins—what could be round taillights high near the trunk. “Go faster, Logan.”

He does what she asks without question. The engine whines its protest and the car thrums beneath her. She can feel the vibrations transfer from the seat to her spine.

It’s no good. The Imperial gives chase, accelerating to keep pace, and then closing the distance. While she braces for the impact, time dilates, expanding and stretching until it feels like ages have passed, and then it contracts to a pinpoint.

Bang.

The crash throws her toward the dash and the seat belt pulls her back, banging her head against the seat. Metal shrieks as the Imperial grinds into their rear fender, forcing them sideways. Logan steers into and then out of the skid; his hands are tight on the wheel as he jams on the gas. The smell of scorched rubber fills her nostrils and she gags.
“We can’t outrun them,” he shouts to be heard over the wind. “I have to—” The blow of the next hit from the Imperial snaps his jaw closed, and smacks her into the door panel.

Logan jerks the wheel hard to the right and the car slews violently from side to side as they turn off Rancho Boyeros. They bump over the pockmarked road. Veronica can see the bridge approaching. The sound of the river is louder than she knows it should be and, for a moment, she questions the wisdom of leaving the main street for this desolate stretch of land. But she trusts that Logan has a plan.

Smoke billows from the hood as Logan pushes the car past its limit. She yelps when the Imperial kisses their bumper and the Bel Air’s fin scrapes along the bridge railing. Copper sparks light up her sideview mirror and her stomach roils like the river beneath them.

Logan keeps up the punishing pace to no effect. The temporary gains they make are quickly lost. Veronica suspects the other driver is toying with them, letting them get ahead, and then barreling forward to tap their fender. A cat swatting at a mouse.

Her husband is all concentration, eyes on the road ahead, foot crushing the gas pedal. He pulls away from the black sedan—a yard, two, three—and wrenches the wheel to the right. The tires squeal as they leave the pavement and then spin while they seek purchase in the dirt. They gain traction, propelling the car onward over hilly terrain. Logan drives directly at a copse of trees. At the last second, he stomps on the brakes and the car shudders to a stop, nose down in a ditch.

The ticking of the overheated engine keeps time with the staccato thump, thump, thump of her heart; she closes her eyes and draws in a rough, shaky breath.

“Veronica!” Logan’s cry forces her eyes open, and she turns to stare at the empty driver’s seat. The door is flung wide and he’s gone.

She blinks, disoriented--what happened, he was just there--and yanks ineffectually at her belt. “Logan?” she calls.

“Veronica,” he says softer, lightly touching her shoulder; he’s standing outside the car next to her door. “You need to get out. Are you hurt? Can you move?”

“I’m fine.” She fumbles free of the lap belt. “Where are we?”

“The Havana Golf Course,” he says, pulling open her door. Gingerly, he lifts her from the seat, sets her on the ground, and leans back into the car to get his gun from the glove box. “We need to hide in case they come searching for us.”

She belatedly realizes there are no headlights behind them - the Imperial is gone. Logan starts to pick her up and she blocks his arm. “I told you I’m fine; I can walk.”

“Well then let’s get to it.” His voice is unsteady. Enfolding her hand in his, he tugs her out of the gully toward the trees, and she can feel the tremor in his fingers.

Logan guides her across the course to the undeveloped land at its edge, and starts on a circuitous route that will lead them to the road. They stop fifteen feet shy of the pavement and he crouches low to the ground.

“I don’t think they followed us,” she says, squatting next to him. The woods are still around them. No sound of crunching feet or voices.

“I’m going first to check. If it’s all clear, I’ll signal for you.” He takes her hand again and stands,
pulling her with him. The sudden upward movement makes her queasy and she puts her palm on the tree to steady herself. “Are you sure you’re okay?” Logan asks.

“Just a little dizz—” She vomits at the base of the tree.

Logan holds back her hair and, when she’s done, cleans her mouth with his handkerchief. “How hard did you bang your head?” he asks, fingers gently examining her scalp.

“Not hard.” She stops his hand, pulls it away from her temple. “Why don’t we get out of here first and you can fuss all you want later.” Disregarding his instruction to wait, she trudges up the hill. Her heel catches on a root, twisting her ankle, and she winces, but manages to make it to the road. “Perry and Joan don’t live too far away; we can use their phone to call Clarence.”

“Not too far? Their house is like a mile from here.” He’s openly staring at her right ankle.

She puts her full weight on her foot, folds her arms over her chest, and glares at him, defiantly. “It’s closer than the airport and we need a phone.” Her eyes scan the road. There’s no sign of their pursuers, or anyone else for that matter. “I don’t think they were trying to kill us,” she says, starting off in the direction of the Aberdeen’s, trying hard not to limp. “If they wanted us dead, the bridge was the place to do it.”

“Veronica, will you slow down and take it easy, please?” She waves off his concern and he sighs. “Why are you always so stubborn?”

“Says the pot to the kettle.”

“You don’t need to prove to me that you’re indestructible; you’re allowed to rest, you know.”

“I will when I get home. For now I need you to keep up.” She’s not talking about his walking speed. “What did we do in the past day or so to spook someone enough that they’d try to scare us off?”

“You stole Kendall’s wallet and stalked her to her new hotel.” His mouth flattens into a line as she stumbles slightly and recovers, but he doesn’t comment just offers his arm, which she ignores.

“And you tried to rescue Bubbles.” It’s possible the car chasing them was the same one caught up in Big Dick’s murder, but there’s more than one Imperial in town. Did Rossi get wind of Logan’s attempt to abscond with his mistress? Maybe while trying to save his own skin, Oscar gave up Logan and Weevil. He might’ve thought the information would prove his loyalty and spare his life.

“There’s also the bank,” Logan says. “Ramon’s cousin could’ve told someone we were looking into Big Dick’s finances, and we don’t know what’s in that safe deposit box. It could be something important or dangerous to our attackers.”

Veronica nods. “Kendall, Bubbles, or the bank. We’ve hit a nerve.” But which one? She’s sure Kendall didn’t spot her and Mac having lunch at the Inglaterra. Although that might not matter. If Kendall was suspicious after Montmartre, some phone calls and a few questions would’ve told her everything she wanted to know about them, including the existence of Echolls Investigations.

“Veronica? You’d tell me if you were seriously hurt, right?” His gentle entreaty stops her.

“I would, but I’m not. The nausea has passed - I think it was just an after-effect of the adrenaline. My body’s sore, which I’m sure will be worse tomorrow, but my head doesn’t hurt, and I’m not in pain.” In an effort to reassure, she slides her arms around his waist and holds him. The tension in his body ebbs as his hands glide over her back, confirming for himself that she is safe and
unharmed. “What about you? Are you okay?”

“I am now,” he says, planting a kiss in her hair. “But I’d probably feel better if you let me carry you.”

“Nice try.” Stepping back, she takes his hand and resumes walking.

Logan keeps up his litany of concern for her welfare as they hike to Perry and Joan’s; despite his protest about the distance, it doesn’t take them long to reach the one-level, modern residence. A flat, cantilevered roof extends past the building to cover the carport and the portico leading to the front door. Landscape lighting illuminates the tiled path, but it leaves most of the lavender house draped in shadows, turning its color ashen.

Veronica hesitates. The presence of the Aberdeen’s car—a baby blue Studebaker—in the drive says they’re home, but there are no windows facing the street so she can’t tell if they’re awake or asleep. Logan feels no such compunction, herding her toward the door.

As he rings the bell, she puts a hand on his arm and says, “Let’s not tell—”

Perry opens the door before she can finish. Dressed in a velvet smoking jacket over slacks, he’s trying to play the role of debonair playboy and failing. Just the sight of him sets Veronica’s teeth on edge. “Veronica! What a pleasant surprise!”

“Unfortunately, not so much,” Logan says, a slight grimace crinkling the corners of his eyes as his mouth turns downward. “I’m afraid this isn’t a social call. We were just in an accident, and—”

“Logan let me drive,” she chimes in, high-pitched and breathless. “I just can’t get the HANG of a stick shift!” To sell the ditzy routine, Veronica tilts her head, adds a giggle.

“Anyway,” Logan stretches out the word, mouth twitching as he fights back a smile. “My car is near the eighth hole of the Havana Golf Course, nose down in a sand trap. Mind if we use your phone to call our driver?”

“Of course,” Perry drawls. “Please, come in. Mi casa es su casa, as the locals say.” With his index finger, he pushes the door wider and steps aside to let them pass.

“Thanks, Per, you’re a peach.” Not for the first time, Veronica marvels at her husband’s ability to be sarcastic while sounding sincere. Logan cinches his arm around her waist, tucks her safely to his side, and escorts her into the living area; his body acting as buffer between her and Perry.

The room’s kaleidoscope of colors makes her dizziness return with a vengeance. She gawks at the pointy chandelier; its ends look sharp enough to poke your eyes out and she wonders if that’s the idea—blind guests so they don’t have to actually SEE the tacky decor.

“You can use the phone in the kitchen, while I entertain the lovely Veronica.” He rolls her name around his tongue like he’s savoring the taste of it and Logan frowns. “Through there, last room on your left”—without taking his eyes off Veronica, Perry waves a hand toward the back of the house—“Step quietly as you pass the study; Joan’s lying down with a headache.”

Logan pauses, undecided, and she flaps her wrist in a shooing-motion. But as soon as he leaves, she regrets her haste. Staring after him, she considers following... contemplates how rude it would be to traipse through the house uninvited. The social faux pas might be worth it, though, if it saves her from spending alone time with blond, bland Perry.

Piano music purrs from the hi-fi behind her and Veronica recognizes the medley - the theme from
Picnic mixed with the classic Moonglow. “I think I’ll go remind Logan...” she begins making her excuse as she turns back to the room and knocks into Perry, who is standing way too close.

“Poor thing,” Perry coos, touching her cheek. Veronica recoils at the contact, takes a step away and then another, until the back of her knees bump into a chair. His eyes flash, displeased by her reaction, but he remains undeterred. Advancing on her, he continues to fawn in the oily way that makes her skin crawl. “You’ve been through such an ORDEAL. Can I get you a blanket? A drink, perhaps?”

“Gosh Perry, I’m not sure I should.” She fake swoons into the chair to escape him, lifts a hand to her forehead. “My hands are still shaking, and my stomach...”

“Well then a cocktail’s EXACTLY what you need.” He strolls to the bar. “Nothing like a little nightcap to put the spring back in your step and cure whatever ails you.”

She wrinkles her nose in distaste at both Perry and his selection of cognac. Tipping the bottle, he splashes a generous amount into the shaker, adds Cointreau, lemon juice, and ice. He does the foxtrot—step, step, slow, slow, and quick, quick to the left—as he mixes the Sidecar.

“No arguments, Veronica,” he says, pouring the drink into a sugar-rimmed coupe glass. “This is for your own good. Perry knows best.”

She smirks. “Well gee, if YOU say so, it MUST be true.”

"See, Veronica? Most people would expect a woman so...intensely passionate her husband never strays, to be aggressive, hard to control. Maybe a little crazy. But you clearly just need a strong hand on the reins. And Echolls...well, let's just say he's too indulgent with you." He gives her the drink, lets his fingers linger on her skin. "While I, on the other hand, know EXACTLY how to handle a woman such as yourself."

Perry leans in to kiss her, mouth already open, tongue out. Averting her face, she abruptly stands and tips her cocktail down the front of Perry’s pants. “Goodness gracious, that makes TWO accidents tonight. Guess I just can’t hold my liquor.”

“Don’t worry, Veronica; I’m not mad.” The tense set of his shoulders and his expression—ruddy cheeks, flaring nostrils—says otherwise. “I know very well that when dealing with a strong-willed woman, you need both a carrot and a stick. My carrot is obvious,” he says, loosening the belt of his smoking jacket and pushing it open. “But the stick, well... no one wants to be called before the Un-American Activities Committee, right?” He stalks forward, crowding her. “So what do you say Veronica? Feel like playing nice?”

Her temper sparks and she gives him a little shove. “One thing you should know about us strong-willed women, Per; we rarely feel like playing nice. Besides, I’ve got a carrot at home, and what you’re offering”—she directs a pointed glare at his crotch—“looks more like a radish. A limp one.”

“If not for yourself, what about your husband then?” He snarls. “Willing to get on your knees and exhibit your probably-considerable talents in order to save HIM?”

Raising her arm, she flattens her hand and smacks his cheek with enough force to make her fingers sting. His head snaps to the side, a red palm-shaped welt appearing on his skin. He touches his face. “You’re going to pay for that, Veronica.”
“I still think you should have let me carry you,” Logan mutters, trailing after his wife as she strides down the sidewalk towards Perry and Joan’s. “A twisted ankle in those shoes is no joke—and we both know you twisted YOURS, hiking up that hill solo.”

“I TOLD you, I’m perfectly FINE!” She smacks his hand away, foiling his attempt to put an arm around her. “Stop cosseting me. I’m not mortally wounded, and I’m not five, either.”

“Prove it,” he dares, with a lift of brows. “Be SENSIBLE. You were just in a wreck, for crissakes. Now is not the time to play action heroine.”

She rolls her eyes, gesturing with her head at the aggressively Modern, low-slung bungalow Logan’s thus far avoided visiting. It’s brand-spanking-new, with a magazine-ad lawn, painted that hideous shade of lavender only gorgeous women like Ronnie pull off. A carport extends from the left side, covering a walkway—they have to skirt a baby-blue Studebaker to reach the door.

Logan groans as the doorbell chimes ‘Greensleeves’; realizes a drawn gun won’t play well in the suburbs, and hides his at the small of his back. Veronica catches his arm before he can smooth his lapel, and murmurs, “Let’s not tell…”

But WHAT he shouldn’t tell remains a mystery, since Perry opens the door mid-sentence. He’s dressed for maximum smarm in a crimson velvet smoking jacket over slacks; his gaze skips Logan, then oozes across his wife like she’s the evening’s entertainment. “Veronica! What a pleasant
surprise!"

“Unfortunately, not so much.” Logan manages an apologetic squint-grimace, although he’s dead serious, and Veronica shoots him a minatory look. “I’m afraid this isn’t a social call. We just had an accident, and…”

His wife cuts in, adopting the Sally-the-nitwit voice that always leaves him fighting a smile. “Logan let me drive. I just can’t get the HANG of stick shifts!”

He favors her with a sardonic look, since her stick shift skills are world-class, then blandly turns to Perry. “Anyway, my car is near the eighth hole of the Havana Golf Club, nose down in a sand trap. Mind if we use your phone to call our driver?”

“Oh, of course.” Perry somehow manages to make two words sound insinuating. “Please, come in. Mi casa es su casa, as the locals say.”

Stepping back, he allows entry, and Logan tugs Veronica safely past. “Thanks, Per, you’re a peach.”

He can’t control a wince as the living room hoves into view—this décor would hurt his brain even if he HADN’T whacked his head on the steering wheel. It’s like standing inside an Easter basket. The walls are molded-mint green, the carpet that same awful lavender; Perry’s couch is emerald velvet and the accent chairs are peach. A spiky ball chandelier hangs stage center, matching the clock on the grey-fieldstone fireplace…it’s after midnight. Logan wonders if Trina’s started her second set yet, and frets.

“You can use the one in the kitchen—I’ll entertain the lovely Veronica.” Perry waves a hand, presumably kitchen-ward, but still can’t manage to meet Logan’s eye. “Through there, last room on your left. Step quietly as you pass the study, Joan’s laid up with a headache.”

Logan raises his brows at Ronnie, who nods and makes a shooing motion. He sighs, decides not much can happen in the two minutes it’ll take to call home, and follows directions.

Faintly, as he walks down the hall, come the Hi-Fi opening strains of everybody’s favorite Moonglow medley. Smirking, Logan pictures Perry on the receiving end of Veronica-brand discouragement; decides he could care less if she maims the guy.

As he passes the study door, which stands slightly ajar, he notes Perry’s sent him to the most far-flung corner of the house. Pauses, as a slurred voice calls his name. A brief internal debate ensues…Joan’s barely tolerable on a good day. But he can hear still-civil murmuring in the living room, from this distance, so he pushes the door wide and enters.

Perry’s unfortunate spouse isn’t asleep, as advertised. Instead, she’s sprawled across a red-velvet couch in a zebra-striped caftan, squinting at him from behind a cigarette. Her hair’s in a simple bun, for once, and she’s gone overboard with Mother’s Little Helpers.

Logan scouts for a phone. This room’s worse than the den, grass-green-painted panels Christmas-clashing with red plaid. One blessedly white wall houses a fireplace, and the décor runs to Rockwell prints and plywood guitars. A poker table gathers dust in the corner—thank GOD he’s never been invited here for a game.

“Well, well, well—Missster Echolls. What on Earth are YOU doing at chez moi at this time of night?” Joan sounds sleepy, but not displeased, as she levers herself upright. “If I’d known, I would have made canapes. I have olives in the kitchen, I could get…toothpicks…”
“No need.” Logan takes an involuntary step back. “I had a minor accident, just dropped in to make a quick call. I meant to use the phone in the kitchen--Per says you’re not…well.”

“Au contraire, I feel FABULOUS.” She stretches, luxuriant, waggling the cigarette. Gestures at an accent table, on which a handset sits. “Use this one, it’s MUCH closer. I INSIST.”

Sighing, Logan crosses the room and quickly dials. Tina answers, chirping, “Echolls residence,” and relief washes over him--finally, a fucking break.

“Thank God you’re home,” he says, massaging both temples with one hand. “Listen, we’re in a bit of a bind…had an eentsy mishap with the Bel Air. Can Clarence come fetch us at,” he squints towards the ceiling, trying to remember, “Nineteen Carretera de Vento, ASAP?”

“Let me find him.” Tina sets the receiver down, and he can hear the shout and response. “No problem, he’s on his way. Do you need a tow truck? Are both of you all right?”

Sparing a brief glance for Joan, Logan hedges, “Fit as a fiddle. But if my friend Bud beats us there, make him a drink and ask him to wait in the library.”

“Bud Sanders?” Tina asks. “You want me to arrange a house call with Veronica’s doctor?”

“Do you like pimento cheese?” Joan interrupts, managing to stagger upright. She prevents a slow keel-over by grabbing the sofa’s back. “Because I have LOTS. And, I’m pretty sure, ham. I could wrap the cheese AROUND the ham…no, that’s not right…”

Logan wonders if he should worry that every woman he knows wants to feed him. “Really, I’m fine,” he assures her. Adds, into the receiver, “Sorry, didn’t catch that.”

“I SAID, if you can’t speak freely, use the word ‘absolutely’. If either of you is hurt say ‘certainly’. If you’re in danger say ‘ridiculous’, and if this doctor thing’s a precaution, say ‘divine’.”

“Clandestine!” Logan murmurs. “You’re absolutely right, Tina, we SHOULD postpone. Although I’m sure whatever Remy’s prepared is DIVINE. It’s a crying shame it has to go in the garbage.”

Tina snorts. “Just for that, I’m telling him you think his salmon lasagna’s to die for.”

Logan grimaces, and Joan says, “Oh, I know! You ALWAYS enjoy a drink!” Staggering over to the built-in, she half-kneels, half-falls, then starts opening cabinets. “There’s a bottle of Schnapps in here somewhere.”

“I’ll call Bud now,” Tina tells him. “And Clarence should show within ten minutes.”

“You’re a peach,” Logan says to empty air. Replaces the receiver just as Joan sets the curtain on fire, holding her cigarette clear of some board games.

She produces a bottle; waves it triumphantly as Logan grabs a ukulele-shaped throw pillow and smothers the flames. “Whoopsie!” she says, noticing the smoke. Hides a bout of giggles behind her palm.

“Here you go,” she adds, offering the bottle, as he uses the singed pillow to wipe his brow. “Not the quality you’re used to, I’m sure, since you’re so awfully rich and famous.” She subsides back onto the couch, gazing up at him with bleary wistfulness. “It must be nice to be a celebrity. Do people notice your every move?”

Logan sets the Schnapps on a bookshelf, safely distant from the still-smoking curtain, because AS
IF he’s drinking apricot ANYTHING. “Oh, absolutely,” he agrees. “It’s pure heaven. International disrepute due to the sins of my father was my childhood DREAM.”

She giggles again, softer this time, sleepier. “You’re the MOST,” she says. “I wish you and Veronica would come back to the club. It gets so BORING playing canasta all day with diplomats’ wives.”

He shakes his head, watching, as she drifts off, neck tilted sideways. Steals her cigarette and puts it out, before she burns the whole house down. At least Joan’s too star-struck and over-medicated to try seduction, he reflects; she’s just looking for escape from the tedium of marriage to Perry.

The voices from the next room grow louder, angrier-- Joan frowns through her doze, like she’s trying not to hear. Logan groans, flexing his fingers to limber up, and heads down the hall to intervene.

His pace quickens as the sound of a slap echoes—too late, the little woman’s gotten fighty. Rushing in, he finds Perry blotting what smells like a Sidecar off his fly, while the last stanza of ‘Moonglow’ skips on the stereo.

Ronnie’s in a heaving-bosomed, admittedly fetching rage; a palm-shaped red print on Perry’s cheek is slowly leaching back to white. His blond, plasticene Ken Doll hair is miraculously disarrayed, and he hides his privates with a cocktail napkin when he spots Logan.

The flexing fingers tighten automatically into a fist. One corner of Logan’s mouth crooks, anticipatory, as adrenaline floods through him. “Golly, angel,” he drawls, triangulating Perry’s escape routes, shifting unobtrusively to block them. “I was only gone five minutes. MUST you be so irresistible?”

He stalks towards Perry, who visibly flinches. Veronica moves to intercept, placing both palms flat on his chest. “No,” she says, clinging to his lapels when he tries to shift her. Digs in her heels, pushing him backwards, winces as the twisted ankle twinges. “Outside, NOW, our ride is coming. Perry, I can’t thank you enough for all your LOVELY hospitality.”

Abandoning resistance, Logan sweeps her up in his arms; ignores her protests as he shoulders out the door. Passing the carport, he sets her on the yard’s retaining wall, kneels before her to check the ankle—thankfully, it’s not swollen. Runs his palms across her abdomen, watching for a wince that doesn’t come, then asks, “Any headache? Dizziness? Blurred vision or further nausea? Did that moron somehow manage to hurt you?”

“How eyes. Their house is an abomination,” she quips, and he smiles.

“True.” He strokes back her hair, kisses her forehead. “Wait here for Clarence, I won’t be a minute.” Rising, he heads back to beat Perry’s face in, only to be halted by her grip on his slacks.

“Don’t even think about it,” she says, managing to stand. He does a dancing side-step, trying to get around her, but she blocks like she can read his mind. “Yes, the guy was a cad, but I HANDLED it, Logan! And as much as I’d love to watch you make him sorry, it would do more harm than good.”

“It would do ME LOTS of good,” Logan counters, folding his arms. “My frustration level is astronomically high, and crushing his cheekbone would REALLY take the pressure off.” She narrows her eyes and he flings up his hands in exasperation. “You SLAPPED him, Veronica! And poured a drink down his pants. If you think I’m letting whatever he did go, you’re as delusional as Joan.”
“Oh look,” she says, as the Rolls appears behind them, “Our ride. Help me in, because I’m wobbly-- I’ll explain why THIS revenge is best served cold.”

Clarence climbs out, sizes up Logan’s temper issue with a glance, and wordlessly shakes his head. Logan closes his eyes, tilts his face skyward, and counts backwards from a hundred by fives.

“Fine,” he says at last, when the urge to crush Perry subsides. Helps Veronica into the backseat, and climbs carefully up after. “Lay it out for me. I’m all ears.”

Veronica foregoes the obvious joke, since the moment’s fraught. Says, instead, as Clarence starts the engine, “He threatened to gin up charges, turn us in to the Subcommittee. It’s not enough to give that jerk a black eye, Logan. We need to ruin him so thoroughly he flees in disgrace, and we need to do it SOON.”

“Did he resort to blackmail before or after his pass?” Logan demands, lounging back with utterly fake languor. “The devil’s in the details.”

“After the pass, before I lost my temper.” Veronica surprises him by coming clean. “He hoped to encourage cooperation, apparently he thinks all women are morons.”

“Wow,” Logan says, red haze of rage returning. “I have to admit, I’m shocked he had the BALLS, what with his wife and your husband in the next room. If we’re going to frame him, the fake scandal had better be repugnant. I want that asshole RUINED.” He sits back. “And just so you know, I still plan to break his nose once you’re safe.”

“I look forward to watching. Meantime, Clarence can do some leg work.” Veronica meets her bodyguard’s gaze in the rearview, and he nods. “Let’s find out what Perry’s hiding, and we’ll tailor our revenge accordingly. After, that is, Trina’s out of harm’s way. Her danger’s most immediate.”

Logan nods, glad he had the perspicacity to contact Weevil while Veronica was packing Mac’s suitcase. He consented to the airport run, since Dick badly needed an ultimatum, and Trina’s a glutton for encores. But someone will kick her offstage, eventually. He can only pray the diversions he set in train keep her from venturing outside to her death.

No matter how much she infuriates him, she’s the only sibling he’s got.

He wonders, again, who might have run them off the road and why. Rossi’s certainly no fan; but the list of his and Veronica’s enemies is novel-length. Everyone from the Minister of Agriculture to the crew of the Siempre Mañana would be happy to dance at his wake—and he’s the CHARMING one in this marriage.

Whoever the attempted murderer turns out to be, though…they’ll be laid up in traction, flinching each time the door opens, before he’s done making them pay.

Clarence pulls into their drive--Logan’s out of the car, lifting Veronica, before she even has a chance to sit up. She smacks his shoulder, protests she can walk, but he’s tired of cutting her slack. “You weigh ninety-seven pounds,” he informs her, running up the steps and pressing the bell with his elbow. “Besides, you hogged all the assailant-maiming fun at Perry’s. So please, Veronica…let me have one thing my way.”

The door opens as his wife caves, looping her arms around his neck; Tina frowns and pushes it wide so he can brush past. He carries Ronnie to the living room, sets her tenderly on the couch, and scowls because the doctor’s clearly absent.

A quirked eyebrow at Tina elicits details. “Bud got held up—the GM plant manager’s son fell out
of a tree. He’ll come as soon as he sets the arm, but Logan, I should warn you…”

Warning proves unnecessary, though, because Weevil erupts from the library, clearly peeved and dressed in black. “What the hell, Echolls? You said you’d be here an hour ago! We’re gonna miss the…” He pauses, taking in the scene, and tries an unconvincing smile. “Oh, hey, V. Didn’t see you sitting there. Your husband and I are late for the….thing. You know?”

“How which thing would that be, exactly?” Veronica crosses her arms. Weevil shoots Logan a seemingly-expressionless glance which he correctly interprets as pleading.

“Never you mind,” Logan says authoritatively, with no real hope of success. “YOUR job is to sit quietly on the couch, and let the staff pamper you until Bud shows. The…thing will go off without a hitch, I do solemnly swear.”

“You know, I thought ‘If you’re happy with Duncan, I’m happy, too,’ was your least believable lie ever,” Veronica snaps, unimpressed. “But it just got downgraded. You really expect me to let you and Tweedledumber run amok, after someone just ran us off the road?”

“Someone ran you off the ROAD?” Weevil demands, ignoring the insult, since it’s hardly V’s best effort. “When?”

“Right around the time I was scheduled to meet you,” Logan says. “The Bel Air’s totaled. We left it spewing smoke on golf club grounds and hiked to a phone, during which Veronica twisted her ankle. I’ve called for a doctor, but he seems to prefer other clients, and meanwhile she won’t sit still.”

“I won’t sit still because I’m FINE,” Veronica protests. “You’re just insanely overprotective. And whatever illogical scheme you two are running is absolutely out of the question unless I get to come along.”

“My protectiveness is wholly appropriate, given the circumstances.” Logan meets her eyes squarely. “Don’t you think?”

She stares back for a moment, infuriated, then sighs and reluctantly nods. “Look, I just want to make sure you’re safe,” he continues, tracing a faint bruise along her collarbone with the lightest of touches. “You got thrown around like a rag doll when the car landed nose-down. I promise to bite my tongue after the doctor clears you, no matter how much ass you kick.”

“Yeah, it’s only one night,” Weevil adds, ill-advisedly, and Veronica rounds on him so sharply he takes a step back.

“YOU are in my black books already, Navarro.” She bites off her words, lifting a brow. “Want to make it worse? Because if Logan comes back from this…whatever with ONE hair out of place, you’ll WISH all you did was let him get shot.”

“Doctor’s climbing the front steps,” Tina interjects, from her position by the window. “In case you feel like wrapping up this scene from Peyton Place.”

“That’s my cue to exit, stage left.” Logan kisses Veronica’s forehead gently, while she looks at him with patent skepticism. “I’ll call later to hear Bud’s full report. And I promise my hair will stay intact.”

“It had BETTER,” Veronica mutters as he makes tracks for the back porch, eager to avoid further conversation. “I expect to be told every DETAIL!”
Weevil sighs relief as they make good their escape, hurrying through the garden fence towards the parked Rolls. Logan’s fishing for keys and checking his watch when Clarence appears out of nowhere and catches his arm.

“Fuck!” he says, cocking a reflexive fist, then relaxes as he sees who’s grabbed him. “Man, I almost decked you. What’s the problem? I’ve got somewhere I need to be.”

“Cabaret Parisien?” Clarence asks, wryly. “What a coincidence. I was just on my way there myself —Veronica’s orders.”

Logan runs a frustrated hand through his hair, because of COURSE she’d leave herself defenseless to prevent him taking a risk. “No, you need to stay here,” he says, resigning himself to a night on the couch. “What if those goons who ran us off the road come BACK?”

“My thoughts exactly,” Clarence says. “One of us should stay and stand guard, and I’m pretty sure she’d prefer you.”

Shaking his head, Logan says, “But you’re the professional. You’re TRAINED to fend off organized assaults—whereas Weevs and I don’t have the best track record rescuing damsels, lately. Besides, let’s face it…my sister will follow a golden goose anywhere. Even WE should be able to get her to the FOCSA without bloodshed.”

“Hey!” Weevil protests, but Clarence just considers and nods.

“You’ll want to trick Trina, not appeal to her better angels,” he advises. “And post a guard, once she’s hidden. Your mistake with Bubbles lay in presenting her with unpalatable choices—you should have convinced her there WAS no choice.”

Logan grins, because devious minds think alike. “Already handled. Never let it be said I don’t learn from my mistakes.”

Very faintly, Clarence smiles. Tips his hat, including Logan and Weevil in the gesture, and heads inside.

“Did you send the flowers, like I asked?” Logan asks, unlocking the car and climbing behind the wheel. “And champagne, and chocolates? It took my sister an hour-plus to get off-stage, the night we saw her show…but I’m not interested in taking chances.”

“No sweat.” Weevil seats himself, gestures at the road ahead. “Veuve Clicquot, Black Magic bon-bons, and a shitload of red roses…you owe me 300 more pesos. I attached your dumb ‘I’ll be the Gene Kelly to your Debbie Reynolds’ note, too; but if THAT punches your sister’s clock, she’s more of a lost cause than I thought.”

Logan rolls his eyes, but can’t fault the character analysis. “I’d worry about you posing as driver, since Trina’s met you.” He squints through the darkness, reading street signs. “But she makes it a rule not to remember people who aren’t rich and famous.”

“Plus you know how it is.” Weevil rolls his window down, balances his elbow on the sill. “Rumor has it all us brown people look the same.”

Logan’s heard similar statements from childhood associates, so he doesn’t comment. Just navigates the inconsistently-lit streets, feels grateful Neptune’s in his rearview and his wife never wants to move back. Even at a tender age, he was pretty intolerable, pre-Veronica. He has the feeling, if he’d stayed, he would have gotten worse instead of better.
They roll up to the Cabaret Parisien curb within minutes--idle by white-and-terracotta stairs that lead to the public entrance. Black lampposts with globe-shaped bulbs light the path to a ruffled black awning, on which the club’s name is printed. Dense foliage and square-cut hedges border the stairs on both sides, and a neon Eiffel Tower protrudes from the leaves.

“I’ll wait with the engine running,” Logan tells his friend, who’s checking a gun for bullets and shoving it into his waistband. “Get her out here as quickly as possible. And keep talking, so she never has a chance to say no.”

“There may come a day when I can’t coax girls into back seats,” Weevil says, with a faint smirk. “But this ain’t it, by a long shot.”

“Hey, watch it, that’s my SISTER you’re insulting!” Logan calls after him as he strides away. Then admits, as he sinks lower in the seat, “Not that she wouldn’t, if promised…basically anything.”

Extracting a flask from his pocket, he takes a morose swallow. Entertains himself as he waits with visions of a public mob hit--Trina gunned down on stage while butchering “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair”. Or returning home to find his wife and staff missing, the carpets soaked in blood. His mind shies from contemplating what happened to Oscar, and possibly Bubbles. If he wallows too much in guilt he won’t be functional.

Off-key warbling puts a period to his brooding; he straightens as Trina emerges, clad in hot pink chiffon beneath a raincoat. She’s doing what he surmises to be a Reynolds impression (affected tap-dancing towards the Rolls, while caterwauling about the sun in her heart). Weevil trails behind, hands in pockets, nobly containing a wince.

She pauses at the top of the steps, peering towards the car…her always-ready-for-the-stage voice carries clearly. “Where’s my Gene?” she demands, rounding on Weevil. He holds up a hand to deny responsibility. “Doesn’t he want to duet beneath the street lights? Isn’t this supposed to be ROMANTIC?”

“He’s waiting in the car,” Weevil says, gesturing, and Logan heaves a sigh, because like THAT’s going to fly. “Right down there.”

Crossing her arms, Trina adopts a skeptical pose. “Haven’t I seen you somewhere before? Are you one of those men who wait by the stage door? Because I’m sure you’re just the sweetest. But I have to be honest…the PRINCE part of Prince Charming is extremely important to me…”

Logan SEES the moment when Weevil’s massive eye roll morphs into ‘Fuck it’ exasperation; he reaches for the door handle to intervene. Then Weevil yanks a burlap sack out of his coat, tugs it over Trina’s head, and shoulders her writhing, shrieking form. Logan’s eyes go wide as she lands a kick to his friend’s nuts, losing a shoe; but even hunched in pain, Weevil gets her downstairs and into the backseat before she manages to struggle free.

“What the fuck are you DOING?” Logan demands, as Weevil throws the passenger door open and climbs in. Points emphatically towards the road. “Who said you were allowed to manhandle her?”

“She wouldn’t come!” Weevil protests as Logan takes off with a screech. “Omelet, break a few eggs, you know the saying.”

“Help! Police!” Trina screams from the backseat, audible even through the fortunately-closed privacy screen. “I’ve been kidnapped! And I’m worth a lot, so I’m in extra peril! I’m a very famous person!”
Weevil winces, curling in on himself in agony, and Logan swerves briefly into traffic as he attempts to get the screen open. “Oh God, OH GOD!” Trina shrieks, volume escalating still further. “I’ll jump, do you hear me, kidnapper? I’ll jump right out of this car! And then where will you be?”

Logan jerks the wheel to correct, wrestling with the latch; but the back door swings open, and he realizes she’s not kidding. A brief glance at the side mirror confirms she’s braced in the frame, working up nerve. So he releases a deep breath on a string of muttered curses, and drives his brand-new Rolls off-road, behind a screening copse of trees.

Yanking up the parking brake, he flings his door open and storms out, planting his body in front of hers to better gesticulate. “Jesus Christ, Treens, it’s me! What the hell were you THINKING, trying to jump? I’m taking you someplace safe, so you don’t get shot in the head!”

“You KIDNAPPED me?” she yells back, gripping her raincoat with both hands. “Are you INSANE? This is ridiculous, you take me back right now! I need to go table-to-table and schmooze my fans!”

“The only place you’re going is my safe house,” he says truculently, crossing his arms. “You’re an idiot, granted, but I’m not letting gangsters kill you.”

“Well then I’ll WALK!” she shouts, managing a dramatic flounce-turn. Begins a slow, uneven retreat, her one heel slipping on gravel.

“Oh, crissakes. There’s no pumpkin coach pulled by mice careening to your rescue.” She stomps faster in response to this; Weevil finally emerges, hunched over, just as inspiration strikes. “You know, the apartment where I plan to stash you is the height of luxury,” Logan coos. “Room service, Treens. Satin sheets.”

She pauses mid-dramatic exit, cocking her head to one side. “Caviar?”

“Beluga,” Logan confirms, smirking as Weevil groans. “UNLIMITED. Along with any other luxuries you require.”

“I’ll need a projector,” Trina announces, whirling to face him. “So I can keep up with the industry, watching all the latest films. And I have VERY specific wardrobe and beauty needs. My skin’s chafed something awful by polyester peignoirs.”

“Fine,” Logan says, world-weary. “Just, please…get in the car.”

Trina limps back, on her dignity--rests a palm on the still-open rear door’s frame. “I hope you have liquor in here,” she tells him, before climbing in. “After all this excitement, I could use a drink.”

Logan sighs and shuts it, gets back behind the wheel. Doesn’t bother to open the screen, because there’s no further need to converse.

“You, I don’t envy,” Weevil says, sprawling backwards into his seat, legs carefully spread. “She’ll make it her mission to be your worst nightmare, after this. And probably bankrupt you, in the process.”

“MY nightmare?” Logan demands, very sarcastically, as he puts the car in gear. Gingerly begins his transit through trees and towards the road. “YOU’RE the one who abducted her from a public area, giving her grounds to press charges. Ergo, YOU’RE the unfortunate soul who gets to stand guard.”
CHAPTER TWELVE: VERONICA: BARRIO DE LA VICTORIA, 1956: EL JARDÍN DE LAS DELICIAS TERRENALES

Bed rest is what Dr. Sanders recommended—for a day, maybe two. But he didn’t understand the impossibility of his medical advice, so she plans to ignore him AND keep the information to herself. If Logan gets wind of the doctor’s instructions, he’ll post a guard at her bedroom door à la Weevil and Trina.

Veronica grins. Weevil having to stand watch over a demanding Trina MIGHT be worse punishment than getting an earful from his abuela. Too bad for him, Veronica’s already told his grandmother about his activities at the Louse Ring. She mentally shrugs. Maybe being banned from the racetrack AND his babysitting duties will finally stop Weevil from encouraging Logan’s shenanigans.

Stretching across the empty mattress, she wiggles her ankle, frowns at the slight twinge, and takes inventory of her injuries. As predicted, she’s sore, but otherwise fine. She needs to get dressed, eat breakfast, and find Clarence. With the Bel Air out of commission, they’re going to have to use his car to tail Perry.

Perry.

Last night he’d moved himself to the top of her things-to-do list. Not because of the proposition—which, albeit disgusting, was completely forgettable—but because he’d threatened Logan and THAT was unacceptable. Someone was going to pay all right, but it wouldn’t be her.

“Breakfast,” Logan sings, pushing open the door. Champ bounds into the room ahead of him, scrabbles onto the mattress, and wiggles beneath the bedding to hide, hoping if they don’t see her, they won’t make her get down. An indulgent smile teases its way across Logan’s mouth and he shakes his head at her subterfuge. “She’s definitely your dog.”

“Please,” Veronica says, waving away the comparison. “If she was truly my dog, she would’ve come in here disguised as a pillow and waited until I was distracted by the food before climbing on the bed.” She scratches Champ’s rump, making the dog’s tail thump. Tossing off the blankets, Champ rolls on her back for belly rubs. “See? Horrible at undercover work- must be YOUR dog.”

“Certainly her adoration for you mimics my own,” he says, setting the tray on the night stand. It is laden with food. Waffles slathered with butter, a pitcher of warm syrup at its side, eggs, bacon, fresh fruit, and a piping hot cup of cafe con leche.

Veronica’s stomach rumbles in anticipation. She reaches for the pillow Champ dislodged and Logan beats her to it, plumping it between his hands before placing it behind her. When she’s comfortably leaning against the headboard, Logan puts the tray over her lap. “Not joining me?” she
asks, picking up a slice of bacon and biting the end.

Logan’s dressed for the day in another of his tailored linen suits—this one a silver-gray—with a one-tip-fold pocket square in a bold tangerine. He’s dispensed with a tie and left the top two buttons of his shirt open. Veronica swallows, admires the view.

“I already ate.” He leans over, kisses her forehead. “And you need your rest.”

The word pings her radar. Smelling a rat, she wrinkles her nose and glares at the food - breakfast served with a side of ulterior motives. “You called Dr. Sanders,” she says, glum, poking at the now-offensive waffle. Logan should’ve brought her Eggs Benedict… Arnold.

“I did, but ONLY because you seemed less than forthcoming when I asked what he said.” He moves to the highboy, dons his watch and slips his wallet in the inside pocket of his jacket.

“I told you the important parts.” His smirk says otherwise, and she huffs frustration, ticks off the list. “Ankle not sprained or broken, no concussion, and the—”

“Weren’t you going to knit? Blankets, hats”—he flutters his hands in the air—“mittens? Today would be a good day for that.”

Veronica blinks, incredulous. “You want me to... KNIT?”

“Crochet?” He leans against the dresser. “Those little socks aren’t going to make themselves.”

She growls frustration. “I am NOT staying in bed all day. I’ve got things to do.” One eyebrow quirks while he waits for her to explain what ‘things’ could be more important than following doctor’s orders. Veronica chews the side of her mouth. Sharing her ACTUAL plans would only make him more adamant that she stay put. “I need to talk to the bartender at Sloppy Joe’s, show him some photos.”

Logan shakes his head. “It can wait- Big Dick will still be dead tomorrow.”

“And, since we both know it wasn’t Trina,” she continues, ignoring him. “we should probably find out who stole Rossi’s missing money BEFORE Lansky starts looking for your sister, too.”

“Already on it, my love.” He frowns. “And you’re supposed to STAY AWAY from Rossi; rescuing Bubbles and saving my clueless sister are MY cases. Or do you need me to remind you why we’re even having this conversation? Dangerous mobster tried to KILL you last night.”

Veronica rolls her eyes. “They weren’t trying to kill us, and we don’t even KNOW who they were. Maybe they were trying to scare YOU off, and YOU should be the one under house arrest, not me.”

Logan takes a deep breath, puffs out his cheeks, and slowly exhales. “It’s ONE day, Veronica, not even twenty-four hours. Tomorrow you can go back to making bad guys pay while giving me ulcers.”

“You are not going after Rossi without me. I’ve been…” Veronica clamps her mouth shut.

“Yes? You’ve been?” He prompts, and she shakes her head. There’s no way he’s getting her to confess to tailing Rossi that easily. Another smirk. “That’s what I thought.”

“He shut down one of his brothels, Logan, and all the women vanished.” It’s more than she wants to admit to knowing, but he needs to understand. He can rescue Bubbles, but finding those missing
women and nailing Rossi to the wall for his crime are just not things she’s willing to drop. “I think Rossi sold them to his best-paying clients.”

Logan’s mouth flattens, his expression grim. Whether it’s because of the disappearing prostitutes or her persistence, Veronica can’t be sure. It’s probably both. “This is a discussion for a different day; one when you’re not supposed to be taking it easy.”

“Forcing me to relax is only going to stress me out,” she warns.

“Guess that’s a no on the knitting then?” He moves to her side, leans over to kiss her goodbye, and she averts her face. His resulting sigh whispers across her skin, ruffling the fine hairs on her neck. “And just so you don’t get any ideas,” he says, straightening. “I’ve told the entire staff Dr. Sanders wants you on complete bed rest.”

She scowls at him. “You’re LUCKY I don’t have my knitting needles right now.”

“Should I have Tina bring them up?” he asks with a disingenuous smile that makes Veronica grit her teeth. “Maybe some yarn, too?”

“Bite me,” she spits. Chuckling at her outrage, he circles the bed, blows her a kiss from the door. Veronica plucks the pillow from behind her head and chucks it at him. “And they’re called booties!” she yells at his retreating back.

Lifting the breakfast tray, she starts to move it away, changes her mind. There’s no need to let her favorites go to waste. She reaches for a slice of bacon, frowns at the empty plate. No telltale lumps in the bed means Champ is gone. Stealthy little thief – maybe she IS my dog.

In between bites of waffle Veronica sips her coffee, contemplates her options. Even though Sloppy Joe’s was an obfuscation designed to keep Logan from knowing her real plans, she SHOULD go and talk to Delgado. A quick search of her photo albums will net her a picture of Madison and she can show Fabio all the suspects – see if anyone else besides Big Dick was in the bar that night.

Announcing her presence with a sharp knock, Tina peers around the edge of the partially-closed door. “Don’t shoot the messenger,” she says, entering the room. She’s carrying Veronica’s knitting and a silver hand bell. “Logan said you wanted this”—Tina puts the basket on the mattress—“And this is in case you need anything else.”

Veronica fakes a smile. “Has he left yet?” Wariness pinches the corners of Tina’s eyes into tight lines, and she gives a hesitant nod. “Rats,” Veronica says. “I was hoping he’d…” She taps her cheek, pretends to think. “Would you go to the store for me?”

Relief washes over the other woman and her face relaxes into a smile. “Sure, what do you need?”

“Yarn and patterns and… I’ll make a list.” Veronica withdraws a pad and pencil from her nightstand drawer. Imitating Remy’s annoying style of including minutiae, she writes down colors—sea green, periwinkle, daffodil, and honey—specifies merino wool and the harder-to-find Bear Brand, underlines: not Fleischer, continues to add items until the sheet’s filled. “Here you go,” she says, handing over the paper.

Tina’s smile fades as she reads. It will take her HOURS to locate the precise yarn weights and colors, needle gauges, and pattern books Veronica’s requested, but she doesn’t complain, merely asks, “Anything else while I’m out?”

Veronica shakes her head. Not wanting to appear TOO agreeable, she says, “I’m just sorry I missed Logan. Making HIM shop for my supplies would be just punishment for this enforced bedrest.”
She smirks. “But I have ALL AFTERNOON to think of other ways to make him pay.”

Tina snickers. “You could always hide his blue and orange smoking jacket; he’s awfully fond of it.”

“The Sartorial Nightmare?” At her nod, Veronica claps her hands together. “Perfect!” She tilts her head. “Can you have Corny bring me the garden shears?”

“Ouch,” Tina says, wincing at the extreme change of plan. “He left with Logan, but, if you’re sure…” She pauses for a beat, giving Veronica a chance to change her mind. When no retraction is forthcoming, she continues, “I’ll bring them up as soon as I get back from shopping.”

She knows Tina will conveniently forget the clippers—too loyal to Logan—but it won’t matter, since Veronica doesn’t really intend on ruining her husband’s favorite robe; she just needs Tina to believe she’s mad enough to do it. If her compliance with Logan’s house-bound edict was without anger and a plot for vengeance, Tina would grow suspicious.

Briefly, Veronica wonders what Logan’s up to with Corny, and then dismisses the thought—it’s one less person she must distract and divert. “Oh, and can you tell Remy I want Beef Bourguignon for dinner?” The dish with its seventeen different ingredients, coupled with Remy’s need for perfection, will ensure he spends most of the day preparing it. But for good measure, Veronica adds, “And one of his famous chocolate soufflés with homemade whipped cream for dessert?”

Darn, now she DOES want that. No matter, she needs to be back by dinnertime anyway, and at least she’ll have something to enjoy while she shoots daggers across the table at Logan.

“Maybe I should buy earplugs while I’m out,” Tina murmurs as she starts from the room. “So I don’t have to listen to Remy’s lectures on baking the perfect soufflé.”

“Get me a set too,” Veronica calls. “To muffle the sound of Logan weeping over his ruined jacket.”

Wearing a worried frown, Tina departs, probably concocting her own scheme to save the paisley eyesore from destruction. Veronica shrugs—better that she plot than suspect—and shoves the last piece of waffle in her mouth, drains her coffee, and gets out of bed. She dresses in black cigarette pants with tiny white polka dots, a matching black, cap-sleeve shirt, and, in deference to her ankle, a pair of ballet flats. Taking her photo album with her, she leaves the closet and sits in the chair by the window.

By the time she finds a picture of Madison, Tina’s little red Fiat is puttering down the street away from the house. Remy leaves shortly thereafter and Veronica laughs, wonders which one of those seventeen ingredients he was missing. She checks her purse, takes a minute to appreciate her blissfully quiet—VERY empty—house, and heads for the garage.

Clarence’s glacier-blue Ford Crestline Victoria gleams in the driveway. All the windows are open, including the rear windshield, and she can smell the Bickmore leather conditioner he uses on the seats. Veronica opens the driver’s side door, crouches near the kickplate, and pulls the wires from beneath the steering column. Using her pocketknife, she strips the battery and ignition wires, twists them together.

“A key would be easier,” Clarence says, dryly, startling her, and she bumps her head on the wheel as she rocks backward. He’s leaning through the open passenger window; his stoic and stern expression belied by the amused pride in his eyes.
“Yes, but I didn’t think you’d just hand them over.” Veronica touches the starter wire to the bundle, completing the circuit, and presses the switch under the dash; the engine roars to life. Pleased with the result, she returns her knife to her bag, and slides behind the wheel.

“I sincerely regret teaching you how to do that.” Clarence yanks open his door, climbs onto the bench seat next to her.

“At least I didn’t use your other trick- shove a screwdriver into the ignition and ruin the cylinder.”

A smile flits across his lips and disappears. “You were always destined to be a hoodlum.”

“Aw, Clarence, don’t sell yourself short.” She finishes adjusting the mirrors and puts the car in reverse. “You definitely deserve some of the credit for my craftiness.”

He tips his head in acknowledgment, and she grins. Growing up, Clarence was a permanent fixture at the Kane’s. And while the boys were fixated on their Superman comics, and Lilly was busy getting advice on fashion and makeup from Seventeen magazine, Veronica was receiving a different education from Clarence. ‘Boy’ stuff like changing a tire, parallel parking, and how to read a map. Along with the dangerous things - breaking and entering, cleaning a handgun, and how to hotwire almost any vehicle. Veronica may have learned the finer points of investigation from Keith, but Clarence taught her the shadier skills she needed to be effective.

“You know your husband is going to kill me when he finds out I was an accomplice to your escape,” Clarence says as she pulls from the driveway.

Veronica taps the brakes, waves at the sidewalk. “So stay home then and plead ignorance.”

He levels her with the Blank Stare Of Exasperation, and she hits the gas, turning the car in the direction of Perry’s house. The slime is probably at work, turning the car in the direction of Perry’s house. The slime is probably at work, but she wants to confirm he’s not out ‘sick’ nursing his wounded ego. Or worse, hiding any Logan-inflicted injuries. They’d agreed to wait before extracting revenge, but Veronica can’t be sure her husband listened- he was very keen on the idea of bashing in Perry’s face.

“How did you give your watchdogs the slip?” Clarence asks, settling in his seat for her tale of chicanery.

Veronica tells him about her spurious requests for an elaborate dinner and enough yarn to make sweaters for all the Fidelistas in the hills. “My husband underestimates me.”

Clarence shakes his head. “Not true. Logan knows EXACTLY what you’re capable of- adores you for it. He was probably just counting on your better angels to keep you tucked in bed.” Then he mutters, “Poor bastard.”

His words spike a teensy-weensy pang of guilt in Veronica, and she smothers the emotion. Her scheming is necessary. She needs to neutralize Perry before he makes good on his threat against Logan. “He’ll never know.”

Neither agreeing with nor denying her assertion, Clarence only hmms and asks, “What happens if they get home before you do?”

“Don’t you worry about it; I have a contingency plan.” Champ wasn’t the only one who could hide things in the yard. Pajamas, slippers, and the new Pearl Buck novel were under a lounge chair in the far corner of the garden. If anyone discovered her absence, Veronica could make a costume change and feign falling asleep under the cluster of Corojo palm trees while reading.
She makes the turn on Rancho Boyeros, heading toward the airport, and as they approach Carretera de Vento, Clarence hazards a guess as to their destination. “The Aberdeen’s?”

Veronica nods. “See, I’m not being defiant without cause. Need I remind you, that jerk threatened Logan?”

“Virtuous though your reasons may be, I’m not sure Logan would agree with the logic. He’d rather be labeled a communist and be banned from America for life than see anything happen to YOU.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me; Bud’s just being his usual overly-cautious self,” she says, dismissive, pulling to the curb across the street.

The lavender house is even uglier in the daylight. It’s the clash of styles. Sleek modern lines meant to look clean with a minimal amount of fuss are ruined by ornate additions—rococo cornices, engraved panel doors, large Victorian sconces—then hidden under a garish paint color and dwarfed by overdone landscaping.

“Car’s gone,” Clarence says, pointing out the absence of the blue Studebaker. “Are you going in?”

“No, Joan’s probably home. If I need to search, I’ll wait until Monday when she plays bridge at the club.” Even with an ego the size of Perry’s, it’s unlikely he’d keep evidence of any misdeeds where Joan could find it, but Veronica is sure it exists. There is no way he’s as advertised. Last night was further proof that something rotten lurks beneath his squeaky-clean exterior. “We’re going to tail him on his lunch break.”

She makes a U-turn, heads back toward the Malecon and the American Embassy. The oblong rectangle clad in tan travertine tile and rows of windows stands apart from the city. Its elevated, walled courtyards and wide sidewalks make it an island unto itself. They also make it easy to spot Perry’s car in the lot. Veronica finds an unobtrusive place to park with good sightlines and settles in to wait.

“Learn anything new about Rossi’s missing money?” Veronica asks, flipping open the glove box for the binoculars Clarence always keeps on hand.

“He’s scrambling to hide the loss from the big bosses, but he’s tight on cash. If he doesn’t cough up their take soon, they’re going to start believing the rumors.”

Which won’t bode well for Trina. They need to come up with a plan to exfiltrate her out of Havana sooner rather than later. A private plane might be their best bet. No need to fan the flames by booking her passage on a commercial airline. At least she’s being quasi-agreeable, unlike the other damsel in distress. “Any word on Bubbles?”

“Nothing since she slipped through Logan’s grasp at El Encanto.”

Knowing her husband, he’s probably waived their fee AND offered the sisters enough money to start a new life somewhere, which makes Bubbles refusal to leave interesting. What kind of hold does Rossi have on her? Whatever it is, they have to find a way to loosen his grip, or she’s going to end up dead. If she isn’t already.

Veronica lowers the binoculars. “While you were tailing him around, did you figure out where Rossi’s been keeping her?”

“At his house.”

She sits up straighter. “Really?” In the month Veronica’s been following Rossi, she’s never seen a
woman at his beachside residence. His view of women as commodities to be bought and sold—sex as business transaction—seemed to preclude his dalliances from an invitation into his personal sanctum. “Do you think she’s been there this entire time?”

Clarence shakes his head. “I’m thinking recent development - maybe a week or two. If it was any longer, we would’ve seen her sooner.”

With a nod, she resumes her surveillance of the embassy’s exits.

At precisely noon, Perry walks from the building. A jaunty bounce to his stride, he takes the wide marble stairs two at a time and crosses to his car. Behind the wheel, he checks his appearance in the rearview, and smooths a hand over his perfectly-coiffed blond head.

Veronica hands the field glasses to Clarence and puts the car in drive. There’s an art to following someone. If you leave right when they do, it gives them a chance to notice, but delay too long, and you risk losing them. She waits for him to exit the lot onto Calzada and lets him get a block ahead before pulling into traffic.

“You think he’s cheating on his wife?”

“Most definitely, but an affair isn’t enough.” Veronica keeps two cars in between them as they merge onto the Malecon. “Getting him in trouble with Joan won’t help us; I’m going to need more.” And she’ll find it, even if she has to manufacture something; Perry messed with the wrong person.

The blue Studebaker skirts past the site of the proposed Havana tunnel—Batista has grand plans to build one under the bay—and continues along the ring road. It’s easy to keep her distance as he navigates through the city, but gets progressively harder as he heads out of town on the Via Blanca. She eases up on the gas.

“Any idea where he’s going?” Clarence asks, keeping his eyes trained on the road ahead.

“A work thing maybe?” She hopes she’s wrong, but this seems far for a simple afternoon tryst. She’s tailed Perry before, but his nights and weekends are devoted exclusively to Joan and schmoozing at the casinos. Lunch is her last avenue.

Traffic thins. They’re about thirty miles outside of Havana, and Veronica considers turning around. Starts to wonder if Perry made the tail and is taking them on a wild goose chase, when he turns off the road heading for Camilo Cienfuegos. Locals still call it Hershey, even though Milton Hershey has been dead for years. The Sugar King, Julio Lobo, now owns the cane fields and mill, and Veronica guesses the lingering love for the chocolate magnate must irk him.

Stalks of cane rise up from the land on both sides of the road. A beat-up Ford truck is the only other vehicle sharing the lane, and Veronica pulls in behind it, using it as cover. They bump over the tracks for the electric railway. She can see the mill and refinery ahead.

“If he’s going into the plant, we’ll need to follow the rest of the way on foot,” Clarence says, turning in his seat to look at her. “Will your ankle hold up?”

“My ankle is—” She doesn’t need to finish her thought as Perry’s destination becomes clear- a small outbuilding far from the factory. Veronica pulls to the left of the lumbering truck, slows her speed to match, and continues down the road past where Perry has stopped. When she’s sure they won’t be seen, she applies the brakes, and throws the car into park. “Find a place to turn around and pick me up over there,” she directs Clarence, pointing to a spot at the edge of the field.
Without waiting for a reply, she grabs her bag, and approaches the cabin from an oblique angle. Perry’s car is parked at a slant in front of the door. There are two windows on the north wall—Veronica creeps toward the closer one. Heavy drapes block her view. She inches along the exterior to the next window; its curtains have been pushed open, allowing a sliver of light into the shack.

A familiar chemical smell suffuses the air and a peek inside confirms the makeshift darkroom. Photo trays, developing tanks, and an enlarger are scattered on a workbench. It and a small desk with a typewriter and spirit duplicator are the only pieces of furniture in the room. A woman leans on the edge of the worn pedestal desk. Her dark hair is piled on her head in a messy bun and her carbon-ink stained fingers hold an unlit cigarette to her mouth.

Perry hasn’t ventured far from the door. His hand’s still on the knob, body turned away from the woman. While she appears relaxed and at ease, it’s clear from his rigid posture that Perry’s uncomfortable. “This is the last time,” he says, tossing an envelope on the table. It bumps a bottle of fixer.

“We’ll see.” She blows a strand of hair from her forehead, lights her Camel and inhales. “How IS Joan?” she asks, exhaling a stream of smoke and flicking ash on the floor.

Veronica crouches low, takes out her camera, and photographs the scene, timing the click of the shutter with the *whir clack* of the ditto machine. The camera is loud in the stillness of the field around her, but neither of the occupants seem to hear or notice - caught up in their own drama. There is something about the woman that tugs at Veronica’s memory. She takes a close-up of her face, and returns the camera to her bag.

“Just stay away from her, Haydee,” Perry seethes.

Haydee smiles. “If you want that, then you know what to do.”

Threats and blackmail. Did they have an affair and Haydee’s keeping her silence in exchange for… money? Information? Veronica wants to stay and see how this plays out, but she needs to get to the car before Perry leaves, and he looks as if he’s done with this conversation.

Veronica sprints back to where Clarence is waiting, slides into the passenger seat. “So we’re not the only ones who hate Perry,” she says, describing the scene she witnessed. “A relationship gone wrong?”

“Possibly. After I take you home, I’ll come here and—”

Shaking her head, Veronica interrupts, “We’re not done; I want to see if he returns to the embassy.” She holds up a finger. “And before you argue with me, I gave you a chance to stay behind, feign ignorance, but YOU chose to come.” He grimaces and the muscle beneath his eye ticks. Veronica grins. “If you take me back, I’m just going to leave again.”

A double slam—first the building door and then the car—signals Perry’s on the move. Conceding to Veronica’s demands, Clarence puts the car in gear, and gives the Studebaker a head start before following.

Perry sticks to the same route in reverse, but instead of stopping at the embassy, he continues past it to a residential part of Vedado and a white stucco house. It is built inside a glen, making the second story level with the street. He parks in the stone courtyard that serves as a driveway.

Removing her camera from the bag between her feet, Veronica snaps a photo of the house, making sure to capture the address.
In sync with Perry’s arrival at the front door, it opens. A smiling brunette steps across the threshold to greet him. She’s wearing a fern green negligee trimmed in lace. It’s the wrong color for her complexion, turning her skin sallow, but she’s still attractive in that upper-crust-American-housewife way. Perry snakes his arm around her waist, pulling her closer for a kiss, and the sheer nightie swirls about her legs.

Veronica makes a gagging sound, snaps a photo. “Time to peek through some windows,” she says, exiting the car as Perry and the brunette disappear inside.

She wades through the bijao and duranta plants, ducks beneath a bright-red flamboyan tree, and then skirts past a row of potted Cuban petticoat palms lining the patio. She edges along the house. It’s floorplan is upside down. Living room, dining, kitchen are all on the second story, and they’ve used the natural dip of the land to give the first floor bedrooms privacy.

Veronica follows the decline toward the back of the property. A secluded garden terrace surrounds the rear of the house, containing a small pond and cascading waterfall. No street noise penetrates the oasis. It’s… tranquil. She wonders after the identity of Perry’s mistress. Clearly, she can afford the best in isolated love nests.

The first two bedrooms are unoccupied. Spartan furnishings and plain white walls, they feel sterile. Veronica bumps into another terra cotta pot and freezes. No one comes flying outside and there’s no shouting about police and trespassing, but she waits a minute before proceeding.

By the time she reaches the final bedroom window, Perry and the brunette are already in flagrante. Veronica doesn’t know why she’s surprised by the quickness—foreplay is probably a foreign concept to Perry—but she is. Wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am.

Wrinkling her nose in disgust at the sight of Perry’s pale, white ass bobbing up and down, Veronica raises her camera and takes her photos. For good measure, she focuses in on the woman’s face, depresses the shutter release again and stows the camera.

She retreats through the jungle landscape and returns to Clarence. “Well, that was enough to make a girl lose her appetite.”

“But, let me guess, you didn’t?”

“Of course not, I’m made of stronger stuff.” He graces her with another one of his rare smiles. At least she thinks it’s a smile, but with Clarence it’s hard to tell. “Chicken and rice? Chicharrones? Picadillo?” she suggests.

“Are you going to pick one, or did you want all three?”

Veronica shrugs. “You choose; I’m easy.” She also isn’t very hungry, but lunch is a harmless enough request, and one that will keep him from calling an end to their day. To add to the deception, Veronica gives him the wide-eyed innocent stare she usually reserves for Logan. Clarence frowns, just as skeptical as her husband, but he complies, pulling away from the curb.

They settle on cajitas—small cardboard boxes—filled with roasted pork, congri, and yuca con mojo. Clarence also gets them the chicharrones and two cups of sweet guarapo frio. While he’s getting the food, Veronica moves back to the driver’s seat.

Clarence’s obvious look of dismay at the change makes her mouth twitch in amusement. “Since we’re out and about anyway, let’s go check in on Rossi; we can have some entertainment with our meal.”
“I thought we’d take this home,” he says, holding up the bag of food.

“Nope, things to do, bad guys to put away.”

“Can’t you just leave Rossi for me to deal with?”

“What IS it with you and my husband? I am NOT going to step aside and let you two bring down MY bad guy.” She heads east on Zapata toward Paseo Carlos and the Barrio de la Victoria. One of Havana’s notorious red-light districts, it’s not as upscale as the area around Casa Marina, but it’s a step above Barrio Colon, which caters to… less well-heeled clientele.

The six-by-eight block neighborhood of white stucco houses is filled mostly with bordellos. Foreign tourists looking to buy sex on the island don’t need to search very hard. Women—jineteras—lounge in the doorways and lean out open second-story windows calling to the cars and pedestrians who pass by, offering their services. Veronica ignores the come-ons and open propositioning.

Rossi’s office is on Xifré in the largest brothel. Also white, this one has an elaborate balustrade across the top floor balcony and takes up the entire corner of the block. She cruises past, makes a left on Maloja and parks. The range for the bug isn’t far so she has little choice but to remain close. Sinking low in the seat, she tunes the radio to the right frequency.

An angry voice blares through the car’s interior. “I broke legs and did mob dirty work to get YOU here, and you don’t appreciate it—you’re trying to cut me out!”

Veronica arches an inquisitive eyebrow at Clarence, who answers, “Trocani.” He passes Veronica her lunch, and then opens his own. The smell of the marinade—bitter oranges, garlic, onions, and oregano—makes her mouth water. So much for not being hungry. Taking a large bite of the tender pork, she listens to Rossi’s reply.

“I would never do that to you; you’re like a father to me.” Even with the tinny quality of the bug, Veronica can hear the genuine distress in Rossi’s voice. “You’ll get your share.”

Trocani remains unmoved by the assurances. “You think Lansky would treat The Brain like this?”

The Brain was Arnold Rothstein—Meyer Lansky’s mentor until he was gunned down for refusing to pay a debt owed from a fixed poker game. Veronica appreciates the irony. Rumor had it, Rothstein was the same man responsible for fixing the 1919 World Series and the resulting Black Sox Scandal. *Karma, it’s a bitch.*

“I just need a little more time,” Rossi pleads.

“To do what? Gamble away the rest of MY money? You already screwed up our chance to buy into the Riviera.”

“That wasn’t my fault, and the deal’s not dead yet. The investor brought—”

Carmelo cuts him off, intent on listing all the ways Rossi’s failing in his obligations. “And what about the missing money from Luzmaria’s place? You find it yet?”

Her fork pauses mid-air, and her gaze slides to Clarence, who gives a slight nod of agreement. Now that they know which bordello the money disappeared from, he can cultivate a relationship with one of the working girls. Not unlike the source they already have at Casa Marina. Veronica’s glad their silent communication skills are flawless and their mentor/mentee relationship isn’t as fraught as the one they’re listening to.
“I’m working on it.” Rossi growls, frustration. “Montoya didn’t have it on him—claimed he didn’t take it—but I know it was him.”

“Are you sure, Angelo? How do I know YOU didn’t make the money disappear, eh? To fund your latest trip to the track? What is it these Cubans say? Sin padrino no se bautice? Maybe they ain’t so dumb after all and you’d do well to remember the advice.”

Veronica finishes her rice and beans, thinks about the adage. Literally it’s ‘without a godfather there is no baptism,’ but the deeper meaning, justice takes a backseat to personal alliances, could be viewed as a warning: *I come first, Angelo and don’t forget it.*

“You’ll get your twenty grand, Carm - even if I have to take it out of my own pocket.” His very shallow, almost-empty pocket. Veronica can’t see Rossi keeping this promise unless he does something drastic. Her hands tighten on the steering wheel. With the pressure he’s under, will another entire house of women go missing- sold to the highest bidder?

“I think we should take a harder look at that redheaded bimbo.”

There’s a moment of silence and then Rossi asks, “Trina?” A bleat of static fills the car as he makes a dismissive snort. “She’s too stupid.”

“What? So now all criminals are smart? Look at those two idiots running cons in Lansky’s casinos.” Veronica smirks. He has to be talking about Kendall and Cormac. And they ARE idiots if they think they’ll get away with pulling a fast one on Lansky. Echoing her thought, Trocani says, “He’s gonna put an end to their games AND them, if they don’t quit it soon.”

It’s a solution. She’d asked Logan about their end game. If Kendall and Cormac were Big Dick’s killers, how would they get justice since the police weren’t interested? And the answer, while not pretty, was Lansky. Veronica would only need to send him proof of their scams—anonymously, of course—and he’d do the rest. But first, she has to be sure. Finding the murder weapon in their hotel room would be nice.

“What about your blonde? After all, Montoya was HER bodyguard- maybe she knows where the money’s at. I think I’m gonna pay her AND the redhead a little visit.”

“Leave them alone, Carm; I said—”

“Are YOU trying to give ME orders now? Who d’ya think you’re talkin’ to? I’m not some schmuck you can boss around- this is MY operation, capiche? And I’ll do what I think’s best.”

A slamming door makes Veronica scramble for her camera. She lifts it to her face in time to catch Trocani leaving. Short and stocky with a round, fleshy nose that’s clearly been broken more than once. Deep-set eyes and dark hair going to bald, he’s a funhouse mirror version of a man - features distorted and out of proportion. Lips moving, he talks to himself as he stalks down the street, his beefy hands curled into fists at his sides.

She snaps a few more frames, lowers the Leica and turns to Clarence. “He’s a loose canon; he might even be more dangerous than Rossi, although that’s hard to imagine.” She fakes a yawn.

“You want to go home?” His expression is a combination of relief and skepticism.

Veronica yawns again. “I may have overdone it, and I don’t want Logan calling Bud again, or I’ll be on bedrest for the next six months.”
There’s no argument from the passenger seat, and Veronica makes a U-turn, takes Infanta toward the Malecon. When they reach the house, Tina’s car is still missing from the drive, and Veronica grins. But her elation is short-lived when she sees Isabetta’s Volkswagen bug. She squeezes the Ford in between the agave-green Beetle and Remy’s Renault. If Izzy is here, does that mean Corny is back? And, did he bring Logan with him?

Shit.

With her ‘cover’ already in place, today was the perfect time to revisit the Inglaterra. An hour in her darkroom to lull Clarence into a false sense of security—make him believe she’s staying put—and then she could be on the road in another stolen car. But not if Logan is here.

Shit.

Clarence clears his throat—his version of a deep belly laugh—and says, “I hope your contingency plan’s as clever as you think it is.”

“You better hope, because it’s not just my head on the chopping block.” Turning off the car, she listens to the engine tick as it cools, stares at the garage. There’s a narrow strip of land between it and the fence, which circles around to the yard. Champ has claimed this space as her own personal dog run, but it’s just wide enough for Veronica to sneak her way into the garden.

Clarence follows her gaze and sighs. “Stay here; I’ll go run interference - provide a distraction if necessary.”

Facing an angry Logan is not the worst thing Clarence has ever done in service of protecting her. His loyalty runs deep. It’s not only that she thwarted the Kanes’ plan to frame him for Lilly’s murder by finding his alibi for Keith; but because she believed in his innocence, taking his side against the powerful family. Since then, he’s been her staunchest defender, apart from Logan.

Clarence transplanted his entire life to Cuba to watch over her. Has stood in front of bullets with her name on them, and even took it upon himself to remove one of the biggest threats to her life—and Logan’s—Aaron Echolls. Surely, squaring off with her irate husband rates as a piece of a cake in comparison. But she still feels a twinge of guilt. “I can handle Logan on my own.”

“I have no doubt,”—he smirks—“but let’s see if he’s even here before you go off all half-cocked.”

They get out of the car, quietly shutting the doors, and Veronica takes a peek in the garage. Only the Rolls sits in the far left bay. There’s no sign of the Speedster. “Car’s gone.”

With a decisive nod, Clarence disappears through the wrought-iron gate in the garden wall. He’s back in under five. “Remy’s cursing in the kitchen and Isabetta’s drawing your roses, you can avoid them both by using the front door.”

“Excellent!” She starts in that direction, pauses. “And you’ll go find Trocani?”

He levels a pointed look at Remy’s silver car. “Should I take all the distributor caps before I go?”

Veronica shrugs. “You do what you feel you need to do, but I’m going inside to develop pictures and rest.”

“It probably wouldn’t stop you anyway,” he mutters, pulling his keys from a front pocket. The Ford’s engine starts as she rounds the corner, cuts across the lawn, and lets herself inside. Whatever Remy’s vexation, it has clearly been remedied because there’s a distinct lack of complaining from the kitchen. The house has a still, vacant quality that soothes.
Bag in hand, she passes through the arched doorway beneath the stairs. Originally intended as a closet, Logan hired someone to push back the far wall—stealing space from the study—to create the small-but-functional darkroom with both wet and dry areas. It is her refuge. No one ventures inside and no one bothers her when she’s working. In hindsight, she should’ve had the contractor build a hidden escape hatch and underground tunnel so she could roam about Havana sans bodyguard, or overprotective husband.

Veronica hangs a do-not-disturb sign—nicked years ago from Logan’s luxury hotel suite—on the knob and locks the door. When she has gathered the things she’ll need, she flicks off the light, plunging the room into total darkness, gives her eyes a second to adjust. Sticking the film cannister in the changing bag, she uses a church key to pop it open. Nimble fingers feed the strip onto a reel, and then fit it inside the developing tank. She turns on the nearby lamp.

Opening the small freezer, she removes the ice cube trays to make cold water baths for the chemicals. While they reach the right temperature, she adds distilled water to the tank to pre-soak the film. Not a necessary step, but one that’s part of her process.

There’s an art to it—matching chemicals to film, correct temps, precise timing—that Veronica loves. She drains the water from the tank and adds the developer, spins the black bakelite tank to agitate.

An art.

Frowning, she stares across the room at the enlarger. Perry’s run-of-the-mill affair with a bored housewife holds little interest. It’s common and expected. Cheating on your spouse is de rigueur in Havana. The practice as banal as Perry himself. Which makes the photos almost useless. There’s nothing she can do with them save show them to Joan, who is probably well aware of her husband’s infidelities. Joan wears her disillusion like a sackcloth of bitterness and grief. Unhappiness alleviated only with a few extra pills and copious amounts of liquor.

Veronica doesn’t want to add photographic proof to her misery, but she will if she has to. If the choice is sparing Joan’s feelings or saving Logan… She shakes her head. Sorry, Joan.

Switching out the Rodinal for stop bath, she glances at the clock. There’s no telling when Logan will be home; it depends on how long his latest madcap adventure takes. Veronica just hopes it doesn’t involve Weevil… or guns. But whatever it is, she assumes it’s important or else he wouldn’t have trusted the staff to act as his proxy jailers. He’d be planted in a chair at her bedside making sure she lifted nothing heavier than a book. And a thin one at that.

Time ticks and she pours out the stop bath, adds fixer. It will be ten minutes for this, twenty for rinsing, and then another forty-five for drying before she can make a print. Fortunately, she only has to turn one of them into a photo right now - the closeup of the woman Perry called Haydee.

She rinses the film and clips it on a line above the sink. Squinting at the negative, she finds the frame she wants. Even in the tiny, ghostly image, the woman looks familiar. Veronica doesn’t know why, but she knows who to ask.

Photographs and a ditto machine. What was Haydee doing way out there in her reclusive shed? And, more important, how was Perry involved? Maybe Veronica made the wrong call, leaving to continue the tail. Maybe she should’ve stayed behind. Talked to Haydee and tried to steal a peek inside the envelope Perry delivered.

Too late now. Veronica would just have to pay another visit to the sugar cane field and hope the mysterious Haydee would share whatever secrets she held.
In anticipation of the film being dry, she starts to prep, cutting photo paper into test strips, setting up her trays, and taking the negative carrier out of the enlarger. This is the part she likes best—experimenting with the exposure time, playing with the light and shadow—and she loses herself in the process until she has a perfect 8x10.

Veronica leaves the darkroom for the study and her lockpick set. She hides the zippered, brown leather case in the bottom of her purse and removes the photos intended for Delgado. A revisit to Sloppy Joe’s will have to wait—she’s got more important things to do. She hesitates over repacking her camera, decides to leave it behind.

There’s still no sign of Logan. Leaving her purse on the bottom step, she hustles upstairs, dons her robe to hide her street clothes, and returns. She kicks off her shoes and wanders into the kitchen. Heavenly smells emanate from the dutch oven, simmering gently on the stove, and Remy is cleaning the counters. Not good.

At her entrance, Remy looks up and asks, “Aren’t you supposed to be in bed?”

“I woke up hungry.” She pads over to the fridge, pulls out the first thing she finds—a hunk of cheddar cheese—and nibbles on it. “I don’t suppose you can make…” Sighing, she shakes her head. “Never mind, it would probably be too difficult for you.”

He pouts at her. “Nothing is too ‘difficult’ for me.”

“Of course not, sorry.” A conciliatory smile and arm pat accompanies her apology. “Think you can make those cheesy scalloped potatoes to go with the stew?”

A gulp. “Gratin Dauphinois?”

Veronica nods. The dish will add another hour and a half to his dinner prep. “Thanks, Rem - you’re the best,” she says, without giving him time to refuse, and wanders from the room to the sound of him grumbling under his breath.

Discarding the robe on a dining room chair, she shoves her feet back into her shoes, grabs her bag, and heads for the yard. Isabella has her easel set up in the center of the lawn and she’s drawing the entire garden—including a lounging Champ—in charcoal. Without stopping, she shades in a palm leaf, and greets Veronica. “I’m waiting for Dougie; we had plans, but… apparently, he forgot.”

Izzy’s patience with her absent-minded boyfriend is boundless. Veronica glances at the satchel sitting beneath the easel. “While you wait, would you mind lending me your car?” There’s a good chance no one has told her about Veronica’s imprisonment. “Remy needs fresh cream for one of his dishes and Tina isn’t here.”

“Está bien.” She sets the charcoal on the tray, reaches for the canvas bag. They both notice the dark smudges on her hands at the same time - Izzy wipes them on her pants, while Veronica thinks of Haydee’s stained fingers.

“I met this woman today.” Veronica says, accepting the key ring from Izzy. “I thought I recognized her- maybe from one of your father’s parties?” Not that you could apply such a conventional word as ‘party’ to one of Carlos’ bohemian gatherings. It was more like a loose assortment of eclectic people congregating to drink and discuss whatever taboo subjects were on hand - the rebels, Castro, politics, Batista.

Izzy’s eyes widen when she sees the picture, and Veronica feels the thrill of an impending lead. Touching the edge of the 8x10, Izzy says, “That’s Haydee Casañas. She’s a writer, and”—Izabella
glances around the yard, drops her voice—“a communist.”

What is this? Perry, the sworn communist-hater, fraternizing with the enemy? “Are you sure?”

Nodding, Izzy tears the photo to shreds. “You can’t be seen with this - you could get into trouble.” Crossing the patio toward the house, her eyes dart around the yard for a safe place to dispose of the pieces. She settles on Logan’s barbecue grill, lifts the lid and shoves the evidence under the ashes. “She writes an underground newsletter—Soy Fidelista!—supporting Castro and the rebels.”

“Can you get me a copy?” Before she can refuse, Veronica adds, “It’s important.”

“I’ll try.”

Veronica thanks her, says she’ll be back with the car as soon as possible, and leaves through the gate. Perry’s relationship with Haydee is now ten times more interesting. Again, Veronica regrets her decision to leave the shack in favor of catching him with the housewife. Perry in cahoots with a communist sympathizer, an anti-Basista rebel? It might be enough to turn the tables on him, bring HIM before the House Subcommittee.

Compared to the boat of the Bel Air, Isabetta’s VW is a zippy little car. Veronica weaves in and out of traffic with ease, decides to ask Logan for one of her own. When he’s done being pissed at her, that is.

The white, neoclassical Inglaterra is in the center of the city, right on the Prado, which makes it perfect for people-watching from the cafe, but difficult for parking. She uses the valet, then strolls into the lobby like one of the guests. Half the trick of accessing places you’re not allowed is acting like you belong, and she’s very good at it. No one pays her any attention.

Kendall and Cormac are on the third floor. Most of the rooms are interior ones with ‘windows’ facing the hotel’s inside courtyard, but Kendall has sprung for an exterior suite fronting the Prado. Veronica has her tools in hand before she reaches the door. She gives it a slight knock to check for occupants. No answer and no sound from within.

Her gaze drops to the lock. It is a simple pin-and-tumbler mechanism. Inserting the tension wrench into the bottom of the keyhole, she applies slight pressure, slides the pick in the top. She scrubs the pick back and forth, raking the lock until the gap between the key and driver pins is even with the shear line, adds a little torque to the wrench, and the lock clicks open.

A quick check over her shoulder confirms she’s still alone in the hall. Cracking open the door, she slips into the room. It’s basic—bed, nightstands, dresser—with a tile floor and lots of chintz. The floral pattern covers the queen duvet, the small settee, and the heavy drapes to dizzying effect. Thankfully, the curtains have been drawn and the louvered doors to the balcony stand open, allowing natural light and a gentle breeze.

The room is tidy, but not as thoroughly clean as Kendall’s former suite at The Capri. Not as luxurious either. It feels lived in— the lingering scent of Aqua Velva, a suit coat tossed on the arm of the couch, heels kicked off at the side of the bed, papers on the dresser. Veronica starts with them. Small bits and bobs cleaned out of pockets and purses. Nothing of much interest, except a thin black portfolio with RC in gold-embossed letters at the corner. She flips open the cover.

A stack of bonds rests in the pocket. Their face amount—ten thousand dollars—is the highest denomination issued by the United States, and they all read: promises to pay to the bearer. There are only twenty of them. Two hundred thousand dollars. Not even close to the amount Big Dick absconded with. Granted, there is the money for Madison and the undetermined contents of the
safe deposit box, but it’s a disappointing sum.

Veronica debates whether or not to take them. Even though they rightfully belong to the people Big Dick conned, she decides to leave them for now, closing the leather cover.

Searching the drawers and the space under the bed doesn’t take long. She checks the backside of paintings on the walls, runs her fingers along the underside of the sofa, and pokes around the bathroom, saving the closet for last. It is stuffed with dresses and two nice suits. Handbags and hatboxes sit on the top shelf. There’s no time for her to go through each one so she ignores them in favor of the luggage on the floor.

A tag identifies the beat-up American Tourister as Cormac’s. The crocodile trunk shoved upright in the corner matches several pieces, including the train case stuffed with makeup Veronica found in the bathroom. She pegs these as belonging to Kendall. That leaves a large brown leather Louis Vuitton. The gold RC monogram beneath the handle confirms it’s Big Dick’s suitcase. Veronica wiggles it free from between the surrounding luggage, lays it on the floor. The lock is better constructed than the one on the hotel room door, and it takes her a few minutes to find the correct angle and pressure to pop it open.

The contents are mundane. Dress shirts and pajamas sit nestled in the top tray. Veronica undoes the straps, searches through the clothes, and then lifts the tray to set it aside. Slacks, cardigans, and smoking jackets take up the bottom level. She carefully goes through each item, stares at the now empty case. No additional bonds, no…

Veronica frowns at the lining. Two thin ledges are nailed into opposite ends of the case to hold the top tray. They protrude from the sides by an inch. At least the one on the right side does. The one on the left is flush with the lining. She knocks on the right interior—a sharp thunk of knuckles on wood—does the same on the left and the sound is muffled.

Smoothing the lining with her hand she feels the shape of a small book underneath. She grips the ledge between thumb and index finger, pulls. It comes off with ease, taking the tacked lining with it. A black leather journal and a thick stack of folded bearer bonds are taped to the side.

Veronica’s ears perk up at the rumble of the elevator, waits for it to continue upward, but instead there’s a ding as it stops on the floor. She grabs the book and bonds and hides them in the bottom of her purse, strains to hear the sound of footsteps in the hall to determine direction. There are no voices. Veronica hopes this means whoever’s approaching is alone.

Using the side of her hand, Veronica bangs the ledge back into place, tosses in the clothes and the wood tray, and then snaps the brass clasps closed. The clack of heels on tile draws closer. Kendall, not Cormac.

Veronica shoves the case into the closet, debates which would be worse—being found in the room or getting caught sneaking out—decides to stay and bluff. As the door swings open and Kendall crosses the threshold, Veronica rushes toward her. “Oh, thank goodness you’re okay! I was so worried when I found your room empty and the door unlocked!”

Taking a step back, eyes narrowing with suspicion, Kendall’s gaze darts to the door, and then focuses on Veronica. “I locked that door myself.”

Wide-eyed innocent expression firmly in place, Veronica lifts one shoulder in a delicate shrug. “It was open when I got here.”

Kendall folds her arms over her chest. “You’re that woman from Montmartre, the one with the
dashing husband. How did you know where I was staying?”

“You must have told me?” Veronica waves away the subject, unconcerned. “I wanted to see how you were after that dreadful encounter, make sure that boor didn’t follow you home.”

“So you waited two days to check on my safety? How THOUGHTFUL.” Her eyes move past Veronica to search the room. A slight, almost imperceptible nod indicates she finds everything in its place. Veronica contains her sigh of relief, thankful she left the bearer bonds untouched on the dresser. But Kendall isn’t finished with her. “Why are you really here?”

“As I already said, I only wanted to check on you...and now that I see you’re fine, I’ll just be go—”

“Open your purse,” Kendall demands.

“Excuse me?” Veronica blinks in mock outrage. “You want me to do what?”

“Let me see inside your bag.” Kendall closes the door, trapping them in the room.

She doesn’t have much choice but to comply. Thankful for the hidden gas mask compartment, Veronica unzips the top, pulls it open to display the innocuous contents - wallet, compact, hairbrush, car keys. “Satisfied?”

“No.” Crossing to the bed, she grabs the phone from the nightstand, jabs the O button with her thumb. “I found a thief in my room,” she tells the person on the other end of the line. “Can you send security?” She listens for a moment and then smacks the receiver back in its cradle. “You’re lucky I didn’t call the police.”

Veronica’s sure ‘luck’ has nothing to do with it. Involving the authorities in her business is probably the last thing Kendall wants. Maybe she’s counting on the hotel to call them while she uses the time to make a fast getaway? Challenging, Veronica juts her chin at the phone. “Well maybe you should, because I didn’t STEAL anything, and I’m not a THIEF.”

Without knocking, two security guards tumble through the door. The larger one blinks in disbelief when he sees her and Kendall squaring off in the center of the room, looks around. “Where’d the intruder go?”

“It’s HER!” Kendall points an accusing finger. “She broke into my room, and I caught her going through my things.”

“That’s a lie.” Turning to the guard, Veronica says, “This is all a big misunderstanding.”

With a sympathetic nod, he takes her arm. “I’m sure it is, señora, but you still must come with us.”

She lets them lead her from the room. On their way down the hall, she pleads her case, repeating the same story she gave Kendall. “So you see there’s no reason for you to detain me; I’ll just be on my way, and I’ll send her a nice note with my sincere apologies.”

“I’m sorry, but the hotel has rules we must follow.”

The security office is off the horseshoe-shaped lobby, behind the front desk. They escort her inside, leaving the door open, and gesture toward a chair. Veronica sits, contemplates the best way out of this situation. “I have money,” she says, opening her purse to extract her wallet.

“Are you trying to bribe us, senora?” The younger, smaller guard asks, frowning disapproval.
“No, no, of course not.” She drops the wallet back in her bag. “I’m just trying to prove I have no reason to steal.”

“You are American, yes?” When she nods, they revert to Spanish. Veronica keeps a blank expression on her face, pretends to not understand them as they debate what to do with her. The fat guard sits in the banker’s chair behind the desk; the wood creaks under his weight. “And your name?”

“Veronica Echolls.”

Another flurry of Spanish. The older guard suggests a bribe might not be such a bad idea for all ‘their troubles’ and the younger one insists they call the police. Veronica needs to avoid that.

Burying her face in her hands, she lets her shoulders shake, pretends to cry. “If you would just call my husband, I’m sure he can clear this up.” Logan’s going to be livid, but better he collect her from a security office at a fancy hotel than from behind bars. She manufactures a few tears, looks across the desk at the potentially-bribable guard. “Please, sir?”

His eyes roll heavenward and he sighs. “Very well.” Thanking him profusely, she recites the number and he dials the phone, leans back in his chair, props his feet on the desk. “May I speak with Señor Echolls?”

While he presumably waits for Logan to pick up, he shoos the other guard from the office, tells him to get a glass of water and tissues for their ‘guest.’ The young one hesitates, but then does as his boss asks, leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

A voice bleeds through the phone’s receiver and the guard drops his feet to the floor. “Yes, this is Salvador Gutiérrez at Hotel Inglaterra security. We have a woman here who claims to be your wife, she was found in the room of a guest, causing a...disturbance. Can you come and collect her?”
As soon as he rounds the corner, Logan abandons his smugly-assured pose to lean against the wall, gazing at the ceiling. Nothing’s more fun than cat-and-mousing with a prickly Veronica. But when they genuinely disagree, and he’s the one who wins, her expression of betrayal cuts him to the heart. The sheer unfairness of being a woman in a man’s world enragess her…and their marriage is supposed to be her shield. Plus, her strength is the aspect of her he loves most. The last thing he wants to do is confine her.

Bud was crystal-clear in his instructions, though (‘Never mind the ankle--Veronica’s badly bruised from the seatbelt. Until we’re sure there’s no internal damage, she’d best stick to novels and tea.’) And Logan trusts the gruff, no-bullshit British expat more than he does the rest of the medical community combined.

Part of this has to do with the way Bud never pulls punches. Part’s because once, when Logan needed a knife wound on his back stitched, Bud noticed cigar burns along his shoulder blade. Brushing off suave attempts at deflection, he rolled up his own sleeve, showed Logan similar burns, and said, “Why do you think I spend my life helping people?” And then they never spoke of it again.

Pushing off the wall to head downstairs, Logan checks his cuffs and rolls his neck, glad he chose to dispense with a tie. It might not pass muster with Emily Post; but the sense of being slowly strangled is strong enough today already.

Clearly Veronica resents being curtailed, despite her seeming complaisance--he needs to warn his reinforcements to stay on guard. Outwitting his wife takes all his mental focus…and today his brain’s at capacity. Locating probably-dead Bubbles and Rossi’s missing money before both
permanently disappear loom large, and frankly, he’s stumped. But if he gives in and begs V for help, he’ll have to meet her demands in trade.

He’s up early, for him—you can’t sleep late and catch Veronica napping—but the kitchen’s not the beehive of activity he expects. It’s only occupants are Corny (who’s gazing off into space, sipping coffee, three half-eaten danishes spread forgotten before him). And, futzing with the buffet like it’s a Rembrandt exhibit, Remy.

Logan crosses to the counter where his coffee pot steams, pours himself a cup. Leans a hip on the ledge and observes, thoughtful. His revenge on Remy coalesces in a bit of crystalline insight, and he smirks.

“Quite a spread,” he observes, just loud enough to get Remy’s attention--not moving from his lounge, because that would make it look like he cared. “Are we feeding the ENTIRE French Foreign Legion this morning, or just the artillery corps?”

“Your wife.” Remy straightens the doily beneath a chafing dish and minutely adjusts the lid. “She’s got the appetite of a few good men, and she likes culinary variety.”

Logan suppresses a sigh. Remy’s only five years older than him, which felt like a bigger deal when Logan was pimple-faced and fifteen, forced into daily comportment lessons…and Remy was the suave, handsome twenty-year-old teaching them. But despite the fact that Logan’s handsome and suave himself, now, not to mention Remy’s employer? Something—maybe their formerly-reversed roles, maybe that Gallic sense of superiority—keeps the chef from feeling subservient.

“Well, if she’s not satisfied by THAT spread, I AM having her checked for tapeworms,” Logan says, eyes on the prize. “And since you’ve obviously finished your chefly duties, and have moved on to table-arranging, I’m putting you on a different detail for the afternoon.”

Remy turns, brushing dark hair out of his eyes, a dead ringer for those Italian statues girls swoon over (though in fact he’s a pretentious ne’er-do-well). “This IS my detail,” he says, obstinance creeping in. “I’m the chef, I cook. Voila, my work is done!”

He gestures at the meal defiantly, and Logan narrows his eyes. “Done properly, I hope. No shrimp stock this time, to send me to the hospital?”

“That was ONE mistake!” Remy yells. Then, with a glance at Corny (who’s watching them like television) adds, more softly, “The container was mislabeled at the fishmonger’s. Always do I read the ingredients--and since then, I make my own!”

“It would be SUCH a shame if Veronica ever found out you poisoned her husband,” Logan says silkily, tracing the rim of his coffee cup with one finger. “Tragic, really, since she loves your desserts so much. But all this unpleasantness could be easily avoided if you just did me one TINY favor. It’s even a job for which you’re uniquely well-suited.”

“I already told Tina I would model for that artist.” Remy waves a dismissive hand. “Your blackmail is so passe.”

“A sacrifice for which I’m sure his female students will be thankful,” Logan says, drily. “And while we’re on the subject of women filled with inexplicable admiration for you…Trina needs a substitute bodyguard today. My afternoon activities require a shadier associate than anyone I employ, hard as that may be to believe.”

An expression of horror dawns slowly on Remy’s face. “She’s here?” he breathes. “Your sister? In
“Here and holed up in my FOCSA apartment, so she won’t be shot by the mob,” Logan confirms. “Her list of demands is EXTREMELY detailed…and of course includes a visit with you.”

Remy buries his face in one hand. Corny, still observing from the table chortles, “Hooooo, this is gnar-LY! Karma comes back to bite you in the FACE, my man!”

Shooting him a dirty look, Remy protests, “I was her instructor in comportment only! And even at that task, I failed! NEVER did I encourage her in these…emotions!”

“As she loves to remind people, she’s an Echolls,” Logan says, sipping. “Capable of forming lasting grand passions with almost no encouragement. But you’re a fearless fellow, if the way you’ve been making free with my home and cash is any indication. Surely you won’t shrink from the task of supervising one small fake-redhead for…say the next twelve hours?”

Remy stares, hunted--Logan has a moment of smug surety he’ll cave. Then the chef cuts loose with a profane tirade in his native tongue, marching in a tight circle and waving his arms to punctuate. The words ‘never’, ‘coercion’ and ‘jackass’ are emphasized.

Smiling, Logan sets down his coffee to better appreciate the moment and tsks. “Remy, mon ami. Hysteria is unbecoming. And you know I can’t follow your argument when you use uncouth waterfront slang.”

“Like you haven’t spent half your life uncouth,” Remy retorts, tossing hair out of his eyes. “AND committing crimes along the waterfront. In FACT, I seem to recall a story involving a cigar warehouse burned by smugglers which would also enthrall Veronica…but for all the wrong reasons. Of course I would never TELL it, because I adore her—Veronica encouraged my culinary dreams when others did NOT, and gave a safe home to this loyal Frenchman after the war. UNLESS, perhaps, I am pushed too far by someone who, to this DAY still can’t sing on key!”

With one last defiant glare at Logan he storms off, brushing past Tina as she enters with a stack of messages. “What was THAT about?” she asks, observing Corny’s helpless laughter with wide eyes. Turns to Logan for explanation.

“Just Remy being combative and refusing work,” Logan retrieves his coffee and tries not to openly fume. “In other words, an average morning. Are those, by chance, for me?”

“You betcha.” She hands over the slips, and Logan sets down his cup again to page through. “Eli somehow disabled the apartment’s phone at one point early this morning. But she just started handing notes to HIM.”

He peruses requests for a wind chime, imported eye cream, cultured butter and ‘LOUNGEWEAR 100% CASHMERE’ and sighs. “You haven’t, by a stroke of luck, obtained these yet?”

“It’s all in a box by the door.” She smiles, crossing the kitchen to select a plate. “Well, except the butter, I didn’t want it to melt. I figured you’d give her whatever she wanted, so I went out just as the stores opened and made the rounds.”

“Tina,” he says. “Never, for any reason, leave my employ. My collected composure will be exposed as a fraud.”

“Are you kidding?” She winks. “I’m having the time of my life, following you and Veronica around the world.”
“And my heart just grew three sizes.” He grins, actually sincere, and adds, “Now, since YOU’VE solved the pressing Trina-related problems, MY only task is to locate a babysitter. Someone, perhaps, who’s NEVER busy.” Turning his gaze on Corny, he adds, “How about it, Henderson? It’ll provide a welcome break from NOT tying up roses before the weather gets hot.”

“Sure, man, sounds groovy.” Corny notices the danishes for the first time in half an hour, selects one to consume. “It’s cool if I bring my bongos, right?”

Logan sighs; elects not to answer in favor of waving in Clarence, who’s hauling Champ from beneath the hedge. “One last thing,” he says, as their bodyguard pushes through the door, dusting the dog off with his breakfast napkin. “Before Corny and I depart on our errand of mercy. I HAVE made it clear that Veronica’s on medically-required bed rest, correct? That means no exercising, no ‘quick trips to the office to look at paperwork’ and ABSOLUTELY no hair-raising adventures. You two are on the front lines, and your adversary’s both furious and wily, so I expect maximum effort. NOBODY lets their guard down.” He waves a hand towards the door. “And make sure to remind Remy, whenever he resurfaces; he’s currently enjoying a snit.”

Champ barks, as if she understands; Logan runs an affectionate finger down her nose, then points at her, mock-stern. “And if YOU’RE hiding the good silver under the hydrangeas again, you and I will have words.”

She burrows her face into Clarence’s armpit, making him smile. Logan gestures for Corny to follow, and heads for the front door, collecting Trina’s box as he goes.

“So what’s got you all bent out of shape, hombre?” Corny asks, once they’re in the Speedster on the open road, wind in their hair with a side of freedom. “Haven’t seen you do that cat-and-mouse thing to old Remy in MONTHS.”

Logan spends a moment recalling Remy’s appalled expression with enjoyment. Shakes his head. “I’m worried about Veronica,” he admits. “And this case has me tied up in knots. If I don’t find some missing money pronto, gangsters will off Trina, plus my client’s sister has disappeared. I have no clue where to search for either the cash OR the girl; and every hour I spin my wheels increases the likelihood someone suffers.” Flicking on his left turn signal, he adds, “Any way you look at this mess, I’m fucked.”

“Aw, come on, friend. Don’t let all that temporal shit rattle your cage.” Corny leans back, crossing his worn-out Chucks on the dashboard. “Life’s one big cycle, you know? Like a snake eating its own tail. If you want to know where the money and the girl WENT, just go back to where they CAME FROM. Ourobouros, man. Easy-peasy.”

“I’m sure if I was really fucking high that would make SO much sense,” Logan says. “Unfortunately, I’m not, and it’s still too early for cocktails. But thanks for giving me a glimpse of the eternal mystery. Your dedication to beatnik-dom is inspiring.”

“What you need is a vacation,” Corny opines, lacing his fingers across his chest, unfazed. “You are GONE, daddy. REAL gone, and normally you act half-asleep.”

“Ain’t it the truth.” Logan turns into the FOCSA garage, and eases his baby gently into his reserved space. “Come on, Kerouac, up and at’em. Let’s get in there and spell Navarro before he loses his will to live.”

Logan knows things are bad before he gets the apartment unlocked; he can hear Trina doing vocal exercises through the sound-dampening door. Wincing, he swings it wide, and is confronted by the sight of Weevil behind the beige modern couch, gun trained his direction.
He raises his hands, palms out; Weevs turns the muzzle ceiling-ward and uncocks, then crosses himself. “You ever hear of knocking?” he asks, tucking the weapon away. Fishes a wad of papers out of his pocket, stomps across the white Axminster to shove them into Logan’s chest. “After ten solid hours of THAT,” he gestures with his head at the caterwauling in the next room, “you’re lucky I didn’t shoot you anyway.”

The papers Logan’s clutching prove to be more demands—he tucks them in his breast pocket just as the bedroom door opens. Trina saunters out, clad in what looks like a pair of his pajamas, and calls, “Eli? Are you still making noise? Because I thought I explained I need ABSOLUTE SILENCE before I can…oh, hey there, Logie. I’m so glad you’re here, because we REALLY need to discuss that MATTRESS.”

She fake-shudders as Corny, who’s been staring open-mouthed, comes up with, “Whoa, man! Your sister has some PIPES!”

“Why thank you!” Trina simpers, shifting into charm-the-fan-mode. “Who are you, again?”

“Douglas Cornelius Henderson the third,” Logan says drily, smirking as she bats her lashes. “Otherwise known as my gardener, so don’t get stars in your eyes. Although,” he adds, with a sideways glance at Corny’s bongos, “he IS a musician, of sorts. Certainly on professional par with YOU.”

“Impressive!” Trina narrows her eyes at Logan, reading his sarcasm, but unsure of the best response. “It’s so rare to meet a true talent in this highly commercial age.”

“Well you two geniuses go ahead and bond.” Weevil makes for the door, gesturing for Logan to follow. “We got business, and it won’t wait.”

Logan locks up, since he doesn’t trust Corny to remember, while Weevil waits impatiently by the elevator. Once they’re inside, headed down, he crosses his arms. “And just what IS our urgent business, exactly?”

“Anything that doesn’t involve me being in there,” Weevil heads into the garage, looking for Logan’s car. “I don’t care if we spend the afternoon playing pinochle, it’s got to be more pleasant.”

“Talk to me after you’ve spent fifteen YEARS trapped in a house with her,” Logan says drily, selecting the proper key. “Corny’s high as a hot-air balloon and feeling philosophical, though. So take comfort in the fact that he may very well drive HER nuts.”

“I’ve got a bulletin for you: it ain’t a long drive.” Weevil settles back as Logan eases out of the garage, into the warm, bright afternoon. “And maybe it’s just that every time I talk to that guy I’ve had a few? But seems to me he usually makes sense.”

“His latest intuition from behind the veil was that we locate the girl and the money by learning where they came from,” Logan says. “But it’s a great big world. And Bubbles, maiden name Smith, hasn’t left a lot of breadcrumbs to her past.”

“She’ll still be easier to find than that money, even though there’s just one place it COULD have come from.” Weevil turns to watch a woman saunter down the street. “Rossi’s brothels. That’s his only piece of the pie, on account of he’s filling in for the big boss—or he WAS. Guy doesn’t have a back-up source of income.”

“Which would explain why he’s so anxious to recover it,” Logan says. “Trocani no doubt frowns upon stealing from the family business. It’s a plus in my eyes, though, if he’s shot for defrauding
his capo. I get rid of the biggest pain in my ass, yet our hands remain clean.”

“Unless Rossi’s the only guy who knows where Bubbles went,” Weevil says. “Then Creepy Pretty Boy dying makes your problems WORSE.”

“If the money came from Rossi’s brothels,” Logan muses, hooking a u-turn, “Then Casa Marina’s where we ought to start searching. It’s the biggest, fanciest whorehouse he runs. If the boss has been raiding the safe, somebody there’s got to know.”

“Gloriana Reyes still works at that one.” Weevil taps the brim of his hat thoughtfully. “And you know she’ll tell anything she’s heard for a half-hour of compliments plus cash.”

“I can sit in the cocktail lounge and grill the unoccupied employees,” Logan offers, turning onto La Rampa. “But you’ll have to give me a crash course on how cash normally flows through a bordello. I’ve got zero experience with that corner of the criminal underworld.”

“Yeah, your problem is too MANY willing women,” Weevil says, dry. “I stick to the grift myself—my policy is, only take things people choose to give. But a brothel’s gotta be a good place to skim from, just like any cash enterprise with regular repeat customers.”

“What percentage of the proceeds would Rossi keep?” Logan asks, stopping at a crosswalk so a family eating ice cream can pass. “And who would he have to pay, to stay in business?”

“Well, everybody’s got to bribe Batista,” Weevil says, considering. “Say a straight ten percent off the top. Then Lansky will take his share—that’s ten or twenty more, to coexist with the scum-sucking neighbors in peace and harmony. Probably those morditas come due first of the month, same as rent or insurance—which is what they basically are.”

“So thirty percent of the gross is earmarked, regardless of fluctuations in cash flow,” Logan muses, shifting gears. “That’s a lot of overhead. I wonder if Trocani got a cut too, back when he was locked up—and if Rossi still gets one, now the boss is back in play. And if not—how far in advance did he know this change was coming?”

“Could be why he killed the guard,” Weevil says. “If Rossi’s been putting aside for a rainy day long-term, and Oscar knew enough about his methods to steal some…best to shut the guy’s mouth permanently, before he sang like a canary to Trocani.”

“So there wasn’t necessarily one big noticeable theft,” Logan muses. “Could have been a rerouting of pennies lasting years, designed to fly under the radar. I wonder if maisons de joie keep books?”

Weevil shrugs. “This place in particular, though…remember how fancy it is inside? Must require a lot of upkeep, expensive clientele have high standards. If there’s money missing, it’ll show—something will be missing, or broken, or shabby. Or someone will be shorted, and mad enough to bitch.”

“Everything seemed brand-spanking-new, last time Veronica made us snoop here,” Logan says, parking across the street from Casa Marina. “Unlike most ACTUAL castles I’ve been inside.”

Climbing out of the car, Logan gazes up speculatively at the two-story façade. The place LOOKS like it ought to house storybook princesses; pristinely white, detailed in blue and grey, it’s got Moorish arches, peaked roofs, and the requisite crenellated tower. He wonders if the resemblance is purposeful—if some sick fucks get off on the idea of debauching Sleeping Beauty. Dismisses the line of reasoning with a head-shake as he locks up his Speedster.

The front door, is painted, appropriately, red, with an Art Deco rose etched in the glass; it’s opened
by a white-coated porter as they approach. They’re ushered smilingly beneath a snowy wrought-iron arch into a celestial-blue entrance room, floored in Moorish tile and furnished like a French salon. Flowering plants overflow pots in all corners, suggestive of fecundity. Girls of every ethnic stamp pose, draped across divans like butterflies, in brightly-colored, elegantly revealing gowns.

A blonde in blue who looks like a Boticelli rises, smiling. He recalls Veronica this morning, gold hair spilling across her satin bed-jacket; hotly plotting vengeance for less-fortunate girls, sold like cattle when they failed to turn a profit. An ember of fury stirs in his gut—never-fading rage at those who victimize the vulnerable. It pushes him past the reactionary stage, into clear-eyed, vengeful calculation.

Debauchery’s glamorously staged at Casa Marina, in parody of a more gracious age. But Logan’s got a keen eye for the niceties of décor, thanks to his House-Beautiful-obsessed mother. He notes threadbare patches on Persian rugs, places where paint’s chipped off the railing, and decides Weevil’s right. Corners are being cut, here. Something below the surface is amiss.

Everybody knows who he is in this town, so Logan’s not surprised when he’s swarmed. A gin rickey’s pressed into his hand and he’s herded to a couch, leaving Weevil free to abscond with their informant. He can’t tell which of the women is discreetly coordinating activity, but clearly she’s a thinker. The girls sent to seduce him are his wife’s polar opposites… tall, voluptuous, dark in coloring, and patently un-American.

Idly, he lets them fawn, watching bankers and mobsters choose ways to waste their salaries. The employees are stunning, here, and business is brisk; whatever Casa Marina’s financial woes, they’re not about cash flow.

Over the rim of his drink, his gaze fixes on a tall, ascetic outlier; the guy’s leaning against the wall, making no effort to flirt, studying the girls like he’s choosing produce. Logan’s sure they’ve never met, but something about this man feels both familiar and wrong. Frowning, he focuses, trying to tease the thread of memory free.

His fugue state’s interrupted by the chestnut-haired beauty to his left—Sarita, if he recalls correctly—who tips his drink up with one finger and archly smiles. “Are you going to take your coat off and unwind, this time? Stay a while, enjoy some company?”

“But I’m enjoying ALL the company,” he says, disingenuous, humoring her with a sip. “How could I possibly choose between so many lovely and charming companions?”

“Who says you have to pick one?” The truly opulent girl to his right strokes a palm down his arm. She’s Cuban, new to the joint, and looks young enough to make flirting uncomfortable. “It’s like a buffet—fill as many plates as you want.”

“You’re wasting your time,” an Asian girl on the couch opposite interjects, desultorily fanning herself with a newspaper. “Don’t you recognize him? Logan Echolls—the only man in Havana who DOESN’T keep a mistress. He’s famous for it. Comes in with his friend every few months, drinks and flirts and tips everyone in the room; but when his friend’s done, they leave. I heard Rita HAYWORTH tried to kiss him at the Tropicana once, and he turned her down. He’s actually in love with his WIFE.”

“Real gentlemen don’t gossip about ladies,” Logan demurs, when Sarita lifts her brows. He gestures at a passing waiter, orders a round of champagne. “But if you knew how amazing my wife is, you’d all understand.”

The wine arrives, a tray of frothing coupes, and the mood becomes festive as glasses are
distributed. Logan lifts his in a toast. “To the lovely employees of Casa Marina. May your days be peaceful and lucrative, and may all your customers be kind.”

The chatter swirls, unoccupied girls happy to entertain now they know tips are forthcoming. Logan goes back to frowning at the man he almost-recognizes, who’s questioning a delicate brunette, now, in a distastefully proprietary way. “What’s wrong?” Cuban Teenager asks, proving unfortunately observant. “You don’t like the tall man?”

“I recognize him from somewhere,” Logan corrects, shaking his head. “But I can’t recall the name. And this isn’t covered in etiquette manuals, but I doubt he wants me to ask.”

“Oh, that one doesn’t care.” An angular beauty in purple approaches, cocktail in hand. She’s all sloe eyes and sculptural cheekbones, hair done up in Caribbean-style braids, and her air of self-possession is arresting. “He stops by to shop every week. Likes to throw private parties, and VERY particular about entertainment.”

Recognition strikes; this is the same man he saw herding women into the Sevilla Tuesday, while he chatted on the sidewalk with Weevil. So if this is Amletto’s procurer, and Rossi’s willing to sell… could HE be the link for which Veronica’s searching? Could Amletto have bought the missing prostitutes, for ‘use’ in his hotel?

The purple-clad woman gazes pointedly at the spot on the couch between Logan and Sarita; Sarita, surprisingly, yields her place. Smiling at Logan, she sips her drink as she gracefully reclines—he studies her, thoughtful. Her accent’s pure City of Angels, and she’s older than the other employees…glamorous, but with a jaded edge. “The thinker,” he realizes, musing out loud. Moving in close, no doubt, to better size him up.

“Bookkeeper,” she corrects, mouth curving in amusement. “Taking a break, the numbers began to blur. I’m Loretta. I think you’re acquainted with a friend of mine, name of Clarence?”

Logan’s brows lift. Is she claiming to be his bodyguard’s heretofore-unsuspected paramour? Or hinting she’s his man on the inside, so to speak? He knows very little about the personal life of the inscrutable Clarence Wiedman, so it’s hard to say. Loretta might be here to check up on Logan, make sure he’s not cheating—or here to offer help.

“Small world,” is all he says, tapping his glass to hers. “Interesting, as well, that this establishment HAS a bookkeeper. I assumed you’d avoid a paper trail, even though it’s not like the authorities CARE.”

“They definitely care, when they don’t get their cut,” Loretta says, arch. “Someone needs to calculate percentages. And in addition to my MANY other talents, I have a mathematical mind.”

“She fits in better than the last bean counter, too,” Sarita interjects, not to be outdone. “Big bruiser, scaring off customers every time he showed his face. Now he only turns up on Sunday to collect the week’s cash. That’s the day we’re closed, you know—so our customers can pretend to be family men. Go to church, pray for their souls.”

“Our boss just doesn’t want outsiders to know how much we earn.” The Cuban girl laughs. “Destroys the illusion of romance.”

“They don’t want money getting lost again,” the newspaper-fanner corrects, pressing a cold glass of champagne to her cheek. “After what happened at Casa de Luz? That whole bag stolen? Nobody’s taking chances.”
Loretta shoots her a cautionary look, and she rolls her eyes but subsides. “Dahlia’s right,” Loretta warns. “Maintaining the illusion of romance is critical, Renee. My sister didn’t, and look where it got HER.”

Logan cocks his head, open his mouth to dig for dirt—but Weevil saunters downstairs at the exact wrong moment, whistling, and the opportunity’s lost. He gestures with his head at Logan, who drains his glass. Sets it on the table, and turns to Loretta with a smile.

“Meeting you was VERY enlightening.” He offers his hand, which she shakes. “But I’m being summoned. I’m afraid I’ve got to run.”

“Come by anytime,” Loretta says, direct and assertive in a way he’s sure Clarence admires. “I’ll take a break. We’ll chat.”

“I look forward to it.” He smiles, hands her a discreetly folded stack of bills. “Pass this around when I leave, will you? In thanks for the charming conversation?”

She winks at him, and he follows Weevil out the door.

“Gloriana’s scared shitless,” Weevil says without preamble, once they’re safely in the car and around the corner. “Wouldn’t talk at all until I piled on the cash. Sounds like those rumors everybody’s heard about Rossi disappearing women are real. Apparently some hookers at Casa Estella who couldn’t turn a profit went missing…and she’s not eager to fall into that category.”

“The entire employee roster vanished, or so I’ve been told,” Logan says grimly. “Also, possibly, the sister of my wife’s apparent spy. Ronnie thinks Rossi auctioned the girls to the highest bidder; I spotted one of Amletto’s goons in the parlor, looking to buy. Could be he’s running them at the Sevilla to guests willing to pay. Then vanishing any that don’t…thrive.”

“So if business is bad enough Rossi liquidated one operation,” Weevil says, grimacing at his choice of terms, “Maybe the missing money’s lost profit? Like he’s accusing people of theft to cover, while running the enterprise into the ground?”

“No, although I don’t doubt he WOULD.” Logan stops at a light, rubbing the headache between his eyes. “Sunday’s cash pickup day at all his establishments, and the same bruise walks off with the suitcase every week. My guess is, something happened to seven days’ haul from Casa de Luz, and Rossi’s scrambling to figure out what.”

“Well I hear Oscar’s dead.” Weevil crosses his arms, looking out the window. “So it’s a fair bet HE happened.”

“Then where did the cash go?” Logan asks. “Did he hide it? Or spend it already? Because I’m positive Trina doesn’t have a share, or she wouldn’t be so thrilled to freeload. And if Rossi recovered the full amount, he wouldn’t still be looking.”

Weevil shrugs. “You want me to add hunting down missing money to my list of jobs? Since I’ve got so much free time?”

Logan shakes his head. “Nah, the clock is ticking. I need to pull in Clarence or Veronica. If the cash isn’t found soon, I’ll be forced to replace it—can’t have Trina getting whacked. But that will drastically diminish my escape-from-Cuba fund…and you know how I feel about putting my wife in danger.”

“Only a moron would empty his bank account to pay back mobsters!” Weevil’s voice grows strained the way it always does when Logan’s noble streak raises his blood pressure. “If someone
steals from them, and they find proof, that person gets whacked as an example. Nobody who betrays the brotherhood lives--first rule of gangs, man!"

“Then I’ll get in bed with them,” Logan says, faking nonchalance. “Cut some kind of deal. I’ll do what’s necessary to keep my family safe…even the idiot portion.”

“Any deal you make with Rossi, you’ll come out the loser. Jesus.” Weevil shakes his head, simmering. “Someday either you gotta quit this drama queen business, or I’ll quit saving your dumb ass from yourself.”

Logan opens his mouth to reply, but his friend cuts him off, scowling. “Look, here’s something I’ve got that maybe Rossi’s goons don’t. I know where Oscar lived. You want to head over there, see if we can find clues?”

“Better than cruising the city, hoping to catch Bubbles promenading,” Logan says. “Address, please.”

“1212 Maximo Gomez,” Weevil says, curt. “And make it snappy. I ain’t slept in almost twenty-four hours, thanks to your pain-in-the-ass sister. I stay up much longer, and my reaction time’ll be shot.”

Oscar’s apartment proves to be stone-and-glass Modernist, wedged between two colonial buildings with a carport underneath. Weevil leads the way to the tiny elevator and the second floor, while Logan locates lock picks and scouts for witnesses. When they reach the door, though, it swings quietly open at first touch.

“Never a good sign,” Logan murmurs, removing his gun from the ankle holster V didn’t notice this morning, thank GOD. He gestures for Weevil to hug the wall. With one foot, he eases the door wider, slips inside.

The interior space is beige, with glass tables, molded-plastic furniture and a river-pebble wall--looks like someone spent a ton, Aaron-style, to fit it out, but never considered taste. It’s also completely trashed. The sofa’s overturned, stuffing spilling out, the cabinets have been emptied onto the floor; a couple bullet holes grace the wall, as if maybe money wasn’t found, and someone got exercised.

“Guess you AREN’T the only person who knows where he lived.” Logan kicks a white furry throw pillow, confirms the only other room is the clearly-empty bath. Sinks into a space-age chair with a sigh. “Think it’s worthwhile to dig through this mess? My guess is, any decent clues are long gone.”

Weevil shoves his gun back into his waistband, picks up a magazine on the counter—leafs through, then checks the sticker. “This month’s Playboy,” he says. “Oscar had some good connections. Usually it takes forever for American magazines to make it over.”

Logan’s lets his focus drift, frown deepening. He studies the detrius the way Veronica taught him...looking for anything new or different. An object used but not put away, items that don’t belong. His gaze falls on a colorful flyer, ad for a club of some kind, resting on the table beside an egg-shaped armchair—there’s an uncapped pen atop. Bingo.

Weevil’s looking out the window, distracted and scowling again, so Logan bestirs himself to fetch it. Lifts his brows at the Tia Nena Club’s demure slogan (‘attended by pretty girls’), since it’s the site of hardcore sex shows that would make Dick’s month. There’s a time and date scribbled on the front—three days ago, midnight. Logan folds and pockets it, figuring the little woman can connect
“Ready?” he asks, making Weevil jump. “When you start staring off into space and plotting, it’s time to get you safely home.”

Weevil laughs and follows, but he’s silent in the car for most of the drive, gaze half-lidded and inscrutable, face tired. Probably the injustice of the missing girls galls him…and a galled Eli Navarro is unpredictable. He knows, maybe better than anyone, how rigged the Cuban game is—but can’t always control the urge to salt the Earth with the riggers.

Logan agrees, philosophically (though he knows another monster’s always waiting in the wings). But herding rats into a mousetrap requires strategy and self-control. And as the Trina debacle proved, patience isn’t his friend’s strong suit.

It’s siesta time when they roll up to the house, and normally not a creature would be stirring. But today, Weevil’s formidable grandmother Leticia stands, arms crossed, in the doorway, apron flour-smeared from the day’s baking. She watches their approach with a scowl.

Weevil groans, sinking lower in his seat, and Logan can’t control a snicker. “Oh, right!” He snaps, disingenuously. “I forgot to mention. Veronica was REALLY mad when I left her stranded at home this morning. And you know she never feels better until she crosses a name off her shit list.”

With a jaundiced look, Weevil climbs from the car, shoulders slumped, to meet his fate. Logan calls after him, “Be at FOCSA at midnight to spell my gardener!” and gets the finger, hidden behind his friend’s back, in return. Laughing for the first time since yesterday, he drives away.

It’s still fairly early—too soon for Veronica’s anger to have abated. Since Logan has no more desire than Weevil to be the target of his wife’s plots, he studies Trina’s ransom demands at a red light, and decides to do her shopping himself. Poor Tina must be worn out, after foiling escape attempts all afternoon. If she has to procure ‘red satin sleep mask with COOLING GEL’ too, she might very well snap.

A few hours spent in El Encanto’s soothing environs, mercifully NOT meeting the salesgirl who accused him of bullying, does a lot to buoy Logan’s mood. He skips up the FOCSA’s front steps with his bags, humming; nods at the doorman with a smile when the guy rushes to hold the elevator.

It’s not until he exits on the thirty-ninth floor and hears music that his transitory period of happiness deflates.

The melody currently issuing from his apartment (although whether it merits that name is questionable) is loud enough to make the walls vibrate. It seems vaguely jazz-inspired…or at least someone’s blasting away on a trumpet, between the howls and drum solos. He can just make out the shrill notes of a piccolo, and tendrils of smoke curl worryingly from beneath the door.

Logan stands in the hall for a minute, debating whether to cut and run--postpone the reckoning for leaving Corny and Trina alone together until he’s NOT already in the doghouse. But God knows what the apartment will look like if he lets them jam unsupervised until midnight. If the building’s board of directors doesn’t revoke his membership before then.

Sighing, he unlocks the door. Coughs as the mingled scents of cloves, coffee, cheap booze and undeoderized bodies wash over him. “Wow, Treen,” he calls, voice sharp enough to make even the piccolo player falter, “Aren’t you supposed to wait until mom and dad are AWAY for the weekend, before throwing the house-ruining bash?”
His sister, decked out in black leotard and tights, hair slicked back and drink in hand, pauses her interpretive dance at the center of a beatnik circle; her smile is equal parts pride and chagrin. “Logie!” she trills. “Come on in! We’re just blocking out the stage show Doug and I brainstormed this morning. It’s called ‘The Emptiness of Materialism’!”

Of its own volition, Logan’s lip curls. Lifting the bags, he says, “So I should return all this stuff to the store, then? Wouldn’t want you to don your new sleep mask and suffer an existential crisis.”

“Oh, you,” Trina says, like she thinks he’s joking, although surely she knows better. “Just be a dear and drop all that stuff in the bedroom. Then you can listen to the poem I composed for the spoken-word segment.”

Tossing the bags on the couch, Logan folds his arms and stares at Corny, who’s wedged between a three-hundred-pound guy with a beige beard, and a weedy Cuban trumpeter with pimples. He’s wearing sunglasses for some reason, despite the candle-lit dimness of the room; a hand-rolled cigarette hangs from one corner of his mouth. It takes ‘Doug’ a minute to notice the perusal, three guesses why. Finally, his hand stills on the bongo and he offers, “Man, Trina and I totally have a ton in common!”

“So I see.” Logan sighs, admitting defeat. They haven’t caused any damage a couple hours of maid service won’t fix. And besides, he’s fresh out of blackmail victims for a task Corny ENJOYS. “Think you can keep the sound at a level that WON’T get us evicted?”

“Oh, sure, man, no problemo.” Corny smiles, clearly relieved the nebulous, unspoken issue seems to have passed. “Too much rehearsing makes the act stale anyway. Rondo here’s got a filmstrip of a chicken trying to fly, and then he also brought something in Dutch about…empty train stations?”

The bearded behemoth nods, and Corny grins concurrence. “So hey, if you run into Isabetta back at the house, tell her to come on up and party! And tell her to bring the cigar box in my bedroom for, like…reasons, you know? Metaphysical reasons. Like, it’ll enhance the show.”

“Riiiight.” Logan wonders fatalistically if there’s any way this week can possibly get worse. Decides not to jinx himself, since there’s ALWAYS farther to fall. “Try not to destroy anything expensive, Trina’s draining my bank account rapidly enough. Weevil Navarro will spell you at midnight. And please, Corny, I implore you, and whatever brain cells you’ve still got functioning in there…do NOT let my sister leave this apartment, for any reason whatsoever. Are we clear?”

“As the water in a lake on a bright spring day.” Corny grins goofily, drumming a tattoo on the bongo for emphasis, and flashes Logan a thumbs-up.

His bandmates hoot and high-five approval, and Trina says, “You’re not seriously leaving before the poem? This is going to be the avant-garde spectacle of the CENTURY, Logie! Don’t you want to be able to tell people you saw the first iteration?”

“Rain check,” he says, trying not to flinch. “I need to check in with my confined-to-bedrest wife. But you keep right on workshopping—quietly. Maybe when you’re back to LA you can get FOSSE involved.”

“Oh!” Trina says, like she seriously thinks that’s possible--takes a sip of her drink and begins dancing again. Logan quietly lets himself out, rolling his eyes, and locks the door behind. Considers, then rejects for appearances’ sake, the idea of sticking a chair under the knob, to make sure this motley crew stays put.

He takes the leisurely way home down Calle 7, soothed by the wind in the palm trees as dusk
creeps down. The light takes on that warm, tangerine glow unique to Cuba, which always makes him feel...safe, somehow, despite the constant danger. He’s a glamorous misfit in a town of like-minded souls. And he enjoys play-acting himself more, in service of Veronica’s causes.

Leaving his car in the drive for later, Logan cuts through his garden—he’s been hunting Champ’s new hiding spot all week, his favorite cufflinks are missing. The feminine clothes and books beneath a lounger elicit a frown as he passes...they seem like abandoned prep for some classic Veronica scheme. Clarence is on the patio, though, reading a newspaper and eating, so he figures maybe she was foiled.

Inside, it’s warmer—Remy must be baking—and he can see Tina on the phone through a crack in the library door. Logan climbs the stairs, pulling off his suit jacket as he goes, eager to shower away the scent of cheap perfume...once he’s done battle, that is, with the avenging angel in his bed.

His suite’s empty, though; and a touch-test of the mattress confirms the sheets are cold. Which means Veronica contrived to evade his safeguards not long after he put them in place, and is currently God knows where doing God knows what. Cursing under his breath, he re-dons his coat, and grimly begins to search.

Tina’s just hanging up when he enters the library—she makes a final, tidy note on a legal pad, then shoves her pencil behind her ear. “Hi there,” she says, with a cheerful grin. “Who knew daffodil-colored yarn was rare? How’s our recalcitrant patient?”

“Well, she’s not in the bedroom, or anywhere on the premises that I can discover,” he says, folding his arms and leaning against the jamb. “So at this point, it’s hard to say.”

“What?” Tina shoves her chair back and rushes past him into the hall. “She’s got to be here somewhere! Clarence promised not to let her out of his sight!”

She shoves determinedly through the French doors, and engages an unflustered Clarence in brief conversation. “Darkroom,” she announces, when she returns. “Apparently she couldn’t stand to lie down for one more minute. He thought developing evidence would keep her mind off her plight.”

Logan raises his brows skeptically, because he’s known Veronica since age twelve, but obediently follows Tina to the darkroom. Listens, with growing fatalism, while she knocks and knocks. Eventually, with a whispered and un-secretarial epithet, Tina braves V’s wrath by opening the door. Does a quick search and comes back, apologetically shaking her head.

“She’s flown the coop.” Exasperated, Tina brushes back a loose strand of hair. “And if Clarence doesn’t know where she is, I doubt anyone does. Remy’s been slaving away all day over some meal fit for an empress, he curses at anyone who enters the kitchen. And Corny’s still over at the FOCSA.”

Logan turns towards the patio, intent on questioning Clarence further, but is interrupted mid-stalk by the ringing phone. Before he can backtrack, Tina’s answered with an impressively perky, “Echolls residence!” beckoning him frantically closer.

She frowns into the phone as if the connection’s bad, while Logan checks his watch. Five-fifteen. God, Ronnie could well have been missing all DAY. Then she presses the receiver to her chest and says, “It’s for you. I don’t recognize the voice, and he didn’t give a name.”

Taking the handset, Logan says, “Echolls speaking,” while a sinking feeling afflicts him. Tina shifts closer, trying to hear.
“Yes, this is Salvador Gutierrez at Hotel Inglaterra security? We have a woman here who claims to be your wife—she was found in the room of a guest, causing a…disturbance. Will you come and collect her?”

“Can you describe this woman?” Logan leans back against the console table, relaxing, shoots Tina a wry look. “And was she up to something nefarious?”

“Blonde, pretty,” Gutierrez says, dubious. “Crying. Senorita Banks told me she was searching their room, but she didn’t have any stolen goods on her…person.”

“That’s my wife, all right,” Logan says, with edge. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Give her a tissue or something, meanwhile, to help her contain her abject terror.”

He hangs up, tells Tina, “She’s fine,” and continues his interrupted storm-out. Plants both fists on the patio table, a gesture of contained violence that makes Clarence fold his paper. “You mind explaining why Inglaterra Security just called, to inform me my wife was caught red-handed in Priscilla Banks’ room? I thought I made my wishes clear before leaving this morning.”

A faint tic pulses below Clarence’s eye, the Wiedman equivalent of a fist through the wall. “She must have escaped while I was out…running errands. But I removed distributor caps from all employee vehicles, so I’m surprised she made it across town.”

Isabetta, who’s working on a painting in the garden, turns to shout, “Are you talking about Veronica? Is something wrong?”

She wanders over. The gauzy white smock hanging from her thin frame is smeared with charcoal and paint; a streak of carnelian adorns her pale curls. “Because I saw her maybe an hour ago? Or two? She asked me about…someone, and then I let her borrow my car to run to the store for Remy. I hope that’s all right?”

Logan lets out a huff of exasperation. Wiedman says, “She’s supposed to be on bed rest. Doctor’s orders.”

“I’m so sorry!” Izzy’s huge blue eyes get even huger as her faux pas registers. “I’d never have let her take it if I’d known! She seemed fine, though, truly—full of that inner fire, comprendes?”

“Oh, I know,” Logan says, dry. “Don’t worry, Izzy. We’re all aware how crafty and persuasive my wife can be. I need you to pack up and come with me now, though, if you’d be so kind—you can take charge of the vehicle, while I take charge of her. Corny requires your civilizing influence over at the FOCSA. And Veronica and I DESPERATELY need some alone time to chat.”

“As for you two,” Logan adds, as Izzy strolls back to take apart her easel, clearly a stranger to urgency, “you knew what you were up against, and you buckled under pressure. Get your stories straight now, because we WILL discuss this later.”

He carries Isabetta’s supplies, stashes them in his trunk, then lends her his perfume-befouled sportcoat—less because of the evening chill, more to protect the Speedster’s seats. She’s quiet during the drive. He wonders if it’s his fate today to travel with monosyllabic, distracted companions.

“So who was Veronica asking about?” he inquires, when he can’t cope with any more silence. Taps his thumbs against the steering wheel, waiting for the light to change. “Earlier, when she borrowed your car?”

“Oh…” Isabetta’s a comically poor liar, it turns out—the fear and chagrin on her face are palpable.
“I don’t know, just some suspicious person. You know how she is…always wanting to learn everything about everybody.”

“Mmmm,” Logan says, instincts on red alert. “Luckily, there are plenty of suspicious persons to fuel her investigative fire.”

Isabetta nods, probably not getting the barb, and reverts to silence. She asks to stay in the car when they park, and he agrees…she’ll be safer out of range of the upcoming battle.

XXXXX

After twenty-six minutes’ worth of bribes and fast-talking, Logan’s ushered into the office where they’ve stashed Ronnie, unable to cope with her bravura performance. She looks particularly angelic as she dabs big blue eyes with a tissue; her golden locks are tied winsomely back with ribbon, her cheeks flushed pink with emotion. But she’s dressed all in black, never mind the frivolous polka dots, and wearing flats…so he knows better than to give an inch. It takes a con to know a con, which is probably how Priscilla caught her.

Crossing his arms and planting a shoulder resolutely against the doorframe, he murmurs, “You can cut out the crocodile tears, Mrs. Siddons. I’ve greased the requisite palms and sprung you.”

She stands, chin jutting obstinately, and tucks the handkerchief she’s using as a prop away. Her gaze cuts almost imperceptibly towards the hall behind him, searching for guards who might be listening. “Are you TRYING to get me arrested?”

“Oh, I’M the one being reckless, here?” he lifts a lazy brow, and the angry flush across her cheekbones is gratifying—but not enough so to make up for his panic. “You have a flower petal in your hair and dust on your knees. What bushes have you been hiding in that I DON’T know about, prior to raiding a probable murderer’s room and getting CAUGHT?”

“We should discuss this at home,” she murmurs, going for brisk and dismissive as she shoulders her purse. “I’ve got Isabetta’s Volkswagen down in the garage, I’ll drive it back and meet you there.”

He laughs, and her eyes narrow. “Nice try,” he says, holding out his hand. “Keys, please, Izzy’s waiting in my Speedster to take possession. You and I will enjoy a nice, leisurely ride together, clear the air.”

She snorts, and he continues, inexorable. “Our agreement, when we opened the detective agency, was that I would provide the funds, social connections and legitimizing business face. And YOU would be honest with me about the risks you faced, then take appropriate precautions. This…today…you’re not holding up your end, Veronica.”

There’s no way she believes he’d let her be arrested, but he can tell she’s calculating, anyway—how much can I push, what will I be forced to admit? “Fine,” she decides, slapping keys into his palm. “But if I have to endure a lecture on good sense from Logan ‘King of Snap Decisions’ Echolls, I warn you now, I’m jumping out of the car.”

“Aw, sweetums.” He drapes an obliging arm around her as she summons fake tears, then presses into his chest for the walk of shame past witnesses. “Just stop. All this fervent gratitude for your rescue is embarrassing me.”

Ronnie falls silent as soon as there’s no need for performance, watching with crossed arms while he transfers art equipment; she refuses to acknowledge Izzy’s wordless apology. He recognizes the
posture—V knows she’s wrong, and would rather eat dirt than admit it—but doesn’t feel sympathetic. She went against doctor’s advice even though it was important, scared everyone shitless. And now she thinks he wants to lecture and chastise her…like she really doesn’t know him at ALL.

Truth is, Logan HATES it when he pushes and people roll over…hates his talent for manipulation, the ease with which he dominates. The number one quality he looks for, in friends, associates and ESPECIALLY wives, is a refusal to put up with his crap.

“So,” he says, pulling out of the dark garage and into traffic, “how ‘bout this weather we’ve been having?” When she rolls her eyes but doesn’t comment, he continues, lightly, “Not in the mood for repartee?”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she mutters. “You were the lesser of two evils back there. It’s the only reason I’m sitting in your car.”

“Veronica,” he says, with mingled exasperation and pleading. “Why are you trying to blame me, when you’re the one who screwed up?”

“Because you made me MAD!” She rounds on him, and yeah, here come the fireworks. He straightens, anticipatory. “All that nonsense about me violating our agreement…YOU violated it first, buster! You promised to accept that I’d take risks, and acknowledge I can handle myself. But ever since…you know…you’ve barely allowed me to breathe! First you forced Clarence to follow me everywhere but the bathroom, then you moved me to that awful sauna of an office—and let me tell you, Logan, heatstroke is a more real-and-present danger than whatever you’re imagining. And THEN, after one teentsy car wreck and subsequent unwanted pass, you ORDER me to stay in bed like an INVALID!”

“Only because the stakes are higher these days, and you won’t listen!” he says. “Cuba getting more dangerous daily is NOT a figment of my imagination. Besides, neither of those choices were made to curtail your independence.” He flashes her a sideways glance. “And it was BUD who told you to stay in bed, not me.”

“Bud is hopelessly old-fashioned, and has zero patience,” she says. “You know I’m not a delicate flower who needs to be cosseted, Logan. It makes me CRAZY.”

“I was worried, okay?” he snaps, cornered. “Everywhere we go someone tries to hurt you--and I’m always seconds too late to stop them!”

Her gaze softens as she studies his face. “Now you know how I felt when you turned up shot,” she murmurs, brushing back a windblown hank of his hair. “You came when I called, though, the way you always do. And because you did, I’m fine.”

“Of COURSE I came!” he snaps, losing the battle to keep his voice even. “But if someday there’s a time when I can’t…Veronica, please. Just…don’t ever force me to live the rest of my life without you.”

She puts her hand on top of his on the gearshift instead of answering, entwining their fingers. He lets out a breath, looking down at the place they touch, and gently squeezes.

“So,” she says, after a moment of silence during which tension unravels. “How’s your sister?”

“Bonding with Corny to the detriment of our furniture, and rehearsing a musical called ‘The Emptiness of Materialism,’” he says, and she snickers. “How’s Rossi?”
She opens her mouth to reply, then snaps it shut with a sardonic look. “Nice try.”

“Weevil and I uncovered some VERY interesting information during our travels today,” Logan wheedles, because they’ve made this much progress--maybe more’s in the cards. “I might know what happened to your missing women. Too bad you HAVEN’T been tailing Rossi, while investigating their disappearance. If I got my hands on photos of the prostitutes in question, I’d be able to confirm my theory.”

Veronica fixes him with a hard stare; he tries to return a bland one, but it likely comes off smug. Finally she scowls and says, “Fine, damn it. You win--I have photos, and I may have heard something pertinent today, as well. But I promise, Rossi had no idea I was listening. And Clarence was with me the WHOLE TIME.”

“Was he?” Logan muses, so pleased he’s gotten a confession he decides not to push. “No wonder the poor bastard’s eye twitched when I questioned him. What did you hear? Any hints about the fate of Bubbles?”

“I think she might still be alive,” Veronica says, and a knot he didn’t realize was in his gut unravels. “Trocani told Rossi he wants to pay Bubbles a visit, to ask about the missing…”

“The missing?” Logan prompts when she trails off, but she’s done sharing.

“Trocani still thinks Trina’s behind the theft,” is all she says.

“Well, there’s no chance my sister’s a criminal mastermind,” he says, because come on. “But I DO think Oscar had a partner. Look what I found when I cased his already-looted apartment.”

He pulls the flyer out of his jacket pocket, grimacing at the charcoal stain Isabetta left on the lapel. Veronica accepts and studies it, eyebrows raised.

“You need to send WEEVIL to investigate this one,” she decides, as he pulls into their driveway. “But ten will get you fifty, Oscar’s partner’s a skeezy man. Come on, the pictures you want are stashed upstairs.”

She leads him by the hand into the house, past a very-relieved Tina; they climb the iron-banistered staircase to their bedroom, where she should have been all along. Without hesitation, she kicks off her shoes and hops onto the mattress.

“Wait, was that a line?” he asks, lounging on the bed beside her, propping his jaw with one hand. “Is this the part where you show me your etchings?”

Giving him an arch but humoring look, she crosses to the lower-right bedpost—reaches up on tiptoe to remove the finial and sticks two fingers inside.

“You need a boost?” he asks, as she makes a soft growl of exasperation. Then, triumphantly, extracts a bunch of photos, rolled into a thin tube and tied with a hairband.

“Sneaky!” he says, admiring. Spares a quick glance for the other three bedposts, wondering what secrets they hold. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

She hands the pictures over and he unrolls, grabbing books from his nightstand to flatten the stack. He studies them carefully once, then again to be sure, wishing it wasn’t so likely most of these women are dead.

“Her,” he says, selecting a blonde from the stack, then a vivacious-looking Cuban. “And this one,
too. We saw them, remember? Being ushered into the Sevilla night before last, by a frequent Casa Marina customer."

She squints down at the picture; notices his still insisting you don’t need glasses? smirk, and returns an I admit nothing glare. “I think the guy’s Amletto’s buyer,” he continues. “And I think he viewed the recent shutdown of Casa Estella as a going-out-of-business sale.”

“Did Rossi drain the profits from that brothel, then switch embezzling locations?” she asks, studying the pictures he’s chosen. “Could that have been the reason for the buy-out? Because I learned today the missing money came from Casa de Luz. Trocani seems to think Rossi gambled it away.”

“And who can blame him?” Logan rolls up the remaining photos, hands them back. “My sources, though, suggest Rossi’s skimming from ALL his brothels. Maybe that one just didn’t earn enough back to support the theft?” He shrugs. “My guess is, the bagman he sends to collect profits every Sunday is involved. We need to hunt that guy down, extract some answers.”

“Also,” Veronica adds, carefully stashing the pictures in her nightstand drawer, “if we’re planning to rescue those girls, before they outlive their usefulness as hospitality perks and disappear? We’ll need to get proactive.”

“Why did that sentence just give me chills?” He reclines onto the pillows, one arm behind his head.

“Relax,” she says, smiling. “All you need to do is muster a few funds and throw an eentsy private party. One that requires…entertainment. I’ll set up the endgame.”

He holds out a hand, and she knee-walks across the bed to nestle against him. Tucking her close, he sniffs her potting-soil-scented hair. “So that’s the sum total of your activities today?” he asks, giving her one more chance to come clean. “You listened to Rossi’s bug with Clarence safely by your side, then fruitlessly burgled Priscilla Banks?”

Her face goes still, and he flatters himself that she considers telling the truth. But all she says is, “Not fruitlessly. I found Big Dick’s suitcase in her closet, and made off with his missing bearer bonds.”

“But security said they didn’t find any…” he smiles slowly as it all comes clear. “The false bottom in your purse. THAT purchase certainly came in handy. How much filthy lucre was Dick carrying?”

“A lot,” she says with a smirk. “Big stack, the width of my palm, I haven’t had a chance to count them. At least some of the grandmothers and war widows he swindled won’t lose the family farm.”

“You know,” he tells her, kissing her cheek, “You’re rapidly turning all my hair grey, but I’ve got to admit—I admire your moxie.”

“My moxie’s pretty fond of you, too.” She rolls onto her stomach, planting her sharp little chin on his chest. “Even when you’re sarcastic and overbearing.”

He smiles, and she presses her pretty, soft mouth to his, gentle kiss saying the words she rarely can. Removing the hand from beneath his head, he threads his fingers through her hair, cradles her skull; takes her hesitant caress and gives back ardency, so she knows she can count on his love. It’s sweet, so sweet…all his doubts unravel, because in her arms, he’s home.

The phone rings downstairs and they both ignore it, caught up in slow-burning lust, unwilling to
rush. But within two minutes Tina’s knocking, calling, “Logan, you want to talk to this person.” So he pulls away, kisses Veronica’s forehead with a sigh.

“Have I mentioned today how much I hate people?” he asks, climbing reluctantly out of bed. “Want to come downstairs with me, eavesdrop on the extension?”

She shakes her head. “I’m tired—I think I’m finally ready to rest. Bring me something to eat when you come back, will you? I’m suddenly famished, too.”

“Oh, NOW you’re compliant,” he says, arch. “After you’ve gotten everything you wanted.” But he catches her hand and kisses her fingers before he goes.

Skipping down the stairs, he picks up the extension in the library, taking off the ruined jacket as he does so and throwing it across the room. “Echolls,” he says into the handset, falling backwards into the desk chair and spinning.

“Senor, this is Carlos Aviles, do you remember me? Ramon’s cousin, from the bank?”

“Of course,” Logan says, sitting up straight. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“There’s been a development,” the guy says, insinuating. “I thought you might be interested?”

He pauses long enough for Logan to murmur, “Absolutely,” just to ensure that money will be changing hands.

“A woman called my supervisor today, claiming to be Senorita Sinclair. She made an appointment for tomorrow—Friday—at noon. It sounds like she’s here in Cuba to collect her money.”

“Excellent,” Logan says, sure Veronica will both love and hate this news. “If we happen to intercept Miss Sinclair during her visit—coincidentally, of course—I promise your name won’t be mentioned.”

Signing off with a smile, Logan saunters to the kitchen, in search of treats with which to pamper his wife. Remy’s stirring pots on the stove, noble brow filmed with sweat; an array of elaborate dishes cover the counter. Logan’s lips flatten with amusement, because now he knows how Ronnie kept the chef occupied.

“Mrs. Echolls is fatigued,” he announces, extracting a tray from the cabinet beneath the central island. “After her unsanctioned and strenuous outing. If you’ll point out the dishes she requested for dinner, I’ll take them up myself.”

“The bourguignon,” Remy says, lifting one wooden-spoon-wielding arm to wipe his forehead. He gestures with the elbow. “That pan of potatoes, and the soufflé—it just came out of the oven, be careful. Take the pitcher of cream beside it, as well.”

Locating bowls, Logan dishes out starch, plus a generous portion of wine-scented stew. He’s lifting the entire dessert onto the tray, with the assistance of a tea towel, when he notices a roast chicken near the wall. It’s his favorite kind, simply flavored with lemon and thyme, beside a board of fruit and cheese. Remy’s culinary version of an apology.

He smiles, adding his own spoils to the tray, along with a bottle of Tavel. Says, offhand, “So you CAN make edible meals that don’t involve cream sauces. I KNEW you had hidden depths.”

“Bah.” Remy tosses his bangs, not turning around. “I’m the most talented chef you’ll ever have the luck to employ, I can make anything. Now get out of my kitchen and feed your wife. I have bread
to bake for breakfast, once I’m done with these.”

Logan hefts the tray and goes, humming. Plots ways, as he climbs, to tire V out enough so she’ll sleep.
A three-hour time difference meant late night calls for her, or early morning ones for Wallace. Luckily he liked waking with the sunrise, and she was always up to the wee hours so they didn’t miss their weekly calls— even if the day of them changed. Veronica smiles at his cheerful hello. Ever the optimist, not much lays him low. “For your information, leaving a message with Tina is NOT the same as fulfilling your phone turn.”

“If you kept the hours of a normal person, I wouldn’t have to bother your social secretary.”

“Says the man who wakes up at six a.m.— you know that’s not normal, right?” Veronica talks over his laugh. “Besides, if I led a humdrum life, how would I ever keep you entertained?”

“You could never be boring, V.”

Another smile crosses her face as she abandons the dining room table, carries her second cafe con leche to the back patio and stretches out on a chaise. “I trust Mac made it home safely?”

“She did, but she didn’t seem all that happy with your husband? Muttering something about Logan owing her for babysitting?” His confusion is proof that Mac didn’t offer any details of her flight with Dick.

Veronica snickers, and without explaining, says, “He definitely does - maybe you can parlay that into a new color console television, and my dad can watch baseball at your house.”

“Hmm… and speaking of dads.” There is a long silence. Veronica waits for him to continue, starts to fear the call has been dropped, when he says, “Mac gave me the picture; thank you, V.”

It was one of the first cases Veronica worked with her dad - trying to learn the fate of a pilot shot down over Europe during the war. Hank Fennel, Tuskegee airman, and posthumous winner of the Distinguished Flying Cross, also known as Wallace’s dad.

“You’re welcome. I wanted to give it to you in person, but…”

“Where did you find it?”
The photo was a group of airmen gathered in front of a Curtiss P-40 Warhawk, and the one in the center was definitely Hank. “At Christmas in an antique shop in Paris, of all places.”

When Alicia—a widow with two sons—came into Mars Investigations looking for information about her late husband, Keith took the case, and Veronica got a new best friend. It didn’t take them long to bond over missing parents and the woes of high school.

“You just never know when to quit,” Wallace says with a smile in his voice.

“Persistence is my middle name.”

“Really? I thought it was obstinate, or maybe stubborn,” he intones, dishes clattering in the background as he makes breakfast, right on time. Wallace is nothing if not dependable.

“Those, too.” Veronica sips her coffee. Official channels didn’t offer up any new information on Hank Fennel and his final mission, but it didn’t keep Veronica from looking. Over the years, she’s dragged Logan through countless, out-of-the-way, dusty shops in search of WW2 information. No new leads, but she’d found the photo AND her prison-saving, secret compartment, purse.

“Why didn’t you give it to me on your next visit?”

“Because…” Veronica lets her sentence trail off and sighs, starts again. “You know I want to see you…and my dad, of course, but I… I hate, Neptune.”

“Keith’s going to be disappointed if you don’t come when your case is over.”

An understatement. Veronica wishes she’d never made the hasty promise to visit, because now she has to think of a way to let him down gently. Maybe she could convince Keith to meet her in New York? Bribe him with tickets to see the Dodgers at Ebbets Field? “I’ll figure something out.”


“I’m getting there.” She fills him in on the details, then adds, “Yesterday I searched Kendall’s room and found some of the stolen loot, along with Big Dick’s ledger. But nothing to say she killed him.”

“No smoking gun or bloody clothes?”

“I wish.” She finishes her coffee, glances at the door and debates going inside for her third cup. “When they found his body, there were things missing from his personal effects—wallet, money, hotel room key—and Kendall didn’t have them. The cops probably took the cash, but they wouldn’t have any use for the other stuff.”

She can practically hear the shrug in his tone when he says, “Maybe it was a really nice wallet.”

“Ha, ha, ha.” The snick of the door opening makes her turn. She smiles at Logan and the carafe of coffee he’s carrying, holds up her mug and tells Wallace, “You know, Kendall DID have one of Big Dick’s credit cards. It COULD be proof that she was at the crime scene, either with Cormac, or as the shooter.”

Logan finishes refilling her cup, sets the pot on the table near her elbow, and watches her drink. It is the perfect balance of espresso, warm milk, and sugar. She nods approval, and he drops into the chair across from her.
“Or she took the card from him days earlier,” Wallace says, poking a hole in her theory. “It’s definitely not enough evidence for you to do your vengeful-Veronica routine.”

He’s right, but it doesn’t stop her from pouting. “Spoilsport.”

“No, I’m just keeping you honest, and now since my work here is done, I should get ready for my actual, paying job.”

“I’d gladly pay you with an endless supply of fresh-baked cookies, if you’d move to Cuba already,” she teases, swinging her legs off the lounge chair.

“You’re just not going to be satisfied until we’re ALL living in that big crazy house, are you?”

“Nope” —she sings the word, popping the P loud enough to make Wallace chuckle— “And I usually get my way.” This statement elicits a heavenward look from Logan, as if he’s praying for patience. Veronica sticks out her tongue. His exasperated husband act is so transparent; Logan LOVES watching her bend people to her will.

“Because your husband’s a pushover, but the rest of us are immune to you,” Wallace says, drily.

“Big talk from someone three thousand miles away; I dare you to defy the head tilt and puppy-dog eyes in person.”

“Fly home and we’ll see what happens,” he challenges, and Veronica holds in another sigh. Stalemate. They say their goodbyes—Veronica sending her love to Mac, Wallace agreeing it’s his turn to call next—and she hangs up, stares at the phone.

“You’re going to see him soon,” Logan consoles.

Instead of agreeing, she stands. “Has Remy finished making breakfast?” She doesn’t wait for an answer, returning to the dining room to grab the book from the table, tucks it under her arm, and wanders into the kitchen. Remy is STILL arranging the food on the sideboard. “It’s not an art show.” His eyes go wide, apparently wounded by her critique. To soften the slight, she says, “But it looks amazing.”

Folding a piece of bacon into her mouth, she grabs a plate, loads it with two of Remy’s breakfast baguettes—fresh baked bread stuffed with scrambled eggs, cheese, spicy sausage, and spinach—tops them with avocado. She sits at the table, removes the ledger from under her arm and spreads it open.

“It didn’t sound like you and Wallace were fighting,” Logan says, sprawling in the chair across from her.

“We weren’t.”

“Then are WE still fighting?” He sips his coffee, stares at her over the rim. “Was last night a figment of my imagination? A temporary truce to lull me into a false sense of security?”

“Huh?” Tilting her head, she looks up from the pages, giving him her full attention. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re in the middle of a snit and I don’t know why.”

“I’m not in the middle— oh, you mean Remy.” She shrugs. “I was hungry and he was taking too long; he’d already shooed me out of the kitchen earlier with only a meager cup of coffee and
FRUIT.”

At her outrage, Logan smiles into his mug. “And what is it that has all your attention now?” He touches the corner of the book, fans the pages with his index finger. “It must be important to divide your focus between reading and eating.”

“It’s Big Dick’s ledger.” She leaves the table for juice and more bacon. “I found it in Kendall’s room.”

Logan pouts; his expression almost as woebegone as Remy’s, and Veronica sighs. Who came up with the idea of WOMEN being fragile? Her emotionally delicate flower of a husband slides the book toward him for a closer look. “Why didn’t you tell me yesterday?”

“Because I was still mad at you then.” Veronica helps herself to some sausage and a pancake. “Don’t bother trying to read it, Big Dick used some kind of code.” It is all pages of lines and dots and symbols, but there are strings of numbers. They could be dates, or dollar figures, or both.

“No enigma machine hidden in Kendall’s unmentionables, then?”

Veronica shakes her head, rejoins him at the table. “And YOU should get your mind OFF her unmentionables.”

“The only ones worth thinking about are yours.” Reaching across the table, he runs a finger down the lapel of her robe, parting the folds to reveal skin. “Or the lack of them.” He strokes his knuckles along the curve of her breast. “You know we have HOURS before we need to go to the bank- what say we go back upstairs and continue working on our truce? Hammer out the details?”

Taking hold of his hand, she lifts it to her mouth, kisses his knuckle. “A tempting offer, but we have other things to do.”

He arches an inquisitive brow. “Oh?”

“We need to go re-interview the bartender at Sloppy Joe’s - show him photos of our suspects, and see if he can identify anyone else in the bar with Big Dick that night. Plus”—she takes a healthy bite of baguette, talks as she chews—“I have an idea for smuggling Trina out of town, and we should talk about our plan to rescue those missing women.”

“I noticed you’re using a lot of WE’s and OUR’s instead of, I me, and mine - are we working together now? Did I miss a memo?”

Another bite of her breakfast sandwich buys her time to answer. Working against each other is, not-surprisingly, working against them. Their initial agreement might have been him providing the face of the business, but over the years, Logan has proven himself quite adept at detective work. Her husband is one of the smartest people she knows, and while fun to match wits with him, playing spy versus spy, it is better to have him on her side.

“Don’t get me wrong, I enjoy Clarence’s company, but if I have a choice, I’m always going to pick you,” she says, swallowing her bite of cheesy eggs.

His smile is soft. “I love you too, Ronnie.”

Wrapping the sausage in pancake, she soaks it in warm syrup, and shoves the entire thing in her mouth. “I’ll get dressed, and then we can go.”

Logan frowns, tries to decipher what she said, and then nods. “Are you sure? I think you may have
left some uneaten crumbs behind.”

Miming fake laughter, she grabs a danish from the buffet, and eats it on her way upstairs. The jokes are NOT funny, she’s hungry all the time. During yesterday’s wait for Logan in the security office, she’d cleaned out the guard’s bowl of Baracoa chocolate, and a package of mints from her purse. Any day now, she’d have to start hiding FOOD in the bottom of her bag instead of bearer bonds and secret ledgers.

She selects her outfit—green houndstooth sailor pants with a high waist and a black stretch top—strictly for comfort. Clothes shopping is high on her agenda for today, and not just because she needs looser pants. A pair of round toe, t-strap heels, and a black cloche hat complete her look. She brushes powder on her face, applies lipstick, and adds pearl earrings.

Logan is waiting for her in the front hall, spinning the cigar cutter in circles on top of the humidor. It skitters off the wood box and onto the console table. He picks it up, twirls it around his finger, and sets it back in place, flicks it into another spin. Veronica finds his inability to not fidget endearing. Not that she’ll tell him that, of course, but it still makes her smile.

He looks up as she approaches, takes in her appearance, and kisses her cheek; his hand slides over her hip and settles on her ass. “How do you manage to turn me on just as much fully clothed as you do naked?”

“Because you’re an insatiable rake?”

“That could be it.” He kisses down the side of her neck, sucks the hollow of her clavicle. “I hope your plans don’t take all day because I would very much like a long siesta with my wife before tonight’s festivities.”

“Mmm… I might be able to arrange that.” She gently pushes him away. “But then we’d better get a move on.”

Picking up the keys, he tosses them and catches the ring mid-air, whistles on his way from the house.

The Speedster is parked in front— all newly-waxed radiant sunshine. It hurts her eyes. “We need a new car,” Veronica says, settling in the passenger seat, and pinning her hat to her head. “One that isn’t so BRIGHT.”

“It’s a safety feature, people can see me coming.”

“Yeah, from SPACE.” She dons her sunglasses. “We need to get Trina out of Cuba sooner rather than later. If Trocani is serious about finding her, it won’t be long until he comes looking for you.” Veronica figures he’ll visit their office first, and then the house. The apartment at the FOCSA is owned on paper by Lynn Lester, but that deception only affords them a few days. “Clarence knows a pilot with a P-38 Lightning who’s agreed to fly her as far as Florida.”

“When did you arrange that?”

“While you were getting your much-needed beauty sleep.” She readjusts the lap belt, shifts in her seat to face him. “We just need to get her to his airstrip in Agramonte and I’m thinking we do it Sunday, during the parade.” Veronica outlines the plan for him.

“The only flaw? Agramonte is too far and I am NOT spending seven hours in the car with my sister.”

“Chicken,” Veronica scoffs with a chuckle. “But, don’t worry; I know Trina’s your kryptonite.
You only need to drive her out of the city and transfer her into Clarence’s care; he’ll take her the rest of the way.”

His gaze slides over her. “Why’s Clancey being so agreeable?”

“Consider it penance; he’s trying to make amends with you for yesterday. NOT that he has any reason to- it was all MY idea, and he TRIED to stop me.”

“Sure he did,” Logan mutters under his breath, making the turn onto Trocadero. “Was that before or after you risked your neck spying on Rossi?”

“Risk?” She waves away his words. “We ate lunch in the car and listened to the radio. The only ‘risk’ involved was choking on a piece of chicharrones, or getting trichinosis from undercooked pork.”

“Both perfectly reasonable concerns since you’re like a trouble magnet.”

“Says the pot to the kettle.” Before the conversation can devolve into another argument, Veronica changes the subject. “So after Sloppy Joe’s we’ll go to El Encanto for dresses, and then the bank.”

She’s not looking forward to seeing Madison, and she expects the feeling will be mutual. Their ruse is opening a new account—a minor trust—which will have them meeting the same bank officer. Veronica only hopes Madison doesn’t cause a scene. Fingers crossed her newfound wealth will temper her usual bitchiness.

Logan makes the right on Zulueta, coasts down the street. When they arrive at the bar, Delgado is still inside. This time she knocks on the glass door, mimes unlocking it, and smiles, holding up two fingers to indicate she’ll be quick. Fabio glances over his shoulder at some unseen person or thing behind him, and then complies with her request.

“Remember me? Veronica Echolls?”

Fabio nods. “The woman detective.” There’s a disapproving frown on his face when he turns to Logan. “And you are the husband who lets her do this?”

“What can I say?” Logan hangs his head, slumps his shoulders, playing his role as beleaguered husband with panache. “She’s a headstrong woman.”

They exchange the LOOK Veronica loathes; the one that implies Logan should keep a tighter rein on his wife. She is so glad her husband doesn’t actually believe such nonsense. “We brought the photo I mentioned? The one of the American tourist - Richard Casablancas?”

He offers his condolences to Logan on the loss of his friend, leads them toward the black mahogany bar; Veronica withdraws the picture, reminds him of the date of the shooting. His eyes cloud over, strokes his mustache while he thinks. When he finally answers, he addresses Logan. “He was here, I think.”

“Was he alone?” Logan asks, following Fabio’s gaze to a table near the cigar case. “Maybe he was here with one of these women?” Taking the rest of the photos from Veronica, he shuffles the order, and lays them on the bar one at a time. Madison, Sadie, and then Kendall.

Delgado studies each one, shakes his head.

“What about either of these men?” Logan puts down a photo of first Dick and then Cormac.
“No, I have not seen them.” Fabio pushes them to the side and turns his attention back to the others. “There may have…” More mustache stroking as he glances toward the door, and then at a stool in the corner. “I cannot be sure? We are very busy at night, and…” Again his voice trails off as he considers his response.

Feeling her impatience, Logan gives Veronica a quelling look, takes her hand, and rubs her knuckles with his thumb. Tells Fabio, “Anything you can remember will be helpful.”

“There was a woman—not with your friend—but at the end of the bar, alone. American, like him, and beautiful, but…” Pursing his lips, he absently taps a finger on the edge of Kendall’s photo. “No, I’m sorry. It may be that night or a different one, I’m not certain.”

“Thank you for—” Logan starts, and Veronica interrupts, “What happened with the woman?”

Fabio is nonplussed by her taking over the conversation; he glances at Logan, unsure if he should answer. Without saying anything, Logan takes a step back, putting Veronica in front of him. He mirrors her position, and waits.

It’s a subtle signal - I have no problem ceding control to my wife, because I respect her; now you do the same and answer her question. Message received, Fabio says, “She got...upset? Angry? Left the bar without paying. When I went after her, another gentleman settled her check, and followed her out.”

A stranger coming to Kendall’s aid is not hard to imagine, but it’s difficult to believe Delgado wouldn’t recognize her. As Vinnie put it, she was a ‘real looker’. Tracking her down had been easy, in part, because she left an... impression. “Can you tell me anything about her? Blonde, brunette? Tall, short?”

He digs in his heels, refuses to say any more, folding his arms over his chest, and shaking his head. Veronica tries a different route. “What about the man who paid her tab?” She taps the photo of Cormac. “Could it have been him?”

“Not him, but that type, yes,” he says, turning away. “I have to finish here and go home.” Impatient for them to be gone, Fabio taps his foot as she gathers up the photos. He escorts them out, shutting and locking the door the second they’re through it.

“Not exactly helpful...or charming,” Veronica says, reaching the car first. “He seemed nicer the other day.”

“Well, his boss was shooting him dirty looks the entire time we talked.” Logan slides behind the wheel, but doesn’t start the engine. “What do you think about the woman at the bar? Same night as Big Dick or completely irrelevant?”

Veronica shrugs. “Something linked the two events in his mind so it could be important to us; I’m just not sure how. He didn’t identify any of our suspects, though.” But he DID say the man who paid the check was the same ‘type’ of guy as Cormac - con man, hustler, low-level thug. The sort of man Kendall COULD be associated with. “Maybe she wore a disguise? A wig, or a hat to conceal her hair, and a high-necked collar and tight corset to hide her other ‘assets’?”

“Possible. And speaking of disguises…” Logan starts the car, pulls away from the curb. “Dye or a wig?”

“Wig would be better; I can style it to match.”

The one-way streets make the drive take longer than walking. Logan loops around the Hotel Plaza
to take Neptuno over to Galiano and El Encanto. “Trocani suggested that Lansky would put an end”—she slices her hand across her throat—”to Kendall and Cormac for running cons in his casinos. Think Big Dick got caught in the middle of something, and Lansky is responsible for his death? It could explain the speedy execution of the supposed guilty parties.”

“If that’s the case, we’re never going to solve it. Because you are NOT going to try to bring down the entire mob, right?”

“Nope… well, not today.” She grins, pats his hand resting on the gearshift. “For now, I’ll concentrate on just a tiny portion of it, namely Rossi and his bordellos. I gave Clarence that flyer you found in Oscar’s apartment, he’ll work on finding out who met with the bodyguard.”

“You WERE busy this morning, and here I thought I’d completely tuckered you out last night.”

Her grin turns soft. “I did sleep VERY WELL.” She caresses his wrist, lets her hand drop to his lap, and strokes her way up his thigh. “We should have early nights way more often.”

“Are you trying to domesticate me, Mrs. Echolls?”

“God, no. If I wanted tame and boring, I could’ve stayed in Neptune and married someone like Duncan.” She shudders. “The horror is just too great to contemplate.”

“I knew you liked my wicked ways.”

“Almost as much as you love mine.” Her fingers glide over the front of his pants, eliciting a growl from her husband. Pulling back, she hugs the car door, safely out of his reach. “Now let’s do our shopping. Maybe if we hurry, there will be time for me to, uh, model some clothes for you.”

Two pairs of gray plaid cigarette pants, matching black halter tops with pointed collars, bright red sun hats, kitten heels, sunglasses, and one wig later, they finish their errand - without their usual shopping-related coda. Logan’s been broody and hiding it all day, and the romantic thwarting has just made it worse.

“Maybe I should take a page from Rossi’s primer…get a rabbit’s foot or something,” he mutters, driving just a little too fast down the road towards the FOCSA. “Of all the dressing rooms, on all the floors in all the world, SHE has to be working MINE, again.”

Veronica laughs, secretly entertained by the way acid-tongued Logan Echolls let a tiny shopgirl harangue him. “That’s what you get for trying to engage in… how did she put it? Hanky-panky with assorted blondes inside her respectable store?”

“Not assorted blondes…a very specific gorgeous one.”

“Well since you’re already hot and bothered, why don’t YOU take these packages into our sweatbox of an office? I’ll wait here.”

“Afraid I can’t do that, muffin.” She arches a brow at his mock-serious tone, and he continues with a glint in his eye. “You didn’t try anything on. I feel like this whole ruse will fall apart if the clothes are baggy. In fact, it’s my duty, as your husband, to ensure the fit.”

Veronica’s been married long enough to recognize this persistence—he’s at that level of antsiness where his need for skin-on-skin becomes insatiable. When it’s satisfied, he’s lazy and contented as a well-groomed cat. When it isn’t, he grows reckless and impulsive and runs off with Weevil to get
Letting him risk his neck for dumb reasons isn’t part of her plan today. And honestly, she could use some marital togetherness herself. They’ve been squaring off for weeks now over what she should and shouldn’t do; it’s starting to chafe. And sex is the most enjoyable way to reaffirm closeness without TALKING.

“Hmm… I suppose we can’t let THAT happen. With this scheme, appearances are everything.” She climbs from the car, closes the door and leans on it while she waits for Logan to get the bags from the trunk. “You should probably inspect this outfit from all angles. No sense spending money, if you’re not completely satisfied.” Veronica slips her arm into the crook of his elbow for the trip upstairs.

“I knew you’d see it my way,” he whispers, kissing the shell of her ear. “And may I add, I do so admire your pragmatism.” Shifting the bags to one hand, he unlocks the office door.

The first thing she notices is the new piece of furniture—an antique partner’s desk in a rich mahogany. Its surface is twice the size of her former one, almost as big as a twin bed. There are two cabinets on one side, drawers on the other, all with gleaming brass hardware and locks. “Oh Logan, it’s so BIG!”

“Words a husband loves to hear.” Pressing his chest to her back, he cradles her hips between his palms, and bends his head to kiss the side of her neck. “It’s an antique, formerly belonging to the Earl of Sussex. There’s even a secret compartment.”

“Where?” she asks, running her fingers along the edge in search of a button or release lever. “No wait, don’t tell me, I want to find it on my own.”

Logan chuckles. “How about we play hot and cold?” Picking her up, he sits her on the corner. “Currently, you’re VERY hot.” He stands between her knees to kiss her; his hands smooth down her spine and over the curve of her hips.

Veronica wraps her arms around his neck, buries her fingers in his hair. She loves him like this, ardent and naughty…and even more, she loves teasing him until he loses his cool. “How hot?”

“Mmm, smoking.”

With a gentle shove, she pushes him away, slides off the desk to search, opening drawers and turning knobs. She gets on the floor, crawls into the kneehole.

“Getting cold.”

“I wish. This office is like an—” A click followed by the whirl of a fan silences the word ‘oven’. She pops her head out from beneath the desk in time to hear the clunk of the compressor turning on. The air conditioner hums, blowing cool air across her face.

“Oh!” she says, turning gratefully into the blessed breeze. Forgets, for the moment, about the tantalizing compartment as she approaches the giant wall unit and runs fingertips across the vents, closes her eyes. “I just want to stand here and bask in this forever!”

“Forever might be a stretch.” He sidles up behind her, pressing a palm flat to the wall on either side. “Since we have an urgent appointment. But for a little while, feel free to bask. In FACT, you’d probably enjoy this more if you weren’t wearing so many clothes.”

Touching his lips to her temple, he begins to push up her shirt, big hands smoothing and kneading
bared skin with the total absorption that makes her insane. She tries to turn, to kiss him, but he holds her still; palms her breast with just the right amount of gentleness as he unbuttons her pants and dips fingers inside.

“You’re right,” she murmurs, shivering as he traces the lightest of circles around her clit, sinks gentle teeth into her throat. “This feels wonderful. You should take your clothes off too, see for yourself.”

“Why Mrs. Echolls!” There’s a hint of laughter in his voice. “I thought you’d never ask.”

She lets him strip her while she grips the air conditioner’s frame, her nipples knotting hard from the cold and his touch. He kisses down her hip and the back of her leg, licks the sensitive bend of her knee as he removes her shoes. Then, after a moment’s frantic rustling he’s back, setting a visitor’s chair beside her, pulling her flush with his warm and muscled belly.

“Up,” he says, scooching the chair into position before the fan. He helps her onto her knees on the velvet-covered seat. “You look delectable from this angle, but you’re about five inches too short.”

“Psht, you’re just too tall,” she says, as his hand begins its leisurely massage again, stoking lust and heat. She arches back to curl her fingers through his hair, and he runs his lips along her jaw, nips her ear. Cants her hips up with the pressure of his palm so he can slide slowly, torturously inside.

“Maybe,” he says, voice strained as he works gently deeper. She braces herself again to take him, and oh GOD she loves the way he feels, wholly seated within. “But I saw your face when you first noticed the new desk, Veronica. You love big things that belong to you completely. The bigger the better, in my opinion.”

She bares her teeth in a snarl as the fingers stroking her spread apart an inch, avoiding direct stimulation to intensify her build-up; his heavy thrusts pick up speed, and he pinches her nipple in time. His lips find her cheek, soft and hot, the gentlest of kisses, and it’s too much, too delicious. She comes all around him with a growl of satisfaction, squeezing the vent so hard her nails clack against the metal.

Making a soft noise, hungry and overwhelmed, he spills. Thrusts a dozen more times, as if it feels too good to quit, before slumping heavily across her back, face pressed to her nape.

“You’re so beautiful,” he says into her skin, running a palm up her torso to cup her jaw, turn her face for his kiss. She opens to him, ardent, and he smiles against her mouth. “We really ought to check the fit of that outfit, for real--but I’d honestly rather look at you just like this.”

“Perv,” she says, and he laughs but doesn’t deny it. “I can’t believe you bought me a historically significant desk with a secret compartment, then made me forget all about it. YOU have serious skills.”

“I’m honored beyond words to rank higher than your mystery.” He kisses her shoulder, then pads nude to the office restroom to run water over a hand towel.

Climbing off her chair, she admires the rear-view, then turns her attention to the momentarily-neglected desk. It’s amazingly-well crafted, no obvious seams or joins to mark the door; she has to lie under the kneehole, facing up, to spot the hinge where it attaches. Then twist and pull every knob and decoration, before finding the trigger button at the center of a fleur-de-lis.

“Three minutes,” Logan says, when she stands, gesturing dramatically at his watch and winking.
He approaches to kiss her eyelids, washes her sex with the warm cloth. “I’ll have to send a note of reprimand to Christie’s, then work harder to fool you next time.”

“The desk really is wonderful,” she says. “Think of all the contraband I can hide. How can I adequately express my gratitude?”

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out.” He strokes a knuckle along her chin, smiling faintly and fondly. “You’re frighteningly resourceful. But raincheck on that, honey bun. Right now we’ve got to make tracks for the bank.”

Banco de Creditos is in an arcade on the basement level of the Sevilla hotel. To compensate for the lack of natural light, it is overly bright. The fluorescent lamps make the tall marble columns and white tile floor practically glow. Private offices are windowed, and an abundance of potted plants are strategically placed to simulate the outdoors.

Veronica almost walks past Madison. It is the incongruity of the bitchy teenager from memory compared to the woman trying to get a bottle in the mouth of a cranky baby. The voice—bossy and irritating—is what makes the two versions click together. “Here, you take him; he likes you better anyway.” Madison shoves the baby into the arms of her companion - a slight Filipino woman with dark hair and a generous smile. She coos at the baby, gently rocking him until he takes the proffered bottle.

“Madison?” Veronica fakes surprise, widening her eyes and letting her jaw drop. “What are you doing here in Cuba?”

“As if you don’t already know, Miss-sticks-her-nose in everyone’s business.” The shrill, nasal tone makes the baby’s forehead pucker, and he lets out a reedy cry. Heads turn to stare. “Can’t you keep him quiet?” Madison hisses at the nanny.

“I’m trying,” she answers, standing and moving off to the side as the baby’s cries grow louder. Logan follows, gaze riveted to the squirming bundle; his expression a mix of fascination and fear. “You want to hold him?” The nanny offers, desperate, and Logan’s face morphs into one of just panic.

Turning back to Madison, Veronica says, “I’d heard you were pregnant, but I didn’t realize you already had the baby.”

“Three weeks ago.” Madison is watching Logan who is holding the baby in outstretched arms, unsure what to do with him. “It was horrible. I had to have a C-section and it left a SCAR.”

Feeling the oncoming eyeroll, Veronica focuses on Logan. He’s cradling the now-quiet baby to his chest, stroking a finger down one tiny cheek. Raising his face, his eyes meet hers, tender and soft. Veronica takes a step closer to him, smiles.

“His name’s Donald Junior - Donny,” Madison says, breaking the moment. “I named him after his father, my future husband.” She flashes the ring on her finger. It is large and gaudy. Exactly the type of…

Veronica frowns at the diamond. “Donald?”

“Neptune’s BEST sheriff.” Madison smirks at her not-subtle dig at Keith. “You must remember him, he arrested you both countless times. Of course, he’s not going to be sheriff long; after we’re married, he’s going to run for mayor - he’s got political aspirations.”
Veronica doubts Don Lamb could even SPELL aspirations, never mind have them. “What about Dick?”

“As if I was ever going to marry him, when I could have a real man instead.” Her gloating over Lamb like he’s a catch makes Veronica’s eyeroll impossible to contain. Madison scowls at her, shoots a pointed look at the bank officer’s door. “I’m just here to get what’s mine and go home.”

“I’m surprised you waited so long,” Logan says, drily.

The sarcasm is lost on her. “I would’ve been here sooner, but in my delicate condition, I needed rest. Being pregnant and giving BIRTH is not easy, you know.” Veronica covers her derisive snort with a cough, and Madison’s eyes narrow. “My doctor had me in bed for WEEKS; he didn’t even give me permission to fly until yesterday.”

If that’s true, it puts her in the clear for Big Dick’s murder. Not that she was high on the suspect list. Veronica takes another step toward Logan, glances at the baby. He could be three weeks old, or three months, she has no clue. But he’s cute and pudgy and really seems to like Logan, staring at him with wide eyes while he sucks down his bottle.

Poor kid. Madison for a mom, deadbeat Dick for a dad, and now Lamb as his stepfather. Plus, as if all that wasn’t bad enough, he has to go through life saddled with the name Donny. The world is not a kind place.

Veronica strokes the little tuft of fine blond hair, asks Madison, “Who told you Big Dick was dead?”

“His lawyer. He came to the house with trust documents, told me about the money, and said I’d better collect it fast, before the police found out.” Her face contorts with worry, brow furrowing and lips stretching into a tight line. “You’re not going to tell them, are you?” She clutches at her neck. “Big Dick was paying for my doctor, the nanny, rent, and—” Remembering who she’s pleading with, her mouth clamps shut; she raises her chin, folds her arms across her chest, and glares, challenging.

“Wait, are you telling us the esteemed Sheriff of Neptune hasn’t already informed the Feds?” Logan asks with a smirk. “How shocking!”

“I, uh...he doesn’t, um...” Madison sputters.

She’s saved from her floundering by the arrival of the bank manager, who apologizes for keeping her waiting. He introduces himself as Javier Rodriguez before asking, “Do you have your key?”

Madison removes a thin chain from her neck, brandishes the small silver key dangling from its center. It’s weirdly shaped, with irregular-sized grooves on both sides of its blade—this must be for the safe deposit box.

Javier’s gaze briefly rests on each of them, lingers for a moment on Logan with the baby, nods to himself. His eyes move to the nanny, and then land on Veronica. A slight frown mars his brow when he’s unable to identify her role in the group, but he says, “Follow me.”

Veronica picks up the diaper bag, slings it over her shoulder, and falls in step behind Madison. There’s no way she’s going to miss the opening of the box. They follow Javier across the bank to the teller windows. There’s a pebbled-glass door at the end of the counter, which he unlocks and holds open, letting them precede him into a wide vestibule. Once they are through, he lets the door
fall closed.

“After we’re done in here, you’ll just need to come to my office to sign some paperwork, and I’ll have the teller prepare your check,” Javier says, leading them into the vault.

There is only one wall of boxes. The top rows are small boxes, the middle rows, medium-sized, and the bottom brass drawers are deep and wide. They’re all dual-control, and Javier withdraws the bank’s matching key from his front jacket pocket.

Veronica takes a seat at the oak table in the center of the room, juts her chin at one of the empty chairs, indicating Logan should do the same. The corner of his mouth curls upward at her brazenness, but he complies, folding himself onto one of the cushioned chairs, and shifting the baby to his other arm.

She divides her attention between observing as Javier selects the correct box—a small one in the top right corner—and watching Logan play nursemaid. No longer nervous, he looks like a pro, feeding and rocking Donny. That is until the nanny drapes a towel over the shoulder of his bespoke suit, and murmurs, “For the spit up.”

There’s no hiding her smile when Logan tries to return the baby and the nanny pretends to misunderstand, taking Donny only long enough to settle him on Logan’s shoulder and demonstrate patting.

Madison hovers over Javier, waiting for him to set the box on the table. She flips open the lid; her avidity rapidly devolving to disappointment when she sees the contents. “That’s it? Worthless paper?” Her lower lip slides forward in a pout and she blows a strand of hair from her forehead. “I can’t believe I waited an hour for this.”

“Madison,” Veronica starts, reaching for the box. “This isn’t just paper, these are bearer bonds.” At her blank expression, Veronica lifts the banded stack from the box. She thumbs through them doing the math. “They’re worth a hundred grand.”

“Really?” Madison snatches them away, holds them with both hands to read their face.

Swallowing her snarky comment about sounding out the words, Veronica empties the rest of the box’s contents. There are photos—Big Dick and Betina on their wedding day, Dick Jr as a baby, and then as a toddler with baby brother, Cassidy—Veronica sets them aside without looking at the rest. She assumes they’re meant for Donny, but she’s surprised by Big Dick’s show of nostalgia.

Echoing her thought, Logan softly sings, “If I only had a heart, I’d be tender, I’d be gentle, and awful sentimental.”

Veronica snickers, withdraws an envelope from the Prudential Insurance Company of America. Inside are three whole life policies. The first one is on Big Dick’s life in the amount of one million dollars. She finds the declaration page. Dick is listed as sole beneficiary and there’s a double indemnity clause. Veronica puts it atop the photos.

“What’s that?” Madison asks, reaching across the table.

“An insurance policy.” Her eyes light up at the possibility of more money, and Veronica douses the flame by adding, “It’s for Dick.” The next policy is actually on Dick’s life, and the last is Cassidy’s.

Circling the table, Madison leans over her shoulder for a closer look. “Am I the beneficiary on any of them?”
“No.” Veronica shows her the declaration page for each, proves she’s not listed anywhere on the policies. “We can give these to Dick next time we’re in Neptune,” she offers.

“Fine, whatever.” She yanks the baby out of Logan’s arms, startling him awake, and he begins to wail. Madison talks over the crying. “Let’s go to your office for my check so I can get out of here.” The nanny’s pained expression, as she takes the burp cloth from Logan, speaks volumes about both Madison’s parenting, and Donny’s future. “Come on, Tala; I haven’t got all day.”

Shaking her head, Veronica scoops up the papers, preparing to put them in her purse when the bank manager says, “I’m only authorized to let Miss Sinclair have the contents of the box.”

Pretending not to hear him over the sound of Donny’s squalling, she shoves the policies into the zipper compartment, and raises her voice to an unnecessary level. “We should really be on our way too, dear”—she slips her arm through Logan’s—“We have that dinner party to get to. Fifteen guests! What was I thinking?”

She drags Logan from the room and out of the bank, prattling on about this imaginary dinner party while darting looks over her shoulder to make sure they weren’t followed. They don’t slow until they’re outside and nearing the car. Logan laughs at her scatterbrained-blond ruse. “Did we just rob a bank, Bonnie?”

“May have, Clyde.” She hops into the passenger seat, casts another look over her shoulder. The coast remains clear. No screaming bank manager or gun-toting security guard come rushing from the hotel.

“Relax, I don’t think he’s going to chase us down for some old family photos.” Logan takes his time sliding behind the wheel and starting the car.

“Good thing, because you’re a lousy getaway driver,” she says, pointing at the gas pedal. “Want to step on it?”

He does her bidding, putting the car in gear and pulling away from the curb. “Where to now?”

“Obispo Street, near our old office,” she answers, taking out her pilfered loot.

The policy for Big Dick holds little interest to her, but Dick will be happy to know he can continue his unfettered life of excess with an extra two million in his pocket. She skips to the beneficiaries on Dick’s policy—Cassidy, Big Dick, and one Kendall Lacey Shiflett—Veronica can just imagine his reaction when he reads that bit of news.

Logan glances at the papers spread on her lap, then returns his eyes to the road. “Are you going to share the spoils?”

“Big Dick’s policy was recent; it looks like he bought it right before fleeing the country. Since he was taking all the stolen money with him, maybe he got this as a nest egg for his firstborn? He might’ve planned to fake his death at some point so Dick could inherit?”

“Why not? What’s a little insurance fraud on top of all his other crimes?” He slows as they cross Virtudes and approach the park. “But unless we’re back on the idea of Dick being the killer, which we know he’s not, the policies don’t really tell us much.”

“No, but it is interesting that Kendall isn’t a beneficiary. What is it you’re always telling me - it takes a con to know a con? I don’t think Big Dick trusted her at all; he hid the bearer bonds, and kept her off his insurance.”
“Well, why would he? Put her on the insurance, I mean. They weren’t married, and I seriously doubt their relationship was based on love.”

“Because she’s listed on both Dick Jr and Cassidy’s policies.” It confirms her theory - Kendall assisting with the coverup of Cassidy’s suicide in order to collect the money. “Their policies are older, obviously. They were purchased together the summer before the accident. Face value for Cassidy’s was five hundred thousand—no double indemnity clause—and it was split three-ways: Big Dick, Dick, and Kendall.”

He gives a low whistle. “Not bad for a day’s work. Wonder how she talked her way into benefitting from the death of her lover’s son.”

“You sound impressed.”

“You have to admit…” With a glance at her face, he stops talking, changes direction. “The only thing it proves is a motive to want Dick and Beav dead, not Big D.”

“I know,” she sighs. “So much for following the money. The only people who stood to gain anything from his death are actually innocent. Well, except for Kendall, she DID find some of the bearer bonds.”

Logan makes the two left turns, pulls to the side of the road. The stretch of Calle Obispo she wants is a pedestrian-only thoroughfare. “Going to tell me why we’re here?”

“For fried banana chips; I’m hungry, and you didn’t feed me lunch.” She closes her eyes, rests her head on the seat. “Now be a dear and jog up the street to Mateo’s cart for two cones.”

The car rocks with the closing of his door. “Anything else?”

“Surprise me.” She tilts her face to the sun, tries dozing in its warmth while she waits for her food, but sleep is elusive. Solving Big Dick’s murder, rescuing Bubbles and Trina, disgracing Perry, saving the missing women from Rossi’s bordello - all of them compete for her thoughts. She’s missing something. It’s there, right on the edge of her consciousness. She prods at it, turning the pieces.

Logan’s soft, “Hey,” makes her eyes snap open. He leans over the car, gently touches her face. “Tired?” A finger traces along her jaw and tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“Mm-hmm.” She stretches, turns her face into his hand, kisses his palm. “I think I’m going to take a nap when we get home; it’s going to be a late night.”

“You could stay in tonight, leave me to deal with the viper’s nest.”

“And give Suzy a chance to MAMBO with you? I think not.” She takes the paper cone of fried bananas, eyes the large bag he’s holding. “Besides, I have a message I need to deliver in the form of a dress.” His brow quirks, inquisitive, and she ignores it, wiggles her fingers for the rest of her food.

With a sigh, he puts the sack on her lap, circles the hood of the car and reseats himself behind the wheel. “Siesta time?”

“For me, you have other things to do.” She unpacks her lunch. Bocaditos—tiny sweet rolls with a spread of ham, cream cheese, and pimentos—tamales wrapped in corn husks, and one of her favorites, papa rellenas, fried mashed potatoes stuffed with ground beef. “Are you really going to let me eat in your car?” Veronica asks, taking a large bite of the potato ball, and savoring the spicy
picadillo.

Logan winces as a piece of green pepper falls on her leg, narrowly missing his leather upholstery. “It doesn’t appear that I have a choice.”

“Not unless you want me to starve.” She unties a tamale, eats the stuffing with her fingers. “So I’ve been thinking about our plan to get proactive and throw a private party. Clearly, you can’t be the host because Rossi would see through that immediately. And, make no mistake, the women might be part of Amletto’s stable, but Rossi’s sure to hear about it, especially after they disappear.”

“Right,” he growls in sync with the engine. Jamming his foot on the clutch, he palms the gear shift into second, speeds up. “How long have you been following Rossi, Veronica?”

Her first instinct is to prevaricate, but she reminds herself they’re in this together. Partners. “About a month ago. Clarence has this friend, Loretta. She used to be—”

“I met her; she’s the bookkeeper at Casa Marina.”

“Now, but before that she was one of the working girls at Casa Estella with her sister Tamara. Rossi didn’t like them in the same house, didn’t trust their whispering, so he split them up. It shook Loretta. She was sure he was up to something, and asked Clarence to look into it.”

“Clarence, not you.”

“Logan.” She uses the warning tone; the one that lets him know he’s skirting too close to the edge. He mutters a ‘sorry’ and she continues, “Anyway. We started investigating Rossi’s operation—how many bordellos he owned, his place in the organization, his relationship with Lansky—then the women went missing, and you know the rest.”

He turns onto the Malecon, shifts into fourth and silently broods. Veronica lets it lie, finishes eating and cleans up the wrappings. When the quiet stretches too thin, he says, “When and where are we going to throw this fete?”

“Not a hotel - too risky. It needs to be a private residence, some place outside of the city, remote so the girls will have to travel. This way, when we stage a party-ending distraction, it will take a while for their transport to return, and we can smuggle them out in the interim.”

“And where exactly are we going to get this remote, luxurious house?” he asks, tapping his fingers on the wheel, and then fiddling with the turn signal.

Veronica shrugs. “Think Ramon would help us out?”

“For a price.”

“Well, from experience, I know you can be VERY persuasive.” Her hand glides up his thigh. “So, take him to his favorite bistro and plead our case.”
Logan knows he’s officially a mess when he can’t stop fiddling with the silverware.

Whatever he dreamed was forgotten when he woke, but he’s been plagued by premonitions of doom all day—the gloomy mood won’t leave him. He’s pretty sure Veronica wrote him off as clingy this morning, since she’s far too industrious to brood. But tonight’s Nat King Cole at the Tropicana…the Rome towards which all unpleasant roads lead.

Setting down the fork he’s twirling, Logan tosses back his neat gin and gestures for a refill. Ramon’s supposed to meet him here at the Monseigneur, to enjoy ‘cocktails after work’—polite code for ‘plan Veronica’s party, which could get them all shot’. There’s no telling what he’ll need to pony up in payment; something big, surely. Ramon’s third-generation Criollo, he’s almost as rich as Duncan. With him it’s never about cash.

With a sigh, Logan slumps back, gazing ill-temperedly at his normally-calming surroundings. The Monseigneur’s an elegant French bistro with white furniture and black floors, red velvet upholstery and robin’s-egg-blue accents. Everything’s trimmed in silver, from the molding to the elaborate wall sconces, and silver urns filled with red roses adorn each surface. The food here is excellent, not at all pretentious, but he’s too stressed to eat. He accepts and drains his second drink, in preparation for ordering a third, just as the door swishes open and Ramon strides inside.


“Don’t tempt me.” Logan picks up the fucking fork again as the man hurries off, then sets it, determined, down. “I have a full, and probably unpleasant, evening ahead.”
“Yes, Nat King Cole, wasn’t it?” Ramon smiles--Logan’s trials are, to him, a source of entertainment. “A legendary performer. Perhaps the quality of the music will console you.”

“No doubt,” Logan says drily. “Just like that last cigarette consoles a prisoner before the firing squad takes aim.”

Ramon laughs, urbane as always. “We must strive for humor exactly this way, during such trying times.” Accepting a frosty bottle from the waiter, he pours two healthy slugs. “Now, since neither of our schedules permits leisurely gossip, of the kind we both prefer--” he pauses to sip “--let’s discuss our most pressing endeavor.”

“So you’ve decided to help me?” Logan sighs relief as the first swallow cools, then warms, and the calming blur of intoxication takes the edge off angst.

“Why would you doubt?” Ramon tugs a silver ashtray closer, lights a cigarette. Offers the case to Logan, who waves it away. “You and I, we have a beautiful friendship, like those men in the Bogart movie. And perhaps my chivalrous streak is larger than I believed--the idea of lovely young ladies dying distresses me.”

“We’ll need a private residence in which to schedule the soiree.” Logan traces a finger through the condensation on his glass. “Somewhere isolated so there’s no traffic, or neighbors to witness a scene. Specific girls have to be hired as entertainment. And we’ve got to dream up a party-killing crisis ugly enough to scare away guests, so the women in question can be rescued.”

“My family owns a villa on Varadero Beach that should serve.” Ramon exhales smoke thoughtfully towards the ceiling. “Somewhere isolated so there’s no traffic, or neighbors to witness a scene. Specific girls have to be hired as entertainment. And we’ve got to dream up a party-killing crisis ugly enough to scare away guests, so the women in question can be rescued.”

“Acere, I can’t play white knight to six. I don’t have the cachet to tangle with the mob…not even for the world’s largest favor. One woman, sure, I can help her disappear; I have a plan in mind which might also swat a persistent fly. But the rest of the girls go back to the Sevilla after. They can’t disappear on my watch with no explanation.”

Logan shakes his head, smoothing a thumb over the corner of his mustache. “Acere, I can’t play white knight to six. I don’t have the cachet to tangle with the mob…not even for the world’s largest favor. One woman, sure, I can help her disappear; I have a plan in mind which might also swat a persistent fly. But the rest of the girls go back to the Sevilla after. They can’t disappear on my watch with no explanation.”

Logan nods, disappointed but unsurprised. “And what favor would you like to request, in return for all this help?”

“Something quite simple, for a man of your political connections.” Ramon smiles, faintly, crushing out the spent cigarette. “An American passport. So when—not IF anymore, amigo, comprendes? WHEN things go to hell here, I can climb on a plane with my expatriate associates and leave, funds intact.”

Logan absorbs the mingled request and warning in thoughtful silence. Drains his drink, glad for the emotional buffer. “There’s an old friend I can call,” he says finally, with a humor-free smirk. “That donkey story Dick mentioned may actually come in handy.”

He offers a hand to Ramon. His friend shakes it, then pulls a business card from his pocket and scribbles on the back. “Have the lovely Tina messenger photographs of the women you want hired,
no later than six—I’ll make some inquiries, issue invitations. And be at this address tomorrow at nine.” Handing over the card, he adds, “Dress well. But in clothes you don’t mind discarding, after.”

“I appreciate this, Ramon.” Logan pockets the card, adjusts his cuffs as he stands. “Truly. I hate asking you to stick your neck out, but it’s so important to Veronica.”

“Anything for your lovely wife.” Ramon pours himself another drink. “Her brilliant smile of gratitude will be ample payment…although I feel sure you’ll compensate me anyway.”

Logan grins. Ramon toasts him, takes a leisurely sip. Shows every indication, as Logan leaves, of working his way through the bottle until life somehow interrupts.

Clarence is parked outside in the Rolls, waiting to drive him home—it seemed best to compare notes before planning elaborate rescues. He glances over as Logan slides into the seat beside him, silently lifts his brows.

“Ramon will save Loretta’s sister.” Logan tilts his head back and shuts his eyes. “In return for a US passport. And he’s willing to invite the rest of the known victims to his party. But he won’t spend social capital liberating others, not for any price.”

“Then we’ll make alternate arrangements.” Clarence puts the car smoothly in gear. “I have a snitch within Amletto’s organization. Once I find out where, when, and how the women will be transported, I’ll plot an extraction.”

“This is where.” Logan removes the card from his pocket, hands it over. “And tomorrow night is when, an invitation should arrive this evening. Is Veronica still sleeping off yesterday’s hair-raising adventure?”

“She was ten minutes ago, when I telephoned to check for messages,” Clarence tells him. “You need to quit worrying she overtaxed herself. The girl’s stronger than she looks.”

“Well, she’d have to be,” Logan says, reasonably, peeking at the setting sun, re-shutting his eyes. “She seems, and sounds, like an adorable cupcake—the kind the world crushes without trying.”

“Nothing’s going to crush Veronica Mars.” Clarence’s voice holds a faint trace of admiration. “Echolls. Not so long as she feels free.”

Logan nods, acknowledging the deft warning. But he plays possum all the way home in lieu of reply, rehearsing ways to request his next favor.

XXXXX

When they arrive, he locks himself in the library, pours one more fortifying gin. Sips quietly while he dons the emotional armor needed for revisiting his checkered past. Finally, he feels sufficiently cold to pick up the phone and dial.

“Kane residence.” A girlish voice answers on the third ring—he’s slow to pinpoint it as Meg’s. He hasn’t spoken to her in years, and she sounds less cheerful than he remembers.

“Ah, the lovely former Miss Manning.” Logan leans back, crossing his feet on the desk. Slips into his Disgrace-of-Neptune persona as if falling backwards from a ledge. “Congratulations on your recent nuptials. I’m sure the party was spectacular.”

“Logan?” She sounds understandably surprised, but her tone warms as a smile creeps into it.
“Actually, the wedding was hideous--five hundred of our nearest and dearest crammed into the Grand’s ballroom. Celeste insisted I change outfits three times.”

Resisting the easy crack about being left off a guest list that large, he focuses on the favor that’s his end game. “Is the man of the house around? I’ve got a fairly important question only a California Senator can answer.”

“Duncan’s on the lawn,” she says, breezily. “We’re having our Egg Hunt early this year, since he’s attending Mass the actual day—then a summit of religious and civic leaders on how to bring meaning back to the season. They’re worried Easter isn’t about Jesus anymore.” Rustling ensues, papers pushed aside so Meg can perch on the desk. “Dunc’s been painting cascarones for this thing under a magnifying glass all week. Now he’s outside in a rabbit costume, chasing his constituents’ kids.”

Wincing at the mildly horrifying image, Logan feels a brief burst of sympathy for Meg; she and her two perfect children-to-be will have to cope with this tradition annually. Then again, nobody said smoothing over Duncan’s quirks would be easy. “Think he can spare a moment for an old friend?”

“Maybe not the average friend. But you, sure,” she says. “Hold on a minute, I’ll round him up.”

Logan waits, thinking of nothing and drinking, until Duncan comes to the phone. “Echolls, long time no hear!” he says, out of breath. “Sorry, I only have a minute—we’re hosting this holiday thing, and I’m providing the entertainment.”

“I heard,” Logan says drily, draining his glass with one swallow. “Rabbit costume, right? So seasonal and festive!”

“Well, I’m glad you think so.” There’s a thud as Duncan and his giant outfit sit. “The children don’t seem to be enjoying it. They run when I try to hug them, it’s so undignified. Mother would NEVER have tolerated me acting that way.”

“Probably not,” Logan concedes--wishing fleetingly, as he often does when speaking to Duncan, that Lilly was alive to hear this. “Maybe they’d feel braver if you let them come to you?”

“They’re just spoiled by modern parenting,” Duncan opines, dismissive. “I hate to say it, but all the Dr. Spock ‘act affectionate’ stuff is baloney. My folks made a point of keeping me uncomfortable as a child, and I’m better off as a result. If kids don’t learn to act mature around strangers, and you know, large rabbits, how can they expect to be successful?”

Logan reflects briefly on the uncertainty he coped with, once America’s Hero’s career floundered post-war, and feels sure he prefers kind stability. Their Hollywood fixer must have agreed; the explanations for injuries he fabricated were always Rockwell scenarios gone awry.

“How’s Veronica?” Duncan interrupts the trip down memory lane with a trace of wistfulness. “And Tina? I haven’t seen either in…gosh, has it been six years? Wow, time flies.”

“Tina’s efficient and cheerful as ever, Veronica’s still a force of nature,” Logan assures him.

“Well, that’s no surprise.” Duncan laughs. “Remember the time, back in our bachelor days, when Veronica turned up at the hotel, right after Dick came home from Guadalajara with a stripper and a bag of cocaine? Tina really saved our bacon.”

Logan grunts—privately, he thinks a few consequences might have done Dick good. But he only says, “I hear congratulations are in order. Smart choice, picking Meg. You don’t deserve her, but she’ll excel in her role as political hostess.”
“Don’t I know it.” Duncan’s tone grows conspiratorial. “Listen, I’m not supposed to tell anyone yet, according to the doctor…but the truth is, we’re expecting. There’ll be a new member of the Kane family arriving just in time for Thanksgiving!”

“Well isn’t everything coming up roses in your neck of the woods?” Logan kicks open the cabinet beneath the desk, reaches for his gin bottle. “Congratulations, AGAIN. And I’m glad I’ve found you in a benevolent mood, because I need a tiny favor. You’re aware, I’m sure, how much the situation’s worsened here in Cuba?”

“Of course,” Duncan says. “And just between us, you ought to head home sooner rather than later. I know Veronica’s enjoyed her little detective adventure; but as McCarthy’s star wanes, the tide in Congress is turning. We’re less anti-Commie now, and more anti-mob.”

“Noted,” Logan says—because, annoying as Duncan’s condescension can be, this advice is actually useful. “But I’m enjoying our adventure too, as it happens; so we’ll postpone that inevitability as long as possible. We are, however, in the process of paving our path out. And we’re hoping you’ll see it in your heart to make escape possible for some friends.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Duncan says, doubtful. “You know I owe you for the dead donkey. But there are tons of rules and regulations, these days—anything to do with Cuba is radioactive.”

“I don’t need PUBLIC assistance,” Logan soothes, since for Duncan, it’s all about image. “You can do this under the radar, out of earshot of constituents. All I want are visas for nationals opposed to Castro, who have reason to fear a future under his leadership. One’s a wealthy plantation heir, Ramon Aviles. The others are members of my household staff—a family named Navarro. I’d like to bring them along when I leave.”

“Are they notorious in any way?” Duncan asks. Admittedly not without cause, he’s met some of Logan’s associates. “Will this blow up on me later, if I add them to the list?”

“I don’t anticipate trouble with Aviles,” Logan says. “He’s an asset to social settings, charming and cultured. Plus his nose is clean, and he’s willing to make large campaign donations. The head of the Navarro clan had a misspent youth, so he’s a bit trickier, but he’s never associated with Communists or the Mob. The rest of his family is women and children—his grandmother, his widowed sister, her daughter Ofelia, his dead cousin’s son. I’m happy to send birth certificates and fees by courier, if that will expedite this process.”

“Don’t worry about fees,” Duncan tells him, which would seem more generous if he wasn’t heir to a color-TV fortune. “I owe Veronica, anyway. Heck, if it wasn’t for her and her dad, I might be doing time, instead of wearing this sweaty costume to play with neighborhood kids. Remind me of your number again, will you? I’ll have my assistant ring Tina after your courier arrives—fill you in on what I’m able to arrange.”

“I knew I could count on you,” Logan says, before reciting contact information Duncan will never memorize. He even skips sarcasm, because it’s true. Ducky may not publicly associate with Bad Seed Logan Echolls—but he sounded the alarm when Jake framed Clarence, ensuring Lilly’s real killer paid. Behind his bland façade, Duncan’s ruthless as they come. Which is an asset in politics, most likely, if not necessarily in friendship.

Uncapping the bottle he’s holding, Logan pours a celebratory drink…jerks and splashes as a commotion breaks out in the hall. A man’s voice—God damn it, PERRY’S voice—is pitched above the noise. He’s screaming in falsetto about Veronica being a bitch, claiming passports aren’t a God-given right.
“Duck, I’ve got to go.” He sets the gin on the desk and pushes out of his chair. “Trouble just rode in on a very annoying horse. Go enjoy the egg hunt—and maybe give Doctor Spock a chance, since you’re about to be a dad. Oh, and Happy Easter.”

Not registering whatever platitude Duncan spouts, he hangs up. Moves purposefully to confront the intruder, fists clenching as he goes.

Clarence has Perry in a headlock, prepped for ruthless removal, when Logan makes it to the foyer. He clocks Logan’s expression and decisively shakes his head.

“Stay where you are,” he warns, like Logan might lunge. “I was just getting ready to show this guy the door.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Logan murmurs silkily, studying red-faced, writhing Perry like a bug he might squash. “My house, my rules. And my rules dictate I can dispose personally of anyone who threatens my spouse.”

“She was FOLLOWING me!” Perry blurs, Brylcreemed hair beginning to straggle as he thrashes. “Like a filthy spy…like all her stinking commie friends! Someone I know found this in the bushes!”

He tosses down an object which Logan bends to collect. It’s a bow from a woman’s shoe—a pricey Italian flat, to be exact, custom-made for Veronica during their last leather-goods pilgrimage. Logan stifles a sigh.

“She was FOLLOWING me!” Perry continues, perhaps sensing weakness. “She said it was your wife’s, and offered to return it herself. She seems to think you’re her FRIENDS.”

“Bet you didn’t tell her where you found it,” Logan says, very softly. “Did you, Per?”

Perry licks his lips, startled; Veronica chooses this moment to appear on the stairs in her blue silk robe, deliciously tousled. Likely woken from her nap by the noise, more’s the pity. She takes in the situation at a glance and rushes down to save the day, further enraging her accuser.

“I showed that to Joan,” Perry continues, perhaps sensing weakness. “She said it was your wife’s, and offered to return it herself. She seems to think you’re her FRIENDS.”

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“I’ll report you to the CONSULATE!” he screams, making her jerk in surprise. “Commie spy! I’ll confiscate your passport! Nobody who consorts with beatniks and artists like you do is innocent! I doubt your husband’s even AWARE of your crimes…you’re HEEDLESS!”

“Oh, did you turn up to share these suspicions as a FRIEND?” Logan pockets the bow, settles hands on hips. “Since I’m too infatuated to notice my spouse is a Black Widow? Well thanks so much, Per, you’re a pal. Now how about you skedaddle off my property before I count to five? Or I’ll beat the shit out of you for fun, then have YOU arrested for trespassing.”

“You can’t protect her,” Perry warns, supercilious. “If she’s been meddling in my business, I’ll bury her deep. That’s a promise.”

“Veronica could care less about you OR your business,” Logan says, dismissive. “Which I believe she made clear when she threw a drink on your slacks. But you might benefit from reading up on idiots who’ve threatened me and mine. Could be you’d find the exercise…instructive.”

He nods infinitesimally to Clarence, who muscles Perry out. Turns, once the door shuts behind them, and rubs at his burgeoning headache. “I believe this is yours?” he says when Veronica approaches, handing over the bow. “At least now I know where the potting soil came from. It was a conundrum.”
She waves a dismissive hand. “He can’t prove squat, he just gave up the evidence. And he doesn’t have the juice to bury me, no matter what he claims.”

“Maybe not.” Logan fixes her with a level, angry look. “But he knows people who DO. What if he bribes someone to search the house, for funsies? They could find your Castro booklet in the bedpost, or God knows what other contraband.”

“Do I look like an amateur?” She snorts, dismissive. “‘History Will Absolve Me’ isn’t on the premises, nor is ANYTHING incriminating. Besides, I’ve got the goods on old Per. Before he gathers ammo to give me grief, I plan to crush him like an ant. Wait here.”

She trips back upstairs, hair and robe flying, and returns shortly with another stack of photos. “Look,” she says, handing them over. “He’s paying off a Communist insurgent who runs a rebel magazine. Probably they slept together, but I’m crossing my fingers it’s somehow worse. Oh, and she’s not the only lover he’s hiding.”

Logan flips to the next picture; and despite the amount of angst swamping him, can’t help but smirk. “Well, well, well,” he says, lip curling slightly at the all-frills negligee. “Your instincts are, as ever, infallible. Figured out the identity of this femme fatale yet?”

Veronica shakes her head, and he says, “Suzy Gardner. Otherwise known as the American Ambassador’s randy wife.”

Her eyebrows lift, and she takes the picture back. “Wow,” she mutters, examining it. “We really ARE the only couple in Cuba not cheating.” Returning it to the pile, she adds, “Well, this development simplifies things. You show these to the Ambassador, do some verbal tap dance to explain how we got them. And he’ll have motive and means to do Perry biblical harm.”

Logan nods—appropriates the photos and carries them to the office, locks them safely in the desk. Plants both hands on the surface and hangs his head, breathing through confrontation-induced adrenaline, rehearsing conversations with Art.

Maybe thirty seconds pass before the door snicks open, and Ronnie’s small hand strokes his spine. “Hey now, that wasn’t so bad,” she says, voice soothing. “Perry’s just letting off steam. He’s angry he wasn’t allowed to ‘tame’ me, so he’s asserting his questionable manhood.”

“Veronica,” Logan murmurs, not opening his eyes. “I have never had the slightest desire to tame you, but I sympathize with the idiot’s frustration. You CONSTANTLY run circles around me, defying every request I make, and it’s exhausting. We agreed to work as a team just this MORNING…and here I am already, blindsided by misdeeds you HID!” He shakes his head. “I’m faithful because I love you, but even if I didn’t? There’s no way I’d have the energy to stray, after coping with your myriad schemes.”

“Aww, my hard work being infuriating paid off!” she says. “Come on, you know I tell you the important stuff…we’re partners. Plus, for-better-or-worse, right? And you’re not easy either, I’ll have you know.”

He nods; she IS trying, and it’s not like he never lies. It’s just, he keeps remembering Perry’s smug expression, while making threats, and the helplessness he feels is AWFUL. “I think I’d be much calmer if you’d let me beat Perry’s face in.”

“Later for that,” Veronica says. “After we execute my fiendish plan. In the meantime, how about we work through your angst in a more…intimate fashion? You can prove how MUCH influence you have over EVERYTHING I feel—and as a bonus, it will relax you.”
She takes off her robe to reveal a delicate black slip from the La Perla spring collection; it’s gossamer-thin silk, almost transparent, and she’s got nothing on beneath. Shaking back her hair, she approaches to lay palms on his chest. The heaviness in his groin coalesces.

“I want you to know I realize I’m being manipulated.” He curls his hands around her tiny waist, stroking into her navel with his thumbs. “But you look so spectacularly fetching, I’m not sure I care.”

She laughs and he bends to kiss her. Groans as she gives her mouth up wholly, with a prurient enthusiasm that’s addictive. Her slight weight presses him, goal-oriented as ever, and he lets her steer him around the desk. A shove sends him sprawling back on his elbows. He watches with increasingly aroused languor as she smirks and unbucks his belt.

“Let me take care of you,” she purrs, the throaty intonation sending thrills up his cock; and balancing one elbow on his knee, bends to engulf the tip in her mouth. Her cheeks hollow as she sucks, tongue stroking. He watches with fascination, tucking back delicate strands of her hair.

Time fractures. It feels so good he can’t focus, yet she’s so gorgeous he can’t look away. He wants to pet her, squeeze her, return the favor with his own mouth until she falls apart—but he also wants this. The girl many crave but nobody else gets, at his service…stroking between her own legs as she sucks his dick, enjoying every second.

His balls tighten and he murmurs, “Veronica.” Warning her, and also pleading. She releases him with a pop, studies his face.

“Come on.” She helps him remove his slacks, twines his fingers with hers. Leads him around the desk again, pushes him into the chair and climbs atop, delicate, efficient and graceful. Lifting the slip just slightly, she sinks down, engulfing him. Then grips his shoulders with small, strong hands and begins to ride.

God, it’s heaven—he leaves the garment on but runs his hands all over it, tracing the shapes of her nipples, stroking silk against her clit. He kisses her cheek, inhaling the sweet-and-smoky scent of her, and comes from sheer sensory pleasure. It’s visceral, the satisfaction of having her in his arms.

She moans, increasing her pace, making sensation almost unbearable; he lifts her off him, sets her on the desk on her knees. Then licks into her sex the way he’s wanted from the start, tasting himself in her folds. Veronica begins to pant, an indescribably satisfying sound, clawing heedlessly at his hair. When he pushes three fingers deep she contracts around them with a whimper, twisting and shoving hard.

“Yes,” he says, gratified, and stands to embrace her. Carries her to the couch, and reclines so they’re face-to-face. She kisses him, and he enjoys the softness of her lips before murmuring, “I’ve still got my sport coat on.”

“You look VERY handsome.” She unbuttons his shirt with lazy fingers and spreads it apart so she can study his chest. “Can you blame me for wanting to eat you up? Any girl would.”

“You,” he says, without heat, “are a tease. A dyed-in-the-wool, amazingly gorgeous…ah Christ, Veronica.” He trails off as her hand slides down to gently cup his balls. “I need five more minutes. I came so hard just now the entire world went white.”

“I take it you liked the slip.” She meets his eyes with a lurking smile.

“I’m buying you one in every color.” He traces a finger between her breasts, down. “Words can’t
“You demonstrated pretty well without them,” she says. “But if you want to pay me compliments, or better yet, show me again? I’m at your disposal.” She settles back, lifting arms above her head in faux-surrender. Gazing up at him limpidly like a watchful, lazy cat.

Logan remembers how smitten he was, the first time she struck this pose. Feels even more smitten now, because he knows its promise isn’t empty. “I have never had a more tempting offer,” he says, smiling. “And Weevil’s probably still sleeping right now, anyway.” He bends to kiss her, feather-light brush of lips, then realizes his mistake. “Shit! Weevil!”

“What?” she demands as he sits up and begins buttoning, expression morphing to peevish. “He can’t wait one more hour to start your disreputable daily rounds?”

“He’s still with my SISTER,” Logan explains, apologetic, as he gets up to look for pants. “I was supposed to arrive with the relief force at five, but Perry showed up and I got…distracted.”

“He can guard her all day as far as I’m concerned.” Veronica scowls and stands, arms crossed. “He hasn’t shown enough remorse for your bullet wound to be out of my personal doghouse.”

“This wasn’t his fault, muffin.” Logan points at the bicep in question as he zips and buttons. “If he hadn’t stuck around to rescue me, I would have been shot way worse. You ought to save your ire for the guy who wielded the gun.”

“He should have rescued you FASTER,” she snaps, but relents. “Fine, go get your friend. But take someone other than Corny to babysit, this time. Tina says the neighbors complained.”

“There IS no one other than Corny.” Logan locates his belt, threads it through loops. “We can’t spare Tina or Clarence, and Remy REFUSES.”

“Oh, DOES he?” A dangerous glint appears in Veronica’s eye, and she belts her robe with resolve. “Give me five minutes alone with him. Bet you a dollar he’ll crumble like expensive cheese.”

Logan persuades her to shower first, since they look and smell like they’ve been doing exactly what they HAVE. The rinse and change of clothes delays Weevil’s rescue further; Veronica mysteriously loses her towel, and Logan proves only human.

But once she’s gotten what she apparently still REALLY wanted, she trips downstairs with renewed determination, and shoves the swinging doors open with a thud.

It takes Remy three minutes to crack.

Logan times it, from the second Veronica disappears to his meek emergence from his lair. Clad defiantly in tweed, their chef slumps out to the car, refusing to meet Logan’s eye. Ronnie follows, smirking at her husband’s shock, and goes on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

“Make sure to be home by nine.” She smooths his lapels before pinning him with the coyest of under-the-lash looks. “You’ll need time to dress for the Tropicana, and maybe zip me up.”

“You,” Logan says, kissing the tip of her nose, “are a marvel, in myriad ways. I look forward to the zipping more than I can express.”

She smiles, and he spins for the door. Moves rapidly down the steps towards the Speedster, HOPING he’s not skipping, but unable to count it out.
Remy’s sunk in a theatrical brood by the time Logan guns the engine, elbow resting on the windowsill, chin glumly in hand. He doesn’t look up as they pull neatly into traffic, but sighs loudly when the tsk-ing begins.

“WOW,” Logan says, when supercilious fails to garner a reaction. “How the worm turns! What does she have on you that I don’t, I wonder?”

Turning his nose up, Remy sniffs and refuses to answer—but he looks hunted, as well he should. If Logan lays hands on THIS level of dirt IN RE his least-favorite chef, he’ll never have to eat fromage blanc again.

At the FOCSA (once Remy drags his reluctant carcass upstairs) they discover Trina and Weevil mid-merienda. She’s sipping tea and doing all the talking; he sits, coffee in one hand and sandwich in the other, staring off into space as if dead inside.

“Next comes a scene where she pulls the gown out of the closet, then cuts it to shreds,” Trina explains, selecting one of Letty’s famous Torticas de Morons from a Tupperware and nibbling affectedly. “While shouting, ‘IT’S EMPTY! IT’S EMPTY!’—but, you know, with gravitas. It’s a double entendre, see? Because the CLOSET is empty, but SO is the desire to possess the missing clothes! I swear, I should have gone to college and been a philosophy major. I take to this theme like a fish to water.”

“Honey, we’re home!” Logan calls, before his friend commits Hara-Kiri with the butter knife. Trina turns—and her expression of delight upon spotting his unfortunate chef is a thing to behold.

“Renny, DARLING!” she shouts; and, tossing the cookie onto the couch, flings herself into his arms. Remy staggers, possibly whimpers, but takes it like a man. “I had no IDEA you were still in Cuba! And you left important work undone to catch up with little old MOI? Color me so flattered I’m overWHELMED!”

Weevil turns a look of confusion on Logan, which he returns with ill-concealed glee. Remy stands stoic as Trina performs introductions. “Senor Navarro, I’m sure you must recognize Mr. Modest, here, but now you get to meet him for yourself. THIS is my original dance instructor, the one-and-only Renny DuMuoy. He taught me EVERYTHING I know.”

“No, I cannot take credit,” Remy says hurriedly, waving a negating hand. “The…talent is yours alone.”

“He’s so HUMBLE!” Trina simpers, smacking Remy playfully on the arm. “But everything I am—every bit of star power I now possess—I owe to him, and his insistence that I practice, practice, practice!”

“You heard it from the horse’s mouth,” Logan informs Weevil. “Trina wanted to be a Hollywood hostess, before she made the acquaintance of good old DuMuoy.”

“Well surely I can be both?” Trina takes Remy’s arm and tries to coax him over to the couch. “I mean, how hard is it to throw together a few canapes and hire a cellist? But honestly, I was the quietest little mouse, once, before Renny taught me to project.”

“C’EST FOUTOUT!” Remy yells, like the words burst from him unbidden—poor bastard’s finally reached his limit. “Never were you silent, even as a child! And RENNY is what sauces are when not properly thickened. My name is REMY. REM-MY! WHY do you Americans always get it wrong?”
“Oooh, so PASSIONATE!” Trina stage-whispers to Weevil, and Remy flings up exasperated hands. “He really should have been a star, with those looks and that artistic temperament. I’m sure daddy could have arranged it for me, I mean him. But, well…you know.”

Remy slumps on the sofa beside an eyebrows-raised Weevil, ill-temperedly flicks away the stray cookie. Logan pulls Trina aside before she provokes his chef into fleeing.

“Veronica’s got it all arranged,” he tells her, wiping off crumbs somehow transferred to his sleeve. “You’ll be on a private plane to Neptune Sunday, and we’ve bought a specific outfit we’ll need you to wear.”

“Honestly, Logie,” Trina says, “It’s ridiculous for me to sneak away in the dead of night. This will all blow over once Angelo talks sense to his cranky friend. And I can’t abandon my show mid-run—I signed a contract. I’m the STAR!”

“ANGELO sells women who piss him off into sex slavery,” Logan snaps, because sometimes a dose of harsh reality is needed. “Cuba only SEEMS like fun and games. It’s actually a lawless Wild West full of psychos, same as good old Neptune. And although you’re a pain in the ass who embarrasses me constantly—you’re still my sister. So wake UP, Trina, and get your ass to safety, before you famewhore yourself into an early grave.”

Trina studies him for a moment, the intellect she mostly stifles surfacing for a moment in her eyes. “Fine,” she says eventually, apparently softened by pleading. “But if the Parisien comes after me for breach of contract? I’m telling them you kidnapped me against my will.”

“Something to look forward to.” Logan pats her shoulder. “Enjoy your afternoon with DuMuoy—actually, you know what? You should sing for him before he goes. He was telling me on the way over how much he regrets missing your Cleopatra number.”

“WAS he?” Trina smirks, probably plotting musical seduction. Logan gets Weevil’s attention as she swarms her prey, points discreetly at the door.

“That was brutal,” Weevil opines, as they exit the elevator into the garage. “But not as brutal as I’m getting with your gardener, next time we cross paths. If I don’t beat his ass for coming up with that Emptiness thing, he might try to do it again.”

“Weevs, there are so many people in my orbit who deserve a beating, I’m starting to lose track.” Logan unlocks the Speedster so his friend can get in, dons sunglasses with a sigh. “I just hope we’re not caught in the melee, as a result of this insanity we’re planning.”

“Oh, we’re planning for once?” Weevil rests an elbow on the windowsill, smoothing a palm over his skull. “Must be about missing hookers, given what we did yesterday and who you married.”

“He shoots, he scores.” Logan turns left and longs for more coffee. “Ronne and I found some of the girls Rossi sold. Ramon’s throwing a party at his beach house, where he’ll secure the must-acquire target. You and I will work with my wife’s bodyguard to somehow save the rest.”

“So what’s my next job?” Weevil asks. “And can I do it AFTER I sleep, or does it gotta be now?”

“I need you to head down to Vedado, scout the routes to and from the beach,” Logan says. “Sometime tonight, once you’re rested. I want to know when there’s traffic and how much, where we can pull off the road and hide. The scheme I’m mulling has to play out quick and quiet—we need a few witnesses, but not many.”

“Got it,” Weevil says. “You planning to come with? We could get drinks, after, iron out the
“I wish,” Logan says with a sigh, turning down the road towards Weevil’s house. “I have to meet Art at the Tropicana and put out fires. See whether Rossi shows up with Bubbles in tow, confirming her continued existence.”

“Normally you love the Tropicana,” Weevil says. “This case is messing with your head.”

“Ain’t it the truth.” Logan drums ill-temperedly on the steering wheel as he parks. “I’ve got issues with the number of damsels currently in distress.”

Logan’s in the shower, remembering the lost towel fondly, when a blur of red passes the steam-clouded glass.

He shuts off water with a jerk and climbs out, grabbing a bath sheet off the rack. Veronica’s seated at her vanity in the red dress he loves and pearls; her hair’s pinned elaborately up, and she’s applying makeup she doesn’t need. Smiling at him in the mirror, she dusts her face with a big brush. He leans against the wall to watch her primp, absently drying his torso.

“I thought we agreed,” he says, scrubbing dampness from unruly hair, “no repeating wardrobe items for at least a month. It makes us look like peasants, which emphatically we are NOT.”

Uncapping a lipstick, she rolls her eyes, then puckers to apply. “Yes, dear,” she says, blotting, before twisting sideways to examine the results. “I’ve listened to your diatribes, but this time I’m making a point, remember? It’s the outfit I wore when I met Rossi, paired with YOUR pearls, not his. Because I’m your wife, and not for sale. See?”

He walks up behind her, tracing knuckles down her velvety cheek and throat. Veronica leans into his touch, and he bends to kiss her temple. “In that case, I approve,” he says. “And my pearls suit you better, anyway. They’re delicate-looking, but interspersed with the hardest substance on earth.”

Winking with a panache that makes her laugh, he wanders off to dress. There’s a black shawl-collar tux laid out, and a red rose for the buttonhole, no doubt to ensure they match. He dons it efficiently, then collects the velvet box holding his self-soothing purchase, made after he dropped off Weevil. Sets it carelessly on the vanity beside her hairbrush, and moves to his own mirror to Brylcreem.

“What’s this?” she asks, not fooled by his casual act. Her face begins to glow the way it always does when she’s given gifts. A flick of red-painted nail lifts the lid; her mouth drops open as she studies the contents. “Oh, Logan,” she says, tracing a fingertip over gems. “Why?”

He shrugs, smiling faintly and plying his comb. “No reason,” he says. “I was killing time browsing, saw them, thought of you. They’re puzzle rings--two pieces that can be worn alone or together. Like us. Both fabulous, separately, but we work best as a team.”

Nimble fingers make short work of the packaging, and she lifts out her gifts--they’re platinum, fortuitously, adorned with ruby-and-diamond flowers that match her gown. She slips them onto her right hand, mirror image of her wedding rings, and beams such pleasure he feels proud. “I love you,” she says, gaze fixed on the jewels. A sense of contentment settles in his chest, rendering the Tropicana irrelevant.

“Of course you do.” He drizzles aftershave into his palm and begins, carefully, to apply it to his cheeks. “As recently stated, I’m fabulous. How could you resist?”
Logan grasps his wife’s hand to help her down from the Rolls, then doesn’t let go. Tucks it, instead, through his elbow and rests his atop, tracing her new rings with a fingertip.

“Nervous?” she asks, with a curious sideways glance. “Or excited?”

She’s wearing her poker face, icily composed, no doubt eager to give Rossi the metaphorical finger. “I want--” he stops walking for a second to consider, “--to be at home with you. Eating midnight snacks in bed with the dog wedged between us, watching television; you wearing nothing but that slip and your rings. Tonight, all the cat-and-mousing we have to endure feels artificial.”

“You need a break from the game,” she decides, tracing the point of his sideburn. “Maybe after this case is over, we should go someplace more glamorous than Neptune.”

He smiles down at her. “Nice try. Keith would have my head. Besides, it’s not the game that’s bothering me, Veronica--it’s the way rules are rigged so women always lose.”

She must know he’s thinking of his mother. But because she’s Veronica, she doesn’t make him say so. Just leads him through the gardens, past the recently-transplanted fountain from the Nacional, with brisk determination. “We’ll just have to skew the odds in our favor, then,” she says. “It’s not like anyone can outsmart us, when we put our heads together.”

They enter through the gold-roofed, silver-floored foyer, formal images reflected from every shiny surface--Veronica’s vivid designer plumage draws the eye like a bird of paradise. She pauses between the game rooms and rests one black-gloved palm on his cheek, smiling crookedly up. “For luck,” she says, rising on tiptoe, and presses her lips to his.

Everything about her is soft, her mouth, her poreless skin, the elegant sable wrap draped around her shoulders. Gathering her closer by the fur, he deepens the kiss, seeking connection and affection, physical reassurance. Tilts her sideways over his arm, and devours her till he has to breathe. He’s surprised at himself, and she seems to be, as well…but there’s no evidence whatsoever she minds.

“Well!” she says, patting lips with fingertips, giving him that greedy, feline look he can’t resist. “Now I have to fix my makeup…and maybe dump cold water on myself for good measure. Have a drink or two and pace yourself, lover boy. I’ll be back in a flash.”

She applies a tissue to his cosmetic-smeared lips, avoiding the stare he fears is ardent, then quickly strides off towards the lavatory. He grabs champagne from a tray destined for the casino, and drains half in one long gulp.

Logan wanders into the new game room to wait, parks himself by a wall and leans. The design’s amazing, a greenhouse-for-gamblers made entirely of glass; round lamps hang from beams between the panes. The red-carpeted space is packed with couture-clad vacationers, crowded between green-felt tables and potted plants. A gorgeous contralto singer scats onstage.

Normally, this lively scene would fascinate him, rife as it is with human drama. But tonight, he just gazes through the window at tropical foliage and marble nymphs, brooding about the evening ahead.

“Mr. Echolls!” a woman’s voice murmurs, making him jerk to attention. Adds, urgent, “Don’t turn around.”

Fake-relaxing against the wall, he drains his drink. Bends to deposit the flute on a nearby table--and clocks Bubbles a foot away, resplendent in black-ruffled strapless chiffon. The relief he feels
makes him dizzy, but all he says is, “Isn’t THIS a night for surprises? I admit, I’m shocked you’re not dead.”

“Nope, just recently…indisposed.” She removes a compact from her purse and unfolds it, movements slow and stiff. He figures he knows the reason. “I only have a second. These new guards interfere when I talk to men, and Angelo’s just buying cocktails. So as much as I wanted to avoid this—I’m afraid I need a favor.”

“Ominous,” he says, fiddling with his cuffs to control agitation. “And what, exactly, is my motivation to help? You refuse to leave the abusive fuck, and that choice puts my client in jeopardy. I’m starting to wonder whether your interests and hers coincide.”

“Her safety is foremost in my mind,” Bubbles says, unrolling and applying lipstick. “It’s urgent I talk to her, tomorrow at the latest, but I’m not allowed to make calls. Can you set up one more secret meeting at the Belleza Salon, tomorrow at noon? In the interests of keeping my sister alive?”

“Promise me,” Logan says, twisting his cufflink, “that if I do this, you won’t just lie down and wait for Rossi’s bullet. Because I can’t in good conscience stand idle while you sit around expecting to die.”

“I’ll promise anything you ask,” she says, snapping the compact shut. “Provided I get ten minutes alone with her.”

“Then I’ll make sure she’s there,” Logan murmurs. Bubbles nods once, infinitesimally, before walking away; approaches a cocktail-carrying Rossi with a smile, and calmly accepts champagne. Her shitty pimp boyfriend casts a suspicious glance Logan-ward, inspiring the almost irresistible urge to punch. But, not being an amateur at dalliance, Logan’s careful to stare, disinterested, elsewhere. Rossi scowls, denied evidence, and leads his prisoner away.

“What did she want?” Veronica asks, from behind. He turns, notes the grim cast to her exquisitely made-up face.

“A meeting with her sister.” Logan tucks his wife’s arm back through his. “Which you’re in charge of planning. All my efforts to help them have miserably failed…and Bubbles won’t survive another beating.”

“That’s a discussion for later.” She gives his forearm a reassuring squeeze. “I’m not so convinced, anymore, that helping them is safe for YOU. Right now, though, we have dominos to arrange. They won’t fall the way we prefer if we hide back here, gambling, instead of entertaining our guests.”

“You know, normally, this is my favorite part of investigations—the trap’s closing on our villains, but they don’t yet realize.” He escorts her out of the casino, turns right to traverse the hall. “Maybe I’m coming down with something.”

“Yeah, a bad case of empathy,” Veronica says, gently. “Don’t worry, though…the sick stomach eases when you decide end justifies means.”

Tonight’s show is on the outdoor stage, thanks to balmy weather; Logan supports his wife while she holds up her skirts, and leads her down the garden path. They pass beneath a neon arch that reads ‘Bajo Las Estrellas’, then weave through foliage and rectangular tables towards the red-backed stage.

Logan can tell his table’s occupied, since unlike his spouse, he has excellent eyesight—Art and
Suzy are unfashionably early. The sense of being trapped in a tragic film grows stronger. Cole’s backup orchestra, immaculate in white, generates the soothing soundtrack; Martin Fox, a dead ringer for Anthony Quinn, contributes a celebrity cameo along with his lavender spouse Ofelia.

As they approach the multi-level platform, with its shimmying showgirls and geometric wire sculpture, Logan reflects that everyone here’s a liar. Bubbles plays complacent mistress in an effort to minimize bruises; Rossi pretends he’s in control although his power’s been usurped. Suzy strays while faking happiness, Art acts like he’ll never lose his job…and Perry, schmoozing a cocktail waitress by the bar, is a cesspit of moral failings, spit-shined.

Criminals, con artists and movie stars abound in this town, all playing each other for suckers—and the Echolls move among them, hiding teeth, so no one will expect them to strike. Hell, Havana ITSELF is a lie, frenetic gaiety disguising impending revolution. The only truth to latch onto is that nothing perceived is real.

When they reach the table, Suzy’s wandered off to mingle, but Art stands up to greet them with obvious cheer. Logan smiles relief, glad to postpone the inevitable introduction just a little longer.

“Art, so glad you could make it! You remember my lovely wife?” He pulls out a chair with a quirk of brows, and she extends an exceptionally coy hand.

“Always a pleasure,” she murmurs as Art kisses it, flashing her most dazzling smile. V’s clearly determined to grill him, and the force of her charisma stuns. But Art’s a diplomat, trained to cope, so he squares his shoulders and rallies.

“Lovely’s an understatement,” he accuses Logan, who’s arranging her wrap on the chair back and helping her sit. “And she’s so much more than a pretty face. Mrs. Echolls is endlessly fascinating, and an excellent dancer, to boot.”

“YOU are just a flirt who loves to foxtrot,” she says, dry, and re-employs the smile. “And I’d be glad to oblige, if I wasn’t parched. Darling, would you mind fetching me a cocktail? I’m dying for an old-fashioned, and the waiters always take too long.”

Correctly interpreting this as an invitation to get lost, so she can unearth Art’s secrets faster, Logan kisses her cheek and murmurs agreement. At his offer, Art requests a brandy; he leaves them rapidly forming a friendship, punctuated by smirk-inducing giggles.

The bar’s packed—he takes a moment to indulge in indolence while the bartender scrambles. Sips the gin-and-tonic provided contemplatively, elbows behind him on the rail, and wonders if he can speak to Perry without punching. The odds are probably low, so best to pile on anesthetic.

“The American Ambassador!” a voice exclaims mockingly, to his right. Logan turns his head, and there’s Rossi, tuxedoed in white like the help. Lamplight burnishes his hair as he leans against the bar. “You certainly have friends in high places!”

“Low places, too.” Logan lifts his glass in toast, drains it. “I’m versatile.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that about you…I’ve been asking around. Everyone has an opinion on the debonair Logan Echolls—business associates, customers, even my own employees. The word that comes up most often is ‘honorable’, oddly. You’re a man who stands by his friends.”

“Aw, shucks.” Logan wipes his mouth with a napkin and locates his money clip. “Stop before you make me blush.”

“No, it’s interesting, considering the whole playboy act.” Rossi watches him pay, no doubt finding
the trait anything but. “And noble, the way you choose to help strangers, when clearly you don’t need money. But you should keep in mind…loyalty to the wrong people can cost.”

“Well, if anyone understands that, it’s you.” Logan straightens to face him, abandoning pretense. “How ARE things with Carmelo, now that he’s back from mandatory vacation? You guys still one big, happy family? Or are you secretly glad, these days, you’ve kept that lucky coin in reserve?”

“You mean this?” Rossi fishes in his pocket, jaw clenching, and removes the coin in question—turns it between two fingers so it glints beneath the lamps. “As always, you misunderstand. It’s the first dollar I earned in my chosen career, not a wishbone. A reminder that I make my own luck, with skill and determination. And I should mention…few people are aware just HOW determined I can be.”

“Determined, foolhardy. Potato, po-tah-to.” Logan notes, with a sinking sensation, that Veronica’s spotted their tete-a-tete, and is approaching at her rapidest clip. “It takes a special recklessness to court the wife of a guy like me.”

“How could I not?” Rossi turns to see what Logan’s looking at, smiles. “That magnificent gown, that skin…they cry out for exceptional jewels.”

“They DO,” Logan agrees, settling back on his elbows; he can’t escalate the way he’d like to, with his girl nearby. “But unfortunately for you? MY pearls are the only ones she ever plans to wear.”
CHAPTER SIXTEEN: VERONICA: THE TROPICANA, 1956: LAS APARIENCIAS ENGAÑAN

Veronica increases her pace, moving as fast as the curve-hugging velvet gown will allow, skirt swishing around her legs. Logan has settled back against the bar, elbows resting on its surface. An easy pose, but a deceptive one. She sees him roll his wrists. Nostrils flaring with each deep breath. Body relaxing in preparation of the fight. Clearly Rossi has said something to piss him off and—unaware of the danger—keeps talking.

They both look her way, and Veronica arrives in time to hear the end of Logan’s warning. “MY pearls are the only ones she ever plans to wear.”

Rossi’s answering smile is smug, cocky. “It’s a woman’s prerogative to change her mind; she should always know she has OTHER options.”

“I agree, options are important,” Veronica says, lightly touching Logan’s arm, and sliding in between the two men. “But what’s that saying about pearls and SWINE?” Taking Logan’s fresh drink from the bar, she sips the gin and tonic. “I just remember the combination was undesirable.”

Veronica fingers the pearl at her throat, drawing Rossi’s gaze to the necklace; his mouth twists with contempt. “You two deserve each other.” He rolls his lucky coin across his knuckles and slips it into the pocket of his dinner jacket before walking away.

“Do you think he was trying to insult us?” Logan asks, lifting his drink from her hand; he drains the glass, and returns it to the bar.

“Do you care?”

“Not in the slightest.” He wraps his arms around her waist and kisses her neck. The harried bartender removes the empty glass, and Logan reminds him of his order—an Old Fashioned and a brandy—tacks on another gin and tonic for himself. “Learn anything interesting from Art? Is he going to believe Suzy’s straying, or will he have me thrown out of his office for suggesting it?”

“He didn’t want to discuss her.” Veronica shrugs. “But it’s hard to argue with photographs.”

The bartender delivers their drinks, and they take the long way back to their seats, skirting past the
black-piano table Martin Fox constructed for Liberace - probably with the hope of getting him to officially perform at the club. It’s adorned with a white-wooden music stand and three-tined silver candelabras. Armando, a Liberace impersonator, is entertaining the crowd by pretending to play the painted keys.

“Everything is artifice or illusion,” she mutters, fake-smiling at Armando in his satin shirt and gilded vest; he winks at her from beneath his Panama hat.

“Ah, but we’re not just tilting at windmills, Ronnie.” The set of Logan’s mouth is grim, eyes focused across the room as he adds, “Our enemies are real.”

“And plentiful,” she agrees, following his line of sight. Rossi is at a ringside table flirting with one of the showgirls while Bubbles pretends not to notice; her morose stare is fixed on the glittering strands of lights strung between the catwalks and towering palms. “The only ones missing are Kendall and Cormac… but we’ll take care of them later.” Veronica’s gaze lands on the brunette now talking to Art, narrows with antipathy. “First, I need to deal with the queen of the mambo.”

Candles blaze in tall hurricane glasses, setting the table aglow, and bathing Suzy in a flattering light. Which is good, because she needs all the help she can get, having chosen to wear another unbecoming shade of green- this one muddy and drab. Veronica’s aware she’s being catty and doesn’t care. The woman brought it on herself when she decided to flirt with Logan.

Waiters have already served the second course—a chorizo risotto with poblano peppers—and Veronica sets Art’s brandy down next to his plate. “I was beginning to lose faith in your return,” he says, standing.

She waves away his words. “As if I’d miss the chance to finish our debate over Eisenhower’s running mate?”

Art chuckles, claps Logan on the back. “Your wife is positive Ike is going to choose Nixon again, despite the Republicans wanting someone else on the ticket.”

“Surely not ALL Republicans?” Veronica asks, saccharine-sweet. “I mean, not YOU for instance. You must believe the President knows what he’s doing when he chooses a person for a job.” Like ambassador, she thinks but doesn’t add.

“Of course.” This time Art’s laughter is strained, less patronizing. Changing the subject, he says, “I don’t believe you’ve met my wife, Suzy.”

“Not in person, but Logan’s told me all about you.” Veronica slips into the chair Logan’s holding for her, and offers her cheek for a kiss, which he graciously provides before folding himself into the seat on her right. She glances around the room, searching for her ammunition, clocks him by the bar, and then asks Suzy, “How go the dance lessons? Found a partner yet?”

“Oh… I don’t… Um…” She stammers, blinking. Bowing her head, she fiddles with her silverware and smooths imaginary wrinkles from the tablecloth.

Veronica takes a moment to enjoy her discomfort before saying, “Oh look who it is! PERRY and Joan!” Suzy’s head snaps up in time to catch Veronica waving the other couple over. “They don’t look happy to see us - I wonder why?”

“I don’t know, Ronnie,” Logan drawls. “Joan seems delighted.” And it’s true - she does.

Smiling broadly, Joan returns Veronica’s wave. She grabs a reluctant Perry’s arm, and drags him from the bar, making his drink slosh over the rim of his glass. Lips thinning into a sneer, Perry digs
in his heels and shakes his head.

Logan presses his lips to Veronica’s ear and whispers, “Who do you think wins?”

Before Veronica can answer, the pantomimed fight escalates. Joan stiffens her spine and rounds on her husband. Whatever she says makes Perry blanch, and when she turns back to the table, her expression is steel. Both Logan and the ambassador stand as she approaches.

“Joan, lovely as always,” Art greets, kissing her cheek. “And Perry, nice to see you out of the office.” Reclaiming his chair, he says, “I didn’t realize you knew Logan and Veronica.”

“We’re good friends,” Joan overstates, eyeing the place setting next to Logan, who immediately holds out the chair for her.

“That we are.” Veronica nods, agreeing. “In fact, just earlier Perry and I were discussing his new hobby - he fancies himself a GARDENER.”

“Really?” Art questions with a raised brow while Suzy chokes on a mouthful of risotto. She hastily grabs her water, takes a long sip.

Veronica nods. “He was out plowing the field this morning, spreading fertilizer and planting seed. What was it again? Carrots, right?” Perry’s cheeks flush a deep red, and Veronica smiles. “Or maybe it was radishes?”

His jaw clenches. “We should return to our table, Joan.”

“I’m comfortable right here.” She takes a sip of her Tom Collins. “And I want to hear more about your new passion,” she adds, drily.

The show of backbone is surprising. Most days Veronica has no use for Joan, but she’s re-evaluating her opinion. “I’m surprised he hasn’t made a complete mess - what with all the wanton planting and prowling around the bushes he’s been doing.”

“Suzy loves to garden,” Art chimes in, helpfully. “She tends to all the plants at our personal residence in Vedado. Flowers mostly, right honey?”

Suzy’s eyes flick back and forth, looking for a means of escape, while studiously avoiding direct contact with Perry. A nervous titter bubbles past her lips.

Veronica taps her chin. “What’s that expression? **Llevar a alguien al huerto** - take someone to the garden? Maybe you should show Suzy your vegetables, Perry?”

“Ronnie, dear.” Logan doesn’t even try to hide his smile. “I don’t think that expression means what you think it does.”

“No?” She widens her eyes with feigned innocence as Logan pretend-whispers in her ear. “THAT’S what it means?” she gasps. “Oh my goodness.”

The lights dim, signaling the start of the show and silencing further conversation. A trumpet plays the opening note of *Ay Cosita Linda*. Showgirls in sequined bodysuits with tassel skirts and feather headdresses perform a spirited salsa on the catwalks above their head. They dance down a spiral staircase to the stage as the emcee announces the Nat King Cole Trio.

This time it’s not a fake whisper when Logan leans in close, stretches an arm across her chair and says, “For the record, Nat’s got nothing on you- watching YOU skewer Perry and Suzy was WAY
more entertaining.”

“I wish there was an encore,” Logan says, handing her into the passenger seat of the Rolls, and leaning in to give her a kiss.

Veronica frowns. “There was; he sang, Walkin’ My Baby Back Home.”

“Good song.” He curves his palm around her cheek, strokes his thumb across her skin. “I especially liked the part about snuggling and petting.”

“You would.” Grabbing his lapels, she pulls him down for another kiss. His lips are soft, ardent, and she wishes they could just go home, forget about Kendall’s alibi. Maybe he isn’t the only one who needs a break from the game. Her grip loosens and she smooths his collar, gives him a gentle push. “Get in the car, mister.”

“Ooh, that sounds promising.” Pressing his lips to her forehead, he checks her seatbelt, and then backs from the door. She watches through the windshield as he circles the hood to the driver’s side. There is no Clarence tonight; he’s doing recon for Ramon’s party, and meeting with Loretta.

Logan slides behind the wheel, and Veronica says, “You know MY favorite line from that song? Hand in hand to a barbecue stand.” He laughs because - of course, and she turns to face him. “Think we can get a bite to eat?”

“The hotel restaurant is open late - I already checked.” He drives the curving path leading to the exit, and leaves the lush, tropical grounds of the club, makes a right. “And when I said I wanted an encore, I meant of the Veronica Mars show.” Perry used one of Joan’s bathroom trips to escape from the table AND Veronica long before Nat sang his final note. “Just how many garden sex euphemisms do you know?”

“A few, but I was trying to avoid the easy ones like using a hoe, or if he found it difficult to water the garden with such a short hose.” She shrugs. “Too bad the show started when it did because I’d just figured out a way to work papaya into the conversation.”

He grins. Well-versed in colorful Cuban expressions, he knows exactly why a papaya is called frutabomba instead of its proper name. “Think Art was really oblivious to your clever Gardner puns? That one comment about Suzy and her flowers made me wonder.”

“People see what they want to see - who really wants to believe they’re being cuckolded? And by Perry, no less.”

“Well, if he WAS clueless, he won’t be after I show him the pictures, and the memory of tonight is going to sting.” He makes another right onto Avenida 23, checks the rearview as they approach the river. Veronica does the same. The closest car is at least a mile away. Different road, different part of the river, but apparently Art isn’t the only one who’s going to be plagued by memories. Logan takes her hand, laces their fingers together. “What’s your plan for tonight, other than food?”

“To trace Kendall’s steps the at the time of the murder. She’s our last suspect standing, but I still need proof.”

When you hear hoofbeats think horses, not zebras, but sometimes it WAS a zebra, and she has to be positive. Ratting out Kendall to Lansky is a big step—one she won’t be able to take back—and it can’t be based purely on instinct. Even with proof, the idea of playing judge, jury, and executioner makes Veronica uneasy. She isn’t sure she can follow through with it.
According to the police report, Big Dick was killed early Thursday morning around four. If we work backwards—an hour in the bar, taxi ride from the hotel—around this time, he still would’ve been at The Capri with Kendall.” Veronica takes a box of Sen-Sen from her purse, shakes loose a licorice mint and pops it in her mouth. “I want to know what they were doing right before he left, and if anyone saw her follow him.”

“Maybe they were getting biblical,” Logan says with a suggestive eyebrow bob. “And it’s not like you’re going to find any witnesses for that.”

“I should hope not.” Veronica wrinkles her nose in distaste. “But do you really think Big Dick would climb out of bed after sex, get dressed, and travel across the city to have a drink?”

“Not all men fall right to sleep, but I see your point.” He turns left, slows as they approach the hotel. “So was the older man trying to keep up with his young mistress? A nightcap in the lounge? Gambling?”

“Let’s find out.” The Casino de Capri is a one-story annex to the right of the hotel proper. Logan rolls to a stop midway between the two buildings. Veronica points through the windshield, indicating he should move up. “We’ll use the lobby entrance.”

They leave the Rolls with a valet, and walk hand-in-hand up the marble stairs to the double glass doors. A doorman nods in greeting, pulling open one half of the doors, but Veronica pauses. “Do you have time to answer a few questions for us?” she asks, taking photos from her purse.

Silence greets her request. The doorman glances at the street behind them; his gaze then shifts inside toward the front desk. “If you need information, the concierge will be able to help you.”

Veronica continues as if he didn’t say anything. “A friend of ours was staying here last week.” She holds out the photo of Big Dick. “And he got himself into a patch of trouble - we’re trying to help him.” A frown mars the man’s features, but he doesn’t look at the picture. “Do you remember him? Maybe you hailed a cab for him a week ago Thursday? It would’ve been late, around this time.”

“His wife is looking for him,” Logan adds. “She’s very worried.”

“He is missing, your friend?” His eyes fall to the photo, takes his time studying the image. “He is familiar, but that night? No.” He shakes his head. “I do not remember getting a cab for him.”

Veronica keeps up Logan’s lie. “What about his wife?” She shows him Kendall. “Did you see her?”

Recognition dawns, and Veronica contains her eye roll, naturally he remembers the brunette bombshell. “Sì. She checked out that night. Many bags,” he murmurs. “But she was not with your friend, her husband.”

“Was she alone?” Logan asks, and the other man shrugs. “Do you know what time it was?”

Brow furrows with thought; after a beat, he says, “No, I’m sorry.”

While Logan tips him and thanks him for his help, Veronica returns the 8x10’s to her bag. She waits until they are inside and out of earshot to say, “Nice touch with the worried wife.”

“I learned from the best.” Lifting her hand, he kisses her fingers. “Casino next?”

She nods, lets him lead the way. This is one place they haven’t ventured. After Logan learned George Raft was hired to be the face of the casino, glad-handing the gamblers, he refused to come,
citing the actor’s friendship with Aaron as his reason.

It’s too late for George, but the casino is still doing brisk business. There’s a smell of flop sweat, booze, and desperation in the air. Gamblers with discarded jackets and ties, unbuttoned collars, and rolled up sleeves hunch over tables, trying to win back the money they’ve lost. The room’s a tawdry riverboat casino dolled up for its big date to garish effect. Candlestick chandeliers with crimson lampshades hang over the tables. The same red covers the walls; their flocked pattern giving the paper a velvet-like sheen. Roulette wheels form a circle and in their center sits the pit boss, hawk eyes on the croupiers, making sure they don’t cheat.

Veronica takes in the scene, spots the floor manager at the back of the room, towering over the slot machines. He is hard to miss. Nicholas di Costanzo is as fat as he is tall, earning him the nickname “The Fat Butcher.” She doesn’t want to think too closely about what he did to garner the other half of his moniker. It’s enough that she knows he works for Santo Trafficante.

If she wants to learn about Kendall and Big Dick’s activities in the casino, he’s the one to ask, but she’s wary. Anything she tells him will be passed on to his boss. Does she want to alert the mob to her investigation? Would the news reach Lansky? There’s certainly no love lost between Lansky and Trafficante. Theirs is an uneasy alliance - Trafficante being usurped as the mob heir apparent by Lansky’s deal with Batista.

To bide time, she nudges Logan toward the nearest roulette wheel. He takes it in stride, exchanging cash for chips, and handing them to her. She bets the rich-red third column and then doubles her bet on the black. It’s minimal risk - exactly what she wants for her conversation with The Fat Butcher.

“Red eighteen.” A push.

He’ll be polite as to not offend the paying guests, but he won’t volunteer information. Omertà—the mob code of silence—is a real thing. She needs something he might want. Veronica collects her chips, puts them in Logan’s pocket, and gives a slight nod toward the slots. Sliding off her chair, she withdraws the photos, three this time, not two, and walks directly to the fat giant.

“We’re looking for a friend of ours.” Veronica feels lilliputian standing next to the man - he’s got two feet on her, and one on Logan. Regardless, she displays her photos on the nearby stool, dealing them face up like cards. Big Dick, Kendall, and finally, Cormac.

That last one gets his attention, just as she’d hoped. If Trocani’s aware they’re running cons, the word is out, which makes them useful. Nick leans in, eyeballs her. “These people are your friends?”

“Not them, him.” Her index finger lands on Big Dick’s face. “He was staying here last week and fell in with the wrong crowd.” She waves her hand over Kendall and Cormac’s pictures. “Did you see any of them in the casino, Thursday before last?”

“And who are you?”

“Logan Echolls.” Introducing himself before she can is an act meant to protect her, but it’s only a stopgap. Logan leads to Veronica, Veronica to Logan, they are inextricably linked. “He’s my friend’s father and he disappeared on the fifteenth - last place he was seen is this hotel.”

Not true, but why quibble? Veronica goes with it. “Was he here that night? Maybe in the company of these two?”
Nick sucks his teeth. “Whaddya know ‘bout them?”

They’d reached the quid pro quo. “They’re running cons at Montmartre and are staying at the Nacional.” Dated information, but better he think she’s out of the loop than give away Kendall’s current location.

Nodding, he picks up her photos, shuffles them together, and hands them back. “How’d you hear that?”

Logan moves closer, putting himself between her and Nick, and edging her out of the way. “I’m a private investigator. My friend wants me to find his father.”

“He was here with her.” His eyes scan the room. “Came in ‘round midnight, stayed for a coupla hours - blackjack, losing heavy. She left before he did.” Nicholas steps back, folds his arms across his chest, signalling the end of their conversation.

In lieu of thanks, Logan tips his head, takes Veronica’s arm, and ushers her from the casino. Once they are safely ensconced inside the elevator, her pulse slows, returns to normal, and she leans into Logan’s side. His arm tightens about her waist and he kisses her temple. “Without fail you always find the most dangerous person in the room. You’d probably sniff out a killer in a house full of nuns.”

“You say the sweetest things.” Veronica waits for the tension to ebb from his body and his hold to relax before speaking. “So they show at the casino at midnight, lose money for two hours, and Kendall leaves. Where does she go- back to the room to pack? But, if so, why?”

“Maybe they had a lover’s spat? She leaves in a huff, and Big Dick decides he’d rather be anywhere else than deal with her. Goes outside for a smoke, takes a walk, ends up at Sloppy Joe’s.”

Veronica nods along with his theory. “And when he doesn’t come back, she leaves? Or maybe… What if it was a setup and the fight was staged? She’s got Cormac waiting outside the hotel to kill Big Dick, make it look like a mugging.”

“And what? He follows him to the bar, waits for the right opportunity?”

“It would explain why Kendall skedaddled so fast - she knew what was about to happen.” The elevator doors glide open, and the case is replaced by thoughts of food - quatro queso soup with thick slices of warm bread, empanadas, and natilla for dessert.

There are a few diners in the restaurant, but it’s sedate, quiet. In contrast, the area by the pool is bustling. The idea of a fight between Kendall and Big Dick is a good one, but it’s still only speculation. She may have gone to the room to pack while Cormac did her dirty work, or she could’ve grown bored with losing at the gaming tables and sought other entertainment.

Veronica leans over the railing, stares at the hopping bar and the breeze-ruffled surface of the pool. “Think we can get our food to go?”

He smiles, eyes warm on her face, and teases, “OUR food?”

“Fine, MY food.” She tells him what she wants, adds maduros to the list. “I’ll get seats at the bar, order us drinks. Unless you won’t be having those either?” Veronica doesn’t wait for a reply, taking the flight of outdoor steps down one level.

Instruments for a five-piece band are tucked into the far corner of the terrace; the musicians, save
one, are absent. The remaining man sits on a lounger, strumming an acoustic guitar. People gravitate closer to him, dragging their chairs across the tile floor, and a couple dances poolside to the melody Veronica recognizes as *Spanish Romance*. All of the tables near him are occupied.

She moves directly to the bar and a stool on the end. There’s only one bartender on duty. Handsome with an olive-tinted complexion, dark hair, and sleepy eyes, he’s leaning against the back counter beneath the display rack of bottles, posing. He takes his time approaching and, instead of asking what she wants, he just raises an eyebrow and waits. His name tag reads: Sebastian.

Veronica sticks with what they’ve been drinking—a G&T for Logan, an Old-Fashioned for her—and watches Sebastian make them, movements languid and lazy, an insolent smile on his face like the job is beneath him and he’s just playing a role.

Logan arrives before the drinks do; he’s carrying a plate of malanga fritters and nothing else. “This is to tide you over until they deliver the rest,” he says, kissing her forehead. He jerks his chin toward the bartender. “Talk to him yet?”

“No, I want you to take lead - you’ll see why.” Logan’s years of dealing with the over-inflated ego of a narcissist make him uniquely qualified for this encounter. She gives him Kendall’s picture, considers, and hands over Cormac too. “Make sure to use your name and mention you’re an investigator.”

“She’s in trouble?” Logan says, stringing him along. He glances over his shoulder like he’s making sure they’re not being watched, and then drops his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “So do you know her?”

“Kendall. We never exchanged last names, but... she was here every night.” The ‘if you know what I mean’ is implicit in his suggestive tone, but Sebastian frowns at his delivery, probably wishing for a second take, and states it plainly, in case they missed it. “She was into me, sitting at the bar in her skimpy bathing suit, flirting.”

Veronica translates this to mean - taking a nightly swim and scoring free drinks, but she *mm-hmms* in agreement, and flashes a full-wattage smile to feed Sebastian’s ego. He inclines his head, accepting her attention as if it’s his due, catches the man trying to flag him down from the other end of the bar, and sighs. Holding up a finger, he tells Logan, “I’ll be right back,” and then ambles
over to take the man’s order.

“Twit,” Logan says, taking a healthy sip of his gin.

She pats his arm, consoling. “Let’s wrap this up, ask him about the fifteenth, and we can go home.”

In no time Sebastian dispenses with the other customer and returns – it’s the fastest Veronica’s seen him move since their arrival. Logan gets right to it, asking about the wee hours of Thursday morning. “Was she here?”

“Oh sure, that’s the night—” His answer is interrupted by a tray-carrying waiter. Sebastian appears slightly disgusted by the amount of food, and the muscle in Logan’s jaw ticks like he wants to beat the expression from the bartender’s face.

Veronica tastes her soup—a rich creamy smoked gouda with a kick of pepper—and drags a piece of bread through it. “That’s the night...” she prompts Sebastian.

“Are you looking for her alibi?”

Veronica pauses mid-bite. It’s doubtful Sebastian would lie to protect Kendall, the only skin he’d be willing to save is his own, but why take chances. “No, she’s disappeared, and the man she was traveling with is worried about her.”

“The old guy?” Big Dick was only in his fifties, but age is relative, she supposes, and to the hot, young stud with an over-inflated ego, he was probably a geezer. Veronica’s about to agree with him, when Sebastian continues. “Or the guy she left with?”

Not wanting to give him the upper hand or the satisfaction, she conceals her surprise. It’s not difficult. The other man is probably Cormac. To knock Sebastian down a peg, Veronica takes the remaining photo from Logan and flips it on to the bar. “You mean him.”

Sebastian blinks, frowns at the visage, deflates a little. “Yeah, he showed with two goons to drag her away from the pool, a lot of furious whispering about how they had to leave NOW.”

“Are we talking about the same night?” Logan asks. “Late Wednesday, early Thursday?” Sebastian nods, and Logan presses for more. “Do you know what time?”

“Five, five-thirty?” He looks up and away, taps pursed lips. “I come on at eight, work until four. Kendall got here before my shift ended, swam a few laps, and then wanted a drink.” A shrug. “It was after hours, so I made us both one.”

A full hour, hour and half, after the murder. What did Cormac do with the time? Toss the gun over the sea wall and round up some buddies to come help him move Kendall, scrub all traces of Big Dick from the hotel room? It worked, but...

“You said she was here every night?”

“Yeah, after the old man went to sleep, she’d come out. It was always the same - listen to the band, swim a few laps, and have a drink or two.”

Premeditation. Establishing a regular routine. If the police did their job and connected her to Big Dick, Kendall had a ready made alibi - a bartender who would fall all over himself in his haste to talk about the beautiful flirt and her nightly swim.
So why would Cormac blow it? Showing up here in a panic changed the event from normal to noteworthy, thereby ruining a perfect plan. The short answer was - he wouldn’t.

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“Not Kendall,” Logan says when they’re back in the car and on the way home. “If we believe our smarmy bartender, at the time of the murder, she was half-naked and hanging on his every word.”

“I’m not sure about Cormac either.” Veronica lays out her thoughts about his arrival at the Capri. “If this was a setup, they’d have a plan for after - one that didn’t involve making a scene and dragging Kendall away from her alibi.”

“What does that leave us with?”

“Nothing.”

She’s not ready to entirely dismiss Cormac as a suspect. Not all criminals were smart. Case in point, he was running around Havana trying to cheat Meyer Lansky. That did not speak to someone with a cool head and clear thinking. Maybe something went wrong and he got spooked? What if the car—the Chrysler Imperial—wasn’t a getaway vehicle for the killer, but a person in the wrong place at the wrong time who witnessed the shooting?

Veronica frowns. The coincidence is too great. A person in an Imperial happens to see Big Dick’s murder, and then a few days later someone driving the same model car tries to run her and Logan off the road? Not likely.

And what about the woman at Sloppy Joe’s? Where does she figure in all this?

Kendall and Cormac fit, dammit. They had motive, means. AND, it was only after she crossed paths with Kendall that the car tried to run them off the road. Veronica can see it - Kendall gets suspicious after discovering her missing wallet and asks around, learns Logan and Veronica are investigating Big Dick’s murder and sics Cormac on them.

“Do you think the bartender’s lying?”

“About Kendall being interested in him? Yes. About her actually being there? No.”

Veronica sighs. That’s her takeaway, too. She removes the napkin-wrapped empanada from her purse, takes a bite, and ignores Logan’s chuckle, which he tries to disguise as a cough. “I’d really like another shot at searching Kendall’s room.”

Definitely no laughter from his side of the car now, but also no warnings or admonitions. She doesn’t know if that’s a good sign or a bad one.

“They’ve probably switched hotels,” he says, mild.

“Yes, but on the bright side, you’ll get to make friends with a whole new set of security guards.” She pops the last piece of pastry in her mouth, licks her fingers, and ignores Logan’s sigh.

He makes the right at their corner, glides down the street. The neighborhood is quiet and dark, and the only house with lights ablaze is their own. Isabetta’s car is parked at the curb, nose-to-tail with Corny’s weathered Crosley Super station wagon. “Are we having a party?” he asks, turning into the driveway alongside Tina and Carmen’s matching Fiats.

“That’s what happens when mom and dad go out and leave the kids unsupervised.” Her hand
hovers over the door handle. “What do you think- should we ground them, or just take away their allowance?”

“I vote we sneak past them and hide out in our room.” He leers at her, winks. “I’m sure we can think of ways to entertain ourselves.”

“Nice try, but I have other plans.” She pulls the handle, pushes open the door, and leaves the car. The side gate to the garden rattles; a happy Champ dances on her hind legs, pawing at the fence, tail wagging in anticipation. As soon as Veronica unlatches the lock, the dog wiggles through the small opening, and rushes them, yipping and racing around their legs.

Tina’s silhouette appears, framed in the dining room sliders. “Logan? Veronica?”

“It’s us,” Logan confirms, scooping up Champ and tucking her under his arm. Squirming and bouncing, she valiantly tries to reach his face for welcome home kisses, and is slightly mollified when Logan scratches behind her ears.

“How was Nat King Cole?” Tina asks as they enter the house and follow her through the dining room into the kitchen. Her girlfriend sits at the kitchen table with Izzy and a glassy-eyed Corny. A skunky scent hangs in the air, faint, but strong enough to make Veronica’s nose wrinkle. Logan doesn’t seem to notice, which means it’s just her heightened sense of smell. Great, maybe he’s right and I CAN sniff out killers like a well-trained bloodhound.

Veronica directs a pointed look at Corny, who smiles, completely missing the silent reprimand about smoking in the house. Fortunately for him, he has a wise girlfriend. Isabetta whispers in his ear and his blissful expression turns to one of confusion. With a sigh, Izzy stands, beckons for him to do the same. “Dougie and I are going to bed.”

“We are?” A patient nod from Izzy, and he gets up; not understanding, but easy-going to the core, he’s willing to follow her lead. “Later,” he says, picking up their full glasses of scotch, and ambling from the room. Izzy trails behind him, and mouths the word sorry to Veronica as she passes.

Nodding acceptance of the apology, Veronica tosses her purse on the island, kicks off her heels and pads, barefoot, to the refrigerator. She half-listens to Logan tell Tina about the Tropicana. He puts down Champ to discard his jacket and loosen his tie, then joins them at the table.

“Your plan to get rid of the Green-Eyed Man worked, by the way,” Carmen says to Logan, taking a sip of her scotch, and offering him the bottle. “All I needed to do was arrive at the club with my hair unbrushed and my clothes a mess for him to lose interest.” She grins. “I may have also eaten a raw onion and then got close enough to breathe on him.”

Logan chuckles, pours a glass and toasts her with it. Tina joins in the laughter. Resting her head on Carmen’s shoulder, she takes her hand and laces their fingers together. They go to great pains to hide their relationship from the world, and Veronica’s happy they can be comfortable and open with each other here.

Hiding a relationship. Frowning, she closes the refrigerator, and stares at them. Did she get the motive wrong and the money was just a bonus? Could it have been ordinary jealousy? Was Cormac tired of sitting on the sidelines, watching his fiancee canoodle with another man? Maybe he’d had enough and decided to put a permanent end to their con.

Veronica plays out the scenario. Cormac waits for an opportunity—no specific plan in place—sees Big Dick leave the hotel and follows him. Maybe he was already with the two goons who showed at the Capri later? And their girlfriends too? They track Big Dick to Sloppy Joe’s, send one of the
women inside to act as spotter, and she signals when he’s on the move. The fatal meeting on the sidewalk happens, and then they all zoom off in the Imperial.

She retrieves her purse, takes out Cormac’s picture. If the men were with him when he shot Big Dick, there could be witnesses. Kendall and Cormac using Montmartre as their base of operation is about to come in handy.

“Have you ever seen this man at the club?” Veronica asks Carmen, interrupting their conversation about the fastidious Santo Trafficante.

“Ugh,” Carmen says, grimacing. She pushes the photo away. “He’s worse than Trafficante. At least the Green-Eyed man has… charm? This one’s a brute. Always touching the girls, saying crude things.”

“Is he there a lot?”

“Every night, he usually stays until closing, drinking and gambling.” Carmen refills her scotch. “He loses big in the early part of the evening, but by the end, he’s flush. The pit bosses have noticed… there’s been talk.”

Veronica nods. Everyone was downright CHATTY about the two cons - if Kendall and Cormac were smart, their new hotel room was among the Inuit people in a remote part of Greenland. “Notice any friends, or associates? People he—” She stops, rewinds, thinks about Carmen’s answer, and asks, “He’s there every night until closing?”

“Sometimes later, if he’s talking to one of the dealers or hitting on one of the girls.”

“What about last week, Wednesday the fifteenth?”

With no pause for thought, and without hesitation, Carmen starts nodding. “That was our first performance of *Medianoche en Paris* - new costumes, fifty people on stage, and Zenia being well… Zenia. It’s good Tino wanted to debut the show early, a practice run, because we were not”—she winces—“flawless.”

“And you’re SURE Cormac was there?”

“Yes, I remember because these men came for him, and I thought they were there to”—she makes a slicing motion across her throat—“because he seemed anxious. But he went with them willingly, and was back the next night, so obviously not.”

“Well, I guess we don’t have to worry about making them pay,” Logan muses, correctly reaching the same conclusion as Veronica - Cormac isn’t their killer. Coming from someone they both trust, his alibi is unassailable.

What comes before square one? Off the board? Out of the game? Whatever it is, that’s where she stands. Her gaze falls to the table, now empty except for the bottle of Chivas and their tumblers. “What happened to the book I left here this morning?”

“The black leather journal?” Tina asks, letting go of Carman’s hand and rising from her seat. She crosses the kitchen to a pile of papers sitting on the buffet and pulls Big Dick’s notebook from the stack. Now that Kendall and Cormac have been cleared as suspects, it’s Veronica’s last lead. Tina hands it to her before reclaiming her chair. “I didn’t realize you knew shorthand.”

Veronica’s brows knit in confusion. “Shorthand?”
“Pitman,” Tina says, waving toward the book in Veronica’s hand.

“THAT’S what this is?” She flips open the cover to stare at the dots, dashes, and squiggles. “Can you transcribe this for me?” Joining them at the table, she gives the diary back to Tina.

She thumbs through the pages. “Sure, I’ll do it first thing in the morning.”
Logan administers Visine, takes a careful sip of Alka-Seltzer, and reflects that maybe cutting back on booze wouldn’t be the world’s worst idea.

His head is throbbing—whether from lack of sleep, stress or overindulgence, who knows? He’s bathed, shaved and cologne-d, moderately respectable in beige linen, but the weariness can’t be disguised. Thank God he’s got Veronica and her shenanigans to buoy him, or he’d be the most jaded alcoholic alive.

Drifting into the bedroom, he locates cufflinks on the nightstand, smiles reminiscently as he unscrews and fastens. Watching his wife torment offenders is high on his list of favorite things, but the way she put the screws to Suzy really satisfied. Unable to take the woman down a notch without alienating Art, Logan has, admittedly, stewed. He found last night’s mode of revenge sweet.

He slips on his jacket, then his wedding ring, spots a note and keys in his incidentals bowl. Reads, “Make sure Corny takes Remy’s car to FOCSA,” and flips, then pockets, the fob with a smirk. Lingering near the kitchen to observe Remy’s shell-shock should be fun, later—he’ll have to make time.

The household’s still quiet downstairs—it’s ten, two hours earlier than he normally shows his face—but he finds Corny in the yard. Not even pretending to work, his gardener’s sprawled across a
lounge chair with a wet cloth over his eyes, clad in last night’s turtleneck and stinking of hash. Champ, whose nose is sensitive but fond of foul things, doesn’t mind; she’s curled up on his chest, fast asleep, a gnawed silver napkin ring between her paws.

Logan collects the circlet, then the dog. When that fails to rouse Corny, he tosses the rag impatiently into the grass and kicks his chair. “Rise and shine,” he snaps, fending off Champ’s licks. “I need you to drive to FOCSA and relieve our chef before Veronica gets hungry enough to do bodily harm.”

Corny struggles upright with a groan. Unmoved, Logan presses keys into his hand. “Take Remy’s Renault and move your ASS. You can nap on the couch in her suite. I highly doubt my sister’s awake, and she won’t emerge from the bedroom anyway until she’s troweded on all her war paint.”

With a sarcastic salute that lacks verve, Corny staggers into the house. Logan saunters after, wondering if he should have pinned directions to the guy’s shirt, then co-opts the hall phone to rouse the Cuban contingent. He’s underestimating the indefatigable Letty, though. She answers on the first ring with a chirpy, “Digame?” while salsa plays softly in the background—probably cooking, the way Remy ought to be.

“Mrs. Navarro.” Logan leans against the foyer console, letting the hint of a smile creep into his voice. “It’s Logan Echolls. If I ask you to wake Eli, are you in danger from flying pillows?”

“That one knows better than to try.” She turns the music down, and puts a hand over the phone to murmur to someone in the background. “But I sent Ofelia, just in case. She bats her big eyes and nobody can be mad, even if they DID stay out all night. Without calling.”

“My wife uses the same trick,” he tells her, in an effort to sidestep blame. “It’s lucky she’s not a fan of murdering.”

“And speaking of people who ARE,” Letty says, a segue Logan’s got to admire. “How’s the bullet wound? Dr. Alvarez promised it’s just a burn and gouge, but he’s worried you won’t change the dressing.”

Logan sighs. Trust Letty to know the whole story, despite Weevil’s efforts to bury it. “I swear I’m taking care of myself,” he says. “Maybe even turning over a new leaf. I actually considered becoming a teetotaler this morning while brushing my hair.”

She snorts, but just says, “Don’t let it get infected,” before relinquishing the phone.

“Why are you up so early?” Logan’s partner-in-crime sounds just as out of it as he feels. “And what was that about bullets? Is there anything dubious in my past Veronica DIDN’T mention to Grandma?”

“Doubtful.” Logan traces a cufflink with one fingertip, watching the devil herself descend the stairs; she’s dressed demurely in sensible blue, yet somehow looks va-va-voomy. “My wife’s both organized and thorough. Listen, I hate to wake you, but I’ve got a full day planned and wanted to make sure…props and accessories have been acquired for tonight, right?”

“Yeah, it’s all set.” Weevil yawns.

Veronica approaches, sets a palm on Logan’s lapel and murmurs, “Was he able to get the right car?”

He parrots the question and Weevil says, “Like I told you, we’re good to go. Now, you mind if I get back in bed for a few more hours, so when we pull off this crazy scheme, I’m coherent? ‘Cause
I was up till four, spreading your money around.”

“Hopefully you didn’t spend it all.” Logan tucks a strand of hair into Veronica’s chic chignon. “Poverty’s not a state I’m well-equipped to face.”

“Yeah, picturing you in a soup kitchen is tough,” Weevil says. “Maybe I’ll amuse myself dreaming about it, once you let me off the phone.”

“Just be at the rendezvous on time,” Logan says. “And don’t forget the hat, it adds a certain panache.”

Weevil hangs up without answering, and Veronica says, “I wish Ramon had stuck with the FIRST plan.”

“This one’s better, sweet pea.” Logan tugs her close and kisses her temple, the better to look down her cleavage. There’s magically more of it than normal, which OUGHT to make him suspicious, not randy. “He’s risking enough just helping us in the first place. We need to stack the odds in his favor.”

“Maybe.” She toys with the buttons on his shirt and looks up from beneath her lashes. “But it’s still more dangerous for you than I’d like.”

“Aw, you know I’m indestructible.” He takes her hand, kisses it. “Did Tina translate that notebook yet? And have you made arrangements for the Bubbles-and-Janet rendezvous?”

She looks at him askance. “Impatient! Nobody’s even up yet but us early birds. Besides, I just have to call in a noon reservation for Janet at the Belleza--it’s not COMPLICATED. In fact, observe and wonder while I wing it NOW.”

She picks up the receiver with élan; Logan grins and settles back to watch. Winking flirtatiously, she adopts a nasal secretarial tone, which somehow still gets him hot and bothered.

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Veronica allows him to enjoy the fake-voice appointment-booking; then favors him with a grope, a kiss, and a pretend-casual warning before shoving him unceremoniously outside. Probably so she can misbehave in peace.

He stands on the stoop for a moment, staring at the now-locked door. Then sighs, adjusts the envelope containing proof of Perry’s perfidy beneath his arm…and heads off to tell the most powerful US official in Cuba his wife is cheating.

The American Embassy is a six-story Brutalist nightmare made of concrete, glass and imported travertine; it forms a wedge of ugliness between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Havana Bay. Its prison-block exterior is softened only by a Stars-and-Stripes and a few spindly palm trees, altogether the most un-Cuban layout possible. Which is maybe the point, Logan reflects, as he parks in front a few minutes later. Wonks from Ohio might not feel so comfortable, holed up here in Mob paradise. Where better, then, to spend their days than a fortress, mere feet from the ocean and escape?

Killing the engine, Logan opens the envelope and rifles through photos, formulating a speech that will leave Art grateful, not unmanned. Finds a copy of Legislative Decree 997, which prohibits negative public statements against Batista, tucked in the back. Smiles. As usual, Veronica’s solved his dilemma without needing to be asked.
If he didn’t loathe Perry so much, he’d almost pity the poor bastard for the twenty-four hours he’s got coming.

The Echolls name still carries weight, despite its notoriousness, since rich men fund campaigns. So he’s ushered up to the Ambassador without much fuss by a pretty, businesslike young secretary. Art’s door opens into a room which, like the building itself, is cheerless and spare.

Beige carpet covers the floor, one shade lighter than half the boxy chairs and couches; the rest of the furniture is skirted heather-brown. The utilitarian dark coffee tables placed at intervals match the equally-utilitarian desk. This modest piece is flanked by the American and Cuban flags and a map of the country on an easel (the only swatch of color to be seen, beyond a few wilting ficuses).

Brown curtains hang open over the two walls of windows, which provide a featureless view of the sea. Art stands before one, hands crossed behind his back, gazing out. He glances over his shoulder as Logan enters and offers a dispirited smile.

Logan shakes hands, sinks into one of the two plastic guest chairs. Reflects it’s no wonder the Ambassador’s health is failing, if he spends the day here, then goes home to Suzy.

“I want to thank you again for a lovely evening.” Art seats himself behind the desk with a fair imitation of his usual jovial calm. “Nat King Cole was beyond compare--and it’s always such a pleasure to match wits with Veronica. She really is a jewel in any social setting.”

“Oh, the admiration’s mutual.” Logan runs a thumb along the edge of his envelope, debating how to proceed. “She respects your decency, even if she doesn’t share your politics. And between you and me, Veronica’s respect is tough to earn.”

“Oh, of that I’m sure.” Art smiles, and this expression looks more genuine. “The business you’re in—the business you’re BOTH in, unless I miss my guess—tends to strip its practitioners of illusions. But I’m fairly certain Veronica feels sympathy, at least, because she showed a tendency last night to get…protective.”

He eyes the envelope knowingly, and Logan sits back, surprised. “I presume that’s why you’re here?” Art asks. “Photographic evidence in hand? To protect me from the consequences of my wife’s reckless…gardening adventures?”

“You KNOW,” Logan realizes, impressed.

“The details?” Art shakes his head. “I try not to. And the fact that she chose Perry, of all people, came as an admittedly unpleasant surprise. He’s not the most…competent attache, which is bad enough, and on top of that he’s a promiscuous zealot. But the real kicker is, the guy’s CARELESS. Indiscretions do more harm when the parties involved can’t keep mum.”

“If this was only about an affair,” Logan says, seizing his moment, “I would’ve stayed home. I don’t enjoy impugning a lady’s name. But Perry’s being blackmailed by a pamphleteer sympathetic to Castro…maybe even in CONTACT with Castro. And I worry he might betray your wife’s trust to pass along information concerning YOU.”

He tosses the envelope on the desk and Art studies the contents, frowning. “I wouldn’t put it past Castro to turn an Embassy employee,” he muses. “The guy hates me—wants to be seen as a freedom fighter, and I call him what he is, a Communist. One soliciting guns from American crooks in preparation for a coup. The thought of some intellectual with cracked ideals taking over this country, replacing a solid leader like Batista…I tell you, it keeps me up nights. And I served in the Tank Corps in two World Wars.”
“Lansky LOVES Batista, though,” Logan says, an attempt to reassure. “And his armory’s better supplied.”

“For the time being.” Art reassembles the evidence, locks the envelope in his desk. “Unless the US government sends Lansky up the river, or another mobster takes him down. There are idealistic morons in our State Department, too, and they think Castro’s a Robin Hood-style liberator. If they convince the powers-that-be he’s not a dictator-in-waiting, he’ll have more guns than guerillas by fall.”

“My friend in Congress tells me the ideological tide is turning.” Logan crosses his arms, thoughtful. “Less McCarthyism in those hallowed halls, more desire to persecute mobs. Sounds like BOTH those developments bode ill for our rich man’s playground-away-from-home.”

“Oh, beyond a doubt. All this expensive glamour…” Art gestures, presumably at the city they can’t currently see, “sprang up practically overnight. Cuba was a sleepy third-world country when I accepted my appointment in ’53, and it may go back to that state soon. So much excess…it’s not a recipe for long-term stability.”

“Like Brigadoon.” Logan smiles, faintly. “Here for a day, then gone a hundred years.”

“Which matters more to rich expats like you than me, I’m afraid.” Art shakes his head. “My job isn’t to keep the boomtown growing--it’s to mediate between political players so Americans in Cuba stay safe. To which end, I suppose, I’ll have to put Perry on the first plane elsewhere, then send Suzy back to the US with ‘ulcers’. They flare up from time to time, you know.”

He glances out the window, and there’s the wistful smile again. Despite his composure, Suzy’s cheating must prey on his mind. “It’s a shame, really. I so rely on her to take measure of politicians in social situations. She’s perceptive, and an excellent hostess—we think alike. But we all do what we must, in service to God and country, right? It’s a lifetime commitment for those of us in the Game.”

“Cuba’s lucky to have you,” Logan says, standing. “And I’m lucky to call you a friend.”

“Likewise.” Art’s voice holds just a trace of ruefulness, as he rises to shake hands. “Thanks for steering me around this pitfall before I plunged in face first, Logan. Let me know if I can ever do something for you two in return.”

“Just make sure Perry’s gone,” Logan says. “Powerless and disgraced, if possible. His absence from our lives will be ample repayment.”

“I can guarantee, with all sincerity,” Art says, grimly, “that doing so will be my pleasure.”

Touching a finger to his temple in salute, Logan makes good his escape, taking the stairs so he gets out faster. Art’s a good man, and it’s irksome, watching him suffer. Logan hopes the guy’s loyalty—to feckless Suzy, to casually-corrupt Batista, even to his good friend Ike—never comes back to bite him in the ass.

Then in the spirit of screwing oneself via delusions of nobility, Logan heads off to escort Janet on one last probably-doomed sister-rescue.

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“So just to recap,” Logan says to Janet as they turn onto the Prado, because she’s persistently subdued today. “Our end game is to PREVENT a jealous mobster from beating your sister to death—an outcome so likely I’m amazed she’s still breathing. I’m not kidding when I say today’s
your last chance. Are you prepared to do whatever it takes to get her out the back door and into my car?"

“Don’t worry, Mr. Echolls, I get the stakes.” Janet smiles wanly, gazing at passing scenery. She’s dressed in baby pink, a twin-set and skirt that makes her look painfully young, and he’s worried she lacks the cojones for the job. “I’ve been thinking all day about ways to force her hand.” She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear, self-conscious. “And even if she gets headstrong like she always…even if she doesn’t listen, I won’t put you in danger anymore. Your wife was VERY clear you’ve done enough already.”

Ah, he thinks, as he passes the plate-glass-windowed Belleza storefront, name written center-top in gold-leaf cursive. THAT’s why Veronica chased him out of the house…so she could call his client and bully her unimpeded.

“Never you mind about my wife and her threats.” He turns down a side-street, then again into the alley behind the salon. It’s narrow enough to make him fret about his car, and battered from use so puddles collect, but he braves it anyway; points at the worn white brick and black dumpster of the Belleza’s rear. “Just lead your sister through the stockroom and out that door, I’ll be waiting right there to escort you to the airport. You can leg it back home before her guards even realize she’s no longer curling and spraying.”

Janet nods. He grits his teeth as the car jolts through a rut, but circles back around to the front. Two burly men in suits sit ill-at-ease in the gold-and white waiting room, ignoring the receptionist--so he keeps driving, pulls over a block past. “Knock ‘em dead,” he says, which earns him a tremulous smile. Janet climbs from the car and smooths her skirt nervously, steeling herself before striding off.

Logan watches until she makes it inside, hesitating a moment before grasping the knob. Returns to the alley and parks behind the dumpster, then reclines in his seat to wait, armed with last week’s Sunday crossword.

He’s just penciled in ‘reprobate’ and is frowning up at the clouds, wondering about rain, when there’s a flash of color and movement in his peripheral vision. Feeling for his gun, he climbs quietly from the car; peers past the dumpster at a VERY familiar blonde creeping down the alley. Sighs.

She ought to pay better attention. It’s child’s play to sneak up while she’s organizing her lock picks and murmur in her ear, “I can’t leave you alone for a minute.” As it is, she jerks and jumps, metal clattering to the ground--really it’s dumb luck he doesn’t get stabbed.

Bending to collect the fallen tools, she shoots him a filthy look. “What are you doing lurking around like Basil Rathbone? Did you WANT to make me scream, so everybody and their mother knows we’re back here?”

“I could ask the same.” He folds his arms, gazing implacably down. “I thought it was MY job to wait in the alley, discourage pursuit, and drive the getaway car.”

“Not IN the alley,” she hisses exasperated. “NEAR the alley! You’re supposed to be in your car on the side street! I can’t even imagine what possessed you to drive your precious Speedster over these ruts.”

“Ah,” he says, as light dawns. “So you thought you’d get safely inside before I could rush down here and stop you. NOW it makes sense…except for the part where you’re breaking into the salon in the first place. When did THAT become part of the plan?”
“Oh you mean you HAVEN’T figured it all out?” She grins, the steely shark smile that always means trouble. “I need five minutes alone with sweet little innocent Janet before you disappear her from the radar for good.”

“Could that maybe wait until AFTER we save her sister from death by bludgeoning? Must I stick you in the trunk of my car to keep you from ruining the clean getaway?”

“Pssht, like I’d fit inside that tiny thing.” She waves a dismissive hand. “It makes shoeboxes look roomy.”

“Veronica, I could probably get you AND a suitcase in there and have room to spare. Your ferocity is in no way matched by your size.”

“You could,” she agrees, walking her fingertips up his tie, eyes glittering. “But would it be WISE?”

He opens his mouth to say ‘Who cares?’ because this is just the kind of flirting he likes best; but then the stockroom door swings open and Janet emerges. Alone. She’s got both fists pressed to her stomach and tears drying on her face, but she looks resolute. Logan’s stomach sinks like a car in a lake.

“Where is she?” he asks Janet, fighting panic, but she only shakes her head.

“Mr. Echolls…” She puts a hand over her mouth and starts to sob. “She’s staying in Havana. There’s nothing I can do.”

“God damn it!” he explodes, while beside him Veronica narrows her eyes, and makes a sweeping arm gesture to punctuate. “You had one job! Rossi’s playing chicken with his mentor Trocani as we speak—if he doesn’t off her himself, she’s likely to get caught in the crossfire. What could she have possibly said to make you give UP?”

“It doesn’t matter what she told me.” Janet wipes her face, breath shuddering, stiffens her spine. “All that matters is, she’s not interested in cooperating with your plan. And I’m going home right now.”

“Did she send you out here to stall while she leaves?” Veronica asks. Janet’s gaze slides away and she begins a fresh bout of crying. Cursing under her breath, Veronica takes off through the open door of the salon without waiting to hear more.

Logan starts after her, because like hell is he letting her in view of bodyguards WORSE than the one who shot him, but Janet grabs his arm. “Mr. Echolls!” she says, when he doesn’t look at her. “Mr. Echolls, my sister went home before I even came out here— it’s no use. Mr. Echolls, listen to me! You’re fired!”

This captures his attention at last. He turns to look at the small gloved hand gripping him, her earnest young face, and says, “I’m WHAT?”

“You’re FIRED!” she repeats, more firmly. Fishes a creased envelope out of her pocket and shoves it into his hand. “Here’s a check for your services—I don’t need you to get me out of the country. I don’t need anything from you anymore. My sister called me a cab as soon as I showed up, it’s waiting right over there…do you see? It’ll take me to the airport, and I’ll catch the first plane home. So thanks for everything, and try not to worry about us anymore, okay? And tell your wife…she doesn’t need to fret about YOU. Once you’re shut of us, you’ll both be just fine.”

Janet marches around the dumpster while Logan stares, trying to force his brain to comprehend this turn, grabs her suitcase out of the back. Hefts it down the alley at a determined trot, speeding up
with a rueful backwards glance when he moves to pursue (because Veronica wants to talk to her, and he still doesn’t know why). Climbs into the cab and disappears from view.

Letting loose a string of expletives, Logan crumples the envelope in his hand and casts it aside. Then he shoves the free-swinging salon door open so hard it cracks against the wall, and storms inside in search of Veronica.

Her, he finds, on the sidewalk out front, watching a car drive away. But Bubbles and her bruisers must have been in it, because they’re long gone.

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Logan’s sprawled on the living room couch in evening clothes, fidgeting with a coaster and staring morosely at the liquor cabinet, when the front door swings open on a gust of wind. Clarence enters, removing his hat, and lifts a brow at the moody display as he sets it on the console.

“Problem,” he says, with enough lack of inflection Logan doubts it’s a question.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” Throwing the coaster onto the table with a snap, Logan sits up.

Clarence’s second eyebrow joins the first as he carefully hangs his coat on the rack. “Word is Trocani’s taking a hit out on Rossi. Probably after he meets Lansky for brunch tomorrow, gets his blessing. If this secret’s open enough to reach me, Rossi’s definitely heard. So don’t be surprised if he bolts within the next twenty-four hours.”

“Oh, excellent.” Logan flings himself, frustrated, back against the cushions. “The new asshole in town moves fast. I figured he’d spend at least a week interrogating minions—learning what the mouse was up to in his absence before…pouncing.”

This poorly-thought-out metaphor makes Clarence wince, and it’s not like Logan blames him. A few drinks would make these quips sound, or at least feel, suaver; but he just decided to cut back this morning. Fuck if he’s getting soused before bedtime.

“My source tells me there’s some…difference of opinion among the local leadership about whether Trocani or Rossi should run the brothels. Trocani’s lack of savoir faire rubs people the wrong way. Unfortunately, he’s realized the only way to secure his spot is to let it be known Rossi’s skimming--then provide a brutal-but-effective remedy.”

“Wow.” Logan dials up the sarcasm. “Orchestrating the murder of the kid he helped raise to get his JOB back? Trocani’s a bigger teddy bear than dear old Dad.”

Shoving up off the couch, he paces towards the window, resisting the urge to run fingers through his hair. “I wonder if Bubbles heard this rumor? Maybe that’s why she and Janet felt comfortable dispensing with our services. Their problem might be permanently erased if they hang tight a day or two.”

“They dispensed with your services?” A minute head shake makes Clarence’s opinion of this choice clear. “Bubbles had better hope the gamble pays off.”

Logan huffs a humorless laugh--Clarence just barely smiles in response. Gestures at his employer’s evening rig as he removes a notebook from his pocket and flips through. “Leaving soon for Ramon’s party?”

“Yup.” Logan checks his cuffs glumly. “Just trying to get in a more festive mood.”
“I’ve got a lead on the flyer Veronica gave me.” Clarence snaps the booklet shut and taps it against his palm. “I should have plenty of time to check it out before reporting for my scheduled duties.”

“Just be at the appointed place at the appointed moment,” Logan warns. “There’s no room in this plot for dallying.”

“Now when have I EVER dallied?” Clarence checks his watch. “And speaking of the prompt and professional…any idea where Veronica went?”

“Shopping,” Logan says. “For tonight. Something’s fishy because she’s a little too dolled up, but you know how she gets cagey when I pry.”

“I’m sure she’ll eventually fill you in.” Clarence’s voice holds the faintest trace of indulgence. “She claims she only hides her methods from marks.”

“Well the latest plan is to work together.” Logan pats to make sure his wallet’s in place, then fishes keys from his pocket. “Honesty, teamwork, blah blah blah. But since that’s not the bedrock upon which our marriage was founded, I’m just going to enjoy my part in tonight’s theater, and…remain optimistic.”

Clarence winks and exits, presumably to change out of his rumpled daytime gear. Casting one last fulminating look at the gin, Logan flips the keyring around his finger, and heads off to change peoples’ fates.

The drive down Del Puerto Avenue towards Varadero Beach is quiet. Most cars are heading towards town, not away from it, and the shushing of wheels against asphalt as they pass provides the only counterpoint to his brooding.

It’s not like Rossi’s worth the clothes he’s wearing—if Trocani offs him, good riddance. And no doubt a banner fucking day for Bubbles, assuming she’s still among the living. But the importance of getting Trina on a plane out of town ASAP has just quadrupled, because Trocani’s the one who wants her offed for theft. And while he has implicit faith in Veronica’s schemes-within-schemes, Trocani’s a wild card. They don’t know how smart the guy is, or whether he’s watching to see if Trina and Logan make contact.

A quick turn left at a faded sign brings the beach itself into view. In daytime, Varadero’s the Platonic ideal, curving turquoise bay against pristine white sand, sheltered by a green arc of palms. At night, though, it’s disquieting and dark, the crack at the peak of sussurating waves like Earth’s primal heartbeat. The sound calls to him, in a way the ocean hasn’t, for a while. He wants to take his board out in it, ride and be subsumed, made both triumphant and humble.

Yeah, those reckless, escapist man-against-nature fantasies come roaring right back as soon as the booze stops flowing. Maybe instead of a vacation from Cuba, Logan needs a sabbatical.

Ramon’s family beachside ‘cottage’ turns out of be a mansion of the old-money variety. Built in a v-shape around a central tower, like wings canted backwards from a bird in flight, it’s a masterpiece of custom-cut white stone. The windows are leaded glass, the balconies and doors curlicued black iron. Parking by the gate, Logan ambles up a curved and tree-lined path with hands in pockets, smirking at the deceptively welcoming light within.

There are guests spilling out onto the lawn already, so he’s timed his arrival right—a bunch of young-ish, well-groomed men with expensive clothes and jaded faces. They’re bunched in groups, snickering and quipping in low, insinuating voices…assholes looking to bond via misbehavior.
It upsets Logan to watch this ritual unfold, lately. To know these barely-adult specimens can get away with anything, consequence-free, and realize it. Mostly, it upsets him that he could have—probably WOULD have—been one of them, if Veronica hadn’t saved his life. Which makes him want to punish them for things he might have done himself all the more.

He’s admitted by a butler into a large, arched great room, a tastefully-appointed example of Cuban décor. The walls are painted warm, contrasting shades of tangerine and lemon yellow, hung with vibrantly-colored nudes. Glass-fronted cabinets of honey-brown oak alternate with family photos and plants, displaying the curios and treasure of a fanatic naturalist. There’s a crystal chandelier at each end of the room; one lights a card table where a handful of men bet large. The other banishes shadows from a conversation nook, where beautiful prostitutes entice the bold on couches of green-striped silk.

Ramon’s placed himself at the center of the action, clustered with a pair of men his own age, martinis in hand. He’s removing a book of what proves to be Japanese erotica from a nearby cabinet; when Logan approaches he hands it off, so his friends can page through.

“Welcome, amigo!” he says, doing the double-cheek kiss with casual savoir-faire and then gesturing to one of the circulating waiters. “You know Esteban, of course, and this is Marco Pineda—a business associate of my brother, in sugar. Acere, may I present Logan Echolls?”

“A pleasure.” Logan shakes hands, accepts his own martini and sips with relief. “This is quite the festive shindig you’ve got going, but I’m warning you now, I can’t stay long. Veronica has something special planned for tonight, and she’s not taking no for an answer.”

“Ah, the incomparable Mrs. Echolls.” Esteban, who is, to put it politely, a complete cad, kisses his fingertips with slight wistfulness. “Any plan she made for me, I would give myself up to entirely.”

“Well certainly I should, if I know what’s good for me.” Logan does a masterful job of not showing irritation as he toasts Esteban with his drink. “But I couldn’t turn down any party Ramon hosts, and risk being left out of tomorrow’s gossip.”

“I very sincerely doubt you’re left out of any day’s gossip, my friend.” Ramon pats Logan on the back and swaps his cocktail for a fresh one. “But I’ve planned some elegant entertainments of various delightful types; I think perhaps you will not be disappointed.”

The door Logan’s kept in his peripheral vision swings wide, and Perry stumbles in, clearly a little drunk already since his plasticky perfection’s mussed. Suppressing a breath of relief, because fucking FINALLY, Logan gestures with a toothpicked olive at the elegant purchased company. “Well, if nothing else, the view is certainly spectac…”

Pretending to trail off, as if just catching sight of his Tab Hunter-esque nemesis, he lets the loathing and anticipation kept at bay creep into his voice. “What the fuck is Perry Aberdeen doing here? I thought this party was designed to EXCLUDE garbage?”

“Behave,” Ramon says, with just the right note of disinterested indulgence. “Enjoy the wine, or even a woman if your personal code allows. Whatever he’s done, we can act like civilized men for one evening, yes?”

“You only say that,” Logan counters, with a touch of acid, “because you don’t know what he HAS done.”

He tosses back the drink, eats the olive, sets the glass decisively on the table and flicks the toothpick into it. Then, having ensured this bit of drama garners maximum possible attention, he
straightens his lapels, and goes about putting himself in Perry’s sightline.

The guy’s an idiot, so it takes maybe thirty seconds for him to swallow the bait. He plants himself behind the tray of canapes Logan’s perusing and smirks like he’s won the rigged lottery. “Well, well, well,” he smarms, when Logan finally looks up to acknowledge him, after popping a croquette in his mouth with exaggerated relish. “Imagine my surprise at learning your supposed loyalty to the hellcat doesn’t extend farther than an ordinary man’s. A party packed with PROSTITUTES, Echolls? What EVER will I do with such an INTERESTING piece of information?”

Logan tilts his head, pretending to consider, and tucks the food into one cheek so he can talk around it. “Gosh, are you threatening blackmail AGAIN? You’re like this dog my friend had that only knew one trick…and half the time he fucked it up in his eagerness to get fed.”

“I don’t threaten,” Perry blusters. “I act. And you’ve been warned all I plan to warn you, just so you know.”

Swallowing, Logan cracks his neck, and lets the not-very-nice grin he’s barely managed to suppress out at last. “You know I have this OTHER friend,” he says, gently pushing the waiter out of the way, “who’s got this saying, and I feel like it applies here. You were two strikes down before you walked in the door, Per. And you know what happens when you get to three.”

Perry opens his fat pink mouth to respond and Logan punches him in it, hard and fast—the way he’s been aching to do since he saw Veronica’s drink all over this douchebag’s pants. The guy’s head jerks, blood splats, he pinwheels and goes backwards; Logan lets both the smile and the adrenaline loose as the rhythm of his pulse rises, loud in his ears. Dropping onto Perry’s legs before the asshole can get up, he rides the immensely satisfying wave, messing up that too-pretty face as thoroughly as he can before someone gets it together enough to yank him off.

It takes three of them to manage, and that feels good, too. Logan fights them for a second before he remembers he has a part to play, and then he stands there panting, surveying his handiwork, wiping away sweat with one wrist.

“Nobody disrespects my wife,” he says, appropriating a napkin from the buffet to dry off his split knuckles. Tosses it on Perry, who still hasn’t managed to stand, and glances at his co-conspirator, who’s on the scene just like clockwork. “Ramon, I’d say I’m sorry, but we both know I’d be fibbing.”

“You need at least three more drinks.” Ramon shakes his head as he extends a hand to help Perry up. “On the other side of the room or elsewhere, amigo, this isn’t an American boxing ring. Come on Aberdeen, it’s just a bloody nose, you’ll live. Let me find you a companion to make you feel better. I know just the girl…elegant and exotic, exactly the kind you attaché come to Cuba to meet.”

Perry lets himself be led, hand to his head, into the nurturing company of a darkly glamorous Amazon in green. He seems to recover some of his smarm as she coos over him… confident, like all losers of his type, that everybody really wants what he’s got.

Logan grabs a drink and downs it, accepting congratulations on his fighting prowess, cracking a few well-timed jokes. It feels uncomfortably familiar, the aftermath of this scene, pretending ease while his pulse throbs and the red, angry haze lets down. He counts backwards from a hundred in his head, and resists the urge to check his watch while he waits for the final act.

About halfway through the story of Dick, the undercover cop, the waitress from Tallahassee and
the stolen fire engine, a shriek reverberates through the house like air escaping a kettle. Every
degenerate in the room goes silent as Logan’s anticipation gathers. Then Perry’s high, wavery tenor
waits, “Oh my GOD, she’s DEAD!”

Ramon takes off for the back room at a jog as the crowd erupts in scandalized muttering—maybe
because, well, murder, and maybe because ruining mob property isn’t wise. Biting the inside of his
cheek to keep his expression arch, Logan sets down his drink with a clack. “Well, that’s my cue,”
his says, since it is, and beats a hasty retreat.

He’s hard pressed to make it around the corner before the crowd follows, en masse.

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He waits in the gazebo for twenty minutes, concealed behind a white-painted post, watching the
moon rise slowly as guests burn rubber vacating the party. His watch has struck half-past eight and
he’s starting to fret when a rustling in the bushes presages company.

The man who appears is tall-ish and slender, fair hair bleached grey by night, dressed in pale linen
that mirrors Logan’s. He’s young, too, maybe early twenties, and the skip to his step as he bounces
up the stairs belies the gravity of recent events. “Senor Echolls?” he calls, voice pitched just above
a whisper. “It’s me, Carlos Aviles. Ramon’s cousin from the bank, remember?”

Stepping out of concealment, Logan locates his keys and extends them on one finger. “He roped
you into helping again?”

“I volunteered.” Carlos trades the ring for one from his own pocket with a grin. “I like the size of
your paychecks.”

“Many do.” Logan looks, but there’s no identifying fob. “What kind of car you drive?”

“It’s a green ’54 Hudson Jet, parked on the road right over there.” He points to a spot just past the
foliage. “Roof, tinted windows, back seat. Which will come in handy, because I think you’ll have
to carry her.”

“Tamara’s not actually hurt, is she?” Logan straightens, concerned. “Because Ramon promised…”

“No, no, it’s under control. She took a sedative to play a corpse more convincingly, and she’s just
now coming around. If you go in that door there,” he points, “you’ll find the bedroom just past the
master bath. Ramon’s with her now, he’s already put on a show for Amletto’s bulldog.”

Logan nods. Tosses the keys once and pockets them. “I’ll leave this parked at the gas station down
the road from my house. And please, I implore you…the Speedster’s delicate. Treat it like your
firstborn, especially the clutch. The check you get for your pains will be that much bigger.”

“I’ll pretend it’s a beautiful woman,” Carlos says with a wink. “Maybe one who’s a little fast.”

He bounces off down the stairs while Logan frets about the adjective; resolves not to resolve to
quit drinking again until his life gets less stressful. Then, after a quick scan to ensure he’s
unobserved, slinks across the open veranda and into the suite beyond.

The master bedroom continues the yellow-wall/ tangerine-curtain theme, but the shades used here
are paler, subtler. The dark-wood art-deco furniture is elegantly curved; two brass lamps with
tangerine shades sit on matching nightstands, and the rug is both Persian and old. A Ming vase sits
centered on the dresser, packed carelessly with local flowers, and Alphonse Mucha nudes depicting
the four seasons adorn the walls. Atop a peach-silk coverlet embroidered with leaves sits Ramon,
chafing the hand of a supine girl.

“Ah there you are, acere.” He gives Logan a brief over-the-shoulder glance as the girl moans and tries to sit up. She’s younger and taller than Loretta, so slender she’s almost frail, but the facial resemblance is unmistakable. “You should have stayed five minutes longer. You missed Dr. Alvarez’s dramatic death pronouncement, followed by Perry’s breakdown and pell-mell flight. Tamara is quite a good actress, it seems.”

Logan laughs and sits on the edge of the bed. “Did anyone seem suspicious?”

“Suspicious? No.” Ramon pours water from a pitcher on the nightstand and hands the glass to Tamara, who’s made it upright. “Happy? Also no. I paid the waitstaff handsomely to discourage gossip, but I doubt I should throw a party again anytime soon.”

Logan strokes a cufflink with his fingertip, hoping Duncan comes through with the passport soon-ish. Ramon’s gone above and beyond to help, and it’s always in poor taste to repay loyalty with trouble. “Thanks,” he says. “For not leaving me out on this limb by myself.”

“Oh, I’m back here by the sturdy trunk,” Ramon tells him, helping Tamara into a coat. “You’re the one hanging from the thin little branch at the end, the one that’s starting to crack. For the rest of the evening, I’m going to sit in this house with the five friends who didn’t run, and drink and smoke like the upstanding citizen I am. Whatever other madness may happen this evening has nothing to do with me.”

“Ah, ye of little faith. I’ll have you know, as we speak, I’m enjoying a cozy evening en famille with my wife. The only thing I’m guilty of is fisticuffs--and considering how badly Perry needed punching, who could blame me?” He rests hands on hips as Tamara swoons. “How are you feeling, Ms. Cancun? Can you walk?”

“I’ll run if I have to,” she says, determined and serious, squarely meeting Logan’s eyes. “But I’m dizzy, so if you could just…lend me your arm…”

“Now how is that chivalrous?” He rounds the bed, scooping her up in a bridal carry, and Ramon moves to open the door. “Tina will alert me as soon as there’s news,” he tells his friend, passing through the pale, shadowed bathroom. “If your request isn’t granted soon, I’ll have to employ leverage.”

Ramon nods acknowledgement. “Enjoy the rest of your evening, my friend. And make sure no one you encounter sees your quite-famous face.”

Logan grins, then carts his delicate cargo through the bushes to Carlos’ car. This proves to be old but well-maintained, and there’s a blanket in the backseat which he tucks carefully around his passenger. “Just rest,” he says, gentle. “In half an hour you’ll be with your sister, and all this can become a distant memory.”

She nods, eyes drifting shut. By the time they make it to the highway, she’s fast asleep.

Logan drives towards town just over the speed limit, more slowly than is his wont, but fast enough not to attract attention. The angst and stress of earlier have given way to a growing euphoria; despite, or maybe because of, the danger he’s now facing. It’s always this way, though, once the investigation hits the action phase…because that’s where Logan shines. The time to control his impulses, watch his words, chafe at boredom is past. Now he gets to make the bastards pay--and damn if that doesn’t compensate, in spades, for prior annoyances.
Plus, he’s finally saved someone. Tamara’s one less girl who will end up like his mother, owned by a man who spent a whole relationship mistreating her. Or like Lilly, who never got a chance to live out her dreams.

Squinting through the darkness, he spots the mailbox near which he’s supposed to wait. Just past it is a small dirt drive that weaves through a copse to the ruins of a long-burned house. He parks in the still-paved carport, and settles in with a sigh to wait.

Almost two hours pass before a pair of shadowed figures emerge from the ruins; Logan’s palm curls around his holstered gun until they resolve, beneath a stray beam of moonlight, into Clarence and Loretta. Tamara stirs, shoving the blanket off as she wakes, and then the door’s yanked open and she gives a gasp of surprise as she’s engulfed in her sister’s arms.

“I can’t believe you pulled this off,” she murmurs as Loretta rocks her, and Logan climbs out of the car. Then snorts amusement. “I REALLY can’t believe you came up with a plan that didn’t involve bad attitude and a baseball bat.”

“See, that’s your problem,” Loretta says, smile in her voice. “Lack of faith. You okay to travel, baby? You hurt, or sick?”

Tamara shakes her head. “Some of the girls gave up, but not me. I figured you’d get me out sooner or later—which shows what you know about me and faith.”

Logan glances at Clarence, feeling like an intruder, and finds him watching Loretta with an uncommon tenderness in his eyes. Realizes, here’s another truth about his wife’s too-private bodyguard he’d never have guessed. “We should head to the ambush site,” he says, checking his watch. “They must have the van loaded up and rolling by now.”

“This way.” Clarence gestures with his head, putting a hand on Loretta’s shoulder as he passes that she squeezes with one of hers. The two of them drift quietly down a deer track as clouds cover the moon, meandering in an s-shape as they approach a curve in the road.

Hunkering behind a copse of blue-flowered lignum vitae, Clarence beckons Logan close; hands him a beret and bandanna pulled from an inner coat pocket. “Go hide in that bank of trees across the way—take off your coat, and use these to cover your hair and face. Try and attack from the back…any guards who recognize us will need to eat a bullet.”

Nodding understanding, Logan dashes across the roadway and conceals himself behind a fig tree, folding his coat carefully before secreting it beneath the veiny roots. The hammering of his heart resolves into a heightened state of calm as he ties on the makeshift mask and draws his weapon. And then there’s only this moment, breathing, the scent of damp earth and leaves and the soft hooting of an owl, above.

Who knows how much later, an engine growls in the distance, and a battered grey van appears on the horizon. Logan braces himself as it approaches, and then the sound of a siren splits the night. The vegetation all around him is illuminated in strobing color.

There’s really no way to flee on this narrow road through the woods, and the van’s driver seems to know that; just past Logan and Clarence, the thing eases to one side and stops. The cop car pulls in tight behind. Logan gets a brief look at a grey-epauletted-shirt and beret and mirrored shades as the driver climbs out.

Gauging the distance between himself and the van, Logan thinks shit, this is all wrong; it’s parked on a curve, so his approach will be visible, and he’d have to crash noisily through the bushes to
reach the side he’s supposed to cover. But the driver’s window’s rolling down in answer to a knock, the uniform rubbing gloved fingers together in a universal request for bribes. So it’s not like there’s time to shift position.

A brief conversation ensues, only partly heard but apparently defiant—maybe the driver thinks his mob status confers immunity. The cop moves towards the rear doors, as if to wrench them open and expose the girls no one’s supposed to be trafficking. This produces the desired result…the driver climbs out of his seat.

Clarence comes hurtling from the trees as a gesticulating argument begins and presses a gun to the guy’s head; Logan decides speed trumps element of surprise. So with a deep breath, he shoves through the brush and branches, only to reach the passenger side just as the second guard bails out opposite.

Cursing, he jerks the door open, goes through the van’s torn and sticky front seat, getting a glimpse of five frightened women behind a barred divider. Dives out to tackle the asshole as he tries to draw a bead on Clarence, then grabs him by the hair and whacks his face into the dirt. _Stay down_, he thinks, as he pulls cuffs out of his pocket and wrestles them on, but the guy persists in bucking and writhing. Then the cop approaches, tidy and oddly formal in the half-light, and kneels to tie a bag around the mobster’s head.

“Looks like your dumbass plan actually worked for once,” Weevil says, in Spanish, pulling off the mirrored glasses with a grimace and hooking them through the neck of his shirt. “Probably because someone who shall remain nameless thought it up instead of yourself.”

Logan shoots him the bird since a smirk won’t be visible, thanks to the bandanna. Clarence removes the board wedged through the van’s door handles, releasing the unwilling passengers; then shoves his already-cuffed-and-bagged conquest inside. He strides over to Logan and Weevil as the girls mill in the roadway, agitated and whispering, and drags his out-cold captive off to be locked up too.

“They see your face?” Logan murmurs, after shutting both doors and rolling up the driver’s side window. “Can either of them identify you?”

“Not a chance.” Weevil bends to dust off the knees of his trousers. “I kept my eyes pointed down, wore glasses, the whole nine yards. Besides, they’re white, I’m Cuban, you know the deal. Only thing they MIGHT have seen is ‘Ortega’ stitched on my uniform, and it’s gonna take some doing to trace that back to me. Besides, you’re getting my whole clan out of the country pronto anyway, right? So I got no reason to worry.”

“It’ll be at least an hour before anyone misses these clowns.” Clarence approaches, ending a low-voiced consultation with a brave-looking redhead. “But then they’ll retrace the route, and the vegetation’s too thick to hide the van off-road. You two need to get gone.”

“Before I scram,” Weevil says, sounding oddly hesitant. “I have something. You know, for those girls over there. Hold on.”

Logan glances at Clarence, questioning, as Weevil jogs back to the cop car--returns with a battered black briefcase, which he hands the bodyguard with resolution. “Divide it up evenly, got me? Help them move on from this mess.”

With a flick of his thumb, Clarence opens the latch, revealing neat bundles of cash, pale and musty-smelling. Logan murmurs, “What the FUCK?” and Clarence almost-smiles.
“This is the money Oscar took,” he explains, with a steady look at Weevil. “I was going to tell you after we made it home. I followed the clues from the flyer to Navarro.”

The accusing look he turns on his friend is met with a shrug, although Weevs has the grace to look self-conscious. “I told Oscar I’d hold onto it for safekeeping, until things got less hot,” Weevil says. “But when you decided to rescue these women, I figured…they earned it, it’s theirs. Besides, I can always bilk money out you--you’re the easiest person in the world to con.” And with a smirk and sarcastic salute, he climbs into the cop car and takes off, sirens silencing as he disappears.

“Go home,” Clarence says, recapturing Logan’s attention. “I’ve got transportation hidden about half a mile down the road, I’ll rendezvous with Loretta and get these women on a boat. We can’t risk you not being in Miramar when the police come calling, to see where you’ve been since you left the party. There’s no way everybody present kept your scuffle with Perry secret.”

“God that felt good,” Logan says, reminiscingly, flexing the hand he cut smashing Perry’s face. “But you’re right, I’m overdue. And I did promise the little woman a special evening.”

Clarence inclines his head, grave. Logan grins and retrieves his jacket before sprinting for his car. Tosses the bandanna and beret out the window as he pulls out onto the road, and makes tracks at the Jet’s top speed for home.

Parking a few blocks down, as instructed, he approaches through the garden, noting with relief that everything seems quiet and ordinary--no clutch of police waiting in the driveway to pounce. The light through the French doors is welcoming, and he can see Champ scrabbling with both paws at the glass.

He eases into a room that seems otherwise deserted, scooping up the dog to silence her, and suffering the resulting licks wordlessly while he searches. His stomach rumbles as he smells something savory, but a shouted, “Thank GOD!” from the stairs distracts him from investigating.

Logan turns as Veronica appears at the top, hair mussed, clad in an AMAZING blue robe that he sincerely hopes has a matching nightgown. “You really cut it close,” is how she greets him, rushing down; and begins to strip him right there in the hall, appropriating the dog and setting her amidst the discards. “There’s a police car turning onto the road as we speak!”

He opens his mouth to defend himself; but she just bends to suck a hickey onto his neck like she’ll be graded on it later. With a smile, he twists to kiss her properly. She evades his mouth in favor of inspecting her work, though, then shoves his underwear-clad self away. Scooping up dusty garments with purpose, she yanks open the hall closet, from whence she retrieves his favorite (and missing for days) robe; throws it into his face, then rushes back up the stairs. Faintly, from down the hall, comes the sound of the front-door’s knocker.

“Stall as long as you can and then answer that!” she hisses, gesturing with a trouser-filled hand, as calls of “Policia! Abre la puerta!” filter back. Then she disappears from view as he stands bemused and watches, belting the robe closed over his bare chest.

With a sigh, he silently counts to twenty, then yells, “Coming! Give me a second to get dressed!” at the locked and bolted door.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: VERONICA: MIRAMAR, 1956: JUSTICIA QUIERO YO MAS POR MI CASA NO

The fake voice is strictly for Logan’s benefit; she knows how much he loves it when she slips into different characters, and Veronica wants to keep his mood up. It’s going to be a long day of secrets and subterfuge.

“Janet Smith at noon?” The clipped, cultured tone interrupts her musings, and Veronica confirms the information. Miss Snooty Salon Receptionist warms enough to say, “We’ll see her then.”

Dropping the phone in its cradle, Veronica smirks at her husband. “Satisfied?”

“Yes… and a little turned on.” He curls his hands around her waist, and Veronica lets him pull her close. She raises her face for a kiss, traces his jaw with her fingertips. It’s easy to get carried away and forget things when he’s intent on being a distraction, like now. His knee slides between her legs, hiking up the hem of her dress.

“Things to do,” she murmurs against his lips and pushes him away. “We have to keep our eyes on the prize.”

“You ARE the prize, Mrs. Echolls.”

Her cheeks warm, but she pins him with her steely-librarian look, pursing her mouth and frowning. She folds her arms under her breasts. “What’s your plan to rescue the fair maiden from Belleza?”

Logan shrugs. “I need a plan?” His gaze drops to the collared v-neck of her dress, suddenly fascinated by the small loose pleats on her bustline. “I’m sure Bubbles isn’t going to leave; she probably just wants to tell her sister to scram.”
“Be that as it may, you still need to be prepared.” Grabbing his hand, she stops its exploration of her decolletage, and pulls him toward the study. “Men aren’t welcome in the salon—which is probably why Bubbles suggested it—you don’t want them to see all the plucking and primping, it ruins the illusion.”

“Pay no attention to that lady behind the curtain?”

“Exactly.” She withdraws pencil and paper from the desk. “My guess, her bodyguards won’t stray too far from the front door so you’ll have to drop Janet off at the corner.” From memory, Veronica sketches the location of the shop and its cross streets.

“The guards are new,” Logan says, reflexively touching his bicep. “Bubbles says they’re worse than the originals, but they shouldn’t recognize me.”

“Let’s not take any chances, okay? I’m sure Rossi pointed out your pretty face, and told them to keep watch for you and your particular brand of charm.”

“Aww, you think I’m pretty.” He bats his lashes, preens- puffing out his chest and smoothing his hair.

“I do,” Veronica says, smiling. “And I aim to keep you that way.” She makes an X on her drawing, taps the pencil against the page. “The shop has a back door, which leads to a narrow alley that connects these two streets.” Logan cocks an inquisitive brow at her inside information, and she pats his cheek. “I know all sorts of things.”

“Because you’ve had your hair cut there.” His hopeful inflection is belied by the pinched, wary lines around his eyes. “Right?”

“Sure... Or, maybe, the manicurist sneaks into the alley to smoke and meet her married boyfriend, who I just happened to be following one night... possibly with my camera?”

He hangs his head and sighs, but his smile is fond. “So you want me to sneak into this—”

“No,” she interrupts, cutting him off. “I want you to park here and patiently wait for Janet to bring her sister outside.” It’s her turn to touch his wounded arm. “You will not swoop in to save the lady, guns blazing; she can find her own way out.”

“Should I stay in the car like you stayed in bed, or do you actually want me to listen to you?” Her icy stare makes him wince. “Too soon for jokes, huh? Okay,” he agrees, flippant like he’ll try to follow her instructions, but he’s not making any promises. “Guess I should bite the bullet”—he smirks at his unfortunate word choice—“and call Janet, tell her the plan.”

Veronica’s hand lands on his atop the phone, preventing him from picking up the receiver. “You leave our client to me. I’ll convince her it’s high time SHE make her sister listen to reason.”

Perching on the edge of the desk, he studies her face, and then leans over to kiss her nose. “I know you’re used to getting your way, sugarplum, but don’t be too disappointed when this doesn’t go the way you want.”

“The only thing I want is you safe,” she says, palm curving around his cheek. “If Bubbles doesn’t have the good sense to leave, well, that’s her choice.”

Logan turns his head, presses his lips to her wrist. “And Janet?”

“Take her to the airport and put her on a plane.” Standing, Veronica adjusts the top of her girdle
and smooths the banded-waist of her dress. “Have you decided what you’re going to say to Art?”

“No, but I’ll think of something.” His eyes follow her hands as she fiddles with the crinoline beneath her skirt, frowns at her appearance. “And where are you going all gussied up? I thought you were working on Big Dick’s investor list with Tina?”

“I am.” She takes an envelope from the desk, slides her arm through his, and starts walking him toward the entrance hall. “But I have some shopping to do later.” Before he can express any skepticism for her innocent-sounding plan, she straightens his tie, gives him the package for Art, and opens the front door. “Call me when you’re done with the ambassador.” She stands on her toes, brushes their lips together, and turns away. “Be careful and good luck,” she calls over her shoulder on her way to the kitchen.

Without Remy there’s no chance for a hot breakfast and, now that she’s hungry, she regrets sending him off to babysit Trina. She makes toast, slathers it with peanut butter, adds banana slices, and drizzles honey on top, eats it over the sink to avoid spills.

A peek out the window confirms Carmen is still here. Veronica doesn’t know what time they finally went to bed last night. When she and Logan retired to their room, Carmen and Tina showed no signs of being ready for sleep—opening another bottle of scotch and raiding the refrigerator—but she hopes Tina gets up soon.

While she waits, she picks up the phone and dials the operator, asks to be connected with the Hotel Vedado. On the corner of 19 and M, it’s a nice, out-of-the-way hotel with free beach service and a gift shop. Whenever their FOCSA apartment is unavailable, the Vedado is Logan’s go-to choice as hideout. Partly because it’s run by a distant relative of Weevil’s—Bernardo Navarro—who gives him a discounted rate and guarantees secrecy, but mostly because the hotel remains under the radar of the Havana mob contingent.

Janet answers in the middle of the first ring. “Hello?”

“It’s Veronica Echolls.” Eschewing pleasantries, she gets right to the point. “Your sister wants to meet with you today at noon.”

“She does?” Surprise gives way to happiness and she gushes, “Gee, that’s great! I hope this means…” Uncertainty creeps in, tempering her mood. “What do you think this means, Mrs. Echolls? Do you think she’s ready to go home?”

“I don’t know, but YOU need to convince her it’s time.” Veronica gives her the layout of the beauty salon and tells her the plan.

“You want me to go in alone? Maybe Mr. Echolls can help talk—”

“My husband has already done enough,” she snaps. “He got SHOT trying to help your daft sister, and instead of going with him, she ran back to the man who BEATS her.” Veronica tilts her face to the ceiling, takes a deep breath and practices Logan’s trick- counting backwards from a hundred by fives.

“I’m sorry… I didn’t… is he okay?” Janet sputters in the face of the angry outburst.

_Eighty-five, eighty._ It’s not working. “Angelo’s hurting your sister, Janet—a black eye, cracked ribs—it will only get worse. Do you understand? He’s not going to stop.”

“What do I do?”
“Whatever it takes. Plead, threaten, LIE - come up with a story so good it will be impossible for her to refuse. Because, make no mistake, this is your last chance to save your sister. If she doesn’t leave now, Angelo Rossi WILL kill her.”

Veronica doesn’t regret being hard on Janet. Sooner or later Rossi will make Bubbles disappear, and her sister needed to know the stakes for today’s meeting - get her to leave, or say goodbye. But she does feel a little bad about making the woman cry. Hopefully somewhere beneath the tears lies a backbone, and Janet will find the resolve to do what has to be done. At least she understands Logan will no longer be risking his neck for them. *We won’t cause him any more trouble, Mrs. Echolls.*

Now she just has to get Logan to wash his hands of them. She sighs, stares across the dining room table at Tina.

Remy came home in a foul temper, but his black mood was no match for Veronica’s, so he wisely shut himself in the kitchen to bake. To avoid his snit, they were working in here, but the proximity to the yeasty smell of fresh bread is only making her hungry… and irritable.

“How’s it coming?” This is the second—or maybe third—time she’s asked Tina the same question in the past hour. The first time Tina gave her a cursory *good*, but now she doesn’t even look up. Ignoring Veronica’s impatience, she continues to transcribe the journal, turning the dots and dashes into legible words on a pad.

“That’s a name Veronica recognizes. “Let me see.” She holds out her hand for the pad, and Tina slides it across the table. The entire thing is one long list of people and—thanks to The Neptune Register—Jack Montana isn’t the only name she knows. “Is this it? Are you finished?”

Tina nods. “But I still don’t know what the numbers mean.” Standing, she leaves her chair for one closer to Veronica. “The beginning section could be dates?”

Now that they are neat and aligned, Veronica can see the pattern. She picks up the pencil and starts adding slashes. The first entry, Martin Vaughn, has the day, month, and a two-digit year followed by, what she assumes is the amount he invested -- five hundred dollars. Veronica scans the rest of the page, noting that the year disappears from the dates until it changes. She thumbs through to the end. The final entry is dated right before Big Dick’s arrival in Cuba. A last score for traveling
money, and it’s a big one: Ursula Krause, twenty-five thousand dollars.

Veronica frowns. The journal covers a long period—1949 through 1956—and gives her plenty of suspects, but there’s no contact information for any of them, and no way to tell if they were motivated enough to kill over their losses. “Do any other names repeat?”

“A woman, but he’s only written her first name.” Tina finds one of the entries for Millie. In place of a surname are the initials ‘N.P.’ and then the amount of fifty dollars.

Turning back to her collection of articles, Veronica picks up one of the earliest stories: ‘Suicide Triggers Investigation.’ *County Assessor Jack Montana committed suicide earlier this year, leaving behind copies of fraudulent assessment rolls. These sparked an investigation into the financial dealings of Richard Casablancas, Sr. and his company, Casablancas Enterprises.*

She shows the story to Tina. “It looks like Big Dick was keeping a record of his bribes too. I’m guessing the K next to Montana’s name represents the thousand dollars he got each time he inflated the value of worthless swampland.”

“And Millie?” Tina returns the news clipping.

“A notary public?” The woman’s name is missing from the headlines, but Big Dick would need a notary to sign and seal his bogus real estate deeds. Did she keep records on all the shady transactions? And, if so, has she already turned them over to the Feds in order to cut a deal?

“I’m going to wake Carmen—bring her breakfast—and leave you to this.” Tina stands, pushes her chair back in, and stretches. “Unless you need something else?”

“Well, since you’re braving the kitchen anyway... Can you tell Remy he doesn’t have to cook dinner? But I want him to make creme brulee for two, and a tray of his chocolate-dipped strawberries?”

The romantic dessert request makes Tina’s eyebrows raise with the silent question, *are you SURE you want me home tonight?* But she doesn’t voice the sentiment. Used to the offbeat schemes and strange machinations that define the Echolls’ household, she only says, “Okay,” before leaving the room.

Veronica waits to hear yelling from the kitchen, but there is none. Either Remy has calmed down after his night babysitting Trina, or he’s bottles deep into the cooking wine. Probably the latter, she decides, returning her attention to Jack Montana’s suicide.

It’s scant on details. In his role as county assessor, Montana was inflating the values of worthless land and creating deeds for properties that didn’t exist. The lucrative scam went on for years with no one the wiser, and authorities estimated he’d received at least half a million dollars in bribes and kickbacks from Casablancas.

When questioned as to why Montana would choose to take his own life now, his widow, Clara, said: ‘It was the victims who finally got to him. One of them kept calling him at odd hours, coming by the house, saying she wanted proof for the police. Ask me, what she wanted was revenge. Crying about her brother-in-law, and how this ruined her sister’s life. What about MY life?’

Rolling her eyes, Veronica tosses down the paper, not wanting to read any more of the widow’s poor-me story. Plus it’s not really getting her anywhere. In fact, this whole thing feels like a colossal waste of time. Is she really going to track down every name on this list and search their travel plans, just to see if they were in Cuba on the fifteenth? Is she going to call Millie the Notary
to ask if any specific victim seemed particularly murderous?

Sighing, she picks up the journal, turns to the end and works her way backwards, concentrating on the people who lost the most. Would a victim kill for five hundred dollars? What about five thousand? On average, that was an entire year’s salary. It would take decades of scrimping and saving to set aside that amount of money, and minutes to lose it, courtesy of just one snake oil salesman in a nice suit.

Maybe Big Dick deserved what he got and she should just let this go. All these people ruined so he could what? Party in Havana with his hot, young mistress, dine at fancy restaurants, and rub elbows with Hemingway? She turns back the years, 1956, 55, 54. Pages and pages of… her eyes stop at a familiar last name.

It should be familiar, she heard it less than a week ago as part of a not-completely-truthful tale of woe. But there’s some other reason she knows the name. The harder she tries to chase the hazy memory, the further it recedes.

Taking the pad with her, she leaves the dining room for the telephone in the study. It’s too early for Dad to be in the office so she tries him at home.

“Keith Mars.” He sounds alert, and Veronica’s glad she didn’t wake him.

“Why do I know the name Nick Ashten?” She sits on the edge of the desk. “I feel like the answer should be obvious and yet I’m drawing a blank.”

“It should be, and I’m disappointed you don’t remember.” He takes an audible sip of what she assumes is his second, or third, cup of coffee, because he’s not nearly this chipper until after his first dose of caffeine. “And good morning, by the way.”

“Dad.” Impatience tinges the word.

“Veronica.” Keith matches her tone and then chuckles, ruining the effect. “Come on, honey, The Nick Ashten Orchestra? They headlined at the Cocoanut Grove nightclub in the Ambassador Hotel.”

The hazy memory takes shape and she nods. “He died, right? Like a year ago?”

“Maybe a little longer? I think it was around Christmas of ‘54? The official story was a sailing accident, but there were rumors. He’d been drinking heavily, missing shows, Myer Schine was getting ready to fire him from the hotel.”

Veronica glances at the entry in Big Dick’s journal. June 1954, Nick invested a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in Casablancas Enterprises, and six months later he was dead. “So he killed himself?”

“It’s possible, but he might’ve just been drunk and fallen overboard. Either way it was a shame - he was a very talented young man.” He exhales on a long sigh, and Veronica can picture the accompanying head shake. “Tell me, why this sudden interest in Big Band music?”

“Nick Ashten was one of Big Dick’s victims.”

“Well, he certainly can’t be your killer.”

“No, but—” Ask me, what she wanted was revenge. Crying about her brother-in-law, and how this ruined her sister’s life. Hopping off the desk, she says, “I’ve got to go, Dad. I’ll call you later.”
“Uh-oh, I know that voice. You be careful, Veronica, and let me know if you need anything else.”

“I will,” she promises before hanging up. But right now the only thing she needs is a long talk with Janet and her sister. Fortunately, she knows EXACTLY where to find them.

Unfortunately Logan finds her first. He waylays her in the alley behind the salon with talk of plan changes and car trunks. His flirting is both arousing and irritating—it’s also distracting enough for Veronica to almost forget why she’s here. That is, until the stockroom door swings open and Janet rushes into the alley.

Veronica takes in her distraught appearance—chest heaving, hands clenched, tears on her cheeks,—and her gaze narrows. She’s not buying the histrionics or innocent waif routine.

Logan, also unmoved by Janet’s choked sob, rails at her failure to convince Bubbles to leave. “What could she have possibly said to make you just give UP?”

“It doesn’t matter what she said.”

_It matters to me._ Veronica tunes out the rest of her act, glances back at the open door. “Did she send you out here to stall while she leaves?” Janet’s gaze drifts away, but not before Veronica sees the flash of guilt. “Fuck,” she mutters under her breath, pushing past her into the salon.

The stockroom doubles as the employee bathroom. One wall is tall metal shelves of shampoos, conditioners, dyes, and towels. The other has a toilet and a listing, wall-hung sink with an open roll of toilet paper balanced on its lip. Veronica hurries through the no-frills, unsanitary space and into the salon itself, scans the room.

Four employees—all women—wearing black smocks with the gold Belleza logo are gathered around one of the styling chairs near the front of the shop. They’ve pulled back the curtain that separates the salon from the waiting area so the receptionist can join them in their gossip. The lone customer has her head stuffed under one of the silver-hooded hair dryers, oblivious to their whispered conversation, but Veronica catches the word _hermanas_ as she races past them.

There’s no sign of ‘Bubbles.’

She pushes through the frameless glass door to the street, and spots a car pulling away from the curb. It’s another Chrysler, not an Imperial, but a New Yorker, painted Easter-egg blue. Veronica glimpses a blonde in the backseat who _might_ be Bubbles, but there’s no mistaking the two goons in front. They’re… How did Delgado put it? ‘That type.’ Dressed like high-society, but with hard stares and pugilistic faces.

Bubbles and her two mobster bodyguards. Veronica frowns, plays out the murder scenario looking for flaws. An American woman sitting at the end of Sloppy Joe’s bar. Beautiful, Delgado called her, while lingering over the picture of Kendall. Veronica can understand his confusion. The two women have the same va-va-voom allure.

Did she follow Big Dick there, or was she already drinking when he walked in? Maybe his arrival is why she got upset. Of all the gin joints in all the towns… the man responsible for her husband’s death walks into hers? It would be enough to make anyone angry.

A night of drinking, mourning her lot in life - lost fortune, dead husband, and an abusive mobster boyfriend. She chases after Big Dick when he leaves the bar. One bodyguard pays her tab, while the other waits in the Imperial across the street.
Or maybe she wasn’t alone. Considering his penchant for keeping Bubbles at his side, could Rossi have been with her in the bar that night?

“No luck?” Logan’s question startles her and she whirls around to face him. “I got the jump on you twice in one day?” He smirks. “You’re slipping, Mars.”

“Hardly, I was just solv—” The sidewalk next to him is empty. She glances back at the salon.

“Where’s Janet?”

“On her way back to Podunk, Iowa?” He shrugs. “Can you believe she actually FIRED us? Shoved a check in my hand, and hightailed it for a cab to the airport.”

“Dammit, Logan,” Veronica growls, stalking down the block toward the cross street. “I needed to talk to her.”

“I thought you’d be happy to see her gone.” He catches up to Veronica with one long stride. “Especially after browbeating her into leaving me alone.”

“I did no such thing; I merely explained the situation.”

“With your usual grace and tact, I’m sure.” His smile is indulgent, and it only grows when she hmphs at him. They reach her borrowed car, another loan of Izzy’s green Beetle, and Logan leans on the rear fender. “Are you ready to tell me why there’s some all-fired rush to talk to Janet and Bubbles? What has you skulking down alleys and—”

“Heidi,” she interrupts, correcting him. “Not Bubbles - Heidi Ashten.” Brow knitting, his gaze drifts up and away while he thinks over the information. Veronica helps him out, “Remember the Nick Ashten Orchestra?”

Logan nods. “Ambassador Hotel. We caught the show last time we were in California.” His frown deepens. “Bubbles is his wife?”

“Widow. I remembered her name on my drive over here - she was mentioned in his obituary.” She’d made note of the story because it had been a good night—she and Logan escaping Neptune for a drive up the coast—and Veronica was sad to learn of his death. It’s why the name struck a chord when she’d read it in Big Dick’s ledger.

“And you’re mad because they lied to us? Or is there more to it?”

“More.” Veronica explains how Nick Ashten was swindled and ruined by Big Dick. She takes the newspaper article about Jack Montana’s suicide from her purse, hands it over, and points out the ‘what she wanted was revenge’ quote. “It looks like Janet—or whatever her name is—was hounding Montana for information.”

“And what? Learned that Big Dick was planning to flee to Cuba?” Logan bounces upright off the car fender, drags a hand through his hair, and paces a tight circle. “Do you really think she followed him here to kill him?” he asks, incredulous. As if, after casting her in the role of wide-eyed ingenue, it’s hard to see her as the murderer.

“Her or her sister.” Veronica sketches it out for him - Bubbles in the bar when Big Dick arrives, one bodyguard close at hand, the other waiting to be turned into an unwitting getaway driver. “And, of course, there’s always Rossi.”

“As in, why buy you flowers when I can shoot the man you hate instead?” The arched brow and half-smirk match the skepticism in his tone.
Veronica gives a one-shouldered shrug. “Who knows? Maybe he had his own reasons for wanting Big Dick dead.”

“Or maybe you hate him enough you wouldn’t mind watching him hang for this crime?”

“Nice thought, but no one’s going to hang for this, remember?” She tilts her head, stares across the street toward the capital building in the distance. “You know, I thought the ‘guilty parties’ were rounded up and executed so fast because maybe Lansky was behind the murder, but it works the same if it’s Rossi, right? The police wouldn’t want him caught up in this, or they might lose their cuts from his bordellos.”

“That’s thin. Even if Rossi disappeared, the bordellos wouldn’t. Some other lowlife would step right up to fill his shoes, and the graft would keep on rolling.”

Sad, but accurate. Veronica sighs. “If Rossi is the killer, he would also be the one who tried to run us off the road.” It dawns on her that she never told him what she learned from Marisol. “A witness put a Chrysler Imperial outside Sloppy Joe’s the night of the murder.”

Logan’s jaw works, but he makes no sound as he tries to process yet another secret without losing his temper. He rubs a hand over his face and rolls his shoulders; Veronica tries to guess what number he’s on in his backwards countdown. Finally he says, “Could be why he keeps threatening me. Not because he cares about the girl, but because he’s afraid the great Detective Echolls will uncover his sins.”

“It might also be why Janet fired us - Bubbles told her what Rossi did, and they want to keep you out of it?”

“Or they’re covering their own asses.”

“Right.” Veronica slides her arms around his waist, lays her head on his chest. “I woke up this morning with no suspects and now I have three, but which one of them did it - I have no idea.”

“You’ll figure it out.” He kisses the top of her head.

“Mm-hmm. But in the meantime, you have women to save, and I have shopping to do.”

XXXXX

Her first stop isn’t a store, but the house of a seamstress and encajera named Salome - no last name. If she’d ever had one, no one remembers it, and she prefers it that way—‘adds to the mystery,’ she says. But there’s nothing mysterious about her past because she talks about it incessantly. “You know I used to be a showgirl” - is usually the first sentence she says upon meeting someone, and she doesn’t disappoint.

Veronica rounds her eyes, fakes interest, and gushes, “Really?” Then promptly tunes out the ensuing story. She keeps up the pretense of listening, nodding in the appropriate places, while flipping through the rack of lingerie.

Salome’s current full-time job is making costumes for the dancers at Sans Souci, but she brings in extra money running a little shop in her sitting room. Her creations are beautiful—expensive materials, intricate lace—but her talent as a seamstress is not why Veronica is here. Salome is also a first-rate gossip.

When her story of how she met Frank Sinatra finally winds down, and Veronica seems sufficiently impressed, Salome asks, “See anything you like?”
“They’re all gorgeous.” At least in this, Veronica doesn’t have to lie. “But, I need something really special for tonight - perhaps in green? My husband loves me in that color.”

“Anniversary?” Standing, Salome crosses the room to an armoire in the corner, pulls open the doors and frowns at the contents.

“No, not yet.” She blathers on about their upcoming anniversary, his proposal, the wedding, and how they’ll be married eight years this month, making sure to use Logan’s name several times. “Tonight, though, is even more important; I have big news to share.”

Raising her head from the drawer she’s rummaging, Salome runs an appraising eye over Veronica, and grins a wide, toothy smile, which quickly vanishes. “I wish you woulda called first, then maybe, but no… no green.” She straightens with a wispy piece of fabric in hand. “This should fit you.”

Dark enough to appear black, the midnight-blue silk chemise has black lace side-panels, and frastaglio embroidery trims the bust and trails down the lower back. “It’s perfect.” Too bad Logan’s only view of it would be as a puddle on the bedroom floor. “Is there a matching robe?”

There is. Veronica pays the extortionist price for both pieces, waits as Salome bags them. With profuse thanks and a promise to return next week to purchase something for her anniversary, she leaves the yellow Spanish colonial, and slides behind the wheel of Izzy’s VW.

A group of children are playing la gallinita ciega in the center of the road. Veronica watches the blindfolded ‘hen’—a little girl in overalls and pigtails—spin in a circle, trying to tag one of the bigger kids. They’re laughing and chanting: gallinita, gallinita ¿qué se te ha perdido en el pajar?

Their innocence provides a stark contrast to Veronica’s dark thoughts. Bauta is only seventeen miles outside of Havana, but it feels worlds apart. Lowering her head, she rests her cheek on the steering wheel. She’s tired. Tired of this life… tired of Cuba.

Things needed to change. Logan wouldn’t force the issue; he’d never ask her to give up, or give in, but she can see the stress of their lifestyle weighing on him. The bloom is off the rose, and he’s starting to be dragged down by the constant effort to stay one step ahead of their enemies. Protecting her has become his full-time job. And he’s not just defending her safety, but her spirit.

He doesn’t want to see her conform. Doesn’t want society to hammer the nail that sticks out, and she loves him for it. Loves that he provides the freedom for her to be who she is, but now it’s time for her to put his needs first, focus on their family. She makes up her mind, resolute--once this case is done, it’s time to leave. Not back to Neptune, but somewhere else.

Lifting her head, she puts the car in gear. To avoid interrupting the children’s game, she makes a u-turn, and takes the long way, past the Textilera de Ariguanabo to the Carretera Central. The road runs the entire length of the island; she’s half-tempted to just keep driving, take it all the way to the end. Instead she navigates through the streets that lead to the Hotel Sevilla and the cigar shop in its shadow.

Not part of the hotel proper, the shop is still owned by Amleto Battisti, and it is where he gets his personal cigars. Veronica lingers in the store, debating between a box of H. Upmanns and Montecristos, while telling the clerk about the “special night” she has planned. Her timing being precise, it isn’t long before Amleto himself wanders in for his evening constitutional.

Tall, with a fleshy nose, deep-set eyes, and receding hairline, he is wearing a gray tweed single-breasted suit. Veronica waits for him to select a Romeo y Julieta Corona and asks, “Is that a good
brand?"

“One of the best.” He sniffs the cigar, inhaling deeply. “Churchill smokes these.”

Adopting a pretty pout, she tilts her head, and sighs. “Gosh, I just don’t know what to get. Do you think you can help me, mister… ?”

“Battisti”—he takes her gloved hand in his—“but please call me Amleto.”

Resisting the urge to recoil from his touch, she adds a soft giggle to her breathy-voiced blonde routine, and introduces herself. “Veronica Echolls.” She frees her hand, taps the white-and-gold H. Upmann dress box on the counter. “I think Logan, my husband, smokes these… but I really want something memorable for tonight.” She flashes a coy smile. “I have big news to tell him.”

His manner changes with the mention of a husband. Still polite, but the interest in his brown eyes cools, and he takes a step back. He leans across the counter, secures a different box of cigars, and hands it to her. “These should do the trick.”

“Wonderful,” she says, turning to the clerk. “Could you put these on my husband’s account? Logan Echolls. E.C.H—”

Amleto holds up a hand to stop her. “Please accept them as my gift, along with my sincere congratulations.”

Veronica simpers her thanks, allows him to hold the door for her, and strolls for the car. Turning back, she offers him another smile and finger-wave before sliding into the driver’s seat. Safely ensconced in the VW, she shudders with revulsion, tosses the cigars next to the lingerie. She’s suddenly glad Logan didn’t question her ‘shopping’ story.

She puts more miles on Izzy’s car, driving back the way she came. The stops are out of order. If anyone bothers to construct her timeline, they might wonder why she drove past the club for cigars only to return later, but Veronica doubts it. They’ll just chalk it up to her being a dumb blonde who can’t read a map.

The Tropicana looks different in the daytime without the neon lights, music, and glitz. Veronica prefers it this way. She rolls down the window, takes in the scent of cedar and hibiscus, winds her way through the verdant forest of royal palms and mango trees.

Martin is expecting her—he’s the only person she called in advance—and, after a short wait, he greets her at the entrance with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Lovely, as always, but perhaps with an added glow?”

Secrets may be her stock-in-trade, but they’re Martin’s passion…and she can tell from HIS glow, he loves being privy to this one. “Oh, you.” She gives his arm a playful push. “It’s a good thing I’m telling Logan tonight, or you’d spoil everything next time we were here.”

He laughs. “You know me too well.” Taking her hand, he threads it through his crooked elbow, and starts into the club. “Now let’s have a drink while the chef packs your dinner.”

She’d asked him to prepare *cochinita pibil*, claiming it to be Logan’s favorite. It wasn’t, but it did take hours for the banana-leaf-wrapped pork to cook, and required an underground oven pit Remy did not possess.

Martin scoots behind the bar to prepare their drinks, takes down two collins glasses, and muddles fresh mint leaves. He drops a lime wedge in each tumbler, pauses. “Or would you rather have
champagne?"

“A mojito is perfect.” She silently rushes him along, not caring if the mint is properly crushed. There’s one more stop to make and it’s an important one. If she gets to the Nacional too late, her target will be gone.

“I hear Ramon is having a party tonight,” Martin introduces the subject while pouring white rum over ice. “Was Logan not invited?”

He knows very well Logan would be on that guest list, and he’s only fishing for details. But Veronica was counting on his curiosity. “Ramon’s parties start well enough, but they usually end in poor taste.” Her nose crinkles at the thought. “Logan will be home long before that happens.”

A bark of laughter erupts over the rim of his glass at her brazen confidence. “If he knows what’s good for him, I’m sure he will.”

“Exactly.” She raises her mojito, takes a delicate sip. “Besides, he’d never turn down an evening spent entirely in my company.”

“Who would?” Martin offers her a silent toast, gaze sliding past her shoulder. He lifts a finger in signal and a waiter immediately approaches as if waiting in the wings for his cue. A five-tiered stacked food carrier in his hands. “Did you remember the pickled onions and rice?”

“Yes sir.” The waiter lays a hand on the top tier, glances behind him. “Mario has the tortillas and sauces.” A young man in chinos and a t-shirt rushes forward carrying an open cardboard box. Veronica peeks over its side. Containers of guajillo chili and mango habanero are nestled inside along with tortillas and a caramel flan.

“I couldn’t let you go without dessert,” Martin says, following her line of sight. “Or this.” He plucks a bottle of champagne from behind the bar, adds it to the box. “A celebration isn’t complete without it.”

“You’re going to spoil me, Marty.”

“And you deserve to be.” He gives her a hug, warm and paternal. It makes her both reflective and sad. The Tropicana features in many of her fond memories, and Martin might be one of the only people she’ll miss when they leave Havana. “Make sure you give my best to Logan, and tell him Marty thinks he’s a lucky man.”

“Oh, he already knows how lucky he is.” She stands on her toes, gives him an impulsive kiss on the cheek. “Take care, and thank you.” His eyes cloud over, maybe sensing her melancholy, and Veronica smiles to allay any concern. “We’ll see you next week for Billy Daniels.”

Martin’s expression clears, and he waves her on her way.

Steering one-handed down the long drive, she hides the bottle of champagne beneath the passenger seat. It’s not strictly necessary, but why take chances? Best if no one knows she already has a bottle for tonight.

She crosses over to Avenida 31, follows the curves in the road until it turns into Linea, and takes it straight to the Malecon and the Hotel Nacional. There’s merit in the idea of leaving the car with a valet—he will see her purchases. But she decides instead to ward against possible filching, and parks on the tree-lined horseshoe-shaped street.

Her brief conversations with first the bartender and then his manager end with the result she
expects - sorry, but those bottles are reserved for special guests. With a quiver in her bottom lip, she pulls a hankie from her purse and dabs at her eyes, tries one more time to convince them. “But it’s my husband’s favorite.”

The manager holds his arms out at his sides, gives a half-hearted shrug, not in the least bit sorry to deny her request. Veronica’s chin pops up and she snaps her fingers. “Never mind, I know just who to ask,” she says, spinning on her heel and stalking toward the pool.

It takes her no time to find the right cabana; the big bruiser standing off to the side is a dead giveaway. Veronica walks directly for it, prays Lansky isn’t entertaining anyone who can get her in trouble.

The bruiser steps in front of her, blocks her path. “You can’t go in there, miss.”

“Misses,” she corrects. “Mrs. Logan Echolls, and I need to see Mr. Lansky, it’s very important.” Her voice is loud enough to travel and several heads turn in their direction. Bruiser starts to tell her he’s busy and can’t be disturbed, but then Lansky exits the cabana.

A slender man with brown hair and eyes, Veronica stands taller than him in her heels, and she regrets not wearing flats when he has to look up at her. “How can I help you, Mrs… Echolls, did you say?”

“Veronica.” She ducks her head and graces him with the flirty half-smile Logan adores. “I just came from speaking with one of your bartenders and he refused to sell me a bottle of champagne.”

“Oh?”

She nods. “A 1928 Pol Roger.”

His eyes widen slightly, impressed by her choice. “You have very good taste in champagne.”

“Not really, no, but my husband does; it’s his favorite.” She twists the handkerchief between her fingers, distraught. “We drank it on our honeymoon, which wouldn’t you know, we had right here in this very hotel, and I’d really like a bottle for tonight.”

“I don’t normally—”

Not giving him a chance to say no, she continues, “See we’ve been married for almost eight years now, and it was starting to look like we’d never…” She lets her bottom lip tremble and then shakes it off, squaring her shoulders. “But it’s finally happened, and I’m going to tell him tonight. He’s gonna be so happy, Mr. Lansky, and I just want everything to be perfect when I give him the news.”

“Of course you do.” He pats her wringing hands, turns to the bruiser. “Mike, go inside with Mrs. Echolls… Veronica, and tell Jimmy to let her have her champagne.” Veronica rewards his words with a wide smile, and he adds, “No charge.”

“Gee, thank you so much, Mr. Lansky. I knew you were the right person to talk to; Logan’s gonna be so grateful to you for helping me.”

He would be no such thing—his mood when he learns she talked to Lansky will be closer to outrage than gratitude— but why ruin the charade? She trails after Mike to claim her free bottle of Pol Roger from Jimmy, and gives the disagreeable manager a smug smile. It’s out of character, but she’s done playing the docile, ditzy housewife.
Done, that is, until tonight’s encore performance.

XXXXX

It’s showtime.

Veronica takes one last peek at Logan—safe and unharmed—and races upstairs to keep him that way. She surveys their room, nods satisfaction, and examines Logan’s clothes. The suit jacket is in fine shape. Without bothering to remove his wallet from the inside pocket, she tosses it at the mahogany valet stand. It lands haphazardly across the hanger bar. Perfect.

Putting his shirt on over her robe, she keeps it unbuttoned, and then shrugs it off her shoulders, letting it slide down her arms to the floor, aiming for a natural position. She leaves it where it lands and turns her attention to Logan’s pants. They are a little worse for wear. She shakes them out, brushes dirt from the knees. Frowning, she takes the glass of champagne from the nightstand and spills some on the stubborn spot, concealing one stain with another. Satisfied, she drops them on the carpet and kicks them part way under the rumpled bed.

“Don’t dawdle,” she admonishes herself, moving to the mirror. The police are here, and Logan can only stall so long before having to open the door.

Veronica musses her hair, and chews the lipstick from her bottom lip, giving it a swollen, well-kissed look. More banging on the front door tells her time’s up. She tugs her robe off a shoulder, revealing enough bare skin to hint at the nakedness underneath, and loosens the belt as she heads for the top of the stairs. Pinches her cheeks to bring up their color.

Voices echo against the marble and travel up to her perch in the hall. “Where were you this evening?” The officious tone is sure to annoy Logan—deference isn’t in his vocabulary—and Veronica hopes he keeps a cool head.

“Home with my wife.”

“Is that so? WE heard you were at a party thrown by Señor Aviles.”

“Do tell,” Logan says, drily.

Veronica takes it as her cue, sauntering down the stairs. “Are you coming back to bed, darling?” she asks as she reaches the quarter landing, and makes the turn. Her steps slow as the police hove into view. There are five of them—more than she expected—and all turn to watch her approach. Veronica feigns surprise, “Oh, my GOODNESS! I didn’t realize we had company.”

Pausing for a long beat, she gives them ample time to leer at her disheveled state before fixing her robe and tightening the belt. She takes the last few steps and crosses the foyer to Logan’s side.

“The police are here,” he says needlessly, frowning at her appearance. His fingers toy with the opening of her robe, tugging the edges closer together and adjusting the collar to conceal exposed skin. He drapes an arm around her waist, pulls her tight to his side.

“Oh no, did something happen?” She puts a hand over her mouth and looks up at Logan, eyes wide and scandalized. “Gosh, I hope everyone’s okay?”

Before Logan can answer, the police chief says, “There was an incident tonight at Señor Aviles’ home in Varadero.”

“See, that’s why I TOLD you not to make an appearance at that nasty party. I was just saying to
Marty...” Veronica glances at the police chief. “That’s Martin Fox at the Tropicana,” she clarifies for his benefit and then adds, “He had his chef make Logan’s favorite *cochinita pibil* for our dinner tonight.” Her gaze swings back to Logan. “I said to Marty, none of Ramon’s parties end well.”

“Which is why I’m glad I was home with you, sugar plum.” Logan kisses her nose, brushes his knuckles along the curve of her cheek, and Veronica beams at him.

The police chief clears his throat. “Do you mind if we take a look around?”

“Actually, I do,” Logan says, reaching for the door to show them out.

“Oh you.” Veronica playfully swats Logan’s arm. “Don’t be so grumpy; the nice officers didn’t mean to interrupt our evening; they’re just doing their job.” She turns up the wattage on her smile. “Of COURSE you can look around, chief”—she squints at his nameplate—“Carballo.”

“Thank you ma’am.” He gives a nod to his fellow officers and they disperse with their pre-arranged orders - two upstairs, one toward the study, and the other excusing himself to head back outside. She guesses he’ll search the garage and garden, as if they’d be dumb enough to hide the missing girls in the mariposa.

“Please, you simply MUST call me Veronica.” She slips out from beneath Logan’s arm, moves closer to Carballo. “I don’t suppose you know Chief Vermúdez of the Vieja district?”

He gives a polite head shake.

“Gee, that’s too bad. Rafe is a dear friend of ours—lovely man—Logan has him over for poker all the time.” Walking as she talks, she heads for the dining room, trusting Carballo to follow her. Guttering pillar candles on the sideboard are the only illumination, the tapers in the center of the table having burned down hours ago. Veronica turns on the chandelier. “I’m sorry for the mess… we got… um, distracted. Isn’t that right, honey?”

Logan nods, rests his hand on the small of her back. “And it was a very pleasant distraction,” he murmurs the words close to her ear, then directs a pointed look over her shoulder at Chief Carballo. “One that I’d like to get back to.”

“We won’t be long.” Carballo’s gaze moves over the table, takes in the uncleared remains of their dinner, and lands on the dress box of cigars.

“Would you like one?” Veronica offers. “Señor Battisti assured me they’re the best, and Logan enjoyed the one he had after dinner, didn’t you darling?” She waves a hand toward the ashtray with the butt of a smoked cigar sitting on its lip. “Can you believe Amleto gave us the box as a gift? He was so sweet when I told him what a special night this was for us, he simply insisted.”

Logan’s amusement with her act fades at the mention of Battisti. To cover, his distress, he turns to the chief. “You still haven’t told me what this is about.”

Carballo selects a cigar from the box, rolls it between his fingers, and passes it under his nose, inhaling the aroma. Withdrawing his own cutter from a uniform pocket, he snips the end, and says, “A woman was killed.” Swaying slightly on her feet, Veronica gasps, and falls heavily into a nearby chair. “How awful,” she exclaims, clapping her hands to her cheeks. “And here I am just going on and on about dinner, and our special night - babbling like a brook!”

“See, now you’ve upset my wife in her delicate condition.” Reaching past her arm, Logan picks up
the water pitcher, pours a glass, and gently presses it into her palm. “Maybe it’s time you were on your way.”

“My apologies, misses… er, Veronica; I only have a few questions for your husband, and then I’ll take my leave.” He watches as she takes dainty sips of water and turns to Logan, “Perhaps we should move our conversation outside?”

“You’re here after my alibi aren’t you?” Logan asks, and Carballo jerks his chin in the affirmative. “So why then would I leave her sitting inside?”

Veronica hides her smile by taking another sip of water. Sometimes she forgets how truly gifted her husband is at subterfuge and improvisation. She definitely couldn’t ask for a better partner in her capers than Logan. “I’ll be fine,” she assures. “Please just ask your questions.”

“Very well.” Carballo lights his cigar, takes a few puffs. “What time did you arrive home?”

Logan pretends to contemplate his answer. “Eight-thirty, I think?”

“It was closer to nine, dear.” Veronica corrects, knowing it’s still early enough to clear Logan of any wrongdoing this evening. “Remy was just reheating the food and I was lighting the candles. We sat down to eat at nine.”

Carballo’s eyes flick to the candles and he nods to himself. “Remy?”

“He’s our chef. Tonight was his night off, but he doesn’t trust me in his kitchen. I think he’s afraid I’ll burn the house down.” Veronica giggles. “You know, he might not be wrong, considering I forgot to put out all these candles before we went upstairs. It must be the hair.” She points to her head. “Blonde.”

The corner of Logan’s mouth curls upward at her act. “I stand corrected. If my lovely wife says nine, nine it is.”

“And what about the rest of your staff? You have a man who works for you, a chauffeur, I believe, Clarence Wiedman?” Another puff of his cigar. “Where was he this evening?”

“Hmm.” Veronica touches a finger to her cheek. “He helped me carry in my shopping earlier, then gave the car a good wash and wax… I guess he’s in his apartment over the garage? He was going to play cards with Tina and…” Her voice trails off and she tilts her head. “Why do you want to know about Clarence? He wasn’t at Ramon’s party, Logan drove himself.”

“Uh,” he puffs his cigar to buy time while he thinks of an excuse and then says, “I just wanted to know if there was someone else who could corroborate Mr. Echolls’ whereabouts.” He taps the Montecristo on the edge of the ashtray. “Not that I don’t trust you, ma’am, but I want to make sure your husband didn’t leave the house after dinner.”

“Of course he didn’t.” She frowns. “Logan would never do that after I went to such trouble making sure everything was just PERFECT for tonight. I mean, if you don’t believe me, you can ask Marty about the food, AND”—she pauses a moment before delivering the coup de grâce—“you can check with Mr. Lansky too; he gave us the champagne for our celebration and wouldn’t even let me PAY.”

“I… uh, I,” Carballo sputters, and Veronica grins at his discomfort. He hurriedly jabs out his cigar, leaves it smoldering in the ashtray. “Well, then I’m very sorry for disturbing you both - you have a good evening.”
A quick glance at Logan’s face propels Veronica from her chair. “I’ll see you out,” she says, eager to escape her husband’s ire.
“I still don’t see why you had to shore up my alibi by visiting Lansky.” Logan picks at a loose thread on his khakis, brooding. He’s wearing a purple, short-sleeved shirt which features a red-and-green print and wide collar, specifically to pick a fight. But that’s no reason to look sloppy. “A foolhardy choice, to put it mildly—and to put it not-so-mildly, idiotic.”

“My plan worked, didn’t it?” Veronica pauses in zipping grey plaid cigarette pants to hold up a quieting hand. “And don’t even start on whether I should have consulted you first. I wasn’t in any danger by a cabana at a hotel. Besides, in situations where you tend to get protective? It’s better to ask forgiveness than permission.”

She tries again to fasten the trousers, then abandons the effort and hooks her halter at the nape. It’s black, pretty against the burnished gold of her hair, with folded-back, pointed lapels that just hint at cleavage. Normally she’s sleek enough to pull off any style, but today’s outfit seems…snug.

“Zipper broken?” he asks innocently, and she shoots him a dirty look. Spirits lifting, he rises from his across-the-bed sprawl and pads through a shaft of morning sunlight to help. “Not that I don’t enjoy skin-tight ensembles on you,” he pushes edges together with his thumbs and manages to secure the pants, “but this can’t be comfortable.”

“So true.” She grimaces, and minces across the carpet in kitten heels to apply blood-red lipstick. “Believe me, I’d much rather stay in my nightgown, but that wouldn’t fly with the church crowd. And it’s too late to buy a bigger size for our scheme.”

“Who cares what the crowd thinks?” He eases up behind her while she paints on cat eyes with liquid liner, bending his knees to align their bodies. “My only view of that promising confection last night was of a wad of fabric on the floor. I’m betting you could drastically improve my mood WITHOUT apologizing if you modeled it.”

“As if there’s a chance in hell you’re getting any dressed like THAT.” She gestures with her chin at
his shirt, dusting pearly powder on her already-flawless cheeks, and he grins.

“Hey, you told me to wear something that would draw casual observers’ eyes,” he says. “I’m only following instructions. Besides, the closer to summer it gets, the more unbearable I find suits.”

“Poor baby.” She wrinkles her nose at him in the mirror. “When we’re done with this case, you can wear nothing at all as far as I’m concerned. I won’t say a word.”

“Now THAT is a scheme of which I wholeheartedly approve.” He kisses the side of her neck, moves off to slip his sockless feet into loafers. “If you’d quit detecting for half a second, I’d be more than happy to give the staff a holiday--then we can BOTH try out the nudist lifestyle.”

“Ugh, don’t tempt me.” She hands him a diamond pendant and lifts her hair out of the way. “I’m doing a mental run-through of upcoming events--I’ll get distracted.”

Obligingly fastening the tiny clasp, he asks, “Any word this morning from Clarence?”

“No, Tina tells me he left very early…wanted to check on Loretta before going about the day’s business. He’ll meet us at the rendezvous, though, never fear. The guy’s true-blue and won’t stain.”

Locating an enormous red sun hat, she turns it in her hands several times before donning it at a jaunty angle. The effect, on Veronica, is glamorous, but he doubts Trina will fare well by comparison.

“You should secure that thing,” he warns, fastening his watch and tucking a pair of mirrored sunglasses in his shirt collar. “We’re taking the Speedster with the top down. You don’t want it flying into the parade like a haute-couture Frisbee and getting trampled.”

She jabs a few hat pins in at random before gathering up the bag holding Trina’s wig. “Ready to brave the pre-Lent chaos?” she asks. He nods and offers his elbow.

Outside, the heat is ratcheting up; even the breeze off the ocean, when they turn onto the Malecon, barely helps. Logan dons his sunglasses against the glare, and smirks when Veronica says, “Wow, I’m not used to seeing you dressed and outside before noon.”

They pass the base camp for the upcoming parade at the Castillo de la Real Fuerza, slowing as a trailer full of horses turns ponderously off the road. Most of the festival-goers are still shut in houses of worship, asking for pre-emptive forgiveness. Only event organizers are out and about, along with the dance teams that need to drill; they’re still drinking bottled Cokes in casual clothes and doing very little to prepare.

A few hastily-constructed food stands dot the route, wafting smoke as fires are lit beneath spits, churros and croquettes fried. Veronica growls as they pass a temptingly-scented empanada booth, but they’re on a schedule so she doesn’t ask to stop. Logan makes a note, though, to buy food as soon as possible—lately, even frequent meals don’t sate her.

Their leisurely crawl through the Plaza has them approaching the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary as planned, just as service lets out. The massive bell in the tower clangs, announcing the hour—but from the end of the block he can see people spilling out doors, eager to start celebrating. A group of kids in their Sunday best have made a game of hopping down the steps while their parents cluster to chat. Veronica smiles faintly, watching, as they approach.

“Act like you recognize someone in the crowd and wave,” Logan advises, as he slows so pedestrians can pass. “Be graciously condescending, Queen-of-England-style, and hope these
people have excellent memories.”

Veronica takes his advice, displaying all her excellent teeth; he can’t help but grin at the excessive fake enthusiasm. It’s a critical moment, over in an instant, and then he hooks a U-turn at the next intersection to head back to their office.

“I can’t believe I left Trina’s disguise behind.” Veronica points at a yellow light so he’ll slow down rather than speeding through. “That was sloppy, and I’m NEVER sloppy.”

“No, but you WERE otherwise occupied.” Logan smirks as he complies. “Enjoying your new air conditioning.”

“Some girls want jewels…” she shrugs, putting a hand atop her hat as a healthy gust of wind hits. “But this girl in particular? Only wants you.”

A warm feeling spreads through his chest, but he just says, “Well, me and climate control,” then laughs at her ‘goes without saying’ shrug. “God I hope my lecture bore fruit, and we don’t walk into the apartment to find it trashed. Again.”

“Oh hosting seventy-five of Corny’s nearest and dearest.” Veronica grimaces. “In the sheer scope of his bacchanalias, he rivals teenage you.”

“Now let’s not be hasty.” Logan pulls into the FOCSA’s garage. “I like to think that in terms of excess, I was unparalleled.”

“Always preening.” She pats his hand. “Luckily I like that in a man, or you’d still be enduring loveless flings with starlets. No, park over there,” she adds, as he makes to pull into his usual spot. “In the dark, out-of-the-way corner. It works much better for our plan.”

“You want to walk all the way across the lot in those shoes?” he asks, nevertheless doing as she requests. “Aren’t we trying NOT to arouse suspicion?”

“This is what you fixate on, while wearing virulent purple.” She pulls a face. “The strangeness factor of a badly-parked car pales in comparison.”

Despite her protestations, she leans on his arm all the way across the lobby, uncertain in the tiny heels with her center of gravity shifted. Once in the carpeted hall, she makes better time, though she elects to wait by the elevator while he fetches Trina’s clothes. When he swings open the apartment door, however, she calls with her usual panache, “Rise and shine, Trina, we’ve brought your disguise! Hope you’re ready for some subterfuge!”

Their unplanned houseguest (who’s sprawled, asleep, in the easy chair, wearing a tiara and an orange evening gown) snorts awake. Corny and Isabetta, crashed together on the living room couch, slumber on. The coffee table is strewn with Remy’s leftovers and a hookah, and Mickey Mouse chatters shrilly to no one on the console TV.

“What TIME is it?” Trina moans, sitting up and righting her crown, as Logan crosses to the sofa and kicks Corny awake. “Logie, you KNOW I never get out of bed before noon!”

With a gasp and heave, Corny wriggles away from the assault, eyes slitting open as if testing the light level. “I wasn’t sleeping!” he insists, fumbling on the floor for his shoes. “For real, cat! I was, like, alert and ready to pounce on intruders at all times.”

“Why do we pay Henderson again?” Logan asks Veronica, ignoring this blatant falsehood. “Has he ever done actual work requested of him, in any capacity?”
“He’s been putting a lot of effort into the musical,” Veronica says lightly, helping Trina stand and handing her the bag of clothes. “Here, take these and go get changed. Don’t bother with makeup, I’ll put it on you myself once you’re dressed. I want to make sure we match.”

Trina peeks at the contents, eyebrow lifting eloquently, but carries it into the back room. Corny pulls a sock out from under him and stares at it, confused, while beside him, Isabetta rouses.

“Unbelievable,” Logan mutters, as Corny abandons the sock and begins, obliviously, to pack the hookah. Raises his voice to call, “Couldn’t you set an alarm or something? It’s not like you didn’t know we were coming!”

“Yes, but I don’t see why we need to RUSH!” Trina’s voice is awake enough to be shrill, and in the distance, something clatters to the floor. “I still think you’re making too much of a fuss about this situation. Angelo’s not going to murder me in broad daylight on a city street.”

“God, you’re an idiot.” Logan runs an exasperated hand through his hair, then takes the hookah away from Corny and sets it on a table in the corner. “ANGELO is a desperate trapped animal capable of virtually anything. He’d cut your throat for a nickel.”

“Just because he has cash issues?” Trina scoffs, emerging from the bedroom in an outfit just like Veronica’s and twirling. She sits in the chair where she was napping; Veronica twists her hair into a knot and fits a blonde wig on top. “Because honestly, who doesn’t? Poor man, he’s still trying to recover from Dick Casablancas Senior’s untimely demise. The loss of those funds really put a dent in his checkbook.”

“He’s WHAT?” Logan shakes his head to clear it, wondering if he heard correctly. “Are you saying you know something about Big Dick’s death?”

“Duh!” Trina rolls her eyes, appropriating the lipstick Veronica’s taken from her purse and applying it herself. “I thought you were a detective. Big Dick was planning to invest in the Riviera with Angelo.”

Logan lifts his brows, taken aback by this bombshell, and his eyes meet Veronica’s.

Veronica holds his gaze for a second, ignoring Trina’s presence. He was worried enough about his sister before, but this news has shocked him, she can tell from his pale face, and sudden stillness. She needs to question Trina, fast. The sooner she can get her sister-in-law out of the country, the better for her husband’s peace of mind.

“How do you know Big Dick was going to invest in the Riviera?” Veronica asks, taking the lipstick away from Trina.

“That’s why I’m HERE! He’s the one who cut me in on the deal! That man always did have a soft spot for me—and he could DEFINITELY recognize talent.” Trina touches the corner of her mouth, smacks her lips together. “I need to blot.”

“You need to FOCUS,” Veronica snaps. “What did Big Dick tell you about Rossi?”

“That he’s a respectable”—Trina shoots Logan a nasty look—“businessman, looking for a headliner for his new casino. Naturally, Richard thought of me first.”

“Sure he did,” Logan scoffs, snapping off the television to silence Mickey. “Right after he thought about the size of your trust fund.”

Sarcasm aside, it’s an interesting idea—just how much DID Trina ‘invest’ for the chance to have her
“Well, I was home to do my annual holiday show.” Trina closes her eyes so Veronica can paint a neat wing. “This year we did *A Christmas Carol* and I played all three ghosts.” Logan’s derisive snort makes her frown. “I’ll have you know, the Register called it ‘a tour de force performance’.”

Logan’s mouth opens, and Veronica shakes her head, silencing his retort. He settles for kicking the leg of the couch in an effort to rouse Corny, who has resumed cuddling with Izzy and is softly snoring. Veronica sighs, applies liner to Trina’s other eye, and asks, “So, in December?”

“No, it was after my GLOWING reviews.” She waves a dismissive hand in Logan’s direction as if he can’t be expected to understand real talent. “In January, some time.”

Veronica exchanges the tube of liner for a blush brush and powders Trina’s cheeks. “And he definitely mentioned Rossi in that conversation?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Trina turns in her seat to study her appearance in the mirror, glances back at Veronica. “You should probably wear more blush so you don’t always look so washed out.”

Ignoring the slight, she thrusts the hat and sunglasses at Trina. “Put these on.” The last item in the shopping bag is the pair of shoes. Veronica dumps them on the floor next to Trina’s feet, and looks at Logan. “The timing works. Dick said his father was here for the New Year, probably to meet with Rossi, and then he headed back to Neptune for one final—”

“January,” Logan interrupts, giving up on Corny and spinning around to face her. “Weevil said Bubbles arrived in Havana over the summer, but she didn’t start dating”—he grimaces at the word choice—“Rossi until January.”

It’s easy to follow his train of thought. “You think she saw him talking to Big Dick, and that’s why she got involved with him.”

Logan nods. “One sister comes to Cuba to wait for Big Dick, the other stays behind to put pressure on that shady land assessor.”

“Jack Montana,” Veronica murmurs, supplying him with the name while she turns over the idea. She’d added them to the suspect list, but hearing him put it like that, something doesn’t feel right. If the sisters were plotting to kill Big Dick for months, why not do it in Neptune? And, why would they call attention to their plan? Janet putting pressure on Montana, looking for evidence of malfeasance, sounded like she wanted justice, not revenge.

“Well?” Trina snaps, annoyed they aren’t paying attention to her. She holds her arms out at her sides and does a slow turn. “What do you think?”

The disguise isn’t bad. Their four-inch height difference is mitigated by her lower heels, the sunglasses hide her eyes, and the wide-brimmed hat leaves her face in shadows. Up close and on her own, no one would confuse them, but in a moving car, with Logan by her side, everyone should ‘see’ Veronica.

“Let’s not call Mr. DeMille just yet.” Veronica picks up her purse and hands it to Trina. “And maybe tilt the hat a little more.” Without waiting for Trina to comply, she fixes the brim and secures it to the wig with bobby pins. For the final touch, she removes the diamond pendant from her throat and fastens it around Trina’s neck. “That should do it.”

Trina stares at their reflections, and claps her hands together. “If it wasn’t for the few extra pounds
you’ve packed on”—she turns a critical eye to Veronica’s waistline—“We could be twins!”

Veronica’s eye twitches and she presses a finger to her brow. Crossing to Logan’s side, she puts a hand on his arm, uses it for balance as she takes off her heels. “Play nice with your sister.” His answering smirk says she’s expecting too much, and Veronica’s glad she doesn’t have to sit in the car with them. “Give me ten minutes before you head downstairs.”

Concern fills his eyes and he frowns. “Maybe you should wait here?” His fingers trace the curve of her cheek and tuck an errant strand of hair behind her ears. “I’ll make sure I’m not seen on the drive back.”

“Not seen? In that flashy yellow car?” Veronica shakes her head. “Doubtful.” Turning her head to kiss his palm, she takes hold of his wrist and moves his hand away as she steps back. “There’s no time for second thoughts now; I’ll be fine. It’s not even twenty minutes, hardly enough time to take a nap.”

He remains unconvinced. Casting his eyes around the room like he’s searching for an alternative plan, his gaze lands on Corny. “I’ll wake up Henderson; he can make himself useful for once and sneak you back to the house.”

“See, that’s your problem, you always want to go off-book.” Before he can continue his argument, she stands on her toes and plants a quick kiss on his jaw. “Ten minutes,” she reminds him, backing out of the apartment.

Veronica sticks to the stairs and makes her way to the garage. Her luck holds all the way down and she runs into no one, even the garage is dark and empty. She edges along the wall to Logan’s Porsche and leans over the driver’s door to pull the knob under the dash, releasing the trunk. It makes a loud pop in the quiet space.

Pausing a moment, she looks around, confirming once again she’s alone, and moves to the trunk. As promised, Clarence has removed the spare tire and thoughtfully included a pillow for her. She tosses the heels in first, then folds herself into the angular space and lowers the lid.

There’s not much room, so she wriggles around until she finds a semi-comfortable position on her side, back pressed against the gas tank and knees curled up to her chest. She plumps the pillow, shoving it under her head, and closes her eyes.

Big Dick was in bed with Angelo Rossi.

It’s not difficult to believe. Real estate was Big Dick’s métier. Getting an opportunity to invest in a luxury hotel and casino while on the run was probably like manna from heaven for him. Plus it definitely didn’t hurt to be quasi-partners with Lansky. Veronica frowns. Did Lansky know Rossi was looking for outside investors?

She’d considered Rossi as the killer—shooting Big Dick as leverage over Bubbles—but he wouldn’t do away with his golden goose. He desperately needed that influx of cash, especially with Trocani breathing down his neck. No, he wouldn’t have shot Big Dick. Unless…

The clack-clack-clack of Trina’s heels on the concrete, and her shrill voice, interrupt Veronica’s thoughts. “Aren’t you going to get the door for me, dah-ling?”

Veronica groans. Trina is in full ham-mode, which doesn’t bode well for Logan’s equanimity. “I know it’s not exactly in the Echolls repertoire, but for the love of Pete, can you TRY to underplay for once?” His rebuke is punctuated by the slamming of the door.
“Don’t be such a pill.” Another door slam rocks the car. “What’s the matter baby bro, are you not getting any at home? Is Veronica withholding her affections?”

Veronica buries her face in the pillow, prays the sound of the engine will drown out their bickering. *No such luck*. Logan starts the car in time with his response. “You’re why I miss silent films.”

Trina fake-laughs as the car rolls from its spot and moves forward. “So does that mean you don’t want tickets to my opening at the Riviera?”

“God, you just don’t get it, do you?” They bump over the sidewalk onto the street, and the car thrums as Logan downshifts. “The Riviera isn’t Rossi’s hotel, there is no headlining gig, and YOU can’t ever come back to Havana.”

“But what about my investment?”

“A fool and his money… you know the rest.”

The saying could apply to Rossi too. His gambling losses made the idea of partnering with Lansky only a pipe dream, and turned his mentor into his enemy. The only way Rossi would’ve killed Big Dick is if he had a backup plan. Like maybe he expected Kendall to get her hands on the bearer bonds?

Logan makes a right. Veronica’s been counting the turns, trying to visualize where they are on the route, but it’s disorienting in the dark, and the sound of tires on pavement drowns out identifying noises. Logan’s keeping a steady pace, but it’s much slower than he usually drives. She’d say it was because he wanted to be noticed, out and about with his ‘wife’, but she’s sure it has more to do with her being lodged in the trunk.

“Time to put your alleged acting skills to use.” Logan taps the brakes and the car slows to a crawl. “Wave for the nice people, make them think you’re Veronica.”

She can hear the buzz of the crowd—people talking and laughing—and she guesses they are approaching the church. Palm Sunday is not exactly Carnaval, but here in Havana, you never let the opportunity for a good party go to waste. Veronica smirks. The town’s like teenage-Logan in that respect.

His speed increases, which means they’ve cleared the crowds at the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary, and are coming up on the empanada stand. Veronica’s stomach growls in anticipation, and she wishes she’d thought to pack food. Right now, she’d gladly give up the pillow for a little snack. On cue the smell of fried dough and spicy picadillo replaces the odor of gas fumes inside the trunk. She sighs.

Salsa music grows louder as they near the parade route, then fades as Logan heads out past city limits. Their ruse is almost over. The steady hum of the high-performance engine is lulling.

They turn, bounce over an unpaved road for a while, jostling Veronica back to alertness--then finally, mercifully pull over. She coughs as exhaust fumes catch up and filter in, then blinks as the trunk lid’s thrown open, silhouetting her anxious husband.

“Rise and shine,” he says, a shadowy, orange-corona’d shape extending a hand to help her out. “Now that you’ve proved me right about the trunk-and-you-fitting-in-it thing, I think it’s time for you to sit in front like a normal person.”

Veronica takes his hand and gives it a light squeeze.
Logan returns the pressure, the tightness in his chest easing because she’s alert and none the worse for wear. With a gentle tug, he helps her to her feet. “You haven’t by any chance been napping in there?” he asks, brushing back a lock of her hair.

“Nope, just solving all our cases and daydreaming about food.” She presses her forehead to his shirt-front, an uncharacteristic display of public affection, and he puts an arm around her and kisses her scalp. “Any chance we can stop at the empanada stand on the way back?”

“Clarence has you covered.” He gestures towards the other side of the clearing where they’re parked, concealed; her bodyguard’s keeping Trina entertained, one of Remy’s picnic baskets by his foot. “I phoned ahead while you were locking yourself in the trunk—I could hear your stomach growling from across the room. Come say goodbye to trouble with a capital T, and you can eat your fill in the car on the way back.”

She tucks her arm through his, and he helps her carefully over uneven ground to Trina; his sister’s preening in her halter with the big, red hat like flashbulbs are popping and she’s Sophia Loren. “So I said to myself…” she’s telling Clarence, who listens impassively, “dig DEEPER, Trina. Because really, how could I wave convincingly in disguise, when I have no idea whether Veronica’s even CATHOLIC?”

“Well, my dad’s Italian, but my mom’s a drunk with a perpetual Sunday-morning hangover,” Veronica says tartly, fingers digging into Logan’s forearm as she stumbles over a rock. “So I guess the answer is ‘nominally’. But I do appreciate your dedication to not blowing your cover.”

She favors Trina with a brief hug, tiny in his sister’s grip. “Are we good to go on the exfiltration plan?”

“I’m escorting her as far as Miami myself,” Clarence says, with a nod. “I should be back by dinner time, but I asked Remy to make a plate just in case.”

“Excellent,” Logan says. “Everyone in Cuba with ears thanks you. Treen, it’s been swell. How about next time we enjoy family togetherness minus the assassination plots?”

“Oh, you.” She shoves his shoulder, semi-playfully, and he goes ahead and hugs her too—after all, she is his flesh and blood. “You’re going to be sorry you mocked me when ‘The Emptiness of Materialism’ hits big.”

“Mmmm, I’m breathless with anticipation.” She turns to walk away, and he catches her wrist. “And since greed’s a vice you’ve allegedly renounced…” he holds out a hand, palm up. “How about returning my wife’s diamond necklace before you decamp?”

“Gosh, I completely forgot!” Trina makes an over-elaborate show of ‘discovering’ the pendant on her chest, and reluctantly removes it. “It’s so small the eye skips right over, but I’m sure it has sentimental value.”

Logan smirks, refastening the chain around Veronica’s throat, and with an unrepentant, “Toodles!” Trina minces off to climb into the waiting Rolls.

“By the way…” Clarence lifts the picnic basket, and hands it to Logan, who positions it so Veronica can peek beneath the lid. “My sources tell me brunch was a success, at least from Trocani’s perspective. You should anticipate a move on his part sometime today.”

“We’ll keep an eye peeled.” Logan watches his wife extract a container of grapes and begin methodically devouring. “Phone the house once you’ve got her settled, so we know the trip went
Clarence tips his hat and saunters off. Logan helps V back to the car, eating all the way, and wedges the basket between the seats for easy access.

“Well, this has been an eventful morning.” He starts the engine, carefully navigating his baby over the rough patch of ground. “We executed a daring charade before the clock struck noon, and learned Big Dick was a willing participant in crimes leading to his demise.”

“Like that’s shocking.” Veronica opens a sleeve of crackers and slaps a thick slice of Brie atop one. “I’d be more surprised if Big Dick died doing something decent.” She chews thoughtfully for a minute, then adds, “What was that cryptic comment about Trocani? Do I have time to finish lunch before the afternoon gets fraught?”

“Oh, right.” Logan breathes a sigh of relief as his car hits smooth asphalt. “In all the excitement last night, I forgot to mention. Trocani got approval to whack darling Angelo yesterday. But Clarence would have said, if the hit had already gone down.”

Veronica rolls a slice of ham around more cheese with signature single-mindedness. “Trocani must be on cloud nine—whereas Rossi’s no doubt spent the morning scrambling for travel money, so he can get out of Dodge. Unless, of course, he miraculously found the stolen bordello cash.”

“Yeah, that didn’t happen,” Logan mutters, then rubs the back of his neck self-consciously when Veronica shoots him a sharp look. “Fine, Weevil took it,” he admits, but rushes to add, “He gave it to the women who earned it last night, though, before Clarence took them away. So don’t go planning some epic vengeance scheme involving his grandmother. The poor bastard’s suffered enough.”

Veronica snorts disagreement, eyes narrowing as she plots, and Logan’s reminded of a salient fact. “Today IS cash pickup day at Casa Marina, however—Weevs and I figured that much out. Rossi can grab a convenient replacement bundle without arousing extra suspicion.”

“Bravo for him. I hope he gets caught and smacked around before being attached to a cement block. And then I hope he drowns SLOWLY.”

Logan wishes he could agree, but…”What about Bubbles?”

“What about her?” Veronica fixes him with an exasperated stare. “Her sister FIRED us. Plus, she’s made it clear a million times she doesn’t want your help!”

He continues to gaze at her, steadily imploring, until she nudges him to check the road. “Fine,” she says with a huff, after stewing for a minute. “I guess we can at least try to find out whether she’s dead. Or out of the country…didn’t Trina say Rossi owns a private jet?”

Logan nods and she continues, “So that’s how he’ll leave. Bingo. We stake out the plane, see if he has Bubbles with him when he boards; if not, we can start making inquiries.”

“Would Rossi really bring her along on the run?” Logan asks doubtfully. “Why would he want that kind of baggage?”

“Romantic obsession is strange.” She shrugs. “Besides, you’d better hope he can’t bear to let go, because if not…” she slices a finger across her throat. “We’re too late already.”

He sighs, merging onto the harbor road and she continues, over a mouthful of empanada, “On the bright side, he MIGHT keep her close so as not to arouse suspicion. Planning to whack her at the
last minute, you know, right before he skips town.”

“Wonderful,” Logan says. “I’m always so touched by your hopeful scenarios. Also, I like your plan, but there’s a fly in the ointment—which airport?”

She cocks her head, considering. “A couple weeks ago, when I was following him—one hundred percent accompanied by Clarence, don’t start—he drove out to a private runway in Mayabeque Province and hung around for a while in a hangar. That would be my chosen stakeout spot…and look, we’ve even got provisions!”

“Sounds like a plan.” Logan loops wide to make a U-turn, heading southeast towards the autopista. “Remy didn’t by any chance happen to include a flask?”

She removes a bottle of Peche de Vigne which she expertly uncorks, and he takes and drinks deep. “Abstinence is for suckers,” he says, wiping his lips and handing it back. She just shakes her head.

The drive out of Havana is mercifully uneventful. Just past Jaruco, V points out a weather-beaten sign marked ‘Propiedad Privada’, which guides them onto a winding dirt road; he sighs and jolts onto it, gritting his teeth as they creep towards a large, fenced enclosure. When they’re near the entrance, marked only by a gap in chain-link and weeds, Logan turns to his wife, who’s finally slowing down. “Any suggestions for a hiding spot?”

She points at a hanger on the southwest edge, shuttered and painted bright blue. “That’s where the Sugar King keeps his jet, and I happen to know he’s elsewhere today, celebrating a birthday. If you park in the lee of the left-hand side, you’ll have a clear view of Rossi’s hangar.” She indicates the nondescript brown building opposite, a sleek plane’s nose peeking through the open doors. “Wow, looks deserted, we must be early. Too bad Trina didn’t get sentimental and linger there at the end.”

Logan shoots her a sardonic look, which she returns with a smirk, and follows her directions. They watch nothing happen from the shadows while enduring the heat, and Veronica consumes a box of chocolates like they’re popcorn.

“I wonder where the pilot is,” she muses, dabbing her lips daintily while Logan drowses and sips. “The hangar’s not locked, so the plane must be prepped--ergo I’m guessing he can’t be far. I wonder if he’ll arrive with Rossi?”

Logan shrugs, then notices a puff of dust at the end of the road. He sits up and points as it resolves into a cab, which makes its leisurely way across the tarmac before parking beside Rossi’s hangar. A Guayabera-clad driver climbs out, circling to the trunk for bags. “Showtime,” he says, putting the car in gear as Bubbles emerges; but Veronica lays a restraining hand on his arm.

“Wait,” she cautions, as Janet climbs out the other side. “No Rossi. They must be stealing the plane and making a run for it. Maybe Heidi managed to escape during his morning of distraction?”

“Mmm, and I guess Janet lied about leaving town.” He subsides into his seat, flipping the handle of the picnic basket up and back down. “My faith in mankind is constantly being tested, Veronica. That girl’s got such an innocent face!”

“Well we knew she had chutzpah, because she spent months trying to get Big Dick arrested,” Veronica says. “And also, possibly, murdered him. Which isn’t the go-to solution for ingenues.”

“I’ve revised my opinion of ingenues since I met and married you.” He folds his arms to keep his hands still. “If she manages to rescue the femme fatale in the villain’s own plane, though? No doubt her Veronica-resemblance will grow.”
“I just don’t see why she’d hire us, if she was the one to pull the trigger…” his wife muses. Then a Bentley comes roaring onto the tarmac, striking and scattering the pile of bags, and Logan sits up straight and guns the engine.

Rossi emerges from the car without bothering to turn it off, leaving the driver door swinging; he’s got a satchel in one hand and a gun in the other, which he shoots at the cab driver, face contorting. The guy shrieks, diving into the front seat, and the cab peels out of the lot like the hood’s on fire, leaving black streaks of tar.

“Looks like it’s time for us to go off-book.” Logan hands Veronica the gun from his ankle holster. “Indulge me, will you, and curl up on the floor, so you don’t get your brains blown out if he shoots?”

She nods, checking the cylinder, and sinks down into the foot well. Logan squeals out of his hiding place and across the space to the brown hangar as Rossi tries to get a bead on the two fleeing girls.

The mobster spins at the squeal of rubber, getting off two potshots that go high as Logan accelerates towards him, sunlight glinting off fox-red hair and the gun’s barrel. Bubbles—or rather, Heidi—and Janet cringe behind one of the landing wheels; Rossi dives sideways, and Logan strikes him only a glancing blow.

“Stay down,” he mutters, spinning the car so V’s got the hood for protection, then dives out the door, running full-speed towards Rossi before he can stand. The guy makes it up, tries to aim, but Logan knows better than to give him the luxury. He goes straight for a tackle.

Their bodies connect with a meaty thud, pain radiating up from the half-healed gunshot wound, and Rossi falls over backwards, striking the asphalt with a slap. The pistol arcs out of his hand, gleaming, and skitters across the pavement as he tries to shove Logan off.

There’s a moment where time feels suspended—Logan notes the shape of the weapon, a Smith and Wesson, and for an instant actually wonders if it’s the one that killed Big Dick.

Then Veronica shouts, “Get out of the way so I can shoot!” And everyone on the tarmac goes scrambling for the gun.
As she yells to Logan Veronica scrabbles from the Speedster, gun in hand. She takes position behind the open car door, aims the revolver over the top, and cocks back the hammer.

Rossi pushes Logan away and staggers to his knees, reaching for the .38, but Logan’s reflexes are too fast; he’s on his feet and pulling Rossi back down before he gets far. Bubbles and Janet converge on the gun, blocking Veronica’s line of fire. It’s no use. If she shoots, she’s liable to hit one of the women, or worse, her husband.

Just as Rossi breaks free from Logan, Janet stands, the Smith & Wesson clutched in her hand. Rossi lunges for her and she raises her arm, squeezing the trigger.

“No, Jane!” Bubbles cries, putting out a hand to stop her sister. But it’s too late. The impact of the bullet lifts Rossi from his feet and knocks him back. He crumples on the tarmac, head smacking against the ground with a dull thud.

For a moment everything is still—a tableaux vivant of dying as you lived—and then Jane gasps, breaking the silence. Hand trembling, she drops the gun and raises a clenched fist to her mouth to stifle a sob.

Bubbles… Heidi pulls her sister into a hug, turning her away from Rossi’s limp body. “She didn’t mean to shoot him.” Heidi angles her face in Logan’s direction, her tone beseeching. “You saw, he was coming after her; she didn’t have a choice.” Desperation clings to her words. “We’re not killers, Mr. Echolls,” she pleads.

“I’m pretty sure you are.” Veronica steps out from behind the car door. Keeping the gun lowered at her side, she gives them a wide berth and goes to stand next to Logan. Something small near Rossi’s hand glitters in the sunshine, catching her attention.
Logan follows her gaze. “Guess his luck ran out,” he murmurs, scooping the coin off the ground and bouncing it in his palm. He looks across Rossi’s inert body to stare at the sisters. “We know one of you killed Richard Casablancas.”

“Jane had nothing to do with that; I’m the one--”

“Heidi,” Jane barks, cutting her off. She raises a tear-streaked face and grips her sister’s arms. “You don’t have to tell them anything.”

“It’s okay.” They stare at each other, a silent conversation passing between them, and Jane gives a slight nod. Heidi turns to Logan. “I’ll tell you what you want to know if my sister goes free.”

There’s very little chance of that; no one came running at the sound of the gunshot, but it’s only a matter of time before the pilot arrives. Without agreeing to anything, Veronica asks, “When did you decide to kill him? Was it right after Nick died?” Heidi blanches at the mention of Nick, but remains silent. Veronica presses, “Or was it later, after you came to Cuba?”

“It wasn’t like that. We didn’t want him dead,” Jane whines, wringing her hands.

“I only wanted justice for my husband.” Heidi directs a pointed look at Logan, then meets Veronica’s gaze with a challenging stare. “Surely YOU can understand that, Mrs. Echolls.”

Of course she can. If anyone hurt Logan… she’d go scorched-earth without a second thought. Veronica gives a slight nod of agreement. “So what was your plan?”

“Proof. Jane was trying to get the evidence to put him behind bars.”

“By hounding Jack Montana to confess?”

At Veronica’s question, Jane’s eyes widen with surprise. “How did you…” Her voice trails off, and she starts again. “He was a wretched little man. Told me to grow up, and laughed in my face when I explained what he and Richard had done to Nick and my sister.” More tears spill down her face. “His wife was even worse, threatening to call the police if I didn’t leave them alone.”

“You arrived here before Big Dick,” Logan says, staring at Heidi. “Around June. How did you know to come to Cuba?”

“It was just luck.” Her laugh is bitter. “If you want to call it that. Jane sent me here as a distraction; she thought I needed to get out of Neptune.”

It’s too much of a coincidence, and Jane’s shifty, guilt-ridden gaze confirms Veronica’s suspicions. Apparently, the sisters are still keeping secrets, even from each other. “When did you find out he was coming here?”

“It was only a rumor, at first.” Jane catches her bottom lip between her teeth, chews, and darts a glance at her sister. “When I didn’t get anywhere with the land assessor, I started following Richard, trying to find… I don’t know”—she shrugs, holds out her hands—“Something, anything we could use, and there was this woman.” She turns to face Heidi. “Whenever he was with her, she’d bring up Havana, offering to introduce him to her friends.”

“Kendall,” Logan murmurs close to Veronica’s ear, and she mmm’s in agreement. It’s the same thing Dick told them, Kendall pushing for his dad to leave Neptune - ‘we should go to Cuba, baby, and play with the big boys.’

“I’m so sorry, Heidi.” Jane squeezes her eyes shut, takes a deep, shaky breath. “If I’d know about
Rossi, I never would’ve suggested you come here. I just thought... we couldn’t let him run and get away with everything, but--"

Heidi pulls her in for a quick hug, silencing the apology. “It’s okay. I know you didn’t mean for me to get involved with Angelo.”

“How did you? Get involved with him?” Veronica can see the shape of the story now, but she needs a few more details to bring it into focus.

“I liked Sans Souci. It wasn’t right in the city, kinda out of the way, and I... I suppose I liked the name- without care.” Heidi’s grin is wry. “It wasn’t true, of course, but for a few hours each night I wanted to pretend. Just a single girl, out on the town, worry-free.” The corners of her mouth turn down and sadness lines her face. “Angelo was a nightly fixture at the craps table. He was sweet on me, always wanting to dance, sending me flowers. He... he was charming.”

Frowning, her eyes flick to the body on the tarmac. It’s hard to reconcile the man she’s describing with the one on the ground. She wraps her arms around her chest, squeezes. “I wasn’t interested until I saw him celebrating New Year’s Eve with Richard Casablancas.”

“Did you think you could get Rossi to kill him for you?”

“No!” The denial cracks the air, loud as gunfire. “I only wanted information. Angelo told me Richard was investing cash in some big casino deal, and I was going to convince him to steal it, leave Richard broke like he did my Nick.”

It probably wouldn’t have taken much prompting on her part to get Rossi to steal Big Dick’s money. In fact, he might have been planning to do that very thing. “So why did you shoot him?”

“I didn’t mean to; I only wanted to talk.” Off Veronica’s skeptical look, Heidi rushes ahead. “I went to Sloppy Joe’s because I knew he’d be there; he’d told Angelo earlier.” She smirks. “Said he was going to look for Hemingway.”

With a sad shake of her head, she continues. She was drinking alone at the end of the bar, when Big Dick walked in like he owned the joint. All smiles as he ordered the most expensive scotch on offer, and then bought a round of drinks for the table next to him. “It’s not fair, Mrs. Echolls. The way people like that get off scot-free.”

Veronica silently agrees. It isn’t fair, but very little in this world is. “So you followed him outside to confront him.”

“I just couldn’t STAND it- seeing him in the bars and casinos every night, enjoying his freedom and spending other people’s money, living the high-life.” She closes her eyes, pinches the bridge of her nose. “It all happened so fast. One minute I was in the bar, and the next I was shouting at him on the sidewalk.” Her eyes pop open, wide and incredulous. “He didn’t even know who I was! I was so careful to avoid him when he was with Angelo, and... and... he didn’t even remember me!”

Logan waves toward the Smith & Wesson on the ground. “Where did you get the gun?”

“Dominic, my bodyguard-turned-jailor—the one who shot you at the track—he was with me at the bar, and chased after me when I went to confront Richard. The gun was there in his holster, and I... I...” Her face crumples, dissolves into tears, and her shoulders shake. “Don’t you see? He needed to KNOW what he did to me, what he took from me. Nick was the love of my life, and Richard Casablancas DESTROYED him.”

Jane steps forward to comfort her sister, and Heidi clings to her, resting her head on Jane’s
shoulder. Her grief is palpable, and Veronica feels each sob as if it were her own. She glances at Logan, breath catching at the thought of losing him. Would she cope any better than Heidi? And what would she do to the person responsible for his death? How would she make them pay?

Before Veronica can sink too deep into the troubling thoughts, Heidi lifts her head and squares her shoulders. “Now I’ve told you what you wanted to know, it’s time for you to hold up your end of the bargain. Take Jane and leave.” She bends, picks up the Smith & Wesson, and uses her sleeve to wipe the prints from its grip and trigger. “I’ll stay here with him”—she juts her chin toward Rossi—“and wait for the police.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Jane cries, grabbing her sister’s wrist. “Please, Mr. Echolls… Logan, please do something. She can’t go to jail. Not after everything he did to her.”

“I don’t…” Logan’s voice falters, and he turns to Veronica, his expression somber, eyes sad.

Her gaze meets his, then moves over the tarmac to the hangars in the distance. The airfield is still deserted. She ducks her head to stare at the ground and the small pool of blood around Rossi. “Trocani could’ve found him.” Veronica nods to herself, looks at Logan. “You could put the body in his trunk and I’ll drive it into the marsh.”

Logan studies her face. He’s all for the expedient solution if it keeps these women safe; but he worries someday Veronica might regret the ethical lapse. Her chin’s up, though, her jaw jutting like she’s ready to fight him. So he’s pretty certain of her answer when he asks, “Are you sure?”

She scoffs and makes a hurry-up gesture, like his concern is wasting time. “You of all people should know I never say things I don’t mean.”

He smirks at this piece of revisionist history and transfers his focus to the corpse, slowly leaking red rivulets onto the runway. Says, with a trace of plaintiveness, “You didn’t happen to bring a blanket along in that trunk, did you?”

“Nope.” Veronica takes the Smith and Wesson from Heidi’s unresisting hand and wipes it clean with the hem of her shirt. “And even if I did, you couldn’t use it, because evidence. Just man up and say goodbye to that purple monstrosity you’re wearing. It’s not like you can’t afford a hundred worse shirts to torture me with in the future.”

“You must’ve at least had a pillow in there,” he persists. “With a case?”

“Quit stalling.” She curls Rossi’s limp fingers around the trigger and grip, then shoves hand and gun carefully into his pocket. Gets up with a grimace, dusting her knees. “I put the Peche de Vigne back in the picnic basket, right?”

He shrugs, because who remembers details after a murder? Sighs and hefts the body in a fireman’s carry, shoulder blade twitching as gore trickles down. He waits stoically while Veronica retrieves keys from the ignition and unlocks the trunk, then tosses what’s left of Rossi inside. “Good riddance to bad garbage,” he mutters and slams the lid closed, giving it one last soothing slap. “You sold women like livestock, you got off EASY.”

Veronica heads to the Speedster for liquor, which Logan hopes she plans to share. He clocks Bubbles and Janet—make that Heidi and Jane—headed at a rapid clip towards the hangar, retrieved baggage in hand. With one last glance at his wife (who is, tragically, using his liquid sustenance to wash away blood), he retrieves Rossi’s abandoned satchel and gives chase.

When he reaches the building, footsteps echoing, he finds Heidi stacking luggage, while Jane tries
to push rolling stairs closer to the plane. He goes to help, shooing her aside, and says, “Boarding won’t do you much good if you don’t have a pilot to fly this thing. Unless you’ve got heretofore unsuspected skills?”

“He’ll show any minute.” Heidi collects an overnight case and garment bag and carries them up the steps. “I overheard Angelo arranging to leave at three, and it’s nine past now. Our plan was to get here first, then bribe the pilot into taking off without him. I have some jewelry he gave me early in our courtship, it’s worth a lot.”

Logan forebears to comment on the idiocy of this plan—as IF any mob pilot would screw over the Cosa Nostra for a brooch. He just gathers the rest of the suitcases and hands them up. “And leave Rossi to his fate? How surprisingly cold-blooded.”

“He got what was coming to him.” Heidi touches the fading bruise around her eye she can’t quite conceal with makeup, expression hardening. “I just don’t want Jane to suffer for protecting me.”

“Well, seeing as we’ve wiped away all evidence she shot someone,” Logan says, “in order to pin the murder on Trocani, I wouldn’t worry unduly about pursuit. Especially since you had the foresight to both use the same murder weapon.”

“So you ARE going to let us leave.” Heidi’s posture relaxes marginally. “We don’t have to start looking over our shoulders for the law?”

“Come on, I’ve been trying to MAKE you leave since the moment we met! You really haven’t paid attention.” He removes the satchel from his shoulder and hands it to her with a faint smile. “Here, take this, since you’re already absconding with the plane. It’ll help you establish yourselves wherever you end up…and Rossi certainly doesn’t need it.”

Heidi unzips the bag; her eyes widen as she registers the contents. “Mr. Echolls, we can’t…”

“Yes we CAN,” Jane interrupts, climbing halfway up the steps to look. “Angelo owes you for pain and suffering—the way he tortured you over your mistake with Big Dick was awful, to say nothing of the hitting.”

“Dominic gave Rossi the gun I used,” Heidi says, “and he’s been carrying it with him ever since… proof I killed someone, see? Jane thinks that’s more sadistic than all the rest, but then Jane’s never been punched in the face.”

“Just out of curiosity,” Logan asks, folding his arms, “did you know about this Big Dick business when you hired me, JANE? Because coming clean about the particulars of this investigation would have saved us all a lot of stress.”

She shakes her head, blonde curls bouncing. “Of course not!” she says. “I’m not a LIAR! Heidi told me yesterday at the hair salon, so of course I had to fire you…I didn’t want you involved in this mess. I figured Mrs. Echolls would just say ‘good riddance’--I didn’t expect you two to be so stubborn.”

“Not that we’ll be furthering our acquaintance, since I’ll never lay eyes on you again,” Logan says. “But just for the record…ALWAYS count on me being stubborn.”

“Well, I for one appreciate it.” Heidi slinks down the steps, graceful in sky-high heels, and goes on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “You’re a peach, Mr. Echolls. Not a single one of the rumors I’ve heard about you is true.”

“You must not have stumbled across the salacious ones.” He pats her shoulder with a grin, but the
roar of a muffler-free engine drowns out his quip.

An ancient two-tone Chevy pulls up outside the hangar, disgorging a pilot in a stained uniform before peeling away. The guy’s got a last bite of sandwich in one hand, a beer in the other, and his hat’s so askew it’s threatening to fall. “Holaaaa,” he calls, saluting them with the bottle; then drains and tosses it into a can by the door. “Sorry to be late, car wouldn’t start. Señor Rossi already on board?”

“He was unexpectedly invited to a meeting with the boss.” Logan shoos Heidi and Jane up the steps, assuming an air of authority. “Told me to ask you to fly these women to Miami--he’ll catch up later, when business is less pressing.” Removing the money clip from his pocket, Logan counts out and passes over a handful of hundreds. “Here’s twice the going rate, to make sure they have an uneventful flight. The younger one gets airsick, tragically.”

Rossi’s pilot lifts a brow at Logan’s shirt, still uncomfortably sticky with blood, but makes no comment as he pockets the money. This is likely just another Wednesday flying planes for the mob, as far as he’s concerned. “You got it, boss,” he says, winking. “Blue sky, no clouds. Es tan facil como pegarle a un borracho.”

Logan grins, and with a last wave, strides back across the tarmac to where the Speedster sits, doors askew. He closes them gently, and smiles upon discovering Veronica’s returned the bottle of booze to the picnic basket, a few restorative fingers remaining.

Clutching it by the neck, he leans against the hood; removes the cork while he watches the plane taxi out of the hangar, gleaming in the sun as it moves onto the runway. He raises the bottle, but before he can sip, Veronica says, “I hope you plan to share.”

She perches on the hood of the Speedster and he frowns, but doesn’t say anything about her sitting on his baby. Veronica grins, appropriates the bottle and takes a sip. Grimaces, because Peche de Vigne tastes like peach-flavored paint thinner, and hands it back.

“You’re just in time to watch them fly off into the sunset.” He points at the taxiing plane. With a roar, it gathers speed and launches itself into the sky. He toasts it as it goes, murmuring, “Here’s hoping you girls never kill anyone again. Because you are both really, really bad at coping with the follow-through.”

She watches while he savors the last sip. “You know, it might be a good idea for us to disappear from Havana for a while.”

“I could use a trip,” Logan says. “Good thing we’re going to Neptune.”

“Too bad you gave Heidi and Jane all that money,” Veronica says lightly, not engaging with his extremely leading statement. “We could have used it to finance any expedition we wanted.”

“I’d ask how you know I gave it to them, but you always know everything.” Logan tosses the empty bottle back into the basket.

“What I know is you’re a sucker for a pair of big wounded eyes.” She nudges him with her shoulder. “Secretly, I’ve loved that about you since the beginning.”

“And here I thought it was my luxury suite.” He drapes an arm around her. “Isn’t that what you told me, just the other day?”

Veronica nods. “Right. The soft bed and… your bedroom prowess.”
“At last she admits it!” He kisses the tip of her nose. “I figured eventually I’d wear you down.”

“You know, I think I still have that ‘do not disturb’ sign.” She leans into his side. “Want to go home and hang it on the door?”

“Not sure I’ve ever wanted anything more,” he says, and transfers the kiss to her mouth. She tilts her jaw to enjoy it, as the warm breeze kicks up and the sun begins to set.
No Se Es De Donde Se Nace, Sino De Donde Se Pace

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

EPILOGUE--LOGAN, MIRAMAR, 1956--NO SE ES DE DONDE SE NACE, SINO DE DONDE SE PACE

Veronica’s already at the table when Logan makes it to breakfast the next morning. Blue robe wrapped over the nightgown he finally got to enjoy, she’s sipping café con leche with her bare foot tucked under her, gazing dreamily out the window at gently-waving palms.

He pauses for a moment to admire the picture, murmurs, “Oh what a beautiful morning,” to alert her to his presence. Approaches with a sweeping stride, lapels of his newly-recovered dressing gown flowing behind him like a cape, and tosses the package that just arrived by courier triumphantly on the table.

“Go ahead, call me a miracle worker.” He gestures at the envelope as he takes a seat, flipping aside the robe’s tail, and pours himself coffee. “I don’t mind.”

Setting her cup down, she takes the thing in both hands and weighs it, face screwed up in a grimace of pretend-concentration that makes him grin. “Hmmm,” she says, evaluating, “it doesn’t feel like water OR wine.”

‘Hey, Ramon’s brand-new American visa is in there,” Logan protests, sipping with a pleased sigh. Honestly, Tina must be psychic. “And you don’t even want to know what strings I had to pull, or what conversation I had to endure, to get it.”

Deftly, she rips open the seal, and a handful of passport-sized booklets fall out. “Well, unless Ramon’s cloned himself,” she says, surveying the pile in puzzlement, “it looks like you overshot.”

He smiles and steals a piece of bacon from her plate, nimbly avoids her attempt to stab him with a fork before he can eat it. “I MAY have called in a really big favor to obtain extras.”

“Leticia Navarro,” Veronica reads, opening one at random. Looks up at him with a frown. “Logan, you were supposed to keep our exodus from Cuba simple--not drag your partner in crime along, so you can get up to no good in a whole other country. ESPECIALLY when I’m far from done punishing him.”

Logan shrugs, abandoning the notion of filching more food. “He’ll have to pose as my MANSERVANT, Veronica. Surely the indignity will be revenge enough even for you.”

“And Leticia will be our housekeeper, I suppose?” She sets the visa down, twirls it absently in a circle. “Don’t tell me they have their hearts set on moving to Neptune.”

“It’s better than a Cuba controlled by Castro,” Logan says, “considering Weevil’s gangster past. And since you and I agreed Neptune’s our next stop, so you can visit your dad…”

“Yeah,” she says, in the tone that means, ‘well, actually…’ “About that.”

He crows delight, which brings Champ running from the next room to prance around his legs. “I KNEW you’d figure a way to weasel out of that trip, disappointment to Keith be damned!”
“Hey, I did in fact buy tickets to see the Brooklyn Dodgers,” she protests, petting the dog with her foot beneath the table, then continuing the theme by playing footsie with Logan. “I’m sure that’ll induce Dad to meet us in New York for a week, so we can have a nice visit before we leave.”

“Leave for where, pray tell?” he traps her toes between his own and lifts his brows at her over the coffee cup. Predictably, she refuses to be cowed.

“Paris in the springtime,” she says, with a ‘duh’ inflection, tossing her hair carelessly behind one shoulder. “It’s a thing. Maybe you’ve heard?”

“Once or twice.” He cocks his head, considering, smiles as possibilities take hold. “Nice little pied-a-terre in the 6th arrondissement? Lazy walks along the Champs Elysees? Or would you prefer to rusticate at a rural chateau?”

“Either sounds lovely.” She looks up from beneath her lashes in a way that makes him want to re-investigate the nightgown. “As long as I’m with you.”

“Remy, and really everyone but my stomach, will be in heaven. And,” he adds, just to mess with her, “the Navarro clan can come along. I know a diplomat in Paris who’s a LOT easier to bribe than Duncan. Oooh, maybe I’ll put Weevs to work in the VINEYARD!”

“So much for Paris in the springtime,” she says sourly. “I’m sure he’ll figure out a way to turn the job into a con.”

“How?” he asks. “In what possible way could he scam people with dirt and grapes?”

She rolls her eyes but forebears to comment. Champ barks, putting her paws on Logan’s leg in non-verbal demand; and once picked up, begins to scrabble excitedly at his pocket.

“Oh,” he says, reminded, “I almost forgot. While I was collecting the package this morning, I spotted Champ emerging from her hiding place. And look what I found her burying.”

Removing a silver baby rattle from his pocket, he hands it to Veronica with a flourish. “It’s a little gnawed,” he admits, restraining the dog from braving the table to reclaim her treasure. “But she didn’t do TOO much damage.”

“Think Champ’s upset about the prospect of sharing our attention?” V traces the name ‘Echolls’ engraved across the toy with a faint smile.

“Not as long as you keep feeding her bacon.” Logan smirks. “Especially since you threaten violence when I ask for the same privilege.”

“Everyone has their priorities,” Veronica says serenely, “and bacon is mine. But you’re cute, too, so don’t whine.”

“To bacon, then.” Logan lifts his coffee cup in a toast and drains it. “And to my next fifty years with the woman who can eat a pound. May they be just as glamorous as our present, but a lot less life-threatening.”

“Awww.” She clinks her juice glass with his. “You live for danger, or you would never have married me.”

“I’ll drink to that,” he says, and leans across the table to kiss her. Champ hops down from his lap and scampers around barking, as if she agrees.
Thank you so much to the wonderful readers who stuck with this story and stopped by to kudo and comment. We truly appreciate your support, and hope you enjoyed the final chapter!!

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