



The Final Detail

Harlan Coben

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Harlan Coben

A MYRON BOLITAR

NOVEL

THE FINAL DETAIL



Published by
Dell Publishing
a division of
Random House, Inc.
1745 Broadway
New York, NY 10019

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eISBN: 978-0-307-48481-9

v3.0_r3

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Dedication

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About the Author

Myron lay sprawled next to a knee-knockingly gorgeous brunette clad only in a Class-B-felon bikini, a tropical drink sans umbrella in one hand, the aqua clear Caribbean water lapping his feet, the sand a dazzling white powder, the sky a pure blue that could only be God's blank canvas, the sun as soothing and rich as a Swedish masseur with a snifter of cognac, and he was intensely miserable.

The two of them had been on this island paradise for, he guessed, three weeks. Myron had not bothered counting the days. Neither, he imagined, had Terese. The island seemed as remote as Gilligan's—no phone, some lights, no motorcar, plenty of luxury, not much like Robinson Crusoe, and well, not as primitive as can be either. Myron shook his head. You can take the boy out of the television, but you can't take the television out of the boy.

At the horizon's midway point, slicing toward them and ripping a seam of white in the aqua-blue fabric, came the yacht. Myron saw it, and his stomach clenched.

He did not know where they were exactly, though the island did indeed have a name: St. Bacchanals. Yes, for real. It was a small patch of planet, owned by one of those mega-cruise lines that used one side of the island for passengers to swim and barbecue and enjoy a day of their "own personal island paradise." Personal. Just them and the other twenty-five hundred *turistas* squeezed onto a short stretch of beach. Yep, personal, bacchanal-like.

This side of the island, however, was quite different. There was only this one home, owned by the cruise line's CEO, a hybrid between a thatched hut and a plantation manor. The only person within a mile was a servant. Total island population: maybe thirty, all of whom worked as caretakers hired by the cruise line.

The yacht shut off its engine and drifted closer.

Terese Collins lowered her Bolle sunglasses and frowned. In three weeks no vessel except the mammoth cruise liners—they had subtle names like the *Sensation* or the *Ecstasy* or the *Spot*—had ambled past their stretch of sand.

"Did you tell anybody where we were?" she asked.

"No."

"Maybe it's John."

John was the aforementioned CEO of said cruise line, a friend of Terese's.

"I don't think so," Myron said.

Myron had first met Terese Collins, well, a little more than three weeks ago. Terese was "on leave" from her high-profile job as prime-time anchorwoman for CNN. They both had been bullied into going to some charity function by well-meaning friends and had been immediately drawn to each other as though their mutual misery and pain were magnetic. It started as little more than a dare: Drop everything and flee. Just disappear with someone you found attractive and barely knew. Neither backed down, and twelve hours later they were in St. Maarten. Twenty-four hours after that they were here.

For Myron, a man who had slept with a total of four women in his entire life, who had never really experienced one-night stands even in the days when they were fashionable and ostensibly disease-free, who had never had sex purely for the physical sensation and without

the anchors of love or commitment, the decision to flee felt surprisingly right.

He had told no one where he was going or for how long—mostly because he didn't have a clue himself. He'd called Mom and Dad and told them not to worry, a move tantamount to telling them to grow gills and breathe underwater. He'd sent Esperanza a fax and gave her power of attorney over MB SportsReps, the sports agency they now partnered. He had not even called Win.

Terese was watching him. "You know who it is."

Myron said nothing. His heartbeat sped up.

The yacht came closer. A cabin door in the front opened, and as Myron feared, Win stepped out on deck. Panic squeezed the air out of him. Win was not one for casual drop-bys. If he was here, it meant something was very wrong.

Myron stood. He was still too far to yell, so he settled for a wave. Win gave a small nod.

"Wait a second," Terese said. "Isn't that the guy whose family owns Lock-Horne Securities?"

"Yes."

"I interviewed him once. When the market plunged. He has some long, pompous name."

"Windsor Horne Lockwood the third," Myron said.

"Right. Weird guy."

She should only know.

"Good-looking as all hell," Terese continued, "in that old-money, country-club, born-with-silver-golf-club-in-his-hands kinda way."

As though on cue, Win put a hand through the blond locks and smiled.

"You two have something in common," Myron said.

"What's that?"

"You both think he's good-looking as all hell."

Terese studied Myron's face. "You're going back." There was a hint of apprehension in her voice.

Myron nodded. "Win wouldn't have come otherwise."

She took his hand. It was the first tender moment between them in the three weeks since the charity ball. That might sound strange—lovers alone on an island, the sex constant, who had never shared a gentle kiss or a light stroke or soft words—but their relationship had been about forgetting and surviving: two desperate souls standing in the rubble with no interest in trying to rebuild a damn thing.

Terese had spent most days taking long walks by herself; he'd spent them sitting on the beach and exercising and sometimes reading. They met up for food, sleep, and sex. Other than that, they left each other alone to—if not heal—at least stave off the blood flow. He could see that she too had been shattered, that some recent tragedy had struck her deep and hard and to the bone. But he never asked her what had happened. And she never asked him either.

An unspoken rule of their little folly.

The yacht stopped and dropped anchor. Win stepped down onto a motorized dinghy. Myron waited. He shifted his feet, bracing himself. When the dinghy was close enough to the shore, Win snapped off the motor.

"My parents?" Myron called out.

Win shook his head. "They're fine."

"Esperanza?"

Slight hesitation. "She needs your help."

Win stepped gingerly into the water, almost as though he expected it to hold his weight. He was dressed in a white button-down oxford and Lilly Pulitzer shorts with colors loud enough to repel sharks. The Yacht Yuppie. His build was on the slight side, but his forearms looked like steel snakes coiling beneath the skin.

Terese stood as Win approached. Win admired the view without ogling. He was one of the few men Myron knew who could get away with that. Breeding. He took Terese's hand and smiled. They exchanged pleasantries. Fake smiles and pointless bandies followed. Myron stood frozen, not listening. Terese excused herself and headed to the house.

Win carefully watched her saunter away. Then he said, "Quality derrière."

"Would you be referring to me?" Myron asked.

Win kept his eyes keenly focused on the, er, target. "On television she's always sitting behind that anchor desk," he noted. "One would never guess that she had such a high-quality derrière." He shook his head. "It's a shame really."

"Right," Myron said. "Maybe she should stand a couple times during each broadcast. Twist around a few times, bend over, something like that."

"There you go." Win risked a quick glance at Myron. "Take any action snapshots, perhaps videotape?"

"No, that would be you," Myron said, "or maybe an extra-perverse rock star."

"Shame."

"Yeah, shame, I got that." Quality derrière? "So what's wrong with Esperanza?"

Terese finally disappeared through the front door. Win sighed softly and turned toward Myron. "The yacht will take half an hour to refuel. We'll leave then. Mind if I sit?"

"What happened, Win?"

He did not answer, choosing instead to sit on a chaise longue and ease back. He put his hands behind his head and crossed his ankles. "I'll say this for you. When you decide to wig out, you do it in style."

"I didn't wig out. I just needed a break."

"Uh-hmm." Win looked off, and a realization smacked Myron in the head: He had hurt Win's feelings. Strange but probably true. Win might be a blue-blooded, aristocratic sociopath, but hey, he was still human, sort of. The two men had been inseparable since college, yet Myron had run off without even calling. In many ways Win had no one else.

"I meant to call you," Myron said weakly.

Win kept still.

"But I knew if there was a problem, you'd be able to find me." That was true. Win could find a Hoffa needle in a Judge Crater haystack.

Win waved a hand. "Whatever."

"So what's wrong with Esperanza?"

"Clu Haid."

Myron's first client, a right-handed relief pitcher in the twilight of his career. "What about him?"

"He's dead," Win said.

Myron felt his legs buckle a bit. He let himself land on the chaise.

“Shot three times in his own abode.”

Myron lowered his head. “I thought he’d straightened himself out.”

Win said nothing.

“So what does Esperanza have to do with this?”

Win looked at his watch. “Right about now,” he said, “she is in all likelihood being arrested for his murder.”

“What?”

Win said nothing again. He hated to repeat himself.

“They think Esperanza killed him?”

“Good to see your vacation hasn’t dulled your sharp powers of deduction.” Win tilted his face toward the sun.

“What sort of evidence do they have?”

“The murder weapon, for one. Bloodstains. Fibers. Do you have any sunblock?”

“But how ...?” Myron studied his friend’s face. As usual, it gave away nothing. “Did she do it?”

“I have no idea.”

“Did you ask her?”

“Esperanza does not wish to speak with me.”

“What?”

“She does not wish to speak with you either.”

“I don’t understand,” Myron said. “Esperanza wouldn’t kill anyone.”

“You’re quite sure about that, are you?”

Myron swallowed. He had thought that his recent experience would help him understand Win better. Win had killed too. Often, in fact. Now that Myron had done likewise, he thought that there would be a fresh bond. But there wasn’t. Just the opposite, in fact. Their shared experience was opening a whole new chasm.

Win checked his watch. “Why don’t you go get packed?”

“There’s nothing I need to bring.”

Win motioned to the house. Terese stood there, watching them silently. “Then say good-bye to La Derrière and let’s be on our way.”

Terese had put on a robe. She leaned against the doorway and waited.

Myron was not sure what to say. He settled for “Thank you.”

She nodded.

“Do you want to come along?” he asked.

“No.”

“You can’t stay here forever.”

“Why not?”

Myron thought about it for a moment. “You know anything about boxing?”

Terese sniffed the air. “Do I detect the distinct odor of an upcoming sports metaphor?”

“I’m afraid so,” he said.

“Ugh. Go on.”

“This whole thing is sort of like a boxing match,” Myron began. “We’ve been ducking and diving and weaving and trying to keep away from our opponent. But we can only do that for so long. Eventually we have to throw a punch.”

She made a face. “Christ, that was lame.”

“Spur of the moment.”

“And inaccurate,” she added. “Try this. We’ve tasted our opponent’s power. It dropped us to the canvas. Somehow we managed to get back to our feet. But our legs are still rubbery and our eyes are still hazed over. Another big blow and the fight will be over. Better to keep dancing. Better to avoid getting hit and hope to go the distance.”

Hard to argue.

They fell into silence.

Myron said, “If you come up to New York, give me a call and—”

“Right.”

Silence.

“We know what would happen,” Terese said. “We’d meet up for drinks, maybe hop back into the sack, but it won’t be the same. We’ll both be uncomfortable as all hell. We’ll pretend that we’ll get together again, and we won’t even exchange Christmas cards. We’re not lovers, Myron. We’re not even friends. I don’t know what the hell we are, but I’m grateful.”

A bird cawed. The small waves hummed their soft song. Win stood by the shore, his arms crossed, his body frighteningly patient.

“Have a good life, Myron.”

“You too,” he replied.

He and Win took the dinghy to the yacht. A crew member offered Myron his hand. Myron grabbed it and hoisted himself on board. The yacht took off. Myron stood on the deck and watched the shore grow smaller. He was leaning on a teakwood rail. Teakwood. Everything on this vessel was dark and rich and teak.

“Here,” Win said.

Myron turned. Win tossed him a Yoo-Hoo, Myron’s favorite drink, kind of a cross between a soda pop and chocolate milk. Myron smiled. “I haven’t had one of these in three weeks.”

“The withdrawal pains,” Win said. “They must have been agony.”

“No TV and no Yoo-Hoo. It’s a wonder I survived.”

“Yes, you practically lived like a monk,” Win said. Then, looking back at the island, he added, “Well, like a monk who gets laid a lot.”

They were both stalling.

“How long until we get back?” Myron asked.

“Eight hours on the boat,” Win said. “A chartered jet is waiting at St. Bart’s. The flight should take about four hours.”

Myron nodded. He shook the can and popped it. He took a deep swig and turned back toward the water.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Win ignored the statement. Or maybe it was enough for him. The yacht picked up speed. Myron closed his eyes and let the water and gentle spray caress his face. He thought a moment about Clu Haid. Clu hadn’t trusted agents—“a small step below pedophile” was how he put it—so he asked Myron to negotiate his contract, even though Myron was merely a first-year student at Harvard Law. Myron did it. He liked it. And MB SportsReps soon followed.

Clu was a lovable screwup. He unapologetically pursued wine, women, and song—not to mention any high he could get his hands/nose/veins on. Clu never met a party he didn’t like. He was a redheaded big guy with a teddy bear gut, handsome in a boyish way, an almost old-fashioned cad, and immensely charming. Everyone loved Clu. Even Bonnie, his long-suffering wife. Their marriage was a boomerang. She’d throw him out, he’d spin in the air for a while, and then she’d catch him on the return.

Clu had seemed to be slowing down a bit. After all the times Myron had gotten him out of trouble—drug suspensions, drunk driving charges, whatever—Clu had gone puffy, reaching the end of his charm reign. The Yankees had traded for him, putting him on strict probation, giving him one last chance at redemption. Clu had stayed in rehab for the first time. He’d been attending the AA meetings. His fastball was back up in the nineties.

Win interrupted his thoughts. “Do you want to hear what happened?”

“I’m not sure,” Myron said.

“Oh?”

“I screwed up last time. You warned me, but I didn’t listen. A lot of people died because of me.” Myron felt the tears come to his eyes. He pushed them back down. “You have no idea how bad it ended.”

“Myron?”

He turned to his friend. Their eyes met.

“Get over yourself,” Win said.

Myron made a noise—one part sob, two parts chuckle. “I hate when you coddle me.”

“Perhaps you would prefer it if I served up some useless platitudes,” Win said. He swirled his liquor and tasted a bit. “Please select one of the following and then we’ll move on: Life is hard; life is cruel; life is random; sometimes good people are forced to do bad things; sometimes innocent people die; yes, Myron, you screwed up, but you’ll do better this time; no, Myron, you didn’t screw up, it wasn’t your fault; everyone has a breaking point and no one knows yours. Can I stop now?”

“Please.”

“Then let us begin with Clu Haid.”

Myron nodded, took another swig of Yoo-Hoo, emptied the can.

“Everything seemed to be going swimmingly for our old college chum,” Win said. “He was pitching well. Domestic bliss seemed to reign. He was passing his drug tests. He was making curfew with hours to spare. That all changed two weeks ago when a surprise drug test produced a positive result.”

“For what?”

“Heroin.”

Myron shook his head.

“Clu kept his mouth shut to the media,” Win said, “but privately he claimed the test was fixed. That someone had tampered with his food or some such nonsense.”

“How do you know that?”

“Esperanza told me.”

“He went to Esperanza?”

“Yes, Myron. When Clu failed the test, he naturally looked to his agent for help.”

Silence.

“Oh,” Myron said.

“I don’t want to go into the fiasco that is MB SportsReps right now. Suffice to say that Esperanza and Big Cyndi did the best they could. But it’s your agency. Clients hired you. Many have been more than unhappy by your sudden disappearance.”

Myron shrugged. He would probably care one day. “So Clu failed the test.”

“And he was immediately suspended. The media moved in for the kill. He lost all his endorsement deals. Bonnie threw him out. The Yankees disowned him. With nowhere else to turn, Clu repeatedly visited your office. Esperanza told him that you were unavailable. His temper rose with each visit.”

Myron closed his eyes.

“Four days ago Clu confronted Esperanza outside the office. At the Kinney parking lot, to be more exact. They had words. Harsh and rather loud words. According to witnesses, Clu punched her in the mouth.”

“What?”

“I saw Esperanza the next day. Her jaw was swollen. She could barely talk, though she still managed to tell me to mind my own business. My understanding is more damage would have been inflicted had Mario and several other parking attendants not pulled them apart. Supposedly Esperanza made threats of the I’ll-get-you-for-this-you-limp-dick-son-of-a-bit variety as they were being held back.”

Myron shook his head. This made no sense.

“The next afternoon Clu was found dead in the apartment he rented in Fort Lee,” Win continued. “The police learned about the earlier altercation. They were then issued a slew of search warrants and found the murder weapon, a nine millimeter, in your office.”

“My office?”

“MB’s office, yes.”

Myron shook his head again. “It had to be a plant.”

“Yes, perhaps. There were also fibers that matched the carpeting in Clu’s apartment.”

"The fibers are meaningless. Clu was in the office. He probably dragged them there."

"Yes, perhaps," Win said again. "But the specks of blood in the trunk of the company car might be harder to explain."

Myron almost fell over. "Blood in the Taurus?"

"Yes."

"And the police confirmed the blood as Clu's?"

"Same blood type. The DNA test will take several weeks."

Myron could not believe what he was hearing. "Had Esperanza been using the car?"

"That very day. According to the E-Z Pass records, the car crossed the Washington Bridge back into New York within an hour of the murder. And as I said, he was killed in Fort Lee. The apartment is maybe two miles from the bridge."

"This is crazy."

Win said nothing.

"What's her motive?" Myron asked.

"The police don't have a solid one yet. But several are being offered."

"Such as?"

"Esperanza was a new partner at MB SportsReps. She'd been left in charge. The company's inaugural client was about to walk out the door."

Myron frowned. "Pretty flimsy motive."

"He had also recently assaulted her. Perhaps Clu blamed her for all the bad things that were happening to him. Perhaps she wanted vengeance. Who knows?"

"You said something before about her not talking to you."

"Yes."

"So you asked Esperanza about the charges?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And she told me that she had the matter under control," Win said. "And she told me not to contact you. That she did not wish to speak with you."

Myron looked puzzled. "Why not?"

"I haven't a clue."

He pictured Esperanza, the Hispanic beauty he had met in the days when she wrestled professionally under the moniker Little Pocahontas. A lifetime ago. She had been with MB SportsReps since its inception—first as a secretary and now that she'd graduated law school as a full-fledged partner.

"But I'm her best friend," Myron said.

"As I am well aware."

"So why would she say something like that?"

Win guessed the question was rhetorical. He kept silent.

The island was out of sight now. In every direction there was nothing but the churning warm blue of the Atlantic.

"If I hadn't run away," Myron began.

"Myron?"

"What?"

"You're whining again. I cannot handle whining." Myron nodded and leaned against the

teakwood.

“Any thoughts?” Win asked.

“She’ll talk to me,” Myron said. “Count on it.”

“I just tried to call her.”

“And?”

“No answer.”

“Did you try Big Cyndi?”

“She now rooms with Esperanza.”

No surprise. “What’s today?” Myron asked.

“Tuesday.”

“Big Cyndi still bounces at Leather-N-Lust. She might be there.”

“During the day?”

Myron shrugged. “Sexual deviancy has no off hours.”

“Thank God,” Win said.

They fell into silence, the ship gently rocking them.

Win squinted into the sun. “Beautiful, no?”

Myron nodded.

“Must be sick of it after all this time.”

“Very,” Myron said.

“Come below deck. I think you’ll be pleased.”

Win had stocked the yacht with videos. They watched episodes of the old *Batman* show (the one with Julie Newmar as Cat Woman and Lesley Gore as Pussycat—double meow!), the *Oscar Couple* (Oscar and Felix on *Password*), a *Twilight Zone* (“To Serve Man”), and for something more current, *Seinfeld* (Jerry and Elaine visit Jerry’s parents in Florida). Forget pot roasts. This was comfort food. But on the off chance that it wasn’t substantial enough, there were also Doritos and Cheez Doodles and more Yoo-Hoos and even rewarmed pizza from Calabria’s Pizzeria on Livingston Avenue.

Win. He might be a sociopath, but what a guy.

The effect of all this was beyond therapeutic, the time spent at sea and later in the air an emotional pressure chamber of sorts, a chance for Myron’s soul to adjust to the bends, to the sudden reemergence into the real world.

The two friends barely spoke, except to sigh over Julie Newmar as Cat Woman (whenever she came on the screen in her tight black cat suit, Win said, “Puuuurrrrrfect”). They’d both been five or six years old when the show first aired, but something about Julie Newmar as Cat Woman completely blew away any Freudian notions of latency. Why, neither man could say. Her villainy perhaps. Or something more primal. Esperanza would no doubt have an interesting opinion. He tried not to think about her—useless and draining when he couldn’t do anything about it—but the last time he had done something like this was in Philadelphia with both Win and Esperanza. He missed her. Watching the videos was not the same without her running commentary.

The boat docked and they headed for the private jet.

“We’ll save her,” Win said. “We are, after all, the good guys.”

“Questionable.”

“Have confidence, my friend.”

“No, I mean us being the good guys.”

“You should know better.”

“Not anymore I don’t,” Myron said.

Win made his jutting jaw face, the one that had come over on the *Mayflower*. “This moral crisis of yours,” he said. “It’s *très* unbecoming.”

A breathy blond bombshell like something out of an old burlesque skit greeted them in the cabin of the Lock-Horne company jet. She fetched them drinks between giggles and wiggles. Win smiled at her. She smiled back.

“Funny thing,” Myron said.

“What’s that?”

“You always hire curvaceous stewardesses.”

Win frowned. “Please,” he said. “She prefers to be called a flight attendant.”

“Pardon my oafish insensitivity.”

“Try a little harder to be tolerant,” Win said. Then: “Guess what her name is.”

“Tawny?”

“Close. Candi. With an *i*. And she doesn’t dot it. She draws a heart over it.”

Win could be a bigger pig, but it was hard to imagine how.

Myron sat back. The pilot came over the loudspeaker. He addressed them by name, and then they took off. Private jet. Yacht. Sometimes it was nice having wealthy friends.

When they reached cruising altitude, Win opened what looked like a cigar box and pulled out a telephone. "Call your parents," he said.

Myron stayed still for a moment. A fresh wave of guilt rolled over him, coloring his cheeks. He nodded, took the phone, dialed. He gripped the phone a bit too tightly. His mother answered.

Myron said, "Mom—"

Mom started bawling. She managed to yell for Dad. Dad picked up the downstairs extension.

"Dad—"

And then he started bawling too. Stereo bawling. Myron held the phone away from his ear for a moment.

"I was in the Caribbean," he said, "not Beirut."

An explosion of laughter from both. Then more crying. Myron looked at Win. Win smiled impassively. Myron rolled his eyes, but of course he was also pleased. Complain all you want, but who didn't want to be loved like this?

His parents settled into a meaningless chatter—meaningless on purpose, Myron supposed. While they could undoubtedly be pests, Mom and Dad had a wonderful ability to know when to back off. He managed to explain where he'd been. They listened in silence. Then his mother asked, "So where are you calling us from?"

"Win's airplane."

Stereo gasps now. "What?"

"Win's company has a private jet. I just told you he picked me—"

"And you're calling on his phone?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any idea how much that costs?"

"Mom ..."

But the meaningless chatter died down in a hurry then. When Myron hung up seconds later, he sat back. The guilt came again, bathing him in something ice cold. His parents were not young anymore. He hadn't thought about that before he ran. He hadn't thought about a lot of things.

"I shouldn't have done that to them," Myron said. "Or you."

Win shifted in his seat—major body language for him. Candi wiggled back into view. She lowered a screen and hit a switch. A Woody Allen film came on. *Love and Death*. Ambrosia on the mind. They watched without speaking. When it was over, Candi asked Myron if he wanted to take a shower before they landed.

"Excuse me?" Myron said.

Candi giggled, called him a "Big Silly," and wiggled away.

"A shower?"

"There's one in the back," Win said. "I also took the liberty of bringing you a change of clothes."

"You are a friend."

“I am indeed, Big Silly.”

Myron showered and dressed, and then everyone buckled their seat belts for approach. The plane descended without delay, the landing so smooth it could have been choreographed by the Temptations. A stretch limousine was waiting for them on the dark tarmac. When they got off the plane, the air felt strange and unfamiliar, as though he'd been visiting another planet rather than another country. It was also raining hard. They ran down the steps and into the already-open limo doors.

They shook off the wet. “I assume that you'll be staying with me,” Win said.

Myron had been living in a loft down on Spring Street with Jessica. But that was before. “It's okay.”

“It's okay.”

“I could move back in with my folks—”

“I said, it's okay.”

“I'll find my own place.”

“No rush,” Win said. The limousine started up. Win steepled his fingers. He always did that. It looked good on him. Still holding the steeple, he bounced his forefingers against his lips. “I'm not the best one to discuss these matters with,” he said, “but if you want to talk about Jessica or Brenda or whatever ...” He released the steeple, made a waving motion with his right hand. Win was trying. Matters of the heart were not his forte. His feelings of romantic entanglement could objectively be labeled “appalling.”

“Don't worry about it,” Myron said.

“Fine then.”

“Thanks, though.”

Quick nod.

After more than a decade struggling with Jessica—years of being in love with the same woman, having one major breakup, finding each other again, taking tentative steps, growing up, finally moving in together again—it was over.

“I miss Jessica,” Myron said.

“I thought we weren't going to talk about it.”

“Sorry.”

Win shifted in his seat again. “No, go on.” Like he'd rather have an anal probe.

“It's just that ... I guess part of me will always be enmeshed in Jessica.”

Win nodded. “Like something in a machinery mishap.”

Myron smiled. “Yeah. Like that.”

“Then slice off the limb and leave it behind.”

Myron looked at his friend.

Win shrugged. “I've been watching *Sally Jessy* on the side.”

“It shows,” Myron said.

“The episode entitled ‘Mommy Took Away My Nipple Ring,’” Win said. “I'm not afraid to say it made me cry.”

“Good to see you getting in touch with your sensitive side.” As if Win had one. “So what's next?”

Win checked his watch. “I have a contact at the Bergen County house of detention. He should be in by now.” He hit the speakerphone and pressed in some numbers. They listened.

to the phone ring. After two rings a voice said, "Schwartz."

"Brian, this is Win Lockwood."

The usual reverent hush when you first hear that name. Then: "Hey, Win."

"I need a favor."

"Shoot."

"Esperanza Diaz. Is she there?"

Brief pause. "You didn't hear it from me," Schwartz said.

"Hear what?"

"Good, okay, long as we understand each other," he said. "Yeah, she's here. They dragged her through here in cuffs a coupla hours ago. Very hush-hush."

"Why hush-hush?"

"Don't know."

"When is she being arraigned?"

"Tomorrow morning, I guess."

Win looked at Myron. Myron nodded. Esperanza would be held overnight. This was not a good thing.

"Why did they arrest her so late?"

"Don't know."

"And you saw them drag her in cuffs?"

"Yep."

"Didn't they let her surrender on her own?"

"Nope."

Again the two friends looked at each other. The late arrest. The handcuffs. The overnight. Someone in the DA's office was pissed off and trying to make a point. Very not a good thing.

"What else can you tell me?" Win asked.

"Not much. Like I said, they're being quiet on this one. The DA hasn't even released it to the media yet. But he will. Probably before the eleven o'clock news. Quick statement, no time for questions, that kind of thing. Hell, I wouldn't know about it if I wasn't a big fan."

"A big fan?"

"Of professional wrestling. See, I recognized her from her old wrestling days. Did you know Esperanza Diaz used to be Little Pocahontas, the Indian Princess?"

Win glanced at Myron. "Yes, Brian, I know."

"Really?" Brian was big-time excited now. "Little Pocahontas was my absolute fave, by a long way. None. An awesome wrestler. Top drawer. I mean, she used to enter the ring in this skimpy suede bikini, right, and then she'd start grappling with other chicks, bigger chicks really. She'd be writhing around on the floor and stuff—swear to God, she was so hot my fingernails would melt."

"Thank you for the visual," Win said. "Anything else, Brian?"

"No."

"Do you know who her attorney of record is?"

"No." Then: "Oh, one other thing. She's got someone, well, sort of with her."

"Sort of with her, Brian?"

"Outside. On the front steps of the courthouse."

"I'm not sure I'm following you," Win said.

“Out in the rain. Just sitting there. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear it was Little Pocahontas’s old tag team partner, Big Chief Mama. Did you know Big Chief Mama and Little Pocahontas were Intercontinental tag team champions three years running?”

Win sighed. “You don’t say.”

“Whatever Intercontinental means. I mean, what is that, Intercontinental? And I’m not talking about recently. Five, eight years ago, at least. But, man, they were awesome. Great wrestlers. Today, well, the league has no class anymore.”

“Grappling bikini-clad women,” Win said. “They just don’t make them like they used to.”

“Right, exactly. Too many fake, inflated breasts nowadays, at least that’s how I see it. One of them is going to land on her stomach and bam, her boob is going to blow out like a worn tire. So I don’t follow it much anymore. Oh, maybe if I’m flipping the channels and something catches my eye, I might watch a little—”

“You were talking about a woman out in the rain?”

“Right, Win, right, sorry. Anyway, she’s out there, whoever she is. Just sitting there. The cops went by before and asked her what she was doing. She said she was going to wait for her friend.”

“So she’s there right now?”

“Yep.”

“What does she look like, Brian?”

“Like the Incredible Hulk. Only scarier. And maybe greener.”

Win and Myron exchanged glances. No doubt. Big Chief Mama aka Big Cyndi.

“Anything else, Brian?”

“No, not really.” Then: “So you know Esperanza Diaz?”

“Yes.”

“Personally?”

“Yes.”

Silent awe. “Jesus, you lead some life, Win.”

“Oh, indeed.”

“Think you can get me her autograph?”

“I’ll do my best, Brian.”

“A picture autograph maybe? Of Little Pocahontas in costume? I’m a really big fan.”

“So I gather, Brian. Good-bye.”

Win hung up and sat back. He looked over at Myron. Myron nodded. Win picked up the intercom and gave the driver directions to the courthouse.

By the time they arrived at the courthouse in Hackensack, it was nearly 10:00 P.M. Big Cyndi sat in the rain, shoulders hunched; at least Myron thought it was Big Cyndi. From a distance it looked like someone had parked a Volkswagen Bug on the courthouse steps.

Myron stepped out of the car and approached. "Big Cyndi?"

The dark heap let loose a low growl, a lioness warning off an inferior animal who wandered astray.

"It's Myron," he said.

The growl deepened. The rain had plastered Big Cyndi's hair spikes to her scalp, as if she were sporting an uneven Caesar coif. Today's color was hard to decipher—Big Cyndi liked diversity in her follicular tint—but it didn't look like any hue found in the state of nature. Big Cyndi sometimes liked to combine dyes randomly and see what happened. She also insisted on being called Big Cyndi. Not Cyndi. Big Cyndi. She had even had her name legally changed. Official documents read: Cyndi, Big.

"You can't stay here all night," Myron tried.

She finally spoke. "Go home."

"What happened?"

"You ran away." Big Cyndi's voice was childlike, lost.

"Yes."

"You left us alone."

"I'm sorry about that. But I'm back now."

He risked another step. If only he had something to placate her with. Like a half gallon of Häagen-Dazs. Or a sacrificial goat.

Big Cyndi started to cry. Myron approached slowly, semileading with his right hand in case she wanted to sniff it. But the growls were all gone now, replaced by sobs. Myron put his palm on a shoulder that felt like a bowling ball.

"What happened?" he asked again.

She sniffled. Loudly. The sound almost dented the limo's fender. "I can't tell you."

"Why can't you?"

"She said not to."

"Esperanza?"

Big Cyndi nodded.

"She's going to need help," Myron said.

"She doesn't want your help."

The words stung. The rain continued to fall. Myron sat on the step next to her. "Is she angry about my leaving?"

"I can't tell you, Mr. Bolitar. I'm sorry."

"Why not?"

"She told me not to."

"Esperanza can't bear the brunt of this on her own," Myron said. "She's going to need a lawyer."

“She has one.”

“Who?”

“Hester Crimstein.”

Big Cyndi gasped as though she realized she'd said too much, but Myron wondered if the slip had been intentional.

“How did she get Hester Crimstein?” Myron asked.

“I can't say any more, Mr. Bolitar. Please don't be mad at me.”

“I'm not mad, Big Cyndi. I'm just concerned.”

Big Cyndi smiled at him then. The sight made Myron bite back a scream. “It's nice to have you back,” she said.

“Thank you.”

She put her head on his shoulder. The weight made him teeter, but he remained relatively upright. “You know how I feel about Esperanza,” Myron said.

“Yes,” Big Cyndi said. “You love her. And she loves you.”

“So let me help.”

Big Cyndi lifted her head off his shoulder. Blood circulated again. “I think you should leave now.”

Myron stood. “Come on. We'll give you a ride home.”

“No, I'm staying.”

“It's raining and it's late. Someone might try to attack you. It's not safe out here.”

“I can take care of myself,” Big Cyndi said.

He had meant that it wasn't safe for the attackers, but he let it pass. “You can't stay out here all night.”

“I'm not leaving Esperanza alone.”

“But she won't even know you're here.”

Big Cyndi wiped the rain from her face with a hand the size of a truck tire. “She knows.”

Myron looked back at the car. Win was leaning against the door now, arms crossed, umbrella resting on his shoulder. Very Gene Kelly. He nodded at Myron.

“You're sure?” Myron asked.

“Yes, Mr. Bolitar. Oh, and I'll be late for work tomorrow. I hope you understand.”

Myron nodded. They stared at each other, the rain cascading down their faces. A howl of laughter made both of them turn to the right and look at the fortresslike structure that contained the holding cells. Esperanza, the person closest to them both, was incarcerated there. Myron stepped toward the limousine. Then he turned back around.

“Esperanza wouldn't kill anyone,” he said.

He waited for Big Cyndi to agree or at least nod her head. But she didn't. She hunched the shoulders back up and disappeared within herself.

Myron slid back into the car. Win followed, handing Myron a towel. The driver started up.

“Hester Crimstein is her attorney,” Myron said.

“Ms. Court TV?”

“The same.”

“Ah,” Win said. “And what's the name of her show again?”

“*Crimstein on Crime*,” Myron said.

Win frowned. “Cute.”

“She had a book with the same title.” Myron shook his head. “This is weird. Hester Crimstein doesn’t take many cases anymore. So how did Esperanza land her?”

Win tapped his chin with his forefinger. “I’m not positive,” he said, “but I believe Esperanza had a fling with her a couple of months back.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Well, yes, I am such a mirthful fellow. And wasn’t that just the funniest line?”

Wiseass. But it made sense. Esperanza was as perfect a bisexual as you could find—perfect because everyone, no matter what his or her sex or preference, found her immensely attractive. If you’re going to go all ways, might as well have universal appeal, right?

Myron mulled this over a few moments. “Do you know where Hester Crimstein lives?” he asked.

“Two buildings up from me on Central Park West.”

“So let’s pay her a visit.”

Win frowned. “Why?”

“Maybe she can fill us in.”

“She won’t talk to us.”

“Maybe she will.”

“What makes you say that?”

“For one thing,” Myron said, “I’m feeling particularly charming.”

“By God.” Win leaned forward. “Driver, step on the gas.”

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