

CHAPTER 1



Nevis, West Indies

November 1999

The seven-seater plane roared over the Caribbean toward the green cone of the island where Els Gordon would serve out the sentence handed down by her boss: a week's holiday that chagrined her like a toddler's time-out. "If you don't get a grip before you come back . . .," the wanker had said. He hadn't specified the consequences.

The plane fishtailed low over a deserted beach rimmed with jungle before rattling to its landing.

Steam-room heat assaulted Els when she crossed the yielding tarmac, a jolt after the icy drizzle she'd left at Heathrow.

The immigration officer perused her form. "You neglected to state the purpose of your visit."

As neither business nor pleasure covered it, she stared at him too long before saying, "Penance?"

He regarded her, unamused, then checked the "pleasure" box. He peeled back the Scottish national flag cover she'd put on her passport,

revealing its Westminster-issued European Union burgundy. After examining pages with entry stamps from the US, Asia, and South America, he found an empty spot and clacked down his stamp.

A cabbie hurried her to his taxi van in time to beat a dust devil that swirled across the construction zone, engulfing the terminal. Turning the van toward the ball of afternoon sun, he swept his arm to take in the scalped land and heavy machinery. "New airport gon' accommodate jets. Change fortunes for all a' we."

"Mind what you wish for," Els said.

"Even when we reach the twenty-first century, Nevis goin' always be Queen of the Caribees." He patted his chest. "And I am this little island's best ambassador. You want my special tour?"

"All I want is a cold drink and a hot bath," she said, already wondering how she'd survive a week in this tiny place.

When they crested Hurricane Hill, the sea spreading out before her was a wash of undulating sparkles. The brightness was invasive; she felt nature was strutting, taunting her.

"You here for the doctor meeting by the Resort?"

"Na, on my own," she said, recoiling from the thought that she might be walking into a convention of men as arrogant as the investment banking colleagues she'd left behind.

Just beyond the boundary sign for the Parish of St. Thomas Lowland, dung-splattered sheep milling in the road halted the van's progress in front of a cinder block wall. Higher up the hill, Els glimpsed a house nestled into the slope. Unlike the pastel concrete dwellings they'd passed, it looked ancient, a survivor with proportions that charmed her. Its weathered shingles and native stone walls stood in counterpoint to the riot of color poking through the garden's devastation. Plywood blindfolded its windows. An estate agent's sign dangled from the padlocked gate.

The cabbie snuck a peek at the house, waved his arm out the window, and yelled at the sheep.

"I'm in no hurry," Els said. "For once."

“Got to move on, miss.” He leaned on the horn and whispered, “Lord, ley we pass *now*.”

With the ewes bleating encouragement, the babies huddled enough to clear a path. The cabbie drove away so swiftly he nearly clipped a straggling lamb. Els twisted in her seat for another look, but they’d rounded a turn and the house had disappeared.

“So, Mr. Ambassador,” she said, “what’s the story behind that place?”

He gripped the wheel and said nothing. A bit farther on, he slowed for a hairpin curve, tipped his head toward a seawall, and said, “Jack, he gone. But he ain’t left yet.”

“Jack’s the owner?”

“Foh twenty years, mebbe.” He tuned the radio to a preacher’s oration and didn’t speak again, leaving Els to ponder why this Jack would surrender such a treasure to rot and strangling vegetation, and why no buyer had jumped to save it.

She’d always told herself that love and attention could coax anything abandoned back to life.

The cabbie drove down the Resort’s allée of palm trees and up to the Great House entrance. After handing Els’s luggage to the porter, he whipped out a card reading, “Sparrow’s Custom Tours. See the Nevis beyond the Beach and the Peak.”

“The real Nevis,” she said.

“Sparrow show you the sights, tell you the legends,” he said. “Real, you gotta find on you own.”

Needing no assistance pulling her small wheelie or finding her room, Els felt ridiculous tagging along behind Anthony, the porter dispatched with great ceremony by the front desk, who took the long way in order to point out the beach, pool, and dining pavilion. The paths meandered between plants that seemed to reach for her, their foliage in shades of green, burgundy, and purple, as if Gauguin had created

the scene. When Anthony greeted two uniformed women and they replied in incomprehensible patois, Els felt an old stab of otherness.

“Welcome to Hibiscus Villa,” Anthony said, and waved her inside. She eyed the romantic mahogany plantation bed and thought what a narrow, solitary dent she would make.

“What’s this, the honeymoon suite?” she said. She felt as spiky as the arrangement of protea on the coffee table.

“Sometimes,” he said.

She pressed a tip into Anthony’s hand hoping to curtail his narration of the suite’s amenities. He instructed her to enjoy her stay and backed out the door.

Alone with only the whir of the ceiling fan and pulse of the surf, she was rooted in the middle of the floor, unaware of how long she’d stood there when a discreet knock brought her back to the present. The young woman at the door with the name tag “Alaneesha” wheeled in a cart bearing a bottle of champagne in a sweating ice bucket and a frangipani blossom floating in a small bowl.

“Compliments of the management?” Els asked.

Alaneesha handed her a card that read, “Find someone to share this with. Loosen up and come back a new woman.” It was signed “Coxe.” Els wondered if “this” meant the champagne, the bed, or both. It was just like Coxe to assume anything could be righted by a good fuck, preferably while drunk. Fury sent a flush to her face, and she fanned herself with the card.

Alaneesha peered at her. “Ma’am, you okay?”

“Jet lag,” Els said.

After Alaneesha slipped out the door, Els flung the card at the champagne and watched it sink into the ice bath. The frangipani’s aggressive scent filled the room.

Mind what you wish for, Els chided herself. Festive champagne was hardly the cold drink she’d had in mind, and a hot bath, at the moment, might make her explode. She peeled off her sweat-dampened clothing, stepped into the shower, and stood under a cool

stream until she felt rinsed if not cleansed. Wrapped in a huge towel, she went out to her terrace and shielded her eyes against the low sun, which made a couple strolling the beach hand in hand look dipped in toffee.

Over the past year, icy anger had frozen her grief into her bones, but recently the marrow seemed overwhelmed by the effort of this compression and had begun emitting a kind of fog, like dry ice vapors, that displaced the air in her lungs and slowed her brain. It was as if those noxious vapors were wreathing her words, further sharpening her already lacerating tongue. She'd begun messing up at work enough to give the ever-circling hyenas in her department a whiff of vulnerability.

Coxe had flashed his fake-compassion smile when he'd said, "I strongly recommend you take this opportunity to just get over, well, whatever it is." She'd imagined driving the Montblanc fountain pen he so fancied straight into his jugular. As if a few days of Caribbean frolic could erase all that had brought her to this point.