



The Caribbean Prisoner

A Novel

Scott Evans

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Chapter 1

After my father's sudden death, I felt so lost and alone that I took a leave of absence from San Francisco State. Just as my dad and brother and I had done ten years earlier when my mother had died after a long battle with ovarian cancer I decided to travel. I picked an island in the Caribbean, based on a poster I'd seen in a travel agent's office. But, despite its promising name, St. Thomas eventually proved more hellish than I could have imagined. I learned even more about despair. And guilt.

And the redemptive power of vengeance.

On the day of my arrival, when I stepped over the doormat of the Midtown Hotel in the center of Charlotte Amalie, I walked through a dim hall into a small courtyard and felt at peace. Lush, tall, broad-leaf plants grew in the center, surrounded by stairways and landings with black iron railings. Sunlight burned high on the pink walls, casting deep cool shadows where green ferns flourished. It seemed at first the perfect serene setting where I could try to quell the anguish I felt.

A single room on the ground floor next to the office was available, so I took it. The door was a wooden frame holding a series of frosted glass panels. The room was clean but small. Over the bed was a transom of thin metal slats that allowed little light. Above the window, an air-conditioner protruded from the wall. I turned it on, and

though the air was a little stale, the room cooled quickly. The double bed was firm and neatly made, the small bathroom, smelling of bleach, was clean with white tiles on the floor and halfway up the walls.

It was late afternoon. I was hungry and anxious to explore. On the street, reggae music and the beat of steel drums - sounding so upbeat and joyful - drew my attention to the town. I strolled past a dimly lit bar filled with laughter from people whose faces I couldn't see. The smells of rum and cigarette smoke assaulted my nose. A patch of the bay's blue water was visible between the buildings, so I made my way across Main Street where cars crawled at a snail's pace. Natives and tourists alike crowded a park that gave off pleasing aroma of pork cooking on barbeques.

Politely waving off occasional invitations from people to join them, I walked under the shade of palm trees to the waterfront, checking the street map from time to time. Beyond the busy Waterfront Road was St. Thomas Harbor. To my left was a large stone building painted a deep crimson that looked like a prison. A sign in front said the grotesque blood-red castle-like structure was the St. Thomas Police Station, but the map referred to it as "The Fort". Something about it gave a chill.

I turned from the waterfront and trudged up a steep stairway. Trees with low branches created welcome shade. Halfway up the steps, I saw a tidy white building, surrounded by a low, whitewashed rock wall. A sign with carved letters over and under a portrait of a schooner read, GALLEON HOUSE - FOOD AND DRINKS - LUNCHESES AND DINNERS. Through an archway, a sidewalk wound between overgrown vegetation, and disappeared behind the trunks of old palm trees. Within the walls, I smelled rich soil and the various flowers, like jasmine and wisteria, which clung to trellises. These fragrances reminded me of my mother's flower garden and took me back to moments I

had spent with her when I was younger. A green lizard scurried up the cracked wall and disappeared. A small, cream-colored butterfly floated in front of my face, then fluttered into the shadows before turning back and zig-zagging through pockets of sunlight.

The stairway led to a spacious terrace opening on three sides to a view of St. Thomas Bay. The deep harbor lay below me like a sheet of pure turquoise. Yachts mirrored themselves in the water. The narrow streets of Charlotte Amalie, the steep green hillsides dappled with colorful houses, the iridescent vegetation, and the red-tiled roofs made me think of paintings by Paul Gauguin. My mother had loved art and often had me sit on her lap as she browsed through massive books filled with beautiful photos of paintings. The ones by Gauguin had been among her favorites.

“Can I help you?” A blonde man in a half-unbuttoned white shirt stood in the shadows behind the long bar.

“Fantastic view,” I said.

“First time here?”

Nodding, I stepped closer, pulled a barstool out, and ordered a scotch and soda.

“Scotch? Folks come here to drink rum.”

“Got sick on rum once. Doesn’t have much appeal anymore.”

He nodded knowingly while mixing my drink. “What’s your name?”

“Randall Wake. Yours?”

He handed me the glass. “Mike.”

We shook hands. Once my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I noticed the deep, rich wood of the bar top, like the deck of an expensive yacht. “Beautiful bar.”

He nodded. “It’s teak.”

I slid my hand along the smooth surface, then scanned

the room. Two dozen tables with bamboo legs were spaced evenly throughout the terrace, four sturdy bamboo chairs at each. Silverware and folded white napkins adorned each table. It looked like the kind of place my parents might have visited when they were alive.

“Where is everybody? Seems like the rest of the town is buzzing.”

“Most folks come later, for dinner and dancing.”

Sparkling glasses stacked behind the bartender and shelves of liquor bottles, their greens and ambers and browns added to the beauty of the island. It was as if I had begun noticing colors again after a long spell of colorblindness. I smelled the chilled scotch in my drink, the coldness rising to my nostrils, and took another sip.

“Have you lived here long?” I asked.

“Almost ten years. Came down from Houston for a short vacation, after losing my job, and this place needed a bartender.” Mike wiped glasses with a white bar towel as he spoke, stacking each one as he finished. “I’d done a little bartending to pay my way through college, so...”

“What do you do for fun? Go to a different bar and drink?”

“Not much of a drinker. Do a little scuba diving, sometimes with a few of the tourists. You dive?”

“Done a lot of free diving, mostly for abalone. But I’ve done some scuba diving off the coast of Santa Barbara and Catalina Island. Up around Fort Bragg and Mendocino, too, in northern California.”

A few months after my mother’s death, Dad had taken Richard and me to camp at Mendocino, where we went free-diving for abalone. I smiled, recalling Dad cutting the foot out of the shell, then pounding it on a tree stump to tenderize it. He sautéed it over a camp fire in a pan that sizzled with olive oil and white wine. I could almost taste the tender abalone meat melt in my mouth.

“I went diving in the Pacific one time, north of San

Francisco. The water was cloudy and cold. Didn't care for it. Have you been in the water here?"

I shook my head.

"Water's warm and clear. Visibility can be a hundred feet, even on a bad day." He stepped to the cash register, pulled a brochure from a rack, and handed it to me. "There's a catamaran cruise each day that takes folks over to St. John for scuba diving and snorkeling. They supply all the equipment."

I flipped through the brochure.

"You'll notice, no one in those pictures is wearing a wetsuit. Don't need one."

One of the inside photos showed a young, well-built guy swimming under water with an even younger, bountiful woman in the tightest, skimpiest bikini I'd ever seen.

"Can you guarantee I'll meet her if I go?"

He laughed. "They also provide lunch."

I glanced again at the brochure. "Looks like fun."

Two older couples dressed in slacks and bright, colorful shirts and blouses came up the steps and called "Hello" to Mike before taking a table by the railing. Mike ducked under an opening in the bar and went to their table. Once he got back, he went to work making their drinks as I watched, sipped my drink and thumbed through the brochure.

The restaurant filled with people, mostly couples in their sixties, and Mike got busy. I sat alone at the bar, but the good scotch had its effect. I felt a sense of belonging. Drink in hand, I strolled around the cheerful and chatty people to the banister and looked down. The town had become a kind of carnival, filled with music, laughter, and colorful lights.

Maybe it was just the liquor and my newfound freedom, but I felt more alive than I had in months. I'd been numb

since hearing about my father's fatal heart attack, and I'd stayed numb well after his funeral.

I'd wanted to follow in my father's footsteps, which was why I had been a pre-med major at San Francisco State. But after he died, I didn't see the point. Classes were tedious, dull. On a whim, I'd decided to travel to some place I'd never seen before. St. Thomas seemed about as far away from San Francisco as I could get and still be, technically, inside the U. S., since I didn't have an updated passport. So that evening I found myself at a bar in the Virgin Islands, unaware that death had tagged along.

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