

THE FLAMBOYANT TREE

Starkey's flight to London was still several hours away. He discovered the tree after taking a last-minute drive in his rental car around the small island rather than spend the afternoon sitting on a bar stool all afternoon at the airport. It was an older flamboyant tree with gnarly branches and a slight bend midway. At that moment the red blossoms reminded him of his girlfriend, Rita, her colorful spirit, bright clothes, lipstick, the paintings she hung in her Manhattan apartment overlooking Central Park. He hadn't seen her for six weeks. After a few days in London to finalize some business matters he would be off to New York to settle in with her until his next assignment.

He had been on the island for a meeting with one of his contacts and to look for secluded property where he and Rita could escape winter's chill. For Starkey, the island itself was neither here nor there. It had the usual ex-pats in shabby shorts and sandals pretending to be locals; the angry locals left behind from colonialism; Indian merchants charging exorbitant prices; drug dealers and gun runners; oil tankers and cruise ships; grubby tourists looking for cheap trinkets; jet setters in their large yachts parked in the harbor, some motoring on skiffs to the island's three world class restaurants; retired snow birds and financial scammers from the U.S. and Europe hiding their fortunes from the taxman. One of the New York mob families had an enclosed compound with attack dogs hidden in the middle of a warehouse area.

But the ocean was warm, the sand fine and the sunsets one of a kind. A villa there would give them privacy, much needed time alone. He was ready for some peace and tranquility, for a major change in his life. His work was catching up with him in the middle of the night. In a few more years he would begin to look old.

The tree sat on one of the last oceanfront lots on the side of the bay known as Millionaire's Row. The lot was not more than a few hundred feet wide yet deep enough for him to build a small villa with a pool and a garden in back. A neglected For Sale sign twisted in the wind. He instantly visualized the villa he wanted to design and build. Given his life so far, he wanted it to have high walls for security and to block the sight of the villas on the other side of the access road. He would build a sea wall with reinforced steel embedded in the volcanic rock along that end of the beach to beat back storms and one

day perhaps, a hurricane. He knew about islands. He had bought villas before as investments, put women into them, only to lose them because of who he was and what he did.

The tree was in full bloom. He admired the sleek curvature of its limbs and how it leaned coyly to one side. Impulsive and instinctive as he was, the sight of the tree inspired him to reach for his cell phone, call for an extended stay at The Imperial Hotel. That done, he canceled his flight and booked another. He needed time to learn more about the property. He parked his jeep off the end of the access road and hopped out for a fuller view of the tree, then walked up to finger its old bark, its twistedness, its experience in the world.

Within minutes, he drove uphill to a real estate office where he knew a young man named Xavier. He told Starkey the lot had been listed for several years but not considered valuable because of its location at the end of the beach. Exactly what Starkey wanted: privacy and security. There was a villa he had not seen to the left of the lot hidden by a line of trees. The man who lived there was a loner, Xavier told him. His villa could not be seen except at night when the lights were on and then only through the dimly lit trees.

After thumbing through the paperwork, Starkey made an offer then and there. Within a few days the offer was accepted and earnest money exchanged. Xavier promised to remove the For Sale sign and fax the details and the paperwork to Starkey's London address. That was the way Starkey did business. He knew what he wanted. He kept a close eye on time.

He flew to London the next morning, then to New York to surprise Rita with his find. He thought she would be as excited as he was. It was Rita who surprised him over a glass of Cabernet. She was quick to say she'd had it with him — his long absences. Even after he pleaded his case, his news of the lot, plans for a villa, promises for quitting his work, she continued to give her head a negative shake. She'd heard it all before. No more third or fourth chances this time.

“I have to move on, Starkey,” she said, brushing her newly trimmed hair across her forehead with a free hand, a gesture Starkey found enticing. “I’m twenty-nine years old and I want a real life. It’s been two years and I still don’t know exactly who you are

or what you do and you won't tell me. You just take off with a scribbled 'See you soon' note, no hint of when or where you're going or when you'll be back. You know I love you to death but I just can't go to work, come home at night to an empty apartment and wait for you to suddenly show up in my kitchen making dinner. You sleep with me for a few weeks, keep me up late drinking too much wine, and 'poof,' off you go. I can't wait to see you and when you're here I have so much fun. Then you're gone. There are other men, Sharkey. More reliable men. You know there are and it hurts me to know you see other women. It's just not fair. And yes, I do want some babies. I want a house I can decorate and call my own. Someone to share my life with."

What she said was true. Rita was already a successful stock broker and led a busy life with a wide circle of business associates and close friends. She meant what she said. She was no dummy. Sophisticated and very good looking.

She took him to bed with her that night as a farewell gift. The next morning she woke early leaving him in a deep sleep. She sat cardboard boxes and shipping tape on the dining room table for him to pack his things. He tossed the few pieces of clothing and toiletries he stored there down the trash chute outside her apartment door, then penned her a note that read:

"Sorry if I've hurt you. I love you too. Starkey."

He added a footnote in his mind. "If you know what I mean."

He returned to the island a few months later. He designed the villa with a British architect who lived on a neighboring island a short ferry boat ride away. The older man was an expert at designing villas that fit smaller lots. Together, Starkey and he divided the villa into sections: a vaulted living area that opened to a large deck and pool, three separate buildings for sleeping, a kitchen, dining area, a shed to hide a backup generator, a garage, a patio in the back for viewing the garden and the tree.

"The tree could die one day," the architect warned him. "Then what will you have. An expensive villa and no flamboyant tree. Some years it may not bloom at all. When and if does bloom, it will only be from May to September. Besides, it's too close to the house. How can you have a full garden with the tree blocking your view.

"I don't care," Sharkey said. "I want the tree to be the centerpiece when I drive in. I will have the ocean as my front yard."

"Think of an area in front for a cesspool," the architect smiled.

"A cesspool?"

"Right. There is no other kind of waste disposal here."

He also told Starkey he would need to have a large satellite antenna on the roof of the main building if he wanted to watch television, a device Starkey pictured as a blight on the red tile roof he chose. Then there was the matter of drinking water. Sometimes the local water turned orange. The foundation under the main living area would have to include a cistern to collect rainwater. During the dry season he might have to pay to have it filled. Though he had owned and rented villas, Starkey had never built one from scratch. At the end of each day with the architect the details led him to the bar at the casinos.

His plans were submitted to the local government office, approved and filed. Less than a week later Starkey was served with a lawsuit at his room in The Imperial Hotel filed against him by the owner of one of the units in a complex to the right of his property called The Five Villas. The complex consisted of small villas strung together in a single building separated by a wall between each unit. The plaintiff, a woman named Margo, owned the unit across the access road from Starkey's lot. Starkey, who watched her come and go, thought she might be in her forties. She lived there with an older man he assumed was her boyfriend. Hans told him the man who went by the last name of Lundquist was a meat broker on the island and had parked his refrigerated trucks rent free for years on the vacant lot. The lawsuit falsely claimed that Starkey's proposed south wall would infringe on the access road to the beach. Not true according to a survey of the plot. After a year of litigation, with Starkey winning in the local court and at every level of appeal, the case was heard at The Hague. To Starkey's delight, the judge ruled, "There is nothing in the law of the islands or of The Hague that commands that there be a three-lane highway to the ocean." Starkey's wall was well within its legal boundaries.

The lawsuit took some of the shine off Starkey's excitement about his new life plan. The lawsuit cost him several months. The completed project took almost another year. While he waited for the lawsuit to be dismissed he traveled through Europe as a tourist to visit sights he hadn't had time to fully appreciate. Absent during the early stages of construction when the concrete walls were set and before the rooms and roofs took

shape the villa became almost dreamlike to him. He collected furniture and paintings to be shipped to a warehouse on the island. He wanted to be his own interior decorator.

From the day he finally moved in, Margo, Lundquist, and the other owners and their guests at the Five Villas ignored him. They never waved back so he stopped waving hello. When he walked along the beach they pretended not to see him. The sun bathers on the sand turned to one side as he passed by. He shrugged them off. He was there for a little peace and tranquility. He had already told some of his clients he was retiring. In his thoughts he was already finished.

The architect introduced him to Liz, an island woman of mixed race who was a licensed horticulturist educated in England. She was from Grenada, born of a British mother, a former school teacher who ran away from her first husband, and a Jamaican father, a fisherman. Liz was as scrawny as a newborn bird, typically dried up with sunshine as the islands will do to the skin, her faded, stringy hair brushed back and bound with a simple rubber band.

She was anything but peaceful. Though she designed and planted Starkey a beautiful garden, she had a habit of adding flowers, bushes and small trees she called "orphans" she rescued from along the roadside. She planted them in his absence without his permission.

"Liz," he told her. "I don't want these twigs. I want full grown plants."

She had a typical island mouth on her.

"Shit, Starkey. Do you have cancer?"

"No."

"Are you going to die tomorrow?"

"I don't plan to."

"Then, what the fuck. With this sprinkler system, they will soon grow tall and full even before you come back again."

"If you say so."

"I just said it, you stupid American."

What bothered Starkey most about Liz was her pruning agenda. He wanted to time his visits to the blossoming of the flamboyant tree. She had her Haitian workers trim it too often and too short.

“Shit, Liz. You've given it another a crew cut. How about just a little trim.”

“No. It must be pruned. There is an art to it.”

“I understand pruned. I do not get butchered. I like the art as it is.”

She threw up her hands.

“Trees are like people. Some of them improve over time. Plus, my gardeners need work.”

“I have lots for them to work on,” Starkey argued. “For example, the stones piled against my back wall. What about them?”

“They push up out of the ground. They bubble up. You can't fight those stupid rocks. They are too heavy. You need special equipment. It won't work in a small space.”

“All I ask is that you stop cutting the limbs off my tree. The tree will probably live forever if you just leave it alone. Have them put their machetes and saws away for a while. Let it breathe.”

“Point numero uno. It's not your tree. It's God's. Besides, who's lived here hundreds of years?”

“Maybe you. Not me. Look, Liz, I love my flamboyant tree. Stop sawing its limbs off.”

“Don't you want it to outlive you? If you have children, then what?”

“I will never have children,” Starkey said.

“No, then you won't have any grandkids to see it. Not you.”

“Right. I won't have any grandkids. I don't want to bring grandkids into this world. I just want to have a very beautiful flamboyant tree while I'm alive. I want to come here and see it in full bloom. Not hacked up.”

“Selfish man. Speaking strictly for me, I wouldn't want you for a grandfather.”

“Thank you. That's never been one of my goals.”

Starkey didn't know why he let Liz abuse him as she did. He paid her a lot of money to create and maintain his garden. What she said, how she said it, amused him, he supposed.

In the beginning he spent almost as much time on his back patio looking through the limbs and blossoms of his ancient flamboyant tree as he did on his deck watching the ocean and the sunsets change colors. The mosquitoes bothered him. He tried all types of

sprays and candles and gadgets to keep them off but they always drew blood. Wherever he had lived, they seemed to seek him out, draw blood but never asked or paid him. That's not how he did business. He required payment up front. He liked to be paid in cash.

After dark and out of boredom he often walked uphill to The Imperial Hotel to sit at the bar and play blackjack or craps at the casino. It was full seven nights a week. He liked the variety of clientele. The hotel was owned by a German named Hans whose family had been on the island for decades. Hans knew everybody and everything about the island. He introduced Starkey to women at the bar, usually American and European tourists. He bought them dinner at the restaurant next door and then invited for a drink at his villa. They usually stayed the night or longer. When he tired of the island and his routine he traveled back to his London flat or to France and Spain. He stopped trying to call Rita. He knew she meant what she said. But he wished she had come along for the ride.

Late at night when he could not sleep, he sat in the dark staring through the limbs of the flamboyant tree in the shadows of the security lights of The Five Villas. Some nights he could faintly hear voodoo drums and ritual chanting. Occasionally, distant shouts and screams. He asked a local who wore a Christian cross on a chain around his neck, a Dominican who picked up his trash, to give him directions to a place where he could observe whatever the source might be: ceremonies, parties, cultural performances. Were they for the tourists? The man with prickly unshaven whiskers merely shrugged at him. Usually talkative, he walked away.

Starkey discovered that one of the blackjack dealers at the casino owned the villa to his left. It had no beach, only a faux seawall atop a terrace of slabs of stone and boulders. He squinted to see through the trees during the day and saw glimpses of a few sheds, a building that resembled a cabin, a large carpentry table littered with tools. At night a lightbulb hanging from a tree limb gave him a better view of the cabin's littered porch. The blackjack dealer was a Croatian named Slaven. Starkey had never bothered to introduce himself. If the man wanted to be left alone, let him be. The only problem was Slaven's parrot. It had fits of screeching that interrupted Starkey's already broken sleep. He also kept a pack of dogs that broke out in barking fits.

“Some nights I can’t sleep,” he told Slaven over the blackjack table, trying to be polite. “There is this crazy parrot I hear. Squawks all the time.”

“That is because he lost his wife.”

“Really?”

“His name is Bamboo.”

“How do you know that?”

“He is my Bamboo. My bird.”

“So, you are in the villa next to me?”

“Yes,” he said in perfect English. “I can see you on your deck at sunset looking at the ocean.”

“I never see you. I can hear your voice. Are all those dogs yours?”

“Yes.”

“How many do you have?”

“Too many. I lost count.”

Slaven was a burly man with well groomed, parted black hair and a thick mustache. His eyes wandered left and right, even as he dealt.

“Some of my friends suspect he is a gun runner. The war, you know,” Hans said when asked. “That’s the word on him. He is for the Croatians. That is why he has the dogs, they say. For protection. At least a dozen or so. There will be a whore now and then. He doesn’t get his whores through me. I don’t know where he gets them.”

“I suppose that’s his business,” Starkey said.

“I suppose.”

Often, Starkey could hear Slaven arguing with someone in the early morning hours. Possibly on his telephone. He sounded drunk. On a rant. Then there was a silence and after that the sounds of Slaven firing a pistol into the air. At first, the sound of the pistol startled him and he crouched on the alert outside the moonlight close to the front wall of the villa with the Forty-Five he kept at his side on the small table by his chaise longue. The firing was sporadic. It stopped after a few rounds. Starkey didn't want to call the police. He didn't trust them, certain they were taking bribes. And no doubt they could look him up on Interpol. They wouldn't find him there. He was sure of that.

He mentioned the pistol shots to Hans.

“He gets bad news from overseas,” Hans said. “The war you know. It pisses him off so he gets drunk and fires his weapon. That’s what I hear.”

“Who tells you these things.”

Hans shook his head and laughed.

“That’s for me to know.”

Starkey narrowed his eyes and looked directly into Hans’s face.

“Don’t you ever talk about me. You hear,” he said without thinking.

Hans rose from the stool where he was sitting at the bar.

“Never,” he said. “What anyone tells me stays here.” He pointed to his head.

“In there.”

“I wonder,” Starkey said with a glare Hans had not seen before.

During his visits to the island Starkey met several of the ex-pats and snowbirds at the casino. They invited him to their cocktail parties and dinners because he seemed to fit in and had good stories to tell. With little else to do and no real friends — most of his real friends were dead — he accepted. He liked being anonymous in a crowd. That's how he thought of himself. He told them he was in the import-export business which explained his sudden absences. When some of the men went off island on business or to play golf, their wives and girlfriends invited themselves to the villa. The access road at his end of the beach was hard to find in the tangle of small roads that wound through the hillside above him. His location made it difficult for them to be followed. An unexpected perk. It was his way, he told himself, of getting even. Getting even for what he found hard to define.

Lundquist created more early morning racket moving his trucks around in the limited space in the cul-de-sac of the access road. A plague of bad mufflers. He wasn't the only source of aggravation.

One afternoon on the beach Starkey heard his name being called by an American he met at a cocktail party. His name was Marvin something or other. Starkey walked passed by him going in the opposite direction. He pretended he didn't hear him.

“Hey, there, Starkey,” Marvin shouted out again.

“Hey, Marvin,” he called back over his shoulder.

Marvin turned and began to follow him. Starkey sought to lose him but he followed. Starkey was fit. He was a fast walker. Marvin huffed to keep up.

“Hey, slow down. I’m a three pack a day man.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Hey, we need to talk.”

Starkey scowled. Okay, he thought, he was stuck with this guy. Outside of the cocktail parties he aimed to keep a low profile.

“What’s up?”

“We need to talk.”

“Okay. About what?”

“Well, for one thing. About you. Nobody knows anything about you. You come to our parties but you don’t say much about yourself. People are curious. They like your conversation. The other thing is about this guy, Slaven.”

“I don’t know anything about Slaven.”

“He’s your neighbor, isn’t he?”

“He lives in the villa to the left of me. I wouldn’t call him a neighbor. I don’t know anything about him. I see him dealing blackjack at the casino but we don’t talk. I see him sometimes when I go to the Supermarche.”

“What is it with this guy? The only places anyone ever sees him is at the casino or the grocery store. Does he live there?”

Marvin was struggling to keep up. He was tall and lanky and had a full head of blond hair that flipped down over his forehead. Starkey thought he grinned too much. He needed an orthodontist.

“Don’t the dogs bother you?” Marvin asked. “Us folks uphill can hear them at night. We hear gunfire. Are they having gun battles on the beach? I don’t see anything in the Sun Island Times. Is he a drug dealer?”

“No, he is not a drug dealer. I do believe drug dealers park their boats on the beach near the access road. I see them running up and down the road at night next to my south wall. There’s nothing I can do about them. I’ve called the police. Four or five times. They never come. I just ignore the druggies now.”

“Haitians?”

“Who knows? Dominicans, maybe. Or locals. Some could be Dutch. It's too dark to tell. Slaven doesn't deal as far as I know. He keeps to himself. The tourists turn around because of the rocks and the boulders. It's the end of the beach. I see him sometimes late at night standing behind his sea wall.”

Starkey thought, you dumb fuck, Marvin. Thinking of the war, he wanted to say, "They are raping women and scalping men over there in Croatia. They are sawing off heads. They are dumping bodies into trenches and spreading lye on them." And you are worrying about me?

Marvin wouldn't quit.

“And what about you? How about you?”

“You don't need to know.”

“What are you all about?”

“None of your business.”

“Well, you're not very neighborly.”

“We're not neighbors. I have no neighbors. This isn't the suburbs.”

Marvin dropped behind and yelled at him over the sound of the surf.

“So you just want to be a general asshole.”

“You bet.”

“I'll let the others know.”

Fine with me, Starkey said under his breath. He didn't look back. He didn't need their parties, to talk ad nauseum about how rich they were or how much they had traveled or where they had been. He had been plenty of places. No big deal. He had his villa and his lovely tree. That's all he cared about for now. But he wasn't always in full control. Margo and Lundquist argued almost every night. He didn't want any part of their troubles.

One evening Starkey watched them climb out of the small hot tub on Margo's deck just before sunset. They were drunk and naked. Their argument became a shouting, pushing, shoving, scratching fist fight. Lundquist grabbed her around the waist, lifted her off the tile, carried her to the seawall and threw her over onto the beach. At least a six-foot drop. He locked the gate to the deck, leaving her to dig in the vegetation by the wall, Starkey thought, for a key she must have hidden there. Starkey decided not to get

involved. It was their fight. He had had his fill of fighting. He moved his drink into the kitchen and started chopping a salad. He would watch the sun go down from inside the living area, then turn on a tennis tournament.

Even when he wasn't beating up on Margo, Lundquist could be an eyesore. He sat on Margo's deck before each sunset like a whale with a porkpie hat on its head. Starkey couldn't understand why Margo put up with the slob. Her late husband had left her the villa and three convenience stores. Starkey surmised she had other money tucked away. Word was she had a heart condition. She didn't look unhealthy. Maybe that's why she kept Lundquist around. Starkey could see no other reason. She could do much better.

The problem of Slaven's dogs erupted when Lundquist's mother visited him one afternoon at The Five Villas. Lundquist called her, "Sugar," but there was no sweetness in the woman. In Starkey's opinion, she was as obnoxious as her son. She passed him one day on the beach and told him out of nowhere he needed to wear a hat to protect his scalp.

"Madam," Starkey said. "I have survived a war and several years running up and down Wall Street. If I need your advice, I will ask you for it."

The first part of what he told her was true. The second, a lie.

"Well, I'll be damned. You're an absolute rube," she said and flipped him the bird.

Starkey was sitting in his garden the next day admiring his tree when the hubbub on the beach began. There were screams, dogs barking and wailing, followed by angry male voices, sirens and an ambulance shuttling down the access road. He tried to ignore the commotion. It was not going to be a peaceful morning.

Just sit here, Starkey thought, and ignore it. He went inside and turned on his television to watch the tennis tournament. Despite his villa's thick cement block walls, he could still hear the ruckus. He poured himself more coffee and walked across the deck to his perch atop the stairway to the beach. Maybe Margo had had her inevitable heart attack. Or Sugar had fallen. He watched as the paramedics carried a woman's body up the sand and loaded it into the back of the ambulance. It was not Margo. Through his wrought iron gate he could see it was Sugar, struggling in pain on a gurney. He set his

coffee on the railing and stepped down to the beach. The crowd of onlookers was already beginning to disperse. Lundquist was picking up a pair of sunglasses from the sand.

“What’s up, Lundquist?” Starkey asked

“Slaven’s goddamn dogs. We’ll get the sonofabitch. His dogs jumped her. She was picking shells off the sand in front of your villa. That’s all she was doing. Putting them into a paper cup.”

“Too bad,” Starkey said.

Good deal, he thought.

“We’ll get that guy. One way or the other. Gotta go. Gotta get to the hospital before they try to kill her too.”

He ran to his jeep, backed it around and splattered gravel as he gunned up the road.

Starkey returned to his deck and had to laugh at himself. Had his life become so mundane that he had become a nosy neighbor looking for a break in the humdrum? He didn’t know where to go next. If he went back to New York, he’d be stuck with the idea of Rita and who she was with now. London had become a bore. There was Nicole in Munich. He could go back to the monastery in Switzerland for another retreat. No appeal there. He heated his coffee in the microwave and sat again in his garden. He felt restless. Maybe he had a need to stir the pot. He could start a new building project in the mountains. Or, Jackson Hole. No, looking into the tree this was his spot de jour. A better investment than stocks and bonds.

The day was not over. A second round began. He heard gun shots on the beach. Crackling sounds. Small arms fire.

What the shit, now? Starkey asked himself, hurrying inside to grab his Forty-Five. He paused a minute to watch a serve in the tennis match, changed his mind, dropped to the floor in automatic. He crawled outside across his deck and looked through the railings. Oh God, he laughed to himself. Such melodrama. Laughable, this world. The cowboys had arrived. Local police, five of them in crisp uniforms, twirling their pieces like characters in a silent movie, shooting Slaven’s dogs as the dogs, all mongrels, snarled, then rushed them, no doubt the most excitement the police had had in years. Dog carcasses everywhere, whining and twitching in the sand, being tumbled in the froth

of the waves as the foam sloshed ashore. Blood. He cringed at the sight. Bad memories. Flashbacks.

He went back inside, poured a large Scotch and watched more tennis. The player he wanted to win, lost. Nothing but aggravation. He showered and drove to the Imperial Hotel. Again, nothing doing. Hans was not there. The bar was empty except for a few tourist couples. No horny wives. No excitement. He drove back to his villa in the dark. His security lights blinked on when he opened the gate with the remote. At least something in this world worked.

As he lay awake on his bed trying to read a comic book novel — that's what he called paperbacks about espionage — he could hear the voodoo drums and the wailing. Slaven's parrot, Bamboo, was going berserk. Starkey could hear Slaven arguing. He heard a single pistol shot. The bird's squawking stopped. So did Slaven's tirade.

Starkey couldn't sleep but when he did he had his usual nightmares. Getting lost in airports. Losing his luggage. Being drafted again. Riding in the back of a five-ton truck.

He woke at mid-morning. Late for him. His first thought was to file a complaint against Lundquist and the police. Disturbing his peace. Never mind. Lundquist had been on the island several years. No doubt he had the police in his billfold. A lot of money spent on bribes. That's why they put on the show for him and for Sugar.

He brewed his coffee and added some cognac to it. More cognac than coffee. He stood on the platform of the stairway off his deck. The ocean's froth rolled peacefully onto the sand, rolled back out, the rhythm calming to him. He stared out at the horizon, how it curved. Obviously, the world was round. When he looked up, Slaven stood on the top step next to the gate to his deck. Starkey reached for his Forty-Five. It was inside by the toaster in the kitchen. Except at the blackjack table, they had never spoken. Now, here he was, his eyes moist, his pupils wide like an animal that had just been shot. A real body not distorted by the light of the casino or a silhouette behind a sea wall.

Slaven spoke in a low voice.

"My dogs," he said.

Starkey sighed, "I know."

"They shot them."

“I heard. I saw them on the sand. What did you do with them.”

“I lined them up in the garden. Soon they will begin to smell. I will bury them side by side.”

“Did you shoot Bamboo?”

“I did. I’ve wanted to shoot him several times. But he was helpful to me. No more. Sorry for all the racket. He was a noisy little bastard. I understand why. His woman passed away. Just like that. One night she died. I found her in the morning. Bamboo pecked at her. She was upside down. Her legs in the air. I’ve had them for twelve years. They can grow very old, you know. Birds like that.”

“Why now? Why did you shoot him? Why did you shoot him now?”

“He pissed me off. He wouldn’t shut up. I got drunk after they shot my dogs. I told him to shut up. He came to know my commands. Don’t let animals fool you. They know about you. You give them food and drink. They don’t love you. It’s about the food and a place to sleep. The dogs didn’t love me. They loved my food. They licked my hands and curled up at my feet.”

He bowed his head.

“I lost my wife in the war,” he said. “They raped her. Those bastards. My daughter went crazy over it. They have her locked up in an asylum.”

“I’m sorry, Slaven. I truly am,” Starkey said, wondering if he was just dishing out bullshit or if he meant what he said. “I was thinking about making a complaint. Those idiots were firing at random. Bad shots. If it had been only one dog, they would have missed. They could have shot me. They could have shot you. ”

Slaven shrugged.

“They shot my dogs. The police are the animals.”

“Slaven, why don't you come in for a drink. Or I can brew some strong coffee. I can add some cognac.”

“No thank you.” He turned away towards the ocean. “I saw you come out on the beach. I saw the look on your face.”

Starkey was wordless. Slaven looked defeated. The war was not going well.

“Well, if you need one, just knock on my gate.”

“Thank you. What name do you go by now?”

“Starkey will do.”

“Okay then. I will go now and bury my dogs.”

“I have collected a lot of conch shells. You could use them as tomb stones.”

“No thank you. I shall let them melt into the soil.”

“You can come here to talk anytime.”

Slaven moved abruptly as if to walk down the steps. He stopped, turned back just as quick.

“I know about you, Starkey.”

“What do you know?”

“It’s hearsay, but I believe it.”

“How did you find out?”

“I have my ways.”

Starkey knew from the expression on Slaven's face he had been found out.

“Okay. I will check you out too now that you have checked out me.”

“Be careful.”

“Will you try to shoot me?” Sharkey asked.

“Not unless I have to.”

Starkey smiled.

“Slaven, anytime for a drink.”

“Thank you. Truly.”

Slaven stepped cautiously down the stairway and muddled through the sand towards his villa. His few remaining dogs barked at his return.

Starkey poured himself a full glass of cognac. He sat on the brown dirt under the flamboyant tree. The tree was no longer beautiful, he noticed. The blossoms were falling down. He ran his hand over its skin. Just bark. His infatuation had dissipated. Just a tree after all.

“So long, pretty girl,” Starkey said. “I’m off and running. I enjoyed you. But now I must go.”

He heard a truck slip sliding, scattering gravel on the access road. The gate opened by remote. It was Liz with two of her Haitians squatting in the truck bed, their machetes pointing skyward.

Liz jumped down from the truck. She had a solemn look.

“They shot Slaven’s dogs,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Somebody counted twelve. I heard it uphill. It’s all the gossip. They issued Slaven a citation. Public nuisance.”

“How is the old bag?” he asked referring to Sugar.

Liz laughed into her hands.

“In stitches. They should have sewn her mouth shut. Lundquist will sue him. Worse than that. They have another case going. They are demanding the island shut down his project.”

“What project?”

“Where have you been all this while, you ignorant American. Don’t you keep track of anything? He’s behind the small hotel that’s being built on the lot next to the Shipwreck Bar. He’s the money behind it. Lundquist has petitioned the court to stop it.”

“On what grounds?”

“That he’s a gun runner. Everybody knows he is. That’s why he has the dogs. They’re not puppies. And the parrot. For security.”

“They’d have to prove it.”

“That kind of case will take years. The long delay in construction will ruin the project. I don’t know for sure where Slaven got the money. He must have investors. That’s what I hear. Besides, if I were him, I wouldn’t want the government poking their noses into my business.”

“I heard about the guns. But there is so much bullshit on this island. I didn't believe it. I don’t believe a damn thing unless I can see it and feel it for myself. Nobody knows if its gossip or not.”

“That’s because you are demented.”

“Well, you butcher my tree. That’s why you came. You just want my check. To pay for your boys.”

“The last one bounced you know.”

“It did not. I saw it on my statement.”

Liz hid her laugh in her hands.

“No sense of humor. I can’t fool you.”

“Cut it out. Go ahead. Chop up my tree. It’s a goner anyway.”

“No, it is not, you stupid man. I repeat. I am saving your tree. It will outlive you.”

“I don’t like to hear about that.”

Liz walked around her pickup, grinning. She unhooked the gate and lifted a small pot with a tiny plant.

“I have brought you another tree.”

Starkey chuckled to himself.

“Liz, come on. That’s no more than a twig. It just might as well be a weed.”

“Starkey, you are a sick man. I will pray for you. No, this is another flamboyant tree. I am going to plant it right over there in the corner. Next to the back wall. Over time, it will spring up and blossom. You see, I found it just off the main road. It was just sitting there by itself, alone. It said to me, ‘Liz, save me! Save me!’ And so I have. And there you are. Another tree to keep you company.”

She motioned to the Haitians. They climbed out of the pickup with their machetes. One lifted a chain saw with his other hand.

Starkey watched Liz walk to the back wall with the pot sprouting the tiny flamboyant tree, kneel and begin digging a hole with her hands. He could hear her talking to it and once planted she patted the brown dirt around it. When done, she knelt back on her buttocks and beheld her good work.

“Okay, then, Starkey. There you have it. A brand new flamboyant tree. Your very own. A start up. I am charging you nothing for it. Just for the labor.”

“Whose labor? Yours or theirs?” he asked, pointing to the Haitians.

“Both. As you may well imagine.”

“Takes no imagination.”

Surprisingly, he choked a second, swallowed and said:

“Liz, listen up. This is a secret. I called Xavier. I am putting the villa on the market.”

Liz stepped back a foot.

“No, Starkey, no. Don’t do that. What’s the matter with you? You dumb American idiot. It is complete. Everything works. You have the best view. Where else

are you going to find a spot like this? You cannot leave. Travel a while. Think it over. You are being ignorant and brash.”

“I have made up my mind.”

“Have you confided in Hans?”

“Absolutely not.”

“At least you have that much sense.”

Starkey lit a cigarette and sipped his cognac.

Liz began directing the Haitians in French.

“I’m going for a walk,” Starkey said. “I don’t want to hear you sawing away on my tree.”

Liz cold shouldered him. It was over between them.

He changed into a nicer pair of shorts and a top, stepped into his sandals. He took his Forty-Five out from under the mattress and stuck it into a small leather bag he slung over his left shoulder. Easier to grab. He felt better when he was armed.

Starkey slid off his sandals and carried them once he was barefoot on the sand. The late afternoon was bright, blue and cool for that time of year, low in humidity. He stood with his hands on hips watching the dancing diamonds on the water, thinking about what he would do next and where he would go.

He thought about Rita and the man she was with. Okay, admit it, he told himself. I miss Rita. He felt the sudden arrival of tears and wiped his eyes.

He thought about his love affair with the flamboyant tree. Its bright red blossoms. His talk with it.

He thought about his villa. He intended to live there to the end. Liz was right. Everything about it was perfect, the tile, the lively Haitian paintings, the wooden green monkey with the smirk on its lips lifting its tail at the front entrance.

He was forced to think about the telephone call from three nights before Slaven's dogs had been shot, the call he had been dreading. He knew the voice though he had never actually seen the face.

"I've told you I am done," Starkey told the caller.

"You still owe us one. You've been paid."

"It's not about the money. I'll send you a wire transfer."

"Too late. You've been chosen. You know the drill. It's either them or you."

"Last job?"

"Guaranteed. You'll never hear from us again."

"I'll hold you to it."

"The information is on its way. Check your mail box."

A click.

After his walk Starkey spent the rest of the afternoon at the bar at The Imperial Hotel drinking Bloody Marys. They went down smooth and quieted his arms and legs. The bartender there made a good Bloody Mary. Made it from scratch. "Thanks god," as they liked to say on the island, Hans was not there jabbering in his ear. Too early for the regulars. He talked to no one. Stared at the tourists.

He staggered along the beach on his way back to the villa. He made speeches to the ocean, speeches about the condition of the world, its liars and phonies. He had too much to drink. He knew he did. Not like him. He was very careful about it. Had to be. Had to be alert.

He told the ocean he was going to have to kill Slaven. He had found him out and he had to go. He would shoot the rest of the dogs first. Then make it look like a suicide, using Slaven's own pistol.

Back at his villa he sat on the bench by the flamboyant tree and stared at nothing. Still an assassin.