

Drumstick Murder

DRUMSTICK MURDER

By Michael Haskins

Dallas Lucas hadn't eaten brunch with us earlier, unless you counted the stick of celery in his bloody Mary. Of the people gathered for the breakfast reception for the Key West Songwriters Festival, half those that knew Dallas wish they didn't. The other half hated him. The handful of songwriters at the reception that didn't know Dallas didn't know him on purpose. But that never kept him away from gatherings where drinks were free and there was sure be an up-and-coming songwriter or two eager to meet the legend, especially the pretty ones.

"I'll be upstairs around ten," Dallas said to me, as he wandered into the Saloon and went to the bar. "We'll do the interview there. I'll give you a half-hour."

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Upstairs was the Saloon's showroom where some of the festival's events were to take place. It would be quiet at ten in the morning, since the welcoming party usually continued as an afternoon jam session of alcohol-powered songwriters around the outdoor bandstand.

I excused myself from the bar at ten, grabbed my camera bag, and headed upstairs unaware of what waited for me. The loud mixture of music and chatter followed and I stopped on the top landing to look down at the weathered, outdoor bar, the Saloon's worn-concrete floor, and the celebrating crowd. Clint Bullard and Bob Pierce were laughing and jamming on the small stage, powered by bloody Marys, screwdrivers, and mimosas. Roosters strutted and crowed atop the bar's tin roof, having climbed one of the large trees covering the patio to escape the crowds.

As I walked in, Kris Kristofferson's gruff voice thundered like hurricane winds from the multiple speakers in the Key West Saloon's upstairs showroom, his recorded words vibrating off the walls as he sang about love and loss, pilgrims, Sunday mornings, and traveling with Bobby McGee.

Window light dimly illuminated the room. The A/C was on high, and it was chilly. I saw Dallas sitting by the drum set on the shadowy stage about the same time I noticed the CD unit's remote control on the bar. I put my camera bag down and lowered the volume.

"Dallas, I need to hear myself think." I attached the flash to the camera bracket as the music softened. "I appreciate your time. I know you've got a lot of things to do before tonight's show."

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Dallas ignored me. I wondered if my turning down the music upset him. He's a short-tempered man I know because he's part of the featured events at the annual Songwriters' Festival and each year I grow to dislike him more. But this interview was a paying gig so I smiled and disregarded his mood.

If he wanted to massage his hangover in the cold dimness it was okay, but I needed light to take notes. I stopped at the theatrical lighting panel by the woman's room and switched on the soft light above the sound mixer. As soon as I stepped to the front of the stage, I knew why Dallas wasn't talking and it had nothing to do with being upset with me.

Dallas sat on the drummer's stool, his back against the wall, with a wooden drumstick stabbed into his throat. Blood stained his western shirt and jeans, and dripped onto the stage, while his alcoholic eyes stared into the netherworld, leaving a puzzled expression frozen on his face.

The Nashville songwriters downstairs were dressed in shorts, T-shirts and flip-flops to celebrate the tropics, but Dallas died wearing faded jeans, a western shirt, and boots. All that was lacking were his hat, chewing tobacco stains on his chin, and he would've been a cliché.

"What the hell have you gone and done now, Dallas?" I stepped around a puddle of blood at the base of the stool and checked for a pulse that I knew wasn't going to be there. It took someone with strength to drive a drummer's stick into his throat.

This was not the opening-night publicity Charlie Murdock, the event coordinator, wanted for his festival.

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I'm Liam Michael Murphy. Years ago, I picked up the moniker Mad Mick Murphy because of stunts I pulled in college and my Boston-Irish heritage, and it stuck. I'm a journalist living in Key West and a weekly newsmagazine hired me to do a feature on Dallas Lucas, a Nashville legend, and a recent winner of his fifth songwriter-of-the-year award.

It was supposed to be an interview about his life, now it would be about his murder.

I expected all hell to break loose before breakfast was digested, when word got out. Most of the people downstairs wouldn't shed a tear for Dallas, so maybe that made them suspects.

Habit had me shoot a few frames of the body, before I called my friend Key West Police Chief Richard Dowley. Another few minutes wasn't going to matter to anyone, especially Dallas.

"Jesus, Mick," Chief moaned after I told him where I was and what I was looking at. "Can't you go anywhere without bringing trouble?"

"I'm supposed to interview the guy, Chief, not kill him. You want, I'll walk away and let someone else find him."

"Lock the door." I heard him sigh. "Wait there for Sherlock."

"What about the cops? Should I let them in?" I was being sarcastic.

He disconnected our conversation without a reply. Chief's call to Sherlock would put the EMTs and cops into the loop quicker than a 911 call.

Sherlock Corcoran is the city's crime scene investigator and the nickname came with the job. To show his sense of humor, he had a caricature of Sherlock Holmes'

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profile painted on the crime scene van. He was not a big fan of journalists and seeing me at a crime scene never made him smile.

Rows of chairs lined up facing the stage and the well-stocked bar was prepared for the sold-out show that was supposed to feature Dallas this evening. I moved to the back of the room and sat in the corner for the window light. I didn't bother to lock the door because I expected a cop and ambulance to show up quickly.

I took the flash and lens off my camera and put them away. There was no reason for Chief to know I'd taken the photos. Sherlock would shoot more than enough.

"Yeah," I said to Dallas, "you didn't commit suicide."

I scanned the room, wrote what I had witnessed in my notebook, and when I looked down to check my observations, I saw a small pile of wood shavings on the carpet.

I picked up a few of the slivers – light colored wood, thin, uneven like someone had whittled a piece of wood. I jumped up, letting the shavings fall. I was sitting where the killer had sat and whittled the drumstick to a sharp point. I knew it.

I had used the remote and light panel, all things the killer must have used. Damn it, Sherlock would find my fingerprints on things the killer had touched.

I thought of wiping everything down, but knew it would also remove the killer's prints. My only defense was to tell Sherlock upfront what I touched and hope someone else's prints were there too.

I put the camera bag back on the bar and went outside to the steps. The morning held promise for the living, with its ocean-blue sky and jasmine-scented breeze, up away from Duval Street. I heard the siren over the partying downstairs and watched the police

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car turn into the parking lot. Officer Gene Bruehl got out, his long silver hair pulled into a ponytail, and by then a fringe group of songwriters was paying attention to the flashing lights.

Gene stopped at the door and talked to the Saloon's door security men. They pointed toward the back of the Saloon, where the stairs were, and the cop pushed his way through the crowd. Half way up, he looked at me and shook his head.

"This the songwriters crowd?" Gene looked down at the group jamming on the stage, their drinks balanced on the railing.

"Yeah. Most of 'em."

"You want to do the honors?" He opened the door and motioned me through.

I led him down the short hallway to the main room.

"No lights?" He stopped at the edge of the bar.

"This is how I found the room."

"Where's the body?"

He followed me and noticed the dim light over the sound mixer.

"I turned that light on, I needed to see to write," I said and stepped onto the stage.

Before he could join me, the door opened and we heard people outside. Two paramedics came in. Gene glanced at Dallas' body and then went down the hall to meet them. He pointed them toward me, and forced a few curious songwriters outside.

While the first responders checked to make sure Dallas was dead, Kristofferson sang about a dying singer being unappreciated and no one caring until she was gone. I doubted anyone downstairs would write a song like that for Dallas.

Sherlock walked in and stopped in the hallway. "Why are we in the dark?"

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“I left the room as I found it,” I said, “But I touched the CD remote and stage lighting panel.”

He gave me his suspicious, squinted-eyed look, dropped his crime scene bag in the first row of chairs by the stage, and walked to the body without saying anything.

“He hasn’t been dead long.” Sherlock walked off the stage. “Who is he?”

“Dallas Lucas, one of the headliners of the songwriters’ event.” I sat down next to his crime scene bag.

“Not a nobody?” Sherlock moaned, shook his head, and took a camera out of his bag.

The paramedics had their gurney ready.

“Thought he was king of Nashville,” I said.

“I had tickets for his show tomorrow,” said one of the paramedics.

Detectives Donny Barroso and Alfredo Vargas came into the room.

“We gonna turn the lights on?” Donny yelled.

“Turn the lights on, Mick.” Sherlock shot photos of the stage and then moved in for close ups of Dallas. He walked back to his bag.

I went to the cooler unit behind the bar and used my elbow to throw the light switch. One less of my fingerprints for Sherlock to question me about later.

“You watch too much TV.” Donny laughed.

Sherlock jumped back onto the lip of the stage as the lights came on. “Jesus,” he said and all eyes turned toward him. “Don’t anyone move,” he shouted and looked around the floor.

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Blood stained the carpet, leaving a trail from the bar to the stage. Sherlock followed the stains and bloody footprints to the bar, checking to see if there was blood spatter in the seating.

“Donny, anything in the hallway?”

Donny walked carefully toward the tiled hallway. He checked the floor and the walls. “Nothing here,” he called back.

Sherlock stooped down and touched one of the stains. “Blood,” he said. “Fresh blood.” He stood and checked his wristwatch. “What time did you find him?”

“A couple of minutes after ten,” I said.

Sherlock looked concerned and nodded toward the two detectives. “Why don’t you sit in back and tell your story to Donny and Alfredo.” He turned his back to me, searched through his crime scene bag, and then talked with the detectives.

I walked to the last row of chairs, making sure I didn’t step in the blood and waited for the questioning to begin.

Now that the lights were on, I had a clear view of the room. I took a quick look across to where the whittled shavings were and knew it was too late to mention them. The cops were thorough, so they’d find them and piece together the same story I had, the killer waited in back whittling the drumstick.

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I knew most of the bloody footprints were from my boat shoes, but others must have stepped in the blood too. Walking around the dark bar, when I first came in, there was no way I could have avoided it.

Donny sat next to me, while Alfredo straddled the folding chair in the next row, leaning against its back facing me.

“Start from the beginning,” Donny said and pointed a small micro tape recorder at me. “And, Mick, remember Louis will hear this, so keep to the story and forget we’ve known each other for a while or that you and the Chief are friends. We’ve got to do our job.”

“You don’t object to us taping this, do you?” Alfredo smiled, but his eyes stared hard at me.

“I’ve seen your penmanship, guys, hard to decipher it.” I tried to put levity in my words to show them how calm I was. “I understand Donny. Let’s get it over with.”

Lying is an art. Criminals, journalists and cops practice lying, so they’re good at it and good at spotting it in others. I look for the telltale signs, eyes avoiding contact, hands nervously moving, and other uncomfortable body language when interviewing people for a story, signs these detectives would be looking for in me.

I kept eye contact with them.

Donny said the date, time, location, and subject matter into the recorder. I told them almost everything, leaving out the whittling, from the time I walked past the Saloon’s security, showing my invitation – even though R.D., the bouncer, knew me – to calling the Chief after finding Dallas. They let me speak without interruption.

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“You have a reason to kill him, that why you didn’t call 911?” Donny spoke quietly, putting no importance to the words.

I looked right at him. “There was no pulse, I checked it twice.”

“You a medic now?” Alfredo quipped.

“You didn’t see anyone else up here?” Donny didn’t wait for me to answer Alfredo.

“Only Dallas.” I said.

“Another way in or out but the front door?”

“No. The windows don’t open.”

“Sherlock said the vic had been dead a few minutes before you found him.”

Alfredo’s stare hadn’t softened. He waited for me to flinch. “Do you know how he died?”

I looked from Alfredo to Donny and wondered if they knew something I didn’t.

“A drummer’s stick through the neck.” I shrugged. “That’s what it looked like to me.”

“Sherlock said the vic bled out. Someone could’ve saved him with a call to 911,” Alfredo said. “So the killer sat here and watched him bleed to death, maybe drown in his own blood. If you didn’t kill him, where did the killer go?”

“Sherlock’s not the M.E., so he’s guessing. When Dallas left the bar, I was still sitting there. Check with the bartender.”

“The killer was up here and met him? Is that your take on how this happened?”

“I don’t know, but when I saw him at the bar, he was alone.”

“What time was that?” Donny kept the tape recorder pointed at me.

“I didn’t check the time.”

“Take a guess.”

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“Somewhere after breakfast at eight and before the ten o’clock jam sessions.” It wasn’t the precise answer they wanted.

“I know who Dallas is, I watched him on the award show,” Alfredo said. “This is going to be big news, right?”

“Sure, in Nashville and Austin.”

“You going to get paid more for the murder story than the interview?” Donny pushed the recorder closer, while his tone turned accusing.

“You going somewhere with this?” I didn’t believe he thought I’d killed Dallas.

“Answer the question.” He held the recorder inches from my face and lost his smile.

“I was contracted for a story on Dallas. I don’t expect they’ll pay more because he was murdered.” I didn’t look away and neither did he. “I didn’t know the man well enough to want dead.”

“But now there’ll be follow-up stories, right?” Alfredo said.

“Why are we listening to my wife’s music?” Chief’s voice bellowed from the hallway before we could see him.

I didn’t answer Alfredo.

Sherlock walked to the bar to shut the music off. He spoke to Chief, nodding a couple of times toward the stage and once at me. Richard followed Sherlock and observed the body, never touching anything.

Off the stage, Sherlock pointed to the bloodstains and footprints on the carpet and at me. Chief put his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder, pulled him closer, said a few words, and then motioned me to join them.

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“We done?” I asked.

“For the moment.” Donny put the recorder away.

“I told Sherlock you didn’t do this.” Chief said, as I walked up. “I’m correct, right?”

It’s a good thing having the chief of police as a friend when you live on a two-by-four-mile island.

“This is how I found him, Chief.” I kept eye contact with Sherlock.

“Chief, right now the evidence points to Murphy. The vic was killed around ten, when Murphy says he arrived, and he didn’t see anyone else in the room or on the stairs. The bloody footprints are his.” Sherlock pointed to the footprints. “He’s admitted to touching the remote control, the light switch, and other things. Someone sat here and watched the vic drown in his own blood.”

“Guilty of most of those things, but not the murder.” I didn’t turn away from Sherlock and he didn’t flinch, either. “I found the room dark and cold and the CD playing loud as hell, so I turned down the A/C and the music, and put the stage’s sound mixer light on because I needed to take notes. I walked through the blood, because I didn’t see it in the dark. And they’re not all my footprints.” I looked down at Sherlock’s tennis shoes.

“Bag the shoes,” Chief said. “Check everyone’s shoes.”

“I gotta go barefoot?” I protested, as I slipped off my boat shoes.

“Buy a pair of sandals, downstairs.” Chief turned toward Sherlock, who nodded.

“Now, tell me what we’ve got here and who the vic is.” He spoke to me, not Sherlock, which didn’t endear me to the crime scene cop.

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“A dead songwriter, but I’m not the person to tell you about him.” I looked at the bloodstained carpet. “You need to talk to Charlie Murdock and Rob Bauer.”

“Murdock I know, who’s Bauer?”

“Rob’s the BMI rep. Big sponsors of the festival.”

“BMI?” Chief waited for me to explain.

“Broadcast Music International collects royalties for songwriters and singers,” I said. “Polices the industry and pays the royalties out. The Nashville office helps the festival with talent.”

“Okay. Now I know about BMI. What can you tell me about the vic?” He forced me toward the windows, his large arm over my shoulders, and we sat down.

“Rumors.”

“I love rumors.” He adjusted his glasses. “Let’s hear one.”

“Dallas was a womanizer.” I began by recalling things I was sure of. “And I don’t think it mattered if they were single or not.”

“Some of the husbands and boyfriends downstairs?”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “He’s also been accused of stealing songs from new songwriters he’d taken on as a mentor, mostly women.”

“Some of them are downstairs, too?”

“You’re sharp as a tack.”

He ignored my comment. “You think the killer is downstairs too?”

“I’d bet on it.”

“Sherlock likes you for it,” he said. “Why do you think it’s someone downstairs?”

“No one could’ve got in without an invite,” I said. “I was at the bar until ten, and

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Dallas left, I'd say, a little before nine-thirty, but I don't know if he came up here or went to the head. But the likelihood that an outsider got up here that late in the morning," I shook my head, "is impossible. Your detectives think the murderer watched Dallas bleed to death. That's cold and that's somebody with a grudge."

"You were here and had an invite," he said. "No grudge between you two that I should know about?"

I looked at Chief. "You don't think I had anything to do with it."

"You're saying the vic could've been up here with the killer for half an hour before you showed up?" He was asking the questions, not answering.

"Easily." I wondered how long it took to whittle a point on a drumstick. "Can I tell you something that you're not going to like?"

"I don't like anything about this." His sigh was so loud I couldn't imagine no one else heard it. "Yeah, but if you're going to admit to the killing . . ."

"No, not that." I needed him to believe me. I told him about the whittled shavings.

"So, someone sat up here, waiting to kill him."

"That's what it looks like, a sharpened drumstick like he was a vampire. I thought it had to be a strong guy to drive the drumstick in. Now I'm not so sure."

"Maybe someone downstairs thought he was a blood sucker?"

"Has to be to be something like that."

"Let's go downstairs and find Murdock and the BMI guy."

As we walked toward the hallway, Chief stopped and told Sherlock about the shavings and then a commotion at the door caught everyone's attention.

"Gene," Chief yelled.

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“Woman says she’s supposed to meet Murphy up here at eleven,” Gene yelled back, keeping the impatient woman at the door.

“No idea,” I said without being asked and watched Sherlock smile.

We walked to the door and I knew the attractive woman with short, blonde hair and blue eyes. She was a new songwriter. I had to think hard and fast to remember her name.

“Melissa,” I said, not speaking to her, but telling Chief her name.

“Dallas wanted me to come in at the end of his interview, Mick,” Melissa said.

“Do you have a last name, Melissa?” Chief asked quietly.

“Ratcliff.” She growled the name. “What are you cops doing with Dallas? Damn, you ain’t bustin’ him for a joint, are you? I mean, not even Nashville cops would do that. I thought Key West was supposed to be acceptable to different lifestyles.”

By the time she huffed out the last words, Sherlock, Donny, and Alfredo were behind us. When I turned, Donny had his tape recorder directed at her.

“We’re not arresting Dallas for anything,” Chief said. “Tell me why you’re here.”

“Dallas is going to feature me tonight in his show,” she said and grinned, which did little to hide her bloody-Mary eyes. “He wanted me here at eleven, so Mick could end the interview by talking to me. Just ask him, he’ll tell you. Dallas,” she yelled his name, expecting a reply. “Where is he?” She looked past us toward the stage, while Gene held her arm, to keep her in the hallway.

“Dallas can’t talk to you right now.” Chief put his large hand on her thin shoulder, taking over from Gene, and walked her toward the door. “We really need you to wait downstairs and you can have your interview with Mick in a little while.”

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Gene closed the door as Melissa looked like a lost kitten in the rain, unaware of how she had ended up outside.

“Who is she?” Chief turned to me, while the detectives waited quietly for my answer.

“I met her last year,” I said. “Melissa Ratcliff, she’s written a song or two that have become hits. But the interesting thing is Dallas said I had a half-hour for the interview, so I would have been gone before eleven.”

“Why’d he tell her eleven?”

“Did you look at her, Chief?” Donny whistled as we watched Melissa light a cigarette and pace on the outside deck. “She’s not hard on the eyes.”

“I told you, Chief, Dallas liked his women,” I said.

“She married?”

“Don’t know.”

“Maybe a boyfriend?”

“No doubt about that,” I said, because she was a good-looking woman. “I saw her earlier with a couple of guys at the indoor bar.”

“Could she have killed him?”

“I’d put her on my suspect list with Murphy,” Sherlock said, before anyone else could answer.

Richard pushed his glasses in place. “Well, we have a lot more suspects downstairs, so let’s go talk to them.”

“You want me to wait up here for the medical examiner?” Sherlock’s tone said he didn’t.

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“Give it an hour. The M.E. should be here by then,” Chief said. “Join the team boys.” He nodded to Donny and Alfredo. “Go see Detective Morales and help him with the interviewing. Gene, no one comes in.”

Melissa watched us walk down the stairs, dropping her cigarette and crushing it on the deck, without saying anything. She stared at Gene, as if she considered trying to get in the room, again, but followed us instead.

Uniformed police officers stood at the Saloon’s three exits, but it didn’t seem anyone paid attention to them. The buffet was gone, but both bars were full and Tim and Danny Carter were on the stage with Emily Roach and Texas Rich, for another brief jam session.

Charlie Murdock and Rob Bauer were waiting at the bottom of the stairs, a police officer kept them from coming up. I introduced Rob to Richard as Donny and Alfredo met with lead detective Luis Morales.

“I need to get sandals,” I told Charlie.

He looked at my bare feet and pointed to the empty T-shirt shop. “Just take a pair off the shelf. You can pay me later,” he said, “and explain why you’re barefoot.” As I walked away, I heard him ask Richard what was going on upstairs. When I got back, they were huddled on the first landing, away from the crowd that was beginning to realize something was wrong.

“Looks like we’ve got a room full of suspects,” Richard said as I came to the landing. “Is there anyone here that *didn’t* want to kill him?”

Rob Bauer scanned the bar and bandstand area. “There’s only one person who ever walked out on Dallas and is successful. No reason for her to kill him.”

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“And why’s that?” Richard followed Rob’s stare.

“Because she’s the woman who left Dallas, the others were dumped by him, and you know what they say, ‘a woman scorned . . .’”

“Who is she?” Richard interrupted. “The one without the reason to kill him.”

“Barbara Linder, over there between the bar and bandstand.” Rob pointed.

“There’s a dozen women over there,” Richard said. “Let me guess, the petite blonde?”

“You know her?” Rob was surprised.

“No, but she’s a double for Melissa.”

“Miscalculation, Richard,” I said. “Dallas liked blondes, but he’d mess with brunettes or redheads.”

“Someone hold a rattlesnake, he’d probably do it.” Rob laughed before realizing his humor was out of place.

I handed Richard an event program I found in the T-shirt shop. “This has photos of everyone participating in the festival. It might help in the interviewing, if your officers had copies.”

“And where they’re playing is listed too,” Charlie said. “If you need a follow up interview, it could be helpful and maybe get some of them out of here before show time.”

Richard glanced through the program. “There a place you two can walk me through all this? Maybe give me your opinions?” He slapped the folded program against his open palm. “I need some quiet and privacy.”

“My office.” Charlie pointed toward the T-shirt shop.

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“We all want to get this over with.” Richard looked at the crowded room. “We’ve got suspects because the vic stole their songs or slept with their women,” he said, shook his head and straightened his glasses. “This could take forever.”

Charlie looked at his wristwatch. “Shows begin late this afternoon.”

“Maybe.” Richard walked down from the landing. “You wait out here.” He pointed at me. “Sherlock thinks you’re a suspect, you can’t leave,” he said and followed Charlie toward the Saloon’s office.

I took a seat at the bar, as far from the commotion on the stage as possible. “A bloody Mary, Brian.” I opened a program that lay on the bar and started looking through it.

“This seat taken, cowboy?” Barbara Linder drawled the words softly, like Bacall whispering to Bogie, and sat down next to me. She was wearing an oversized Songwriter Festival sweatshirt, sleeves rolled up past her elbows, and shorts that made a fashion statement.

She sipped from her glass. I’d watched Brian earlier, as he made her drink, so I knew there was a double shot of vodka in her orange juice. Her green eyes sparkled, even with morning drinking.

“Hell of a morning,” I said, while I reread her profile in the program.

“Everyone thinks it’s drugs.” She smiled. “Dallas get busted for drugs?”

“You asking or you know?”

Brian brought my drink. It was a little heavy on the hot sauce and vodka. I liked it.

“Tellin’ you what the gossip is.” Her voice was naturally sultry.

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“You’re playing at the hotel by the beach again.” I read from the program, as I bit into the drink’s piece of celery. “A good gig with great surroundings.”

“You took photos of me last year, remember?” She turned to face me.

“We had lunch before the show.”

“I remember.”

“That’s good.”

“No, I remember because you didn’t make a pass at me.” She smiled and touched my hand. “Most men do, even without my encouragement.” She was one of those women whose sex appeal came effortlessly and she’d given up trying to hide it.

It was my turn to smile, a little embarrassed because smart, beautiful women scare me.

“I was there to photograph you,” I said. “I think you’re talented and I was trying to capture that on film.”

“You still use film?” She giggled.

“No, it’s all digital, but capturing you on memory card doesn’t sound right.”

She smiled and sipped her drink. “Thank you for the respect, it was refreshing.” She let go of my hand and twirled strands of her blonde hair between two fingers.

Brett Jones and Ernie Deck shared the stage with Nadia and Amanda, two local entertainers backing them up as Brett talked about the song he was about to sing.

Barbara feigned interest in what he was saying. She lit a cigarette and continued to play with her hair.

“I bet you could get us out of here and we could have lunch on your boat,” she said with an impish smile that made promises I didn’t want to think about.

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“I don’t think so.” I smiled back and looked at the closest exit. “The police consider me a suspect, so I can’t leave.”

“I don’t have a show until tomorrow afternoon.” Her green eyes suggested things I could only imagine, as she twirled a strand of hair like an impatient teenager.

“Suspect?” Barbara turned around in her seat and looked upstairs.

I smiled my reply and read more of the event program. Before I finished I’d read enough to know who killed Dallas.

“Are you going to sell your bird sculptures at the hotel again?” I closed the program.

“You like them?” She turned back to me and stubbed out the cigarette.

“Impressive work.”

“You know, they’re actually very detailed.” She sipped the last of her drink and moved the empty glass forward so Brian would refill it. She lit another cigarette.

“I read that in the program.”

“It’s relaxing.” She looked toward the stage, exhaling a thin stream of smoke. “Writing is work. I enjoy it, and love it when it’s successful, but sometimes facing that blank page, even with an idea in my head, is frightening. But give me a block of wood and I can see the bird hiding inside and I help it come out.”

She fell silent and took the fresh drink from Brian.

The songwriters became aware that the public wasn’t being allowed into the Saloon, even though it was past eleven, and they were not being allowed out. Brett Jones was off the stage and without the music, the hum of conversation seemed loud. All the cops did when questioned was shake their heads. No one in, no one out.

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Barbara took a long swallow of her drink and looked at the anxious crowd. She smiled nervously at me, stubbed out her cigarette, stopped twirling her hair, and massaged her temples, elbows on the bar.

“It was an accident.” The words came out in a soft hum, the seductiveness of her voice effortless. Even so, she looked like a child standing next to a broken lamp, when she turned to me.

“How’d it happen?” I kept my voice low.

“You know my brother has a couple of songs on the charts, right?” She tried a shallow, childish grin and took her drink off the bar. “Dennis Linder.”

“And he’s here.” I tapped the show’s program.

“Yeah. He has shows Thursday and Friday with me.”

“So, what happened upstairs?” My curiosity piqued as to why she was confessing to me.

“Dallas wanted me to move back in with him. He’d been working with Dennis like he does with novice writers. He wanted all of us to work together, make a fortune, he said. And Dennis believed him, because he has his own dreams. Our getting back together was supposed to be your exclusive this morning. But I knew he only wanted me because I’d left him. I didn’t love him then and I don’t even like him now.”

She reached out and touched my hand. Her eyes were cold and the sparkle was gone. Would Barbara have been there when Melissa showed up at eleven? Dallas was Dallas, I thought to myself.

She took a sip of her drink, using her free hand. “I waited upstairs and, as usual, he was late, and then he came with the proposition. He talked about success and money

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and when I said no, he grabbed my shoulders and shook me hard.” Her voice trembled. “He said he’d continue to work with Dennis and ruin us both in the end. I panicked, and he scared me.” Her eyes moved toward the bartender and then back to me. “I knew he’d ruined other careers, and without thinking I struck him with the drumstick.” She was squeezing my hand, hard. “It was an accident.”

“You were by the bar?” I could see the scene in my head and wondered how she handled all the blood.

“Yes. He bled a lot and I pushed him away.” She wiped her eyes with the bar napkin from under her drink. “I guess I hit an artery or something, he leaned against the bar. I grabbed hold of his arm and moved him back to the stage.”

“You didn’t try to take the drumstick out? Or call for help?”

“There was too much blood. I had it all over my blouse and it wouldn’t stop. I wasn’t thinking about anything but the blood and the gurgling sound in his throat.”

“Where’s the blouse?”

“This sweatshirt was behind the bar, so I put it on and wrapped my blouse in an old bag and tossed it in a bin downstairs,” she said. “It was like a dream. No, a nightmare and it happened in a second.”

“They’ll find the blouse.” I was thinking about what the detectives had accused me of.

“Of course, but I wasn’t thinking past the moment.” She took her hand away. “I saw a Kristofferson CD on the bar and put it on loud before I left.”

“Why?” When she said Kristofferson’s name, she tried to hide a smile.

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“Dallas was jealous of him, always has been and I knew he was dying and thought it was poetic justice that he died listening to Kristofferson’s hits.”

“How come I didn’t see you coming down the stairs?”

“It happened as soon as he came upstairs,” she said, crocodile tears rolling down her cheeks. “Around nine-thirty and I was downstairs hiding my blouse before quarter to ten.”

So, Dallas went right upstairs from the bar, letting Barbara wait only a few minutes. I wanted her to say more, wondering if I would hear from her bitter side or a sultry woman.

“What’s going to happen, now, Mick?”

Her amorous voice and frightened schoolgirl look made me want to grab her hand and run away.

“You have to turn yourself in,” I said instead. It was my turn to touch her cold hand. “Tell them the truth. But you have a problem.”

“Don’t I know it,” she said and placed her free hand over mine.

“The whittled drumstick, it looks like you planned to use it as a weapon,” I said. “It looks premeditated and the cops said the murderer watched Dallas bleed to death instead of calling for help. They won’t buy it was an accident.”

“The dead son-of-a-bitch is still screwing with my life!” With teeth clenched, she controlled the anger, but her face couldn’t hide it. “Instead of leaving when he was late, which I should’ve, I waited because Dennis wanted me to talk to Dallas.” She pulled her shaking hands from mine.

“You need an attorney,” I said.

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She had stopped crying, but still looked helpless.

“I know a local one, Nathan Smith. I’ll call him.”

“How do I do it?” She reached out and touched my face. “I guess there’s no lunch this time.”

“Maybe when this is all over.” I got up.

I called Nathan’s cell and gave him a brief explanation of what was going on. His office was three blocks away and he told me sit still and hold on to Barbara. I promised I would. Then I found Detective Morales, and asked him to allow Nathan into the bar.

He looked at me with concern in his black Latin eyes and grinned. “Why? You going to confess?”

“Something like that,” I said and walked back to Barbara.

Nathan showed up within a half hour and after a few minutes of hassle from Luis at the side entrance, he walked in. He’s a tall man with wavy white-blonde hair, a trimmed beard, who likes colorful shirts, linen pants, and Italian loafers.

I introduced him to Barbara and he had me step aside until they finished talking.

“The Chief is here?” Nathan kept his arm around Barbara’s shoulder, like a bear hugging its cub, as he motioned me to join them.

“In the office.”

“Remember to listen to me and do what I say.” He looked at Barbara and she nodded. “Lead the way, Mick.”

Barbara took the final swallow of her drink, stubbed out what had to be her twentieth cigarette and, while holding my hand, walked to the Saloon’s office.

“Why tell me?” I asked as we walked.

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“I thought you’d take me to lunch and we’d be out of here,” she whispered, her face blank of any expression. “When I knew you couldn’t, I wanted to see if you’d believe me.”

“Did I?” We stopped outside the office.

“I think so.” She gave me her schoolgirl smile and kissed my cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered into my ear.

I knocked on the door and opened it, without saying anything more.

“Not now, Mick,” Richard barked.

“Someone wants to turn herself in,” I said and pushed the door open.

Barbara moved forward, Nathan stood behind her, and she smiled her best at the three men in the office.

“I’m Barbara Linder.” Her sultry tone had the men stand. “And this is my attorney, Nathan Smith.” She turned to me, the little-girl-lost look locked on her face.

Yeah, she’ll do well with a Key West jury, no matter what story she told.

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