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I WAS THE ONLY PERSON LIVING at the La Concha Hotel during this most recent spike in the pandemic. I'd been here through hurricanes, floods, and the redecoration of lobbies, common spaces, and restaurants, but never a pandemic. The staff were all quarantined at their homes—or had left the Keys. Had I not lived here for several years, management would have kicked me out, too. It might be one of the oldest hotels in Key West and the tallest building in town, situated right in the middle of Duval Street, but for me, it was home. I owed that to Harry Greenbaum, the largest investor in my former company, *e-Antiquity*. A British gentleman of the highest order; an old family friend; and a billionaire, entrepreneur, mentor, and confidant. Had it not been for Harry, I could never have afforded to live here full time, on the top floor in a suite, no less.

A pang of guilt hit me that I hadn't checked with Harry since early in the pandemic. He'd left me a message that he was holed up in his country estate an hour outside of London and invited me to weather the storm with him, his five-thousand-bottle wine collection and private chef, and a year's supply of the finest foods and delicacies. I'd appreciated the offer, but tempting as it was, I'd declined. Key West was my home now, and whatever happened here, I wanted to stay and deal with it directly. "One Human Family" was the informal motto of those who lived here, which I believed in.

My cell phone rang. The caller ID showed *Ben Reilly*.

What would my dear brother Ben want?

Another pang hit me. I'd checked in with Ben a couple weeks ago and he had sounded happy as a clam. Yes, he was staying at home in what had been our parents' horse farm in Middleburg, Virginia, which he'd inherited along with all their cash and other assets when they died—killed by hit-and-run as they crossed a road in Geneva, Switzerland. I exhaled a long breath, as I did every time I thought of that.

The phone continued to ring.

My father had been on his way to Paris for high-level meetings as an undersecretary of state, but my world had been crashing down around me thanks to Jack Dodson, my former partner and CEO of e-Antiquity. Jack had been cooking our books and siphoning cash away, which caused the company to collapse. When it became clear that e-Antiquity was toast, I took all the research, letters, manifests, maps, and other clues to a number of missing treasures—stole them to keep them away from creditors—and had my parents divert to Geneva. The plan was for them to open a numbered account at Swiss Bank to deposit my plunder. They were killed minutes later.

The phone kept ringing.

Our parents' deaths had created a permanent chasm between my brother and me. For years, Interpol and the Feds had claimed I was involved, but it never made sense, especially since they'd left everything to Ben. At the time they wrote their last will and testament, my net worth was north of fifty million dollars on paper. Had they lived through my personal bankruptcy, divorce from supermodel Heather Drake, and international humiliation, I think they'd have changed their wills, but Ben wouldn't hear it. He said I'd proven myself capable of creating a fortune before, and I no doubt could again.

The phone stopped ringing.

A glance at my five-hundred-square-foot suite and a mental highlight reel of the last ten years since my parents' deaths—more like low-light reel—didn't speak well for Ben's bold prediction. But, truth be told, the hell I'd gone through had caused me to swear off success, social media, watching television—I'd just gotten a cell phone a year ago, and I only used that to coordinate charters (and for backup in case one of the antique planes in Last Resort Charter and Salvage's fleet crapped out and I needed to call Ray Floyd for help).

I glanced at the phone. "I'm sure you're doing fine, Ben."

He was the type to totally ignore all the social distancing responsibilities thrust upon the world. He was young and in good health, and he had millions of dollars for the best care possible.

But here in Key West, Willy Peebles had died. Stubborn to the end, he'd refused to close down the Church of the Redeemer. He'd said it was his mission to support the congregation, and if the Lord was going to take him, then that was His plan.

The year was drawing to a close and there had been over four thousand cases here in the Keys, but the loss of Willy Peebles hit very close to home.

The death of loved ones or close friends isn't something you ever get over—at least I never had. Whether they'd stuck with me as angels or guilty reminders for the life I'd led, their memories were always close. My brother had always joked that I was too sensitive, and when he and I went to Switzerland to collect what our parents had deposited at Swiss Bank, we had a surprise that partially explained our differences. We found a letter from my father explaining that they'd adopted me at birth. It blew my mind, but to Ben's point, it explained a lot. He never showed emotion, and for all I could tell, never grieved over our parents. Whether or not I was adopted, they were my family, and I loved them.

I stood up and went to the counter in my small kitchenette, took a glass, added a couple cubes of ice, and poured three fingers of a special Pilar Rum blend Shawn Martin had given me at Blue Heaven. I held the glass up.

"God bless you, Willy." I took a sip, then raised my glass again. "Mom and Dad."

The room phone now rang. What the heck? I only used that number for business, so I hesitated, but then sat on the bed and picked it up.

"Last Resort Charter and Salvage."

"It's Jesse McDermitt."

McDermitt? The last time I saw him, he had some rare jewels he was researching. "Find any bright shiny things lately?"

“Not really my thing,” Jesse said. “I wondered if I could pick your brain about an airplane?”

“What plane and where?”

“Not any specific plane,” he said. “I’m thinking of upgrading. You remember my little Beaver?”

“Great little puddle jumper,” I said. “I know a lot of people who’d be glad to take it off your hands.”

“Maybe upgrade was the wrong word. Add to might be better. Do you know of any Grummans for sale? Flying boats, specifically.”

Business had been nonexistent, but I had no plans to sell either of Last Resort’s planes if I didn’t have to. Plus, Ray would kill me. Fortunately, between the two of us, we knew almost every other operable flying boat in the country.

“I might,” I said. “That’s a very small community. Any preference on size?”

“My Beaver and your Widgeon are comparable in range and passengers. I’m looking for something with greater range and room.”

That left the Goose, Mallard, or Albatross. “I’ll check with a few people and see what’s out there. Do you care about what condition it’s in?”

“Airworthy would be a plus,” he said with a chuckle. “But dismantled and on a trailer would work if it’s all there. Or fully restored. I just don’t want to have to hunt for a specific wingnut on a strut.”

Jesse would be a good guy to owe me a favor, so helping him now might come in handy someday. “I can get back to you at this number?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Give me a couple of days,” I said. “I’ll call you after Christmas.”

We hung up, and my mind went back to tonight’s gathering at Blue Heaven. Being stuck alone at the hotel in quarantine had not been good for my morale, so seeing my friends had been a nice break, even under the circumstances. I pictured what the scene must be like at Redeemer. A sudden image of Lenny a few years ago as we flew around in Betty—my

1946 Grumman Widgeon—searching for a missing boat made me smile. He'd been terrified of flying.

“And now it's Pastor Lenny Jackson. Good Lord.”

I had music playing on my phone, and the Foo Fighters song “Times Like These” came on. The recollection of my conversation with Lenny and Bruiser pierced my moment of introspection.

“What am I meant to do?”

On the shelves by my front door amidst the books on art and history was a small Lucite block we'd had made for e-Antiquity's original investors after our initial public offering. For a big part of my life, treasure hunting had been what I was meant to do. Hell, I'd done it well.

“King Buck.” I took a long pull on the dark rum. “Dammit, I was good at that.”

After spending months alone at home, you get used to talking to yourself. I wasn't one to talk on the phone much, and my outings had been infrequent, especially when the town opened up and the number of cases spiked, so I was getting as stir-crazy as the rest of the world. Seeing those guys tonight—my closest friends—at our Blue Heaven rendezvous had stirred my soul and got my mind spinning. Archeology, research, treasure hunting, schmoozing governments and universities—all of it—that had been my purpose until Jack took it all away.

I pulled open my closet and unlocked the wall safe—I'd installed a real safe a few years ago, since the standard-issue hotel safe had been too small and insecure for the contents I kept here. I pulled out the fat waterproof pouch of research materials I'd recovered from the Swiss Bank vault—the original documents I'd stolen from e-Antiquity before the FBI, SEC, and creditors had descended upon our offices to seize everything we owned. I'd rationalized that I'd been the one who'd busted my ass to acquire all the research material in the armpits and crotches of the world, and Jack had stolen all the company's cash, so I deserved something. I later learned when he launched a new salvage company that he too had made copies of all these same materials, the sneaky bastard.

I laid the fragile contents out on my dining table, with overflow on the countertop. Each item had an acquisition tale of its own, and cumulatively, we'd paid over a million dollars for the lot. Each one told a story and had promise of riches. The El Mirador Mayan maps were here, along with missing Spanish galleons outside of Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and the Treasure Coast of Florida—branded that because of the eleven ships that sank in 1715 due to a hurricane and weren't rediscovered until the early 1960s when gold and silver coins washed up on Florida's eastern beaches. I flipped through others off Porto Bello, the English Channel, Cairo, Katmandu, Ushuaia, and even the Great Lakes.

Could I have sold these documents piecemeal and lived more comfortably after going broke? Not without running the risk of attracting the attention of my old nemesis, T. Edward Booth, special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who had spent years monitoring my activities and forcing me to do deeds outside of his jurisdiction to help him climb the Bureau's ladder. Plus, I'd always harbored the idea that one day, just maybe, I'd reinvent myself as an archeologist and treasure hunter.

That had been my purpose.

My eyes locked on one of my charts of the Florida Keys. It covered the area out near Fort Jefferson and the Dry Tortugas. The chart was marked in different colors of ink and magic marker where I'd searched in a grid pattern for the *Esmeralda*, a seventeenth-century Spanish wreck that Ernest Hemingway had inadvertently found when he'd pulled anchor after a day of fishing and a long gold chain had come up with the anchor. I learned of his discovery after acquiring a letter he'd written to his editor, Max Perkins, where he noted the find amidst a description of fishing out near the Fort. After I moved to Key West in the wake of e-Antiquity's liquidation, I began to search for the wreck because it was close and easy, even though the location was in National Park waters, where it's illegal to disturb the reefs, do any type of salvage, or recover anything, since, technically, it all belongs to the Park Service.

Details, details ...

In light of Willy's passing and the question the guys had laid upon me tonight, which had hit with the force of a Bruiser Lewis uppercut, seeing this chart now relit the pilot light on my past life. If I wanted to go down that dusty trail again, it made sense to start with the *Esmeralda*.

"What's my purpose, Lenny and Bruiser?" I glanced from relic to relic, map to map, faded letters written in foreign tongues to a notebook with their translations transcribed by period experts, and finally back to the area chart of the Dry Tortugas.

I felt my lips go taut. "I'm looking at it."

