

## TOUCHING THE SUN

### 5

I meant what I said to her, I was going for something to eat, but my stomach could wait. There was something I wanted to do first. I would go to the Oyster Bar, but the man who owned it would be somewhere else.

I went back to the bungalow, showered quickly, then drove across town to Lucayan Beach. I parked my Jeep in the small car park behind The Jolly Tar, a small English style pub overlooking Lucayan Harbor. The Tar was popular with the tourists, especially the British, and tonight was no exception.

Jack Dylan, the owner of The Tar and the Oyster Bar, prided himself on the authenticity of the pub, and as I walked through the door I was greeted by the malty aroma of draught beer, and the sound of a slightly out of tune piano hammering out the strains of *Maybe It's Because I'm A Londoner*, with a chorus of off key voices picking up the refrain. Why was it that the British always wanted to recreate a part of their homeland when they were abroad? Was it a love of the United Kingdom, or a reluctance to embrace different cultures?

The pub was crowded, but I pushed my way through and found Jack. He was in his usual position on the wrong side of the bar, making conversation with a small group of tourists, while his harassed bar staff served glass after glass of cool, refreshing beer. I walked up behind him and slapped him on the back. "How are you keeping, Jack?"

Jack was a giant of a man; around six foot six and two hundred eighty pounds. No longer was he the skinny boy Alan and I had hung out with at the beach after school, although even then he had been the biggest of us. He had a round, open face latticed with broken veins, giving him a permanently flushed appearance. He turned and threw his arms around me, squeezing me in a bear hug. "Harry, great to see you. Howya been?"

"Lousy." I started to tell him about Anna, but he held up a hand to stop me.

"I already know, Harry boy. News travels fast...bad news even faster."

It didn't really surprise me that Jack knew about it. In fact, I'd been banking on it. Very little happened on Grand Bahama Island that Jack didn't get to hear about. He also knew Alan as well as I did; we'd all been friends for just over thirty years. More than friends, we'd grown up together, shared all our life experiences together. We were close, or so I'd thought. Alan's disappearance was making me doubt my own memories.

Alan had helped Jack establish The Jolly Tar fifteen years ago, when Jack's former business venture collapsed. He'd run a high-class seafood restaurant at Chub Cay on Andros, but when a virulent outbreak of salmonella food poisoning hospitalized twenty-four of his customers, and killed three more, the authorities closed him down. They were strict about such things on the Islands, but then with two million tourists coming here each year they had to be. News of a food poisoning epidemic just wasn't good PR.

Alan, a regular face at Jack's tables, had just bought The Jolly Tar, or The Conch as it was then called, and he was looking for someone to run it for him. He called Jack in to do the job, and within two years he'd made such a success of it he could afford to buy it from Alan outright. In time he'd also bought the Oyster Bar.

"It's bad, Harry...Anna and Sally. Tragic," he said. He gripped my arm and steered me to a vacant booth at the back of the pub. "Too public there," he said. "I guess you want to know if I've seen anything of Alan."

"You've heard he's disappeared then?"

"I've not seen him, Harry. We had a falling out about a rum shipment a couple of weeks back. He hasn't set foot in the place since."

I couldn't keep up with all of Alan's deals, but I knew he had some kind of arrangement with Jack and several other of the island's bar owners. He'd buy cheap liquor in Cuba, bring it back to the island, where it would be rebottled, and then he'd pass it on to his outlets for a tidy profit. I'd always suspected the authorities knew about the deal but turned a blind eye to it. Alan Lancaster had a lot of clout in certain high places.

"I take it you've tried his mobile phone?" Jack said.

"Switched off."

We sat down in the booth and Jack signaled for one of the barmen to bring us a bottle of wine. "You know Anna was packing up and moving out when it happened?" I said.

"You're kidding me. Anna and Alan were like that." He crossed his middle finger over his index finger.

"She was taking Sally to the airport for a flight back to the States when the car exploded."

Jack shook his head sadly. He was a man with three broken marriages behind him, and knew firsthand the emotional strain of wives walking out on husbands and taking the kids with them. It had happened to him. "Poor bastard," he said. "Who would have guessed?" He stared me in the eye. "I reckon you've got the right idea, Harry boy. Never let yourself get tied down. Am I right or am I right?"

"I learned that lesson a long time ago, Jack. Katy, remember?"

"Little Katy...God, yes, I'd forgotten about her. The Lady of Pain. Lucky escape, Harry boy."

"Lucky for whom?" I said under my breath. "Where do you think he's gone, Jack?"

"Alan? Haven't got a clue, but I'll give you a word of advice, Harry. Stay out of it." "So you *do* know something."

"I didn't say that. But car bombs? That's in a different league from a little liquor smuggling. The people who operate that ruthlessly deserve to be given a wide berth, a very wide berth indeed. Take it from me, Harry. You don't want to get involved with it."

"I've got to try to help, Jack, and so do you. We're friends, remember?"

We talked some more, just general stuff, finished the bottle between us, and then I left. Some detective I'd make. My first and only lead had ended up a blind alley. I'd thought if anyone would have an idea where Alan had got to it would be Jack.