

DIVER'S PARADISE

CHAPTER 1

EARLY MORNING, MID-JANUARY,
ROCKFORD, ILLINOIS

HE'D NEVER FIRED this gun before—or any gun, for that matter—and the blast from the Colt was louder than he had thought possible. Ears ringing, hands trembling, he laid the revolver on the dinette table.

Marybeth had always called him the “best neighbor in the world.” He lived across the street and visited the Rybergs, Bill and Marybeth, every few days, lending a helping hand, saying encouraging things about their shitty landscaping, and even pretending to enjoy Bill’s old stories.

An early morning visit wasn’t uncommon, and The Neighbor’s appearance hadn’t surprised Marybeth. She’d looked up from the L-shaped counter as he came through the sliding glass door, a bright smile on her face, ready to offer him a pleasant greeting, a split second before the back half of her skull splattered across the kitchen.

Wonder what she’d say about him now.

The Neighbor took a moment and examined the room. His dad always said a .357 Magnum made one hell of a mess. Growing up, his dad had told him lots of things. Some of it was even true. Most of it, though, was total bullshit. But the old man was right about the .357 Magnum.

It does make one hell of a mess.

Especially up close, and *especially* pointed at the face.

Blood on the opposite wall, bone fragments on the stovetop, a dead body on the floor. But what did The Neighbor care? He wouldn’t be

cleaning it up. Besides, he had completed the job, or at least half of it, for today.

The stench of burnt gunpowder couldn't overpower the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee. Near the sink, with two mugs sitting alongside, a coffeemaker dripped black nectar into a small glass pot. He took a cup—not just any cup, but the one imprinted with *World's Best Husband*—and partially filled it.

He got on his tiptoes and retrieved a bottle of Baileys Irish Cream from the cabinet above the microwave. He had watched Ryberg stash it there a few nights ago. The level hadn't changed, and The Neighbor shook his head while unscrewing the cap.

Damn teetotalers.

The Neighbor poured a shot into his coffee. Not too much, though, just enough to steady his hands. Needed to keep his wits about him for Ryberg's return.

Eyes closed; he savored the numbing effects of the alcohol as it traveled down his throat. This had been his dad's favorite drink, and The Neighbor found it fitting to drink it now. He opened his eyes, held the cup up in a mock toast. "Here's to you, Dad."

The morning newspaper lay open on the table. He sat and used a section of the paper to cover the gun, then took the opportunity to flip through the other pages. After a few moments, he realized he had no interest in the news, sports, weather, or anything else. Besides, other than one spot in the classifieds, he wasn't here to read.

The wall clock read 5:40 and, soon, *Mister* Ryberg, the man of the house, would return from his morning walk. He'd stroll through the same sliding door The Neighbor himself had passed through just a few moments ago.

The Neighbor grew anxious considering Ryberg's return. What if he returned with someone in tow? Maybe the guy next door, or that idiot down the street, the one with the fake windmill in his yard,

who sometimes joined Ryberg on his morning walks. No problem. There'd be three dead bodies instead of two. The Neighbor smiled and pointed his finger at the sliding door, making a pretend shooting motion, twice. Four rounds left in the gun, and at this range, even *he* couldn't miss. Too bad for the others. For them, it'd be the wrong place, wrong time.

The Neighbor chuckled. What'd the military call it? Collateral damage?

Ryberg might come back talking on his cellphone. It'd be unlikely this early in the morning, but it *could* happen. Have to wait and see on that one.

Worse yet, someone nearby may have heard the noise. The gun-generated concussion wave and recoil were jarring, and the ear-splitting crack could easily have penetrated the walls of the house. The Neighbor knew the house wasn't a fortress, and he guessed the walls were flimsy and paper thin. Not many people fired guns indoors, so no point in wasting money on extra soundproofing.

He decided not to worry about the things he couldn't change. If someone came investigating, he'd shoot them. Walk right up and pull the trigger. Just as he'd done with Marybeth.

It'd be a different story, though, if the cops happened by. The Neighbor knew he'd lose that encounter. Never stand a chance.

Don't worry about the things you can't change.

Dawn had just broken when The Neighbor caught his weak reflection in the sliding glass door. First thing every morning, even in January, when darkness prevailed till well after six, Marybeth opened every blind in the house.

The Neighbor turned his head left and right, examining his full profiles for several long moments. An article he had read—or was it a TV show he had seen?—came to mind that claimed a successful killer couldn't look like a monster. People believed a killer looked a certain

way. He raised his chin and turned his head in both directions, again studying his reflection.

“Nope,” he said to himself, “no monster here.”

As he swallowed the last drop of his Baileys and coffee, the door slid open. A stout, heavy-breathing man in his early sixties stepped into the house and stood by the table. No one else, no cops, and no cellphone.

“Hello, Bill,” The Neighbor said.

Bill Ryberg stomped his feet on the entry mat, knocking a dusting of snow from his boots. He wore a baseball-style cap with *Rockford Police Department* embroidered on the front.

“Hey,” Ryberg said as he slid the door shut. “You have breakfast yet?”

The Neighbor moved the newspaper aside, exposing the gun.

“What the fuck’s with that?” Ryberg asked, jerking his head at the pistol.

Not saying a word, The Neighbor picked up the gun and pointed it at Ryberg.

“What the *fuck?*” Ryberg said. He stepped toward The Neighbor, reaching for the gun, but caught a glimpse of the lifeless, bloody body of his wife.

“Marybeth!” Ignoring the gun pointed at him, Ryberg hurried around the counter and knelt beside her. His face flushed, and his breathing quickened.

“It’s retribution time, Bill.” The Neighbor stood and walked to where Ryberg knelt on the blood-covered tile floor. He raised the gun and pointed it at Ryberg’s forehead.

“You go to hell,” Ryberg said. He raised himself off the floor, maintaining eye contact with The Neighbor. Ryberg’s knuckles turned white as his hands clenched into tight fists.

The Neighbor had waited a long time for this and wanted to see Ryberg sweat and, hopefully, beg for his life. But to The Neighbor’s

surprise, Ryberg lunged forward and grabbed the gun. The full weight of the older man crashed into The Neighbor, slamming him into a doorframe. The pistol discharged, and the bullet streaked wide of Ryberg's ear. Using his free hand, Ryberg delivered a glancing jab to The Neighbor's nose. Although weak, the strike dazed The Neighbor, snapping his head back and blurring his vision.

Ryberg clinched The Neighbor's arm with one hand and his neck with the other. Nearly overpowered, The Neighbor managed to twist sideways in a quick, practiced maneuver and delivered a kick—his sensei at the dojo called it a *fumakomi geri*—to the older man's leg, an inch below the knee. Ryberg's face contorted and he screamed, crumbling to the floor, bone protruding through his sweatpants from a compound tibia fracture, blood pumping onto the tile. His complexion growing pale, he wrapped both hands around his leg and dry-heaved onto the floor.

Panting, eyes half-closed, Ryberg crawled across the floor to the body of his dead wife and scowled at The Neighbor. "Go to hell," he said through pursed lips. His narrowed eyes met The Neighbor's and didn't waver.

The Neighbor used the back of his sleeve to wipe a single drop of blood from his nose. Well worth it, he thought. Standing on the blood-covered tile, he looked down at Ryberg and pointed the gun at the retired detective's head.

"You said that already."

The Neighbor took a breath, squeezed the trigger, and relished the sound of the blast.

CHAPTER 2

WITH THE WINDOWS down and the top off, the warm Bonaire-island breeze flowed through the cabin of my four-door Jeep Wrangler. I glanced right, across the sea, savoring the salt-filled air. A brilliant shade of blue—one found only in the Caribbean—filled the cloudless sky.

Living on Bonaire, I never worried about traffic lights or big-city hustle and bustle. With fewer crowds and more locals, I considered this tiny island my undiscovered paradise, not yet spoiled by restaurant chains, high-rises, or all-inclusive resorts. Scooters and bicycles were primary transportation for many, while others walked, greeting each other with smiles and waves. The culture, best described as laid-back with an unhurried pace, continued to have that slow, relaxed feel of the *old* Caribbean.

Unhurried, unspoiled, unforgettable.

My phone rang as I turned left, heading north on the road called Kaya International, toward Kralendijk. Even island life has its flaws.

Damn cellphones.

“Hello, Erika,” I said.

“Hello, R. You are on your way back?”

My full name is Roscoe Conklin. However, most folks refer to me as R. “Yes. Do you need anything?”

"It is Friday," she said. A Bonaire native, and having lived on the island her entire life, Erika spoke English as a third, maybe fourth, language. As with most of the local population, her speech contained a hint of Dutch accent and reminded me of someone who wanted to sound formal and correct, but sometimes placed words in the wrong order.

"Yes, it *is* Friday . . . all day," I said.

"I must leave early today."

She had reminded me three times since noon. I smiled, downshifting around a curve.

"I know, I know. You must have a wonderful boss."

"I did have a wonderful boss. Now I work for you."

"Yes, you do." I sighed. "Need anything?"

"I need a raise."

I shook my head. "Anything else?"

"I do not think so."

"See you soon."

A few turns later, I stopped for a road-crossing iguana, or tree chicken as they're called on Bonaire. It stood in the middle of the lane and swiveled an eye in my direction, which I considered a gesture of gratitude for saving its life. Even so, this guy had better quicken the pace. Many locals considered iguanas a food source, and one this size—maybe three feet long from head to tail—would be a prized catch.

We studied each other a moment or two, then I beeped the horn, ending our one-sided standoff. The iguana scurried away and found refuge in the roadside underbrush.

I pulled into the parking lot of the YellowRock Resort, which I owned, courtesy of my life savings and a large chunk of my pension. The *Resort* part, however, was a bit of a misnomer. It was a ten-unit ma-and-pa-type hotel with a front reception area and a small apartment upstairs where I lived.

Guilt shot through me knowing the roof leaked in several units, and, scattered along the path, yellow flakes of paint reminded me of some much-needed upkeep. Bonaire is an island for water lovers and, most days, I wished for more time in the sea. Retired, and in no hurry to overwork myself, I struggled to stay ahead of the repairs. Erika seemed her happiest when keeping me busy.

I'd be lost, though, without her.

Before going into the office, I walked around the side of the building. Mounds of dirt, a cement mixing tool, and several wooden forms laid haphazardly around a partially repaired section of the foundation. The mess had cluttered the small side yard between the YellowRock and the building next door for several weeks. Neither the contractor responsible for the work nor any of his crew had bothered to show for work in several days. He wanted more money to finish; I wanted the job completed before paying him another cent. A stalemate like this on Bonaire—on *island time*—could last for months. Shaking my head, I walked into the guest reception area, which also doubled as the office, on the first floor.

Erika sat behind an old gray desk that reminded me of something from a 1960s secretarial office. I did my work on an identical one against the back wall, and a third, stacked high with papers and other junk, gathered dust in the corner. The place needed an upgrade, but the retro decor of our cozy office served our function and suited us well.

Erika punched away at a computer keyboard, acting as if she hadn't seen me enter. Her yellow polo, embroidered with *YellowRock Resort* on the upper left shoulder, deepened the tint of her dark skin. She refused to tell me her age, but insisted she was older than me “*by several years.*” I loved her like a big sister, and most of the time, she treated me like a little brother.

With black-rimmed glasses perched halfway down her nose, she rolled her eyes as I walked by her desk. “There are *still* some papers on

your desk that *still* need your signature,” she said, turning back to her work.

“Hello to you, too.”

I laid a plastic bag on my desk and retrieved a bottle of water—or *awa* as it’s called in the native language of Papiamento—from the small fridge in the corner. I sat and put my feet on Erika’s desk, playing a game with myself by blocking out most of her face with my size eleven sandals. Her modest afro formed a dark halo around the tops of my toes.

“You *still* have not fixed the problem with that bathroom light.” She continued to gaze at the computer, not giving me the satisfaction of showing the least bit of aggravation.

I didn’t say anything and hoped she’d notice the soles of my sandals.

“The light?” she said.

I decided I’d better answer. “Which unit?” I glanced at the bags I’d placed on my desk. They contained several packages of light bulbs.

“You know which unit.”

“It’s just a light bulb.”

“Then it will be easy to fix, yes?”

“I’ll get it tomorrow.”

She moved her head to see around my sandals. “That is what you said last month about the paint.” She grabbed a small stack of papers, slapped my feet with them, and turned back to her work, muttering “*hende fresku*.”

My Papiamento wasn’t good, but I got the gist of what she said. “What would I do without you?” I lowered my feet to the floor.

Knowing how far to push was most of the fun.

“Don’t forget you have some friends arriving on tomorrow afternoon’s flight,” Erika said. “You’ll need to meet them at the airport.”

“Yup, I remember. Tiffany and her boyfriend.”

She removed her glasses, laid them on the desk, and leaned forward resting on her elbows. “And how does that make you feel?”

I knew what she trolled for but didn’t bite. Tiffany and I had met during a case many years ago and were friends long before I moved to the island. She had visited me on Bonaire in the past and decided to bring her new boyfriend along on this trip.

“I feel fine about it.”

“You know what I mean.” She leaned back in her chair. “When do you plan to introduce her to Arabella?”

“Tiffany is a *friend*. That’s all she’s ever been. Nothing more, nothing less.” I took a swig of water and wiped my mouth with the back of my arm. Letting out an exaggerated “Ahh,” I concentrated on screwing the cap on the bottle before continuing. “Erika, you think you know more than you actually do.”

“Uh-huh.” She put her glasses back on, grabbed the stack of papers, and walked to the filing cabinet.

Wanting the conversation to end, I stood and headed up the stairs leading from the office to my apartment. “I’m going to take a shower. Have a nice weekend and don’t forget to lock up when you leave.”

Entering my apartment, I went straight to the fridge for a cold beer, my favorite being an Amstel Bright. The advertisements described it as a “Euro Pale Lager,” whatever that meant. Most of the bars and restaurants served it with a slice of lime wedged atop the bottle’s neck. At home, I didn’t waste time slicing limes.

Unlike Jeff “The Big” Lebowski, I liked the Eagles *and* Creedence, so I popped *The Eagles Greatest Hits, Volume 1* into the CD player and sat in front of my computer to check email. Twelve new messages. Eleven went straight to my junk folder, but one had a recognizable address—Marko Martijn, the contractor responsible for the unfinished foundation work. Before I clicked it open, my cellphone rang.

“What’s up, Bella?” I said.

"Hey, Conklin, happy birthday."

I laughed. "Thanks, but you're a little early."

"I know, but since it will be the big five-oh, I thought your memory might slip and needed a reminder."

"Yeah, that's funny." Arabella De Groot was from the Netherlands, and I'd found sarcasm doesn't always work on the Dutch.

"I thought so. I called to see how you are doing."

"Well . . . I'm about to take a shower. Want to join me?"

"I wish I could, but I am on my way to work. They called me in to work the desk tonight."

"That's too bad."

"Yes, for both of us. It is that new inspector, Schleper. He thinks we are at his beck and call."

I walked out on the balcony and sat on a lounge facing the sea. "Yup, sounds familiar."

"*Ach*. You think he would give me more respect." She exhaled a short, hard breath. "I have been a cop for ten years on this island. Longer than him!"

Changing the conversation, I asked, "We still running tomorrow morning?"

"You bet. Eight kilometers?"

"If you mean four point nine miles, then yes."

She laughed. "No, I mean eight *kilometers*."

"Ah, forgive me. My measurements are still strictly American."

"I will forgive you. You are drinking a beer right now?"

"Yup. Need to drink away my sorrows before I shower. Alone."

"Do not drink too much. I do not want to hear excuses for tomorrow's run."

"Maybe one more, then I have some paperwork to do. Or maybe change a light bulb."

"Yeah, right. You are drinking, so you will not do more work tonight."

“Hey . . .”

“I will see you tomorrow. Usual time?”

“Yup. Good night.”

She chuckled. “I will send you a text reminder.”

I seldom read text messages and never answered them, but the phone pinged as soon as I set it down. She’d included the words “old man” as part of the reminder about our run.

The sun had moved closer to the distant horizon, creating an orange aura behind the few low clouds. Palm trees and sunsets. Tough to find a more relaxing setting. I nursed my beer and watched the sparse traffic crawl along the one-lane road that ran between the YellowRock Resort and the sea.

I imagined Erika’s delight in arriving at work in the morning and finding the light fixed. It’d be easy—just a bulb. As I headed toward the stairs to retrieve the bags sitting on my office desk, the landline phone rang; the one used most often for off-island communications. It might’ve been a future guest wanting to make a reservation at the YellowRock or maybe an old friend from the States calling to chat me up about retirement in paradise.

Darkness was settling over the vast, smooth sea, and I took a swig of beer, not interested in answering the phone, content with letting voicemail do its job. Besides, the Eagles were telling me to take it easy, and, regardless of the light bulb, that sounded like a good idea. Arabella was right. I was drinking; my work finished for the night.

Second ring.

Nearby, my banjo sat on its stand. Erika had kept me busy enough lately that practice had eluded me. Picking some tunes sounded good.

Third ring.

Turning around, I noticed my old 7-iron propped in the corner. I hadn’t played golf since moving to Bonaire five years ago but still fed

the urge to practice my swing. Make sure my elbow stayed tucked, and the clubface didn't open.

Fourth ring.

Or I could swap the Eagles CD for Creedence, sit on the balcony, and drink another beer or two or three, watching the sun settle below the horizon. Maybe skip the shower, doze off early, and catch a few Zs to the rhythm of the waves.

Fifth ring.

I could've done any of those things but didn't.

Instead, I went to my desk and answered the phone.