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# DEEP SIX

A JAKE LONGLY NOVEL

D. P. LYLE

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*To my late mother, Iris Elaine Campbell Lyle, who taught me the power and healing nature of humor. A day doesn't go by that you are not greatly missed. And to my father Victor Wilson Lyle, who taught me that work is its own reward.*



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# DEEP SIX



## CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS PRECISELY 12:12 a.m. when the window shattered. A crack-crunch, an eardrum-concussing pop, and a spray of glass shards. It didn't explode by itself, mind you, but rather courtesy of a cavity-back, perimeter-weighted two-hundred-dollar five iron. A Callaway. I recognized it because it was mine. Or at least it had been.

I knew the exact time because the flying glass yanked me from sleep, my forward-slumped head aligned squarely with the dashboard clock. Took a couple of seconds to gain any sort of perspective on what had happened.

Of course, sleep wasn't part of the job. Watching the house two doors down and across the street was. In my defense, nothing had moved in the house, or even along the street that snaked through the high-dollar neighborhood, for at least a couple of hours. But sitting in the dark, behind the wheel of my car, boredom did what boredom does. Knocking back the better portion of a bottle of Knob Creek hadn't helped either. Stakeouts were mind numbing and a little more numbing of the mind couldn't be all bad. Right?

"Jake, what the hell are you doing?" the reason for the glass explosion screeched through the jagged hole.

This wasn't just any window. It was vintage; the reason it shattered rather than simply spider-webbing. The original passenger window of my otherwise spotless 1965 Mustang. Burgundy with

black pony interior, now littered with glass shards. Going to be a bitch to find a replacement.

Speaking of bitches, I recognized the grating voice even before I looked up into the face of my ex. Tammy's the name; crazy's the game. I'd lost four good years listening to it. Mostly whining and complaining, sometimes, like now, in a full-on rage. She had a knack for anger. Seemed to need it to get through the day.

She gripped the five iron with both hands, knuckles paled, club cocked up above her shoulder, ready to smash something else. If history offered any lesson it was that she might graduate from the side window to the windshield and so on until she got to me. Tammy didn't have brakes. Or a reverse gear.

Cute according to everyone, except maybe me, she was a beach-blond with bright blue eyes, a magic smile, and a perfect nose. Some plastic surgeons were gifted. Expensive, but gifted. I knew. I'd paid for the nose.

But cute Tammy had a short fuse. She could go from zero to C-4 in a nanosecond.

Like now.

"Funny, I was just fixing to ask you the same thing," I said.

Still shaking the cobwebs loose and trying to get oriented to person, place, and situation, I managed to get the characters involved sorted out pretty quickly. Staring at a cocked five iron in the hands of your ex-wife will do that. The place came along in short order. Peppermill Road. A loop off Perdido Beach Boulevard that arched through The Point, a megabuck enclave nestled into another expensive enclave known as Perdido Beach. Very high up the financial food chain, The Point was a row of seven-figure, stilted homes that hung off Peppermill like charms on a bracelet, each facing the Gulf over a wide, sugary beach.

Okay. Two down, one to go.

Person, check. Place, check. It was the situation I struggled with. “Why are you parked in front of my house?” she asked, chin jutted forward, eyes flashing that anger I knew so well.

Well, there was that.

“I’m not. I’m parked across the street.”

The five iron cocked another couple of inches. Her knuckles whitened even more and her Pilates-pumped forearms tensed. “Don’t mess with me, Jake. Why the hell are you here?”

“Is that my five iron?”

Tammy’s face flushed and the rage that rose up in her chest was almost palpable. I knew I could be infuriating, could push her buttons like no one else. Lord knows she had told me often enough. Truth was I did sort of enjoy it. She actually was cute when she was mad. Dangerous, but cute.

That little vein that ran down the middle of her forehead expanded as she spun, switching to lefty, and shattered the Mustang’s small rear passenger window. Also original. Probably even harder to replace.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. What’s wrong with you?” I was smart enough not to add “other than the usual,” but it did cross my mind. Did I mention the woman never could find her own brake pedal?

She pointed the five iron at my face. “Why are you spying on me?”

I now noticed that she was wearing black sweat pants and a cropped pink t-shirt, exposing her tight belly. She would be hot if she weren’t so insane. I’d married the hotness, and divorced the insanity.

I began brushing glass snow from my shirt and shaking it from my hair. “I’m not.”

“Really? You going to go with that?” At least she had lowered the five iron. “You’re parked across from my home, clear view of

my living room, and you have your pervert glasses with you.” She nodded toward the binoculars on the passenger seat. They were also frosted with shattered glass.

“Night vision. I need them for my work.”

“Work?” She didn’t even make a feeble attempt to cover the sarcasm in her voice.

“I’m on a case. For Ray.”

“Just great. The only person I know who makes you look smart.”

Ray, my dad, actually was smart, sometimes frighteningly so, but Tammy and Ray had never really hit it off. Ray didn’t play well with most people. Neither did Tammy. So they mixed in an oil-and-water, cat-and-dog, fire-and-ice kind of way.

“You remember him?” I said. “He’ll be happy to hear that.”

Another button pushed.

“Don’t be an ass. I tried for four years to sweep him out with the trash, but some lint you just can’t get rid of.”

I smiled. “And he always speaks so kindly of you.”

She bent forward at the waist, her eyes now level with mine. “Right. So why are you working for Ray?”

“He needed someone to do a bit of surveillance work.”

Her expression said she wasn’t buying it. Like I was lying. Can’t imagine where she got such an idea. She gave a soft snort as if to add an exclamation point. “Why not that redheaded behemoth that follows him around?”

“Pancake’s busy.”

Another snort. “Probably eating.”

“Or sleeping. He tends to do that about this time every night.”

She shook her head. Sort of a disgust shake. “And here I thought you swore you’d never work for Ray.” She shrugged. “Guess that’s like every other promise you ever made.”

“Doing a little surveillance isn’t exactly working for him.”

“Surveillance? A big word for snooping.” I started to say something insightful about collecting evidence and not snooping, but Tammy wasn’t finished. “I don’t really give a good goddamn who you snoop on as long as it’s not me.”

“It’s not.”

“Right.” She took a step back and the five iron rose again. She searched for another target. Her gaze settled on the windshield.

“Put the club down and listen.” She lowered it a notch, but her tight jaw didn’t relax an ounce. “I know most things in your world revolve around you, but this has nothing to do with you.”

Her head swiveled one way and then the other. “Who? What did they do?” She was now in full gossip mode. A Tammy staple. “I bet it’s Betsy Friedman, isn’t it?” Not waiting for a response she continued. “Is she humping someone?” She looked toward a gray house with a large fountain in front just ahead of where I was parked. “I bet she is.”

“I can’t talk about it.”

“Sure, you can.”

“No, I can’t.”

“Right. All that private eye protect the client shit?”

“Exactly.”

Longly Investigations, my father’s PI outfit. Ray Longly had been a lawyer and a former FBI special agent and then did some kind of spook work for the Feds he would never talk about and now for the past five years a PI. Ever since he split from the alphabet soup of D.C. agencies. Or they split from him would be more accurate. Part of Ray’s “never playing well with others.”

“And your antics aren’t helping the investigation,” I said.

A quick burst of laughter escaped her collagen-plumped lips. “That’s rich. You couldn’t investigate a flat tire. You’re an idiot.”

Sort of explains the divorce, doesn’t it? Partly, anyway. Before,

back when I played major league baseball, she'd thought I hung the moon. Could do no wrong. Took her to the best restaurants and nightclubs and vacations down in South Beach, sometimes Europe. Tammy loved Paris. And loved playing a Major League wife. Rubbing shoulders with big-name athletes, believing that she could be a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model. Truth was, she probably could. Even today at thirty-one.

But four years ago, after my career ended, after I pitched eleven innings on a cold Cleveland October night and never recovered from the rotator cuff injury that followed, and after the paychecks dwindled to nothing, she moved on. To a lawyer. The guy who owned the seven-figure, six-bedroom hunk of steel, glass, marble, and designer furniture across the street.

Circle of life on the Riviera. Not that one. The redneck one. Gulf coast style.

"If it's not Betsy, then who?" she asked.

I shook my head. "At the risk of being redundant, I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?"

"You pick. Either works for me."

The five iron elevated again. I uncoiled my six-three frame from the car and stood, looking at her over the roof.

"Take a breath, Tammy."

That's when the police cruiser rolled up, settling near the curb maybe twenty feet from my Mustang. A uniformed officer stepped out, remaining behind the open door, right hand resting on the service weapon attached to his hip. He was trim and fit in his perfectly applied uniform and spoke in a calm, even voice.

"You folks want to dial it back a bit?" he said. "Maybe tell me what's going on here?"

After the niceties and introductions, him—Officer Blake Cooper, me—Jake Longly, her—Tammy the Insane, she told her

story. Amazing how it had no relationship to reality. She began slowly but quickly built momentum, telling the good officer that I was pond scum—her words—and that I was a despicable piece of crap—more of her words—and a couple of other monikers that are better left unsaid, finally stating that I was stalking her. Spying on her. In the middle of the night.

Welcome to Tammy's world.

While she spoke, Cooper's gaze moved over her, stopping at the most interesting parts. When he was finally able to extricate himself from all things Tammy, he looked at me. "Sir, were you spying on her?"

"If I was, I'm not sure parking in plain sight right across from her front door would be the wise choice."

"You want to explain that?"

I did.

"Surveillance? On who?"

"Can't say. It's a private matter."

Cooper walked around the door to the front of his cruiser, hand now off the gun, thumbs hooked beneath his service belt. "You live here? In the neighborhood?"

"That's a hoot," Tammy said. "He lives in a cardboard box behind the shopping center."

She can be so endearing.

"No, sir, I don't. I'm on a job. For Longly Investigations."

"Ray Longly?"

"Correct."

"You work for him?"

"He's my father."

Cooper nodded. "That explains a lot."

Ray didn't restrict himself to only the FBI shit list. He and the local gendarmes didn't play well together, either. Seems he frequently

butted heads with them over one thing or another. Usually stomping on their turf. Or at least they tended to see it that way. And more often than not that was the truth of it.

Tammy jumped in. "See, I'm not the only one that thinks your father is a goofball."

Cooper turned her way. "Ma'am, that's not exactly what I said."

She shoved one fist against her hip, staring at him. "Sounded that way to me."

Again he looked her up and down before getting back to me. "Want to tell me what this's all about?"

Boy, did I ever. "I'm on a job. Doing surveillance work for a licensed private investigation firm. I wasn't doing anything until she went Tiger Woods on my car."

"I take it you two know each other," Cooper said. Not really a question.

"We used to be married," I said. "Probably not hard to figure why it didn't work out."

Again the five iron elevated.

"Ma'am, please don't do that," Cooper said.

She shook her head and lowered the club. "I want him arrested."

"I don't think that'll be necessary," Cooper eyed me. "So, you're Ray Longly's son? The baseball player?"

"Ex-baseball player," Tammy said.

"I am," I said.

"You were great in the day."

"That day is long gone." Tammy again.

Cooper took a deep breath and puffed out his cheeks as he exhaled slowly. I think he was finally beginning to realize just how difficult communication with Tammy could be. When he spoke it was calm and measured. "I got a call. One of your neighbors said there was a fight going on. Complaining about the racket."

“So, arrest him for disturbing the peace,” Tammy said. “Or something like that.”

Cooper sighed. “I think I have a better solution. Why don’t you run on back home,” he said to Tammy. And then to me, “Maybe you should shut down your surveillance for the night.”

Tammy’s chin came up and her shoulders squared. “And get off my street.” Always the last word.

“Will do,” I said.

“Ma’am?” Cooper waved a hand toward her house.

She hesitated, turned, started across the street.

“Can I have my five iron?”

“Bite me, Jake.” She extended a middle finger skyward but never looked back as she marched across the street, up the walk, and into her house. The door slammed hard.

“That was fun,” I said.

“Want to file any charges?” Cooper asked, his head tilting toward my Mustang. “For the damages?”

“Wouldn’t do any good. Her new husband’s an attorney.”

He nodded. “I see.” He looked around. “Anything going on I should know about?”

“Not really. It’s a domestic issue.”

Again he nodded. “Not much I can do since it doesn’t seem that you broke any laws, but I’d suggest you vacate the premises.” He shrugged. “To avoid further problems.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“One question,” Cooper said. “How’d you get in here? Past the guard gate?”

“I have a nice smile.” I smiled. Cooper didn’t. “They know me.”

Cooper hesitated, then nodded and handed me his card. He climbed in his cruiser and left.

## CHAPTER TWO

AFTER THE EVER-PLEASANT Tammy and the all-business Officer Blake Cooper vacated the premises, I surveyed the damage to my car. The shattered windows were essentially irreplaceable. Seems Ford doesn't make windows for fifty-year-old cars. The nerve of them. I began knocking away the toothy window remnants from the frames and picking up the larger pieces from the seats, dropping them on the floorboard. The floor mats were expendable, the pony interior not.

As if to prove that any situation could go from bad to worse, the wind kicked up, dragging with it the smell of rain. Out over the Gulf a bank of dark clouds, tops silvered by the moonlight, innards flashing bright white with lightning, marched toward shore.

Just great. Twenty miles from home, no right-side windows. Didn't bode well for my pony interior.

Headlights washed over me, and I looked up the street. Now what? Did Cooper have more to say? Maybe he called it in and his boss gave him the green light to haul my ass downtown. To tweak Ray if nothing else.

I raised one hand to shield my eyes from the headlight glare. The car, a shiny new red SL Mercedes, rolled to a stop. The deeply tinted window slid down, revealing a young woman. Her straight blond hair hung like silk curtains to her shoulders and framed a face that could grace the cover of *Vogue*. Definitely not what I expected.

“That was interesting,” she said.

“You saw that, huh?”

She laughed. Soft, almost musical. “Hard to miss a woman beating the hell out of a classic Mustang with a golf club.”

I looked back up the street, from where she had come. “You live around here, I take it?”

She brushed a wayward strand of hair from her face. “Just back around the bend.”

“You on a beer run or something?”

Another soft laugh. “Heading out to see a friend.”

“A little late, isn’t it?”

“He’s a bartender. Doesn’t close up until one. But he’s not nearly as interesting as this.”

“Bet he’d be happy to hear that.”

She shrugged. “He’d get over it.”

I reeled in my first response—that a woman as beautiful as her probably didn’t have to worry too much about pissing him off. No one would put her on the road for being late. Instead, I smiled.

“So what was that about?” she asked.

“My ex. She’s insane.”

“Obviously.”

“I’m Jake.”

“Nicole.”

She extended a hand out the window, and I shook it. Soft skin, firm grip. The first drops of rain peppered my face.

“You better get that beauty under cover.”

“My thoughts exactly. Problem is, cover is about twenty miles away.”

She hesitated, examining me as if trying to decide something. “Or just up the road. My place. You can stick it in the garage until this blows over.”

“What about your friend?”

“Sean the bartender? Like I said, this is much more interesting.”

She smiled. Perfect teeth. Perfect smile. Just perfect. *Down boy.*

“Glad I could brighten your evening,” I said.

“A girl’s got to find fun where she can.”

“You have an odd definition of fun.”

“I hear that a lot.”

The rain picked up, fat drops now smacking the Mustang’s roof and windshield.

“Follow me,” she said.

Not waiting for an answer, she pulled ahead, flipped a U-turn, and blasted up the road. I cranked up the Mustang and followed, but by the time I made the U, she was already out of sight around the curve. It crossed my mind that maybe this was all a game. That she was trying to ditch me. That maybe, just maybe, this would all be a good story for her to share with her friends over lunch tomorrow.

I realized that this was a rather dim view of the fairer sex, but with rain slanting through my Mustang’s shattered windows, courtesy of one member of that sorority, I suspect I’d be forgiven.

I navigated through the sweeping bend and on to a quieter stretch of Peppermill Road. No sign of the Mercedes. Where the hell did she go?

Here on The Point, the homes were widely spaced, separated by hundred-foot wide natural areas that consisted of sea oat-topped sand dunes and clusters of pine trees. Zero lot line was not part of the residents’ vocabulary. And here, on the point of The Point, the spacing was even more generous, the road even darker.

I slowed. Still no sign of the Mercedes. Then on my left, taillights winked through the sea oats that topped a broad sandy mound. Beyond a wide drive, her Mercedes nudged near a garage door that was rolling open. She pulled in. I slid my Mustang in next to the SL.

“Anybody ever tell you that you’re hard to follow?” I asked.

“Everyone.”

The massive house was two stories of glass and stone and wood. Substantial was the word that came to mind. As well as expensive. Four broad, curved, stone steps led to the intricately carved wooden double front door. I followed Nicole inside.

The interior was equally impressive. And substantial. And expensive. The living room seemed as big as my entire home. Deep sofas, a river rock fireplace, a massive flat screen TV that would do most movie theaters proud, and a wall of French doors that looked out over a wide deck, the beach, and the now churning Gulf. Rain hammered the glass. Lightning skittered in the distance, followed by a low rumble of thunder.

“Something to drink?” Nicole asked.

“Sure.”

She navigated to the bar, a hand-carved oak monstrosity that filled one corner of the room. Behind the bar, dozens of liquor bottles stood like soldiers before a long mirror. She wore strategically frayed jeans and a red Ferrari t-shirt, both welded to her body as if shrink-wrapped. And what a body. Long and lean, curved where it should be. A West-Coast strut that looked like she had been runway trained.

“You look like a bourbon drinker,” she said.

“What does a bourbon drinker look like?”

“Rugged, studly.”

“That’s me, all right.”

She laughed. “What’ll it be? Bourbon?”

“Whatever you’re having is fine.”

“Tequila it is.” She snagged a bottle of Patrón Silver and two glasses, splashing a healthy dose in each, handing one to me. She touched her glass to mine. “Welcome.”

“Nice place. Much better than mine.”

“Mine, too.” She took a sip. “This is my uncle’s vacation home.”

She placed the Patrón bottle on a coffee table that looked long enough to handle an F-18 landing.

“I can’t imagine what his primary must look like,” I said.

“Bigger.”

“What does he do?”

“Movies. Producer, director, writer, all the usual Hollywood tags.”

I gave the room another onceover. “Seems to pay well.”

“Especially at his level. Won a couple of Oscars, a half dozen Emmys.”

“Why here? Why not Malibu or someplace like that?”

She kicked off her sandals. “That’s where he lives most of the time. Malibu. The Colony. He’s originally from Pensacola. Not big on Hollywood folks so he likes to come hang here.”

“And you?”

“My condo’s in California. Orange County. Newport Beach. You know that area?”

“Been there a few times. Very nice.”

“Too crowded. Much quieter here.”

“Where is he now? Your uncle?” The thought crossed my mind that maybe we weren’t alone. Maybe Uncle Joe, or whatever his name was, was upstairs asleep. Or loading a gun.

Her delicate fingers held the glass of tequila near her chest, the Ferrari logo distorted through it. “Europe. He’ll be there for a few months. Shooting his next film.”

“So you’re on vacation?”

“Sort of. Working on a screenplay.”

“Isn’t everyone in California working on a screenplay?”

She laughed again. “Seems so. But I’ve actually had a couple produced.”

"I'm impressed."

"Don't be." She stirred the tequila with one finger and then sucked it clean. "They were short films. Though one was shown at Sundance."

"Congratulations."

"Yeah. With that and six bucks I can get a latte at Starbucks." She sat on the sofa, patting the cushion beside her. "Come. Sit."

I couldn't think of a reason not to, and if I had, I would have hammered any such impulse into submission. I sat. She twisted toward me, folding her legs, her knees against my thigh.

The rain drummed the windows in waves. A long, stuttering flash of lightning lit up the room, followed by palpable thunder.

She flinched and said, "Looks angry out there."

"It'll blow through."

"I guess I'm stuck with you until it does." She flashed a smile. "But since we have some time, tell me the story?" She refilled our glasses, returning the Patrón to the table.

"What story?"

"All that golf club business."

"The usual. Marriage, divorce, crazy woman. You live in California. I'm sure you've seen it before."

"True." She brushed her hair back over her shoulder. Even her neck was beautiful. Or maybe it was the emerald hanging from the wound gold chain. "Are you a stalker or something?"

"No. But, that's what she thought. Then again, in her world everything is about her."

"What were you doing in this neighborhood in the middle of the night?"

"Snooping. Just not on her."

"Interesting. There's a story there."

Her eyes were so deeply blue they seemed bottomless. Like a calm

tropical lagoon. Maybe a blue iceberg. But not cold. Definitely not cold.

“My father’s a PI,” I said. “I was doing some work for him.”

“And the story gets better. Now I’m definitely intrigued.”

“Another old story. Some dude thinks his wife is seeing someone every time he leaves town. Wants her watched. Find out who she’s fooling around with.”

“That’s more mundane than I hoped.”

Nicole was far from mundane. Painfully beautiful but obviously bright. Not one of the vacuum-headed blonds I usually ran into on the local beaches and at my bar.

“PI work is mostly mundane,” I said. “And boring. Lots of time eating junk food, waiting for something to happen.”

“Like getting your windows smashed?”

“That’s a first.”

“I guess real PI work isn’t like the movies? Sam Spade and all that?”

“Not even close. I suspect your uncle would say the same thing.”

“Probably.” She stretched and suppressed a yawn.

“Am I keeping you up?”

“You stole my line.” A wicked smile.

I shook my head. “Funny.”

“That’s what I was going for.”

“What’s his name?” I asked. “Your uncle?”

“Charles Balfour.”

“Really? I know him. Know of him, anyway.”

“Who doesn’t? He’s my mother’s brother. She and Dad are in the business, too. Mom’s in costume design. Dad’s an editor. Both have also won awards.”

“And you’re a screenwriter. Very talented family.”

She tilted her glass toward me and shrugged.

“You should be an actress,” I said. “You definitely look the part.”

“What? Drug-addled and stupid?”

“I was thinking more beautiful and photogenic.”

“And I thought my eyes were too big.”

I looked into those blue eyes. “Not big. Maybe deep.”

She stared at me, then reached out and laid her hand on my arm.

“That’s sweet.” A soft squeeze. “I was an actress. Sort of. Did a couple of movies. Bit parts. The girl in the bikini. Sometimes cutoff jeans. Eye candy. Always in the background.”

“Bet you stole the scenes.”

“Are you hitting on me?” she asked.

“Just making an observation.”

“Pity. I could use being hit on about now.”

“I can’t imagine you going through a single day without some guy making a play.”

She smiled. “That’s very kind. Unfortunately, I seem to attract losers.”

“Don’t we all.”

She snagged the tequila and refilled our glasses again. The bottle now half empty. Felt like most of it was swirling through my head. Should have had more than a granola bar for dinner.

“So, why screenwriting and not acting?” I asked.

“Ever been on a movie set?”

“Not really. A few TV interviews. That sort of thing.”

“Whole different animal. Movie sets are boring. Tedious. A lot of people doing mostly nothing. I don’t do tedious and boring well.”

“How old are you?” I asked.

She frowned. “You should never ask a lady her age.” Then she laughed, those baby blues sparkling. “I’m just kidding you. I’m twenty-seven. Why?”

“You look younger, but act older.”

“That’s a compliment of sorts, I suspect.”

“It is.”

“And you?”

“Thirty-two.”

“So why the divorce?” she asked.

“Like I said, she’s crazy.”

“Crazy usually goes both ways.”

I nodded. “And crazy isn’t all bad. Just when it reaches the level of true insanity.”

“And?”

“And what?”

She flipped her hair back again. “I bet there’s more to the story.”

I shrugged. “I wasn’t very discreet.”

“Banging some bikini blond on the side?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Or were there several?”

I shrugged again. Not really wanting to get into it.

“So you’re an admitted bad boy?” she said.

“You sound like her.”

The phone rang.

“I should get that,” she said. “It’s probably Sean wondering where I am.”

She stood and walked to the bar where her purse sat. She retrieved her cell phone, bringing it to her ear.

The side of the conversation I heard went like this:

“Sorry, I fell asleep.”

“I didn’t hear it. My cell was in the other room.”

“No, it’s too late. Tomorrow?”

“I’ll call you then.”

She hung up the phone. “Sorry about that.”

“Hope he’s not mad.”

“He’ll get over it.” She sat. “Or not.”

For the next hour or so, the rain never let up though the lightning seemed more muted, the thunder more distant. We destroyed the tequila bottle and shared histories.

She was born in Beverly Hills; I’m a local boy who, except for a couple years in the big leagues, had lived on the Gulf my entire life. She earned a degree in literature at UCLA and a MFA in film from USC; I managed two years at the University of South Alabama on a baseball scholarship, up to the bigs, then back to South Alabama to finish my degree in business administration. She hung on the Hollywood circuit but never could catch the big break so moved down to the OC to distance herself from the LA madness; I bought a beach bar, and occasionally worked part-time for my dad. Like tonight.

Soon she placed her empty glass on the coffee table and stretched out on the sofa, her head in my lap. “You’re easy to be with, Jake Longly,” she said.

“As are you.”

She wiggled deeper into the sofa, getting comfy. My head dropped back on the cushion, and I stared up at the pressed-copper ceiling. She took my hand in both of hers, lacing her fingers with mine, and soon her breathing became soft and shallow. My eyes grew heavy.

That was the last thing I remembered.

## CHAPTER THREE

THE NEXT MORNING I woke groggy and more than a bit disoriented. My head had settled into the sofa's deep cushions, my gaze up toward a ceiling I didn't recognize. My heartbeat pulsed in my eyeballs and even my teeth and scalp hurt. I tried to move, but my neck and back protested. Took me a couple of minutes to remember where I was. One glance at Nicole and it all came back. Tequila. The devil's liquid. I never handled white whiskey well, anyway. Gin, vodka, tequila always did a number on my brain. And every time, like now, I promised myself I'd stick to bourbon and beer. Why could I never remember that?

Neither Nicole nor I had moved. She was still stretched out on the sofa, curled on one side, her exquisite face in profile on my lap. She had apparently pulled an afghan throw over us sometime during the night. Or maybe I had. I had no memory of that. I glanced at my watch. Eight a.m.

I slipped from beneath her, settling a decorative pillow beneath her head. She murmured something but didn't wake up. I arranged the throw over her, snugging it up to her neck, and walked to the windows. Clear and sunny. My eyes felt as if someone had sandpapered them. I blinked a few times, but it didn't help. The Gulf was calm and the beach empty except for a few early risers, staking out their plots of sand for the day.

After I found my shoes—one near the bar, the other propped against a chair, no memory of how they got there—I slipped them

on and kissed Nicole on the cheek, saying something stupid like, "I had a good time." Totally lame. But, hungover, it was the best I could come up with. She never opened her eyes but offered a weak smile and muttered, "Call me later."

How could I refuse that offer? But I didn't have her number and said so.

She told me and I added it to my phone's call list. I let myself out.

Next stop, Alberto's Exotic and Vintage Cars. Alberto Garcia, the owner, was the best mechanic around. Could fix anything. And if anyone could find windows for a '65 Mustang, Alberto could. His shop was in Gulf Shores, a mile from the beach, in a mostly light industrial area. The low cinder block building was painted bright yellow and had an aged corrugated metal roof and four work bays. He specialized in exotics and Detroit muscle cars.

When I pulled into the gravel lot, Alberto walked from one of the open bays where a light-blue vintage Chevy Malibu hovered on a lift, two of his guys beneath trying to pry something loose. Alberto smiled while wiping his hands with a grease-stained towel.

"Jake. How goes it?"

"Lost a couple of windows last night."

He leaned into the car, eyeing the glass bits that still covered the floorboards. "What happened?"

"You don't want to know."

"A woman. Got to be."

I shrugged. "Tammy."

He laughed. "That woman's going to do that to your head someday."

Alberto knew Tammy all too well. She had thrown a few tantrums in his direction over some perceived failures to repair her car properly. Wasn't the case, but she never let reality get in the way of a good explosion.

“Might be hard to find windows for this thing,” I said.

He nodded. “I’ll make a couple of calls and see what I can dig up.”

“Thanks.”

“You need a car to drive?”

“Maybe just a ride over to Ray’s place.”

Alberto rounded up one of his guys, a young kid named Robbie, who looked more like a surfer than a mechanic. He had shaggy blond hair that half covered his eyes and wore jeans and a faded green t-shirt, sleeves ripped off at the shoulders, exposing sinewy arms. We climbed in his red pickup and ten minutes later reached the two-story, stilted structure on the sand in Gulf Shores that served as Ray’s home and the offices of Longly Investigations. Ray’s black 1966 Camaro SS and his black Chevy dual cab pickup were wedged among the support poles. I thanked Robbie and climbed the stairs to the first floor deck.

Longly Investigations occupied most of the lower floor, taking up what had originally been the living room, dining room, and den. The kitchen was at the far end; living quarters upstairs. The aroma of cooked bacon and fresh coffee filled the air. In the kitchen, I found a plate with two strips of bacon and a piece of wheat toast. I poured a cup of coffee, and then folded the bacon in the toast, taking a bite as I headed out to the deck, where Ray did most of his work at an umbrella-shaded teak table. Near his elbow rested a plate with the remnants of his typical breakfast—eggs, bacon, toast. He held a cell phone to his ear and a Mountain Dew in his free hand. Always a Dew. Part of Ray’s so-called “breakfast of champions.”

I sat across from him.

Ray was one tough SOB. Fifty-eight, still very fit, with short-cropped graying hair and pale-blue eyes that could ice over with little provocation. Ran on the beach and pumped iron at a local gym every day. Rain or shine. He’d been a Marine before all the

law school, FBI, spook world, and PI stuff. He was straightforward, no BS, and many folks didn't like his in-your-face attitude. Usually those he was investigating. Sometimes the local police. He seemed to step on their turf more often than not. They weren't usually happy. But as he always said, "Screw 'em. If they did a better job, I wouldn't be needed."

Those who didn't tolerate Ray's aggressive and direct approach to life included me. Went back as far as I could remember. He'd always run the family like a military unit. When I slacked off at school, as I often did, Ray would go ballistic. "Make something of yourself, boy," being one of his oft-used lecture punchlines. Had it not been for my baseball prowess, Ray and I would likely have split long ago. But athletic ability made up for a lot of sins in his eyes, so we fell into an uneasy truce. Not that he didn't constantly try to drag me into his business, where he could again be in control, but I resisted. But this time, when Ray asked me to do a little stakeout work for him, he had actually used the word *please*. Not part of his usual vocabulary. So I decided what the hell. Right now though, being down two car windows, I wished I'd said no from jump street. Too late now.

Ray wrapped up his call by saying, "Tell that son of a bitch I ain't coming to Miami. No way." He listened and then said, "Just tell him." He ended the call, not waiting for a response.

"Problem?" I asked.

"That divorce case down in Coral Gables. Going to trial next week in Miami. They want me to come down and testify. Don't want to pay for it though. Fuck 'em." He drained the Dew. "How'd it go last night?"

"Interesting."

"Yeah?"

"Not with Barbara Plummer. Nothing there. Looks like she

crashed around ten. At least that's when all the lights went out. No one came by."

Barbara Plummer was the target of our investigation. Our? I mean Ray's. Henry Plummer, Barbara's husband, a wealthy software developer who used his countless millions to move into real estate development, had hired Ray to catch his wife cheating. He was "absolutely sure" she was and needed ammo. Not for a divorce or anything along those lines. More to "yank her back in line" was the way he put it.

"That doesn't sound interesting."

I told him the rest of the story. The Tammy story. Not the Nicole one. Nothing to hide there, not really, I just didn't want to get into it. Didn't want to listen to Ray ranting about my dick leading me around. An old and repetitive argument between us. Ray was of the opinion that running a bar and chasing bikinis was not a career. I disagreed.

"Shouldn't have parked in front of her house," Ray said. "Her being insane and all. Maybe on down the way a bit would have worked better."

Ray could always do things better.

"The view of the Plummer place was clearer from where I was."

Ray nodded and then rubbed his neck. "Give Pancake a call. Henry will be away a couple more days and he's sniffing into some things on the good wife. Last I heard she has some gig tonight and last time she had one of those she had a visitor. Either planned or picked up at the party."

"Will do."

"Guess you'll have to use the pickup until your car's fixed."

"Thanks."

"Don't park it in front of psycho Tammy's house, though."

“I’m thinking the beach might be a better approach, anyway,” I said. “Good view of the back doors and the bedrooms from there.”

“Better get some sleep today. You look like shit.”

“Thanks. Glad you noticed.”

He shrugged. “Is what it is.”