

## ONE

### KEY WEST, FLORIDA

#### HURRICANE SEASON, 1939

Emmet MacWain left Sloppy Joe's Bar, crossed Duval, Key West's Main street, walked the block over to Whitehead Street, turned left and began the long, hot, walk to the beach. He was in no hurry. He enjoyed the late afternoon strolls almost as much as the evenings spent on the beach where he'd walk the surf line casting his baited hook, angling for the plentiful sand perch or grunts, which he usually de-hooked and tossed back into the waves. Too boney. Occasionally, he would catch a stray snapper, or two, and he would keep these to take home and eat.

He could have just as easily walked the opposite direction and fished off the docks at Mallory Square. It was closer but sometimes travelers, tourists, hung out there watching the sunset and generally being a nuisance, asking him what he used for bait, what was biting tonight and so on.

Emmet preferred solitude. That was one reason he'd come to this remote Florida island that curved away from the mainland west, into the Gulf of Mexico, like a giant, craggy fish hook. He preferred the beach's coolness in the pre-dusk hours, the quiet lap of the surf, the long blue shadows that formed in the sand as the sun set on the opposite, crowded, side of the island.

The routine was this: grab the rod and tackle, head over to Sloppy Joe's about mid-afternoon, have a couple drinks and wait for the day to cool off. He'd taken to drinking rum, a

liquor he'd acquired a taste for since moving here a few months ago and for which his fellow kinsmen, the Scots, given their predilection for malt whiskey, would never forgive him. Not that there were any other Scotsmen in Key West; this "end of the world" place. After the one or two drinks and sometimes a game of cards with some of the colorful locals, he would buy a pound of shrimp from Mr. Josie, the barkeep, and head toward the beach. He walked by bolito booths, where numbered slips of paper were exchanged for cash, and past alleys where make-shift pens were constructed and bright, fierce, gamecocks ripped into each other as the Cubans thronged around them, hands and money waving in the air like the unfettered but windless sails of a ship going nowhere.

Emmet enjoyed his time alone but he also enjoyed the solitude one can find in a bar, alone in a crowd. He was a listener, an observer of not only people but the environment that enveloped them and, in which, he, by proxy, could step in and become a part of that environment, then step out, when it no longer served his interest. It was not the bar itself but the heavy overhead fans slowly cooling the humid air, the smell of fish frying in hot pans of oil, the tinkling and melodic sounds of glasses being filled or washed, and the spirited conversations among the bartenders, sailors, and fishermen who frequented the place and tried to forget there was a depression going on. The bar was a nice refuge except, of course, when it grew too loud, which it occasionally did when the resident celebrity, a book writer named Hemingway, came in and swilled too many. Sometimes even he could be interesting, at least for the first few drinks. But, the man did not know his limit and would soon be bragging about some beast he'd killed in Africa, the huge marlin he'd landed, or how much money his last novel had earned him.

Time and again, the writer, whom everyone insisted on calling "Papa," would encourage the poor Negro who mopped and cleaned the place and who possessed the strength of a bull, to

crouch under the piano and, at Papa's boozy command, lift the instrument off the floor. The Negro would do it, too, beads of sweat popping out of his ebony pate like nitroglycerin oozing out of unstable dynamite. He'd gnash his big horse-teeth and grunt and sometimes fart, which made the writer laugh all the more until, finally, the piano legs were clear of the floor and a round of applause would signal it was okay to set it down. Then Papa would buy the Negro a drink which he would take with him to the back of the kitchen and sip while he waited to mop up another overturned beer, or grant a request for an encore performance with the piano.

If Emmet had been a society snob, he'd have labeled the novelist a bore. But, as he was cut from common cloth, as he suspected was Hemingway, he simply labeled him a loud-mouthed fool; a buffoon who reveled in the extremes, wanted everything, but appreciated little.

Emmet had seen many men like the writer when he was first a soldier, then a copper in London. Self-destructive sots who were fine, even good, company until they passed their limits of alcohol, then had to be put in their place. Sometimes there was no one to take care of that task and, sometimes, there was.

Emmet ambled down Whitehead Street with his fishing pole over his shoulder, an aged Huck Finn, a faint, rum buzz in his head that made him feel mellow. His brown, muscular calves pumped him along and soon a refreshingly cool sweat broke through his white, cotton shirt and khaki shorts. A canvas hat, turned up on one side, Aussie-style, shaded his head from the late afternoon sun. He was a man who did not mind sweating but he looked forward to passing the Bahamian Village where he could buy a cool pint of coconut rum from one of the islanders who sold the syrupy concoction from the front windows of their clapboard homes. He passed the grocer just as he was cutting the string on a bundle of newspapers and placing them on the sidewalk. The headlines read: GERMANY INVADES POLAND. Emmet felt a twinge of guilt,

as if he were hiding here in this apolitical island off of a country that wanted no part of another war. But, he assured himself, he'd fought his share of wars and he kept moving.

Tropical growth lined the street: gumbo-limbo trees, wide-leafed banana palms, sweet-smelling frangipani and flame-colored royal poinciana trees whose dainty, red-orange flowers – usually long gone by now – littered the sidewalk like confetti. But, none of these trees offered much shade to the passerby. The scent of spicy conch chowder permeated the humid air and giant ash-colored clouds rolled overhead, periodically, threatening rain but giving no such relief to the blistering heat. A man could go crazy here, and some did.

After listening to the soft *slap-slap* of his leather sandals and the din of motorists honking at cyclists a block over on Duval, Emmet began to hear a commotion. A cacophony of several voices – mostly Hispanic, with one booming American voice drowning out the competing voices – drifted over to him, carried by the ocean breeze. The noise came from behind a red brick wall that encircled an estate home and piqued Emmet's curiosity.

“I'll give you pip-squeaks a hunnert dollars if ya can last three, no one, *one* roun' with ol' Papa. Whatdya say? I can beat any three o'ya for tha' matter. C'mon you ladies!”

Emmet came into the opening in the brick wall that led into the vast yard that was home to the drunken writer. Papa Hemingway stood in front of the luxurious, two-story Spanish Colonial structure, inebriated and bellowing like a lost cow. Lying about at Hemingway's feet were two Cuban men, both slight of build; the first one with a broken nose that spurted blood between his fingers, the second man seemingly unconscious. Emmet saw the eyelids flicker on the “unconscious” man and knew he was faking.

There were two other men, also Cuban, laughing and cajoling each other to take up Papa's challenge. Emmet recognized one of the men to be Joe Mills, a lightweight boxer who

fought at the Key West Arena, at the corner of Petronia and Thomas Streets, on Friday nights. Emmet, a former amateur boxer and a devout fan of the sport, attended the fights as often as possible, as a spectator only. For a buck and a quarter it was the best show in town, the bouts often moving out of the ring and into the audience where total bedlam ensued.

“C’mon ya senioritas! Can’t ya’s use a hunnert bucks?”

Emmet stepped through the opening in the wall and said, “I can.”

Hemingway jerked around, spinning a half-step past his point of focus, as drunks will do, and stared open-mouthed at Emmet MacWain.

“*You, ol’ man?*” he shouted at Emmet, looking him over as he did so. “‘M’fraid I can’t let ya box with me. Ya might have a heart attack!”

The Cubans looked on in amazement and murmured amongst themselves.

“*El corizone es malo!*” said Hemingway, pointing a thick finger at Emmet’s chest. The Cubans laughed, giddily. Even the unconscious one peeked a look and smiled, revealing a single gold tooth. Once a prosperous fisherman, he used to have more gold teeth but he’d extracted them and sold them to buy his family food. Times were hard even though the shrimp – or “pink gold” as the locals called it – were bountiful, prices were depressed as with all things these days.

“There’s nothing wrong with my heart,” said Emmet. I’m not the one they call ‘*Papa*’.”

“Oh? And what do they call you? Grand-papa?” Then Hemingway was laughing with the Cubans, his big belly shaking, his complexion ruddy from the booze.

Emmet slipped off his shirt and his hat and took his fighting stance. Though he was all of twenty years older than Hemingway, hair thinning and more than a little gray, his shoulders were heavily muscled, his waist trim.

“I’m not some lackey who’ll let you break his nose for a few dollars so he can feed his

family. C'mon you blowhard."

"All right then, gramps. I'll not let some crazy mick insult me in my own front yard."

At that, the two combatants began circling each other to their left. They checked each other, like two wary cats; a tattered old tom, not to be taken lightly, the other a sly Siamese, albeit a drunken one. The Cubans formed a loose circle around the aging alley cats.

"I'm a Scot, not an Irishman," said Emmet, "Though either would be your better. Now show us your money as I suspect you'd be the type to welsh on a bet."

Hemingway pulled a hundred dollar bill from his shirt pocket for Emmet to see, then in the same movement, threw a left jab, a feint, followed by a right cross. He left his thumb extended, and though Emmet dodged to the right, the open thumb caught him in the eye and ripped some flesh at the corner.

The thumb trick was an age-old, dirty-fighter's trick and made Emmet loathe the writer all the more. It also made him change his fighting style, for Emmet was a southpaw and was only leading with his right to make the fight a fair one. Now, he stepped back with his left leg, leaving his right side forward and cocking his left fist back where it would do the most damage. He circled now to the right which put Hemingway at a distinct disadvantage.

"Whoa!" Hemingway spewed. "A switch hitter. A fuckin' southpaw! No matter, I'll still strap ya."

"You're a pig with no integrity," grunted Emmet. Then, he crouched, jabbed with his right fist and jolted Hemingway in his thick abdomen. The blubbery stomach gave like a sack of loose organs and caused Emmet to kink his wrist. He heard his opponent lose his breath, noted he'd dropped his guard an instant and came up with that left. It caught Hemingway on the lower edge of his jaw and snapped his teeth together loud enough to be heard three blocks away.

Hemingway's arms fell limp to his sides and he crashed backward, dead weight, like a sack of grain, but landing relatively softly in the spongy grass that surrounded his home.

Pauline Hemingway watched the scene, dispassionately, from a bedroom window on the second floor. She watched her drunken husband laying supine in their front yard, as if dozing in a hammock, and anticipated the cavernous snore that was sure to follow. She watched the man who'd put Ernest down, saw him replace his clean white shirt over his sun-baked muscular shoulders, then pick up the hundred dollar bill from her husband's relaxed fist. He was an older gentleman but, she thought, not unattractive and she felt something stir in her stomach, a giddiness like butterflies in a love-struck adolescent's tummy. Her cheeks grew hot as she embarrassed herself with her own thoughts. Was she really that lonely? Yes, she was. But, in spite of her husband philandering with any and every new woman that would help inflate his ego, she knew she would never act on her own impulses.

No one had ever put her husband down, literally or figuratively, as this stranger had. Not surprisingly, she admired him for it. She stepped closer to the bug-specked window screen just as the man looked up and saw her.

"Uh-oh," he said, like a child caught doing something he was not supposed to be doing. He grinned sheepishly, then quickly dropped his smile.

"I'm sorry for the trouble, ma'am," Emmet yelled up to her.

"No trouble, sir," she said demurely.

"Are you his..."

"Wife? Yes. I'm afraid so."

"Again, I'm sorry," said Emmet. But, still angry over the thumb trick, added, "I wouldn't think such a brute could keep a lady." There was nothing else to say and Emmet felt he'd said too

much already. He looked around for his fishing rod and started to take his leave.

“Just a moment, sir.” Pauline said.

What now, thought Emmet. Is she one of those protective hens who’ll beat me about the head with a kitchen instrument for taming her banty rooster? Emmet wanted no part of that trouble. The Cubans, sensing trouble filed into the street and quickly disappeared.

Pauline came out the front door accompanied by a small boy, about eight years old.

Emmet felt even worse. It’s one thing to teach an arrogant husband a thing but quite another to spank the father in front of the son.

“I may need assistance getting my husband inside, Mr. ...?”

“MacWain, ma’am. Emmet MacWain.”

“Oh, a Scotsman?”

“A displaced one, to be sure, yes.”

“Displaced? By your choice or by fate?”

“A little of both.”

“I know what you mean,” she said.

At that, they smiled at each other, an instant rapport between two people who were both aliens in this transient, and sometimes, uncivilized place. They turned to the problem of the now snoring writer and would-be pugilist. Emmet looked the sleeping giant over and resolved to himself that he should at least be able to drag the man inside the house unaided.

“You must be very strong,” said the boy to Emmet. He was a cute little waif, thought Emmet, but a tad too thin for his size and a little too pale for a boy living in the Florida Keys.

“No, lad. Just lucky, and your papa wasn’t feeling well today.”

“You mean he’s drunk?” asked the boy.

Emmet glanced from the boy to his mother for help but found her trying to suppress a laugh behind her hand. He looked back to the boy and was trying to sort out an answer when Pauline cleared her throat and said, “Gregory, why don’t you go find Ada and ask her to fetch us a pale of cold water.”

At that the boy darted off and left the adults to tend to his father.

“What type of work do you do, Mr. MacWain?”

“Oh, I don’t really work anymore. I do a little fishing. Take things easy.”

“How nice. The leisure life.”

“Yes, well, I tell myself I’ve earned it.”

“Perhaps you have. What kind of work did you do, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Emmet did not mind; it was not uncommon in these depressed economic times for people to be curious about one’s livelihood. Besides, he enjoyed talking with this handsome woman.

“I was a copper, er, an inspector, in London. With Scotland Yard.”

Pauline’s eyebrows arched dramatically. “How very interesting. But, whatever would bring you to this corner of the world?”

Emmet hesitated, pondering. Then, “I visited here, many years ago. I was young, a soldier passing through on the way back from Cuba. But, Key West always stayed with me. I met my wife here.” He paused, then cleared his throat. “I promised myself, if I stayed alive long enough, I’d return. So...”

“So here you are. Does your wife enjoy this place as much as you do?”

“Uh, no, ma’am,” said Emmet. “She’s dead.”

Pauline wanted to reach out and touch this man, who now turned his face away from hers.

“I...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...oh, what must you think of me? Asking all these

questions and prattling on while my husband lays unconscious on the lawn. Please accept my apologies.”

“None necessary, but again, please accept mine for...this,” he said, gesturing toward Hemingway.

“Done and done.”

“Very well. Now, let’s get your husband inside.”

Emmet positioned himself at Hemingway’s head, lifted him by the back of his neck, pushed him forward and wrapped his arms around the heavy writer’s barrel-chest. The muscles of his thighs bulged and strained as he lifted the slumbering writer’s body. He walked backward, dragging him along, up the steps and into the house as Pauline held the door open.

“Where to?” asked Emmet, glancing around and noticing the many antiques and collectibles the Hemingway’s possessed: a seventeenth century hand-carved bench in the hall, figurines of China and Venetian glass, Spanish and Italian chandeliers, some small, modern paintings and various, mysterious weaponry from far off continents. It looked more like a museum of international acquisitions than a home.

“The kitchen will be fine, please.”

Then, after Emmet maneuvered the fleshy bulk through the halls, Pauline said, “That’s fine. Just lay him on the floor.”

Emmet did as he was instructed and watched as Pauline kneeled down and placed a rolled- up towel under Hemingway’s head. A strand of her dark, buckwheat and honey-colored hair fell out of the bun on her head. She pushed it back with delicate hands, in a gesture so feminine, Emmet felt it was one of the most beautiful he’d ever seen. Suddenly, he thought of Solana, his deceased wife, and he remembered her making that same gesture. Something, long

asleep, stirred in his stomach, or was that his heart?

Ada, the Prussian governess that cared for Gregory and his older brother Patrick, stood in the kitchen, her back against the tall, marble countertop, arms crossed. Her mouth was a slit in her face and though she wasn't frowning, her eyes projected anger. She turned and, with one strong arm, snatched the galvanized metal pail filled with icy water off the counter and slammed it down on the floor, just out of Pauline's reach.

"Thank you, Ada," said Pauline, but the governess maintained her frigid countenance and stormed out of the room, pulling Gregory with her who, up until then, had been standing quietly in a darkened corner of the kitchen.

Pauline glanced up at Emmet, apologetically, but he gave her an almost imperceptible nod which told her she needn't bother with any explanations. It was a small gesture but it meant the world to her right then and she formed an instant admiration for this decent and mannered man. She dipped her hand into the cold water and pulled out a sponge which she squeezed over Hemingway's face. A trickle of water went up his nose just as he was inhaling and he sputtered, blew a mist of water out his nose like a surfacing whale, and sat bolt upright.

"God damn it all to hell!" he roared.

Pauline looked up at Emmet. "It's probably best you leave, now."

"Yes," said Emmet. "It's been a pleasure making your acquaintance." He tipped his jaunty hat and left the kitchen, listening to Hemingway bellow like the sword-impaled bulls he wrote about.

On the way out he passed the boy standing, almost hidden, by a huge Chinese vase adorned with images of dragons. Emmet took the hundred dollar bill from his shirt pocket and, lifting the cap the boy was wearing, put the bill under it and pushed it back over his brow.

“Keep it under you hat,” he said.

Gregory grinned at the big Scot and watched as the front door slowly closed behind him, its pale surface glowing salmon-colored as it caught the hues of sunset.

That night, Emmet caught a rogue snapper off the beach, took it home and ate it with a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine.

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#### TWELVE HOURS LATER

There was a slope in the hardwood floor, from the old house’s foundation settling unevenly, so that the blood ran across the living room, soaked a small area rug, then continued on, into the kitchen, seeking a level under the icebox where it puddled and began to coagulate like a membrane-covered, red pudding.

The rubiginous ooze came from the throat of the woman who was lying, crumpled and shrunken, on the living room floor. The avulsion to her neck was so wide and deep her head was only still attached by her spinal column and the sinewy tissue that made up the nape of her neck. Her mouth was agape, exposing perfect, white teeth, of which only the bicuspid showed signs of wear. Her eyes were open, too, and if she could still see, she would be staring directly at Ernest “Papa” Hemingway, watching him snore away, drunk again, with a blood-smearred bayonet resting in his hand.