

PROLOGUE

Santo Domingo, January 8, 1992

WHEN I LOOKED BACK later, I realized that the soldier pointing his gun at my head terrified me less than his confiscating my passport. Now I had no way to get off the island. *I should have left my passport at home*, I told myself. *I shouldn't have gone to work early*. I had plenty of time to indulge in pointless recriminations as I sat locked away in a filthy, rat-infested Dominican prison. In this concrete fortress, the heat was so oppressive that even the walls around me were sweating.



THE MORNING HAD BEGUN like any other in the city of Santo Domingo.

A furious chorus of car horns split the heavy tropical air, alerting me to the blackout even before I hit the massive traffic jam. Blackouts were a feature of everyday life on the island, a product of

an unstable government presided over by the blind octogenarian president, Joaquín Balaguer. Poverty, widespread corruption, political “disappearances,” and power outages were hallmarks of the era. An unlit traffic light dangled uselessly over the jammed intersection. It was too late to avoid the snarled traffic. Instead I shifted down into first gear, waiting my turn behind the other vehicles on Avenida Tiradentes.

Santo Domingo was a city of intoxicating contrasts—a place where extreme poverty rubbed shoulders with unimaginable wealth. I loved it from the moment I arrived, almost five years ago; though that was not the experience of countless other American expats, drawn by the lure of easy money, endless beaches, and tropical weather. It took a certain type of personality—stubborn, resilient, determined—to flourish in the terrible beauty of Santo Domingo.

As I sat marooned in a sea of chrome, a thud on my windshield shook me out of my thoughts. An old man with a mouthful of rotten teeth tipped a large cardboard crate toward me and gestured to the half-dozen newborn puppies within. I shook my head. He trudged away to try his luck with the drivers behind me.

Ahead, nothing was moving. On most days I would have started to panic. In my line of business, getting to work late was not an option. The first time you were warned; the second time you were fired. Today, however, I had plenty of time. I cranked up the air conditioner and the radio, trying to drown out the incessant honking.

Twenty minutes later I reached the quiet, tree-lined street where our villa was located. All the homes on Salvador Sturla had a neat, uniform look to them: surrounded on three sides by towering walls, with heavy wrought-iron gates protecting the entrance. Our villa also had a gardener tending the lawn, and an armed guard patrolling the premises. The only difference between our villa and the others in this residential neighborhood was that nobody actually lived here.

I parked my little blue Daihatsu next to Roger’s red Cherokee, locked up, and slid the keys into my jeans. The guard opened

the gate and I made my way toward the back of the house. From inside the open side door I heard the crackle of a transistor radio.

Peering into the kitchen, I saw Remo bent over the counter, peeling a mountain of potatoes. I snuck up and grabbed him around the waist. He dropped his knife and spun around, his gray eyes darting between me and the clock mounted on the wall. "I don't believe it!" he cried. "You're *early!*"

I stepped into what used to be the villa's formal dining room. Now it was known as the Big Office. Carmine was hunched over his desk, a garish Hawaiian shirt hanging off his bony frame. His eyes, magnified to owl-like proportions by his thick glasses, widened comically when he saw me. Before he could say anything, a fit of coughing erupted from the next room. I peered in. Roger was studying the racing form with a furrowed brow, alternately sucking on a Marlboro and gulping coffee.

The office ran on a strict schedule. Both men were busy preparing for the frantic day ahead. In twenty minutes the company van would arrive, dropping off the first group of clerks. A second group would arrive shortly afterward. By one o'clock, the phones would be ringing off the hook as we scrambled to record thousands of bets from all across the United States.

I sat at my desk. Roger had another coughing fit in the next room. "Time to quit, Roger!" I called.

Roger managed the Small Office, where bets on a single game were limited to a mere \$2,000. I clerked for Carmine in the Big Office. We took wagers from the professional gamblers, customers we referred to as "wise guys" or "smart money." The kind of men whose daily bets could total \$100,000.

I was addicted to the adrenaline rush that came with working there. At the moment, though, there was nothing to do. The phones were silent; the cubicles that lined the room were empty.

Suddenly, the stillness was shattered by loud shouts from outside. I looked out of the window and my heart tightened into a fist. Waves of heavily armed soldiers were swarming over the outer wall. A troop of machine-gun-toting men in combat fatigues

rushed across the driveway. Our guard dropped his weapon and was brutally wrestled to the ground.

“What the hell’s going on?” Carmine gasped as we peered out of the window. More and more soldiers were pouring over the wall. The sound of their heavy leather boots pounding against the concrete grew louder and louder. Roger came running over in alarm.

It’s a coup, I thought. *It must be a revolution!* The country had been simmering with discontent for a long time. It wouldn’t have been the first politically unstable country in this region to descend into martial law.

No other explanation made sense. I reached for the nearest phone and stabbed the numbers to Tony’s cell. He would know what to do.

Pick up. Pick up.

With shouts and crashes the soldiers charged into the house from several different directions. I heard glass shattering, then crunching under heavy boots. They stormed into the room, weapons drawn, screaming at us in Spanish to put our hands up. Amidst the commotion I heard Tony answering his phone. Someone yelled, *“Drop the phone!”*

“Don’t come in!” I blurted out. The blood rushing in my ears drowned out every other sound. I watched, frozen, as Carmine and Roger, both in their sixties, were roughly pushed up against the wall.

*“Put the phone down! NOW!”*A young soldier was advancing on me.

I stared at him but held tightly onto the receiver. Tony needed to hear what was going on. The soldier raised his hand to strike me. I flinched. When he came close, he stopped and took a step back. Even though I was wearing a baseball cap and a shapeless, baggy T-shirt, he recognized me instantly. To him I was the *Constanza Girl*, the glamorous blonde model who lounged seductively on a boat strewn with pillows. The cigarette commercial ran constantly on the local channels.

The terrace doors crashed open and our lawyer, Gustavo Flores, was unceremoniously shoved inside. I’d never had much

confidence in Gustavo's abilities as a lawyer. Right now, however, his flushed, jowly face was a welcome sight. He was always boasting about his powerful connections. Surely he would put a stop to this madness.

Gustavo flailed around comically before recovering his balance. He straightened up, and mustering whatever dignity he could, pulled his shirt back down over his potbelly. His eyes blazed with indignation and he addressed the soldiers in a booming voice: "*Soy Gustavo Medina Flores. Abogado!*"

All eyes swiveled toward the lawyer, and the room fell silent. Then a soldier viciously drove the butt of his rifle into Gustavo's belly, sending him crumpling to the floor.

Click.

I looked away from Gustavo and found myself staring down the barrel of a gun. The young soldier who had been gawping at me in surprise had regained his fierceness.

In a low, dangerous voice he said, "*Put . . . the . . . phone . . . down.*"

I let the receiver slide out of my hand to the floor, hoping that Tony had heard enough.