

JETLAG ON ISLAND TIME

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CHAPTER I ~ Port Vila

She couldn't sleep, and she usually slept well. Kate woke and lay quietly as clouds passed in front of a swelling moon, making the room dark then softly lit again. Restless, she finally got up, made her way into the bathroom, then returned to bed, but not before peeking into the kitchen to check the digital time on the microwave. It always ran about twenty minutes fast. 2:20 am -- far too early to get up. Had it been four or five, she might have eased into her day, but there was still far too much night, so she settled on her side, scrunching the pillow just so under her head. Still after about fifteen more minutes of tossing and kicking off the sheets, she decided to quit, got up, and walked into the office, booting up the computer.

After all there was much she could do. A spring trip to Europe with her lovely, aging mother needed a few more confirmations: the train from Amsterdam to Venice, a hotel once there, a room in Athens a week later. The Internet would be wide open this time of night. Vanuatu's monopolized telephone/internet service was extremely limited and iffy at best, and during normal working hours the lines were often clogged. So she began, turning on a light over the desk to soften the imposing glow of the monitor.

Within ten minutes she had a delightful find -- a monastery in Venice that took in tourists and was right on the Grand Canal. A 17th century Benedictine monastery, it had been renovated to accommodate modern day pilgrims -- right down to croissants and espresso in the morning and wine tasting in the afternoon. *How civilized*, she thought, smiling in anticipation. *Mom will love this*. The monks who ran the inn were working mid-afternoon when her e-mail arrived.

"Where's Port Vila?" they queried back, not having a clue where in the world she was.

Within minutes Kate was conversing with a Venetian monk in real time via an online chat feature, finalizing a booking early in May for three nights. She waited as he typed directions from the train station to the inn when she heard a noise. It came from the bathroom. As she

crossed the room it crossed her mind that maybe the cat had got in, or a bird had flown into a window.

But when she opened the door into the bathroom, it pushed back.

Kate stiffened. For the first time all night she felt the presence of the man who had been there, in the house, since her first restlessness. He was already there when she woke, in fact in her sleep she probably heard him as he removed the screen over the Jacuzzi and climbed in the open window then crouched behind the half wall of glass block separating the shower and tub from the rest of the room, waiting for moonlight to illuminate the area. Her unconscious ears heard as he planned his attack, then to make it look like a simple burglary or home intrusion he changed clothes and searched the room for a weapon, finding a thick ceramic mug which sat in the jungle shower holding a rooting pineapple top. Taking out the plant, he quietly emptied the water and gripped his fingers around its breadth. It would do.

Suddenly he appeared around the door, tall and wild-eyed with culpable intentions. He was wearing her lingerie, and as she jumped back she had a shiver of recognition, but before she could catch her breath, he brought the mug down on her head, smashing open her forehead, eyebrow, bridge of her nose. The impact nearly knocked her over, sent her reeling, grabbing her forehead, now gushing blood and triggering an avalanche of adrenaline. Within seconds she was out the back door, screaming, running, turning left around the corner of the guest room on the deck, then she noticed a street lamp on the access road that led to the property behind, and without hesitating, she turned and ran across the deck to the other side and down the stairs into the garden, dark now.

It did not occur to Kate to think. Some animal possessed her body and took over the functions and processes she usually reasoned through. It did not occur in that moment whether or not the attacker was following or whether she was OK. She didn't wonder if she'd get away or if she would live...or heal. Or if the Cheshire moon would ever rise again through the needles of the ironwood trees that danced on the lagoon's edge. She simply fled.

Kate remembered only pieces of how she got to the hospital. Staggering around in the dark of the garden, she had bumped into the little red car. By some stroke of fortune the keys were in it, as it had begun to rain earlier in the evening, and she had gone out to put up the top. Neither thinking nor seeing clearly, she sped down the driveway and headed west. She was covered in blood, and when she tried to wipe her hands then her glasses on the nightshirt she

noticed that it too was soaked in blood. Instantly she realized that all the blood was hers, and thinking she should go to the hospital, she grasped that the loss of blood was so fast she would not make it. Just then she looked up and saw a lit sign 'Palm Grove' and swerved right, past the reception area to Tom and Shirley's cottage where she sat bleeding in the car, slumped over the horn.

It seemed forever, but within minutes Tom came from the back door with a flashlight, and Kate opened the car door, stumbled to him, blood-soaked and terrified. "Help me," she pleaded, collapsing in his arms. Tom and Shirley carried her into the hallway and compressed the wounds to try to stop the bleeding. While Tom phoned the police to report the assault and request immediate ambulance assistance, Shirley cleaned Kate up and tied a parrot-print pareu around her shaking body.

Although it was a hot tropical night, her extremities chilled quickly, and she began convulsing. Shirley wrapped her in blankets, tucking her into a guest bed until the police arrived and asked Tom a few questions then left quickly to secure the crime scene. Memories sneaked in as she breathed deeply, trying to slow her shaking. She had brokered the small bungalow resort a year before and through the negotiations had come to know its managers, a transplanted kiwi couple who ran a tight and efficient operation and were friendly and kind. She had encouraged the new investors to keep Tom and Shirley on. Kate was glad they had heeded her advice. Shirley brought her another glass of water and applied pressure to the bleeder as an ambulance pulled around the rear of the bungalow, and the nurse and driver attended to Kate, strapping her onto a gurney for the long, bumpy transfer to the hospital's emergency room.

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"What happened?" asked Dan Brioni, looking down at Kate, tears welling up in his eyes. She thought to tell him, but the words stuck in her throat. "This will hurt more than the surgery," he warned, injecting Novocain into her face, forehead, around her eyes. She lay there, remembering the kind Italian doctor, whom she had met during an earlier trip when her son had punctured his hand during a sailing accident, and rushing him to ER, Kate had waited at his side while Dr. Dan cleaned him up, took x-rays, and scheduled an appointment with Dr. Naovao, the chief surgeon. She remembered it all, watching him tear up now and wincing quietly through the pain as he closed the bleeder and tenderly sutured her wounds.

Kate didn't know how long she lay in post op, but nurses came around periodically, checking

vitals and pain levels. Several police officers dropped by mid morning and just stared at her swelling and bruised face, bandaged from the nose up, afraid to ask questions until Shirley returned with a fresh pareu, a toothbrush and soap, then they took Shirley aside and instructed her not to say anything to anyone until the intruder was found so that Kate could be kept safe in case she was still in danger. She lay there isolated again, listening to their muffled voices as they spoke quietly in the hallway, looking down at her brown toes and thinking she may have had a concussion since she could only remember snippets of things. She remembered being in Tahiti, celebrating her birthday on a private motu. She remembered pâté and cheeses, baguettes and French champagne, and lying tanned and half naked in the languid lagoon, catching up with her girlfriends. Then she remembered a formal swimming pool overlooking the Mediterranean and friends gathered, eating exotic foods and speaking foreign languages. She remembered fragments: frigate birds soaring over an aqua lagoon, meeting T the first time, and how it all began.