



## The Lacey Confession (The Locator Series Book 2)

By Richard Greener

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Greener makes his debut with a simple, taut premise...a small triumph of a thriller. An ideal beach read."—*Publishers Weekly*

"Greener's plot is complex and original...*The Locator* will find a legion of fans." --*The Gumshoe Review*

"Intricate and intelligent. Richard Greener has turned revenge into an art form." – Martin Cruz Smith, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Gorky Park*

#### About the Author

Richard Greener (Atlanta) is a former broadcast industry executive, an award-winning essayist, and recipient of the coveted CEBA Award for excellence in business. Born and raised in New York City, the author resides in Atlanta with his wife of thirty-eight years, Maria. Greener came to writing while suffering from a life-threatening heart condition. He is currently recovering from a heart transplant.

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#### PREFACE

I wrote *The Lacey Confession* while waiting for a new heart. From its first word to its last, I was on the heart transplant list at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. For obvious reasons, when waiting for a heart you can't ever be very far from the hospital. The call may come at any time. My time was spent almost exclusively at home, and most of that in my cozy office overlooking little Martin Lake. The experience has been, I imagine, very similar to being under house arrest. To escape, I wrote.

Throughout all this, my daughter Barbi, who would walk through walls for her father, mobilized her sisters and other co-conspirators, and secretly arranged for me to speak with many of the people I admire, respect, and enjoy. I never knew who might call or when. Each was a wonderful surprise. Some I've known from the past, but except for those few, all were complete strangers, an amazingly diverse group, calling me only out of the goodness of their heart. None of them had to do it. Everyone was warm, friendly, and interested to know about my upcoming transplant, particularly how I managed the awful wait. Most conversations were a few minutes, not hurried but short. But some lasted fifteen or twenty minutes. One call took up a half-hour and another almost an hour. I had a wonderful time.

I want to thank all those who called as well as those who wrote, especially the New York Mets, who were kind enough to send me a baseball signed by my favorite pitcher, Tom Seaver, and the New York Jets, who made my day with a football signed by the great Joe Namath.

Everyone should know how happy they made me and how important they were in the completion of this book. My thanks to all:

Rep. John Lewis, Bill Cosby, Monica Kaufman, Al Franken, Leon Botstein, Sen. Hillary Clinton, Ambassador Andrew Young, Sen. Robert C. Byrd, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Tim Russert, Jackie Mason,

Rep. Ron Paul, Ralph Nader, Whoopi Goldberg, Sen. Lindsay Gra-ham, Jon Stewart, Phyllis Chesler, Sen. Fred Harris, Noam Chomsky, Robin Williams, Father Andrew Greeley, Tom Clancy, Gov. Howard Dean, Rep. Cynthia McKinney, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Frank Torre, Terry Gross, Sen. Barack Obama, The Atlanta Braves, Sen. Russ Feingold, Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr., Barry Levinson, Martin Sheen, David

E. Kelley, David Letterman, Clint Eastwood, Mel Brooks, Christopher Hitchens, Stanley Kutler, Bo Jackson, Oliver Stone, Blythe Danner, and the governor of my home state, Sonny Perdue.

*Roswell, Georgia May 2005*

Editor's note: Richard Greener received a heart transplant in January 2006.

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## THE BEGINNING

*Only wise men—and some newborn fools—say they know what's going on. ?Harry Chapin?*

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## ONE

Cruz Bay was Walter's kind of town. The capital city of St. John in the American Virgin Islands is more accurately a village, much too small to ever be called a city. It's centered on and around the island's largest port, hugging the shore, clinging to the mountain-side. The Rock, as St. John's permanent residents call their much larger neighbor, St. Thomas, is only a short twenty-minute boat ride, but for many who live on St. John, that distance is measured in months or years, not minutes or nautical miles.

Billy's Bar is directly across the small square that fronts the slip where the St. Thomas ferry docks. For many years Walter Sher-man had spent about half his waking hours there. Breakfast nearly every morning—a little later in the day now than when he was younger—a late afternoon lunch and, from time to time, dinner too if the occasion was special enough. He could always be found sitting in the second to last seat at the far end of the bar, near the kitchen, next to the large standing fan. Time didn't change Billy's much. Walter liked that. The same might be said for the whole island and he liked that too. Unless someone reminded him, it was easy for Walter Sherman to forget St. John was part of the United States.

The island can only be reached by small boat, including the ferry. The big cruise ships have to make port at St. Thomas. Tour-ists from those floating hotel vessels, and the Rock's other visitors, staying at the bustling resorts on St. Thomas, often take the short trip to St. John for a few hours of shopping. Some come for the national park, many more for the beaches. Some come over just for dinner and catch the last ferry back to St. Thomas. For the more serious tourists, or bushwhackers as the locals called them, those with a special liking for St. John's calm tranquility and truly magnificent beaches, and with no interest at all in doing things like playing golf, there were the island's two large resort hotels. Walter and his fellow permanent St. John residents frequently thanked God, and the federal government too, for the absence of a golf course anywhere on the island. It had been the Almighty, of course, who in his inspired creation of the Caribbean made the island less than nine miles long and too mountainous to ac-commodate a golf course, a race track, or anything resembling the cursed Disneyland or any of its growing number of cheaper imita-tions. Theme parks they called them. What theme was there, Wal-ter wondered, other than spending money? As an added stroke of luck, the federal government of the United States had accepted a gift of land, comprising nearly two-thirds of the entire island, and designated it a national park. John D. Rockefeller's middle son, Laurence, the smartest and richest of his bunch, was the gener-ous donor. No fool, the only thing Rockefeller kept for

himself was the area called Caneel Bay—surely the loveliest part of the loveliest island—thought of by more than a few as the most beautiful spot in the world. It was here Rockefeller built the first of his famous resorts. The riffraff from the mainland, the back-slapping, heavy-drinking, cigar-smoking golfing quartets looking for an early tee time and a blackjack table, were forced to seek other venues.

In addition to the newer Westin, originally a Hyatt property, and the older Caneel Bay resorts, there are a handful of smaller hotels and guesthouses and about 100 hillside and hilltop homes, most of them for rent, all of them carrying expensive weekly rates. At high season, the island's population of 1,000 doubles. St. John is not for the casual visitor looking for just anyplace to go on a package holiday in the Caribbean. Those seeking a taste of Europe usually go farther south to the Dutch-flavored Curacao. If excitement and adventure among the young, the rich, and the French is what they want, and if they have enough money, they go to trendy and chic St. Barts. And if they are looking for nothing more than to stay in America but get away from winter, they'll head straight to Puerto Rico and be quite content with the hotels and casinos on Dorado Beach. St. John, on the other hand, is a place people come to, to be alone. That's why Walter Sherman was determined to buy a home there the first time he set foot on its shore. That's why his ex-wife, Gloria, called it St. Garbo.

This particular morning, Walter was eating his usual scrambled eggs and toast and drinking a bottle of Diet Coke. Billy stocked the beverage in glass bottles just for him. Anyone else who ordered it got some from the intricate tap system at the bar or from a can. Walter liked the feel of the small glass bottle in his hand, the fizz tickling his nose when the metal cap was popped off, and he was sure it tasted better in glass than any other way. Billy Smith liked and respected Walter as much—no more—than any man he'd ever known. It was no trouble for him to tell the Coke man to always include a couple of cases of the bottles he saved for Walter.

The standing fan, not far from Walter, turned at medium speed. A welcome cool breeze blew off the water, across the square, and into Billy's wide-open front. The small morning crowd mostly sat at the tables shielded from the bright sunshine. Many wore their sunglasses even inside, particularly those sporting the most expensive shades. If you were going to spend three or four hundred dollars for a pair of sunglasses, Walter figured, you'd be loath to ever take them off. Little did he know, some cost twice that. He was reading the op-ed page of The New York Times and taking another bite of his lightly buttered toast when he heard her enter the bar.

Fingerprints are not the only things that give people away, stamping them with a marker those able to interpret such things could recognize. Footsteps told Walter a lot. Man or woman? Big or small? Heavy or lean? Sometimes, as well, they offered clues even to character and health. What he heard now were not the heavy footsteps of a man still wearing his mainland shoes, although he'd heard that noise before and still remembered. This time his ears picked up a sound certain to be the steps of a woman. She was headed his way. Without looking up, he instinctively guessed—decades of experience acting out in his mind involuntarily. He didn't want to do this anymore. He no longer had any interest in things of this sort. But he couldn't help himself. He figured her to be tall, slim, perhaps a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet. He pictured long dark hair. Painted nails. "Christ!" he caught himself, "I must be losing my fucking mind." He didn't have time to think about age, color, or any of a dozen other aspects he always listened for in a woman. She was upon him too quickly. The sound of her heels—he was sure they were very high heels—said she walked in a manner common to many beautiful women. The length of her stride, the time between the sound of each heel clicking as it struck the floor, told Walter Sherman this woman was long legged and before she put one foot down in front of the other, her forward leg almost crossed over the line of the one behind. He could tell that and he reminded himself, a woman who would walk that way was a woman who knew she looked good. He was sure she wore pants with her high heels. How did he know that? He could hear her inner thighs rub against each other. "The sound of corduroy?" he asked himself, pleased to note he wasn't losing his hearing along with everything else.

He expected a confident, sexy woman. He was seldom wrong. He missed only one small detail. She did not wear corduroy. She wore jeans, skin tight and stonewashed. How she put them on was a mystery. She could have been poured in. She was a bit shorter than he guessed. With the advantage of her heels she might have made it to five-six. If she weighed one-twenty, he thought, it was only after a big meal. Her long, black, expensively straightened hair had begun to curl in the Caribbean humidity. Still it fell, across her shoulders halfway down her back and in front, almost to the tips of her breasts in front. She wore a dark blue, silk blouse; two but-tons open at the top. Her bra, the edges of which he could see quite easily, was dark brown with a shiny satin finish. Her outfit was a perfect complement to her olive skin. He saw all that in spite of her feeble attempt at disguise. She had on a wide-brimmed hat pulled down low on her forehead. Big sunglasses were meant to obscure her face. She did her best, he supposed, to hide in plain sight. Still, he recognized her immediately. For a woman he knew was closer to fifty than forty she looked more like thirty. She took a man's breath away and she was keenly aware of it. Walter was but a man.

"Hello, Walter Sherman," she said.

"Do we know each other?" he asked, in a warm and friendly, neighborly tone. For a moment, an instant disconnected to any other, she struck him as a brown-skinned, dark-haired, tropical in-carnation of Mae West. A playful yet confident woman. A woman on top. He looked up from his food and smiled, as much at him-self as to her. She smiled back. Walter's ears actually tingled. She smelled great.

"Only by reputation," she said. "May I?" She pointed at the empty seat next to him.

"Of course."

"You have a nice island here."

"It's not all mine."

"It's killing my hair," she said, seated comfortably atop the wooden stool between Walter and the kitchen door. She ran her hands through the ends of her tumbling locks, gently tugging at the stray ends, lightly touching, practically caressing her pointed nipples with the tips of her long, elegant fingers. Her nails were sparkling red. She looked straight into Walter's eyes as she did this. It stirred him. My God! he thought, for what man would it be otherwise? As if she knew what he was think-ing, she let the thought register then said, firmly but in a low voice, "I need your help." She opened a small silver case, removed a very strange looking cigarette and lit it. "Do you mind?" she asked. Walter shook his head, still smiling all the while. He answered her first question—I need your help is always a question—in a clear and straightforward tone. "I'm sorry. I don't work anymore."

"Me too. At least sometimes it seems that way."

"You're too hard on yourself, Miss Crystal. The last I heard, you were still a big star." She was alone. He didn't ask, but he was tempted to ask her where her people were. She was well known to travel with an entourage fit for a head of state. Wherever she went, she attracted a crowd, a good portion of it in her employ. Wal-ter was careful to pronounce Conchita Crystal's name the way she liked it, Kree-STAL, rolling the r as if he too was Puerto Rican, with the emphasis solidly on the second syllable.

"¿Habla español?" she asked.

"Tengo español en mi corazon, pero inglés en mi boca."

"Now it's you who's too hard on yourself, Mr. Sherman. But, if you prefer, inglés it is. Can we speak here?"

"About?"

"As I said, I need your help." Walter started to say something— something Conchita Crystal was sure she would not want to hear. "I'm desperate, Mr. Sherman," she said, interrupting him before he got a word out. "I've nowhere else to turn. You're the only one."

He felt the tremble in her voice, saw that look in her eyes, a tremble and a stare he'd felt and seen so many times before in the hectic pace of nearly four decades. There came a moment, even for the richest, the most powerful and most famous, when they were undone by whatever loss they were about to spill at Walter's feet. The fear, the dread, the surrender to melancholy—he could hear every bit of it in their voices, sense it in their demeanor. Conchita Crystal was no different from the rest.

"Please listen to me," she pleaded. "Let me tell you why I've come to you. Then, if you still feel you can't do anything, I'll go away. I'll understand. But, please, just hear me out." She reached over and put her hand lightly on his wrist. "It's matter of life and death—mine." She paused, never breaking eye contact with him. Walter said nothing—not right away. His knees weakened. He took a long, deep breath then said, "Not here. Take a walk. Go across the square to the ferry dock. I'll be out in a minute. Okay?"

Conchita Crystal instantly regained her composure. Walter couldn't be sure if it was her relief at knowing he would listen to her story or if that was just what she did for a living. He certainly wasn't about to come to any conclusion at this point. She nodded and smiled. She smiled—a smile he'd seen a thousand times, in TV commercials, on billboards, magazine covers, CDs, and in the movies. This smile, however, this one right now, was special. It was all his. She slid off her barstool, stood facing him, dropped her cigarette to the floor and stepped on it, then turned and left, the sound of her footsteps already filed away in his memory. It was all Walter could do not to watch her every step as she walked away. Conchita Crystal once and maybe still had the best-looking, most famous ass in the Western world.

He took a last forkful of eggs, a final bite of toast and finished his Diet Coke. He folded his newspaper, put it down on the bar, then got up to leave, following her as he said he would.

"That who I think it is?" asked Billy Smith from behind his bar.

"Who's that?" deadpanned Walter. Billy threw his arms up in mock frustration. "Hey, go for it, Walter," he shrugged.

On his way out, Walter passed a very old, stick-thin black man with a fuzzy white beard cut short and close. The old man, whose name was Ike, had a crooked, homemade cigarette dangling from his lips. Smoke completely surrounded his head, floating away in a line of blue haze, swirling out in the direction of the sea. A warm smile, one some said was always there, dominated his aged, wrinkled face. He sat alone at the table closest to the sidewalk, the one right up against the white picket fence that separated Billy's from the street. He was protected from the sun only by the Florida Marlins baseball cap on his bald head.

"That's Chita whatshername, ain't it Walter?" Ike asked.

"Yes, it is."

"Walter!" Ike called after him. "I thought you was retired."

Walter Sherman kept walking, but he turned his head back toward the old man. "You're right, Ike. I was retired."

The frail black man looked at Billy, who had moved up the bar and was now as near to the front as he could get. This time they both shrugged their shoulders.

Walter Sherman had never officially retired. He hadn't made any announcement, sent out any notices or thrown a party and invited his friends to celebrate the event. And, of course, there was no one to give him a gold watch. It just sort of happened. The last job he took was almost four years ago. After that one, he just stopped. He started saying no. People continued to come to him, continued to call. But, after the second year, they must have gotten the message. They stopped. It became known he no longer took clients. Nobody had approached him this way in more than two years.

When he quit, he told himself it wasn't because he couldn't do the work anymore. But he knew it really was. He was getting tired and his was not the kind of work to do if you weren't up to it. In his busiest times as a younger man, he never did more than a dozen jobs a year. While occasionally he caught one he couldn't wrap up in less than a month, two at the most, most of his assignments had been completed in a few weeks. Some took only days.

He'd always had a lot of downtime. So, retirement didn't call for a major personal adjustment. About the same time Walter stopped working, he stopped eating meat, red meat and pork altogether, and he limited his intake of chicken to once monthly—a special day that was. He allowed himself to eat fresh fish two or three times a week, sometimes more often. He'd been told people who ate fish regularly lived longer, healthier lives than those who forsook it for meat, especially beef and pork. That sounded right. He reworked his diet to include a lot of fruits and vegetables, rice, beans and pasta. He cut out the French fries and most other greasy, fried foods. Out with the burgers—in with the grouper. It wasn't difficult for him. Walter ate most of his meals at Billy's and those he didn't were cooked by the old woman, Clara, or since her death, by his new housekeeper. All concerned were happy to oblige his new, healthier habits.

Like most men his age, Walter had been at least twenty pounds heavier than he wanted for far longer than he cared to admit. In his first year of exclusive leisure and new eating tastes he shed them all, all twenty and then some. And he didn't stop there. He was an inch or so under six feet, and by this time in his life, sensed he'd shrunk perhaps a half-inch or more. Racing headlong to sixty, he wanted to be fit again. He was scared it might be his last chance. He started his new diet the morning his scale read 2\_\_\_\_ pounds. "Holy shit!" he thought. "Old, fat and shrinking." He never regretted the panic he felt that morning. He kept going when he hit \_\_\_\_ pounds and didn't even try to level off until he reached \_\_\_\_0. Finally, deep into middle age, he weighed only five pounds more than he did when he left the Army in \_\_\_\_\_. With that he was satisfied.

He still wore his hair long in the back. It had thinned on top, but not remarkably. It had, however, grayed considerably in the last two or three years. Still, some people continued to mistake Walter Sherman for a man younger than he was. His pale blue eyes and rugged, tan, leathery face highlighted the effects of a long stay in the Caribbean. Sure, fewer women found him attractive than had been his experience ten or twenty years ago, but he still got a look now and then. It never bothered him that the women doing the looking were getting older too. One thing he certainly didn't grow tired of was the sight of his recently reacquired flat stomach staring back at him in the mirror. He wore the same kind of clothes since he came to St. John—loose-fitting jeans, a bit baggier as the years went by, and an oversized, pastel-colored T-shirt with no pocket. He was always clean-shaven and although some mistook his casual approach toward dress for messiness, they could not have been further from the truth. A man completely comfortable in his own skin, Walter Sherman carried nothing with him. No wallet. No personal ID of any kind. No money. No habitual paraphernalia, cigarette lighters and the like—he neither smoked nor chewed gum. The key to his car was all he had on him, in his right back pocket with nothing attached. He didn't like shorts—he thought they looked silly on him—and was never seen in them. His only shoes seemed to be the old-fashioned, low-cut, white tennis sneakers. Unless he left the island, Walter never wore socks.

His cholesterol was too high. His doctor prescribed drugs to lower it. He took a little blood pressure medication too and his pros-tate wasn't the smoothly operating piece of machinery it used to be.

"I'm not as old as you are—yet," he told Ike one day. "But, I'm getting there. I piss in Morse code." The two of them had a great laugh at that while Billy was left slightly bewildered.

Retirement? Sure, why not. The time had come for Walter to call it quits. He didn't need the money. He'd done well for many years and did one unique, unforgettable job—his last one—that set him up for life. When a man named Leonard Martin began his crusade, his re-lentless campaign seeking justice for his family, all of whom had died from eating ground beef tainted with E. coli bacteria, they turned to Walter Sherman to find him. In the beginning, Walter didn't know—not about Leonard. He knew what he was searching for, but not who. Nor was he aware of the righteousness of Leonard Martin's crusade. How could he have known these things? He had been deceived. The clients he worked for were, in fact, the ones responsible for Leonard Martin's tragedy. They let it happen. They knew better. The corporate hotshots. The gang of criminals on Wall Street—the very ones who hired Walter. Millions of pounds of poisoned ground beef. They let it leave the packing plant. They let it go to store shelves. They let people—Leonard Martin's family among them—eat it. Thousands sickened. Hundreds died. They did nothing to stop it. Too much was riding on the outcome. Billions actually. They chose the risk to people over the risk to money. In the end they miscalculated. And Leonard Martin extracted a heavy price. One by one he hunted them down. One by one he killed them. Those still alive at the time hoped Walter could find Leonard before Leonard found them.

Walter found Isobel Gitlin first. An obit writer for The New York Times, she was the first to understand, to see beyond the fog and mystery. Leonard Martin was the one. For a while, Walter was her sole supporter. Together, Walter and Isobel searched for him. They searched for Leonard Martin, who was the Cowboy. And Iso-bel. It was still painful for Walter to even think about her. In the end, she betrayed him. She hurt him. He opened his heart to her and with callous indifference she thrust a dagger in it.

Now, when Conchita Crystal smiled at him and touched his wrist, he was only months shy of being fifty-nine years old. For one magical moment she made him feel half his age. Ike saw it plain as day. Finding people was a young man's game. For Walter it began when he was only nineteen. Because it seemed like a good idea at the time, Walter Sherman made the horrendous mistake of joining the Army on his eighteenth birthday. His birthday present was a quick trip to the killing fields of Southeast Asia. In no time at all he went from "Good Morning America" to "Good Morning Viet-nam!" He survived. Many didn't. It wasn't just the bleeding, the dying, even the killing. It was drugs, disconnect from sanity, loss of a moral center. Saigon, and the tall grass, did many strange things to twenty-year-old American boys. But Walter made it. A year later he saved Freddy Russo's life.

Walter found him after Russo went AWOL and was gone for a week. As surely as if he had carried the man's broken body to safety in a jungle firefight, he'd saved Russo's life. In Saigon—a world gone quite mad—if a man was AWOL more than a week, when they found him, they often shot him as a deserter. These executions were distinctly unofficial. It was easier that way. The worst of it was some of the MPs seemed to get off on it. Those who died in this fashion were always marked down as KIA—it was easier that way too—and there were many more of them than anyone back home ever knew. But Walter was there. He knew. He saw it. And that's why he went after and found Russo, who turned out to be an ungrateful little prick.

After that episode, nineteen-year-old Sgt. Walter Sherman from Rhinebeck, New York, found himself transferred, attached to Headquarters Company. There, he did nothing else but look for people. He looked for Americans, Vietnamese, anyone at all, any-one he was told to find. Sometimes he knew why. Other times he didn't. When he went after the pilot, and was gone three weeks, lost in the jungle—when the short odds said he'd never be seen again—and finally, when he emerged from Hell with enough of the pilot's body to satisfy

his commanders, Walter's legend grew. By then he had already acquired his nickname, The Locator.

In between finding people for the Colonel, he was left alone. He had nobody to report to. He simply awaited the next call. Most of the time he didn't even wear a uniform. He rented a small apartment, had a full-time cleaning lady who doubled as a cook, plus a valet of sorts, a teenage boy with a missing arm, ready and eager to do any errand Walter asked. Saigon was like a supermarket, isles jammed, stuffed, overstocked with women and drugs. Bob Dylan and James Brown serenaded the shoppers, with special guests the Rolling Stones and Bob Marley. The uniquely American cry of "Rock 'n' roll!" was more than an often-heard command. It was the sound of invasion, the march music of occupation. Walter wasn't into drugs. Sure, he puffed the magic dragon—who didn't?—but no cocaine, no heroin. Women on the other hand, were . . . everywhere, abundant, available, always there. Love you long time was damn near the Vietnamese national motto. Walter was as much a boy in a candy store as anyone. When his tour was over, he signed up for another. Nobody ever did a study of it, but many in the military believed that Southeast Asian sex was the leading motivator behind reenlistment. Another tour of Saigon's bars and brothels or back to Applebee's in Akron or Kansas City? Not much of a choice for some.

Walter spent more than seven years in Vietnam. He lived. When the war was over, he returned to America. But the war never ended. It stayed in his dreams long after the women faded away. Na Trang, Laos, the Mekong River delta. He never lost it, not all of it. It didn't haunt him as it did others, but every time he thought it was gone, all gone—it wasn't. There were still nights when he would awaken with the smell of Saigon, the stench of blood and napalm, burning huts and burning bodies—so close. Back in the United States, as seamlessly as could be expected, Walter resumed life as a regular soldier. However, there was no one left to find.

He left the Army at twenty-five and spent two uneventful years struggling to make a living back home in upstate New York. Then a distraught Colonel from Ft. Benning, Georgia, called, and Walter Sherman found his way in life. The Colonel, who had heard of Walter through another officer from Saigon, paid Walter a thousand dollars to find his sixteen-year-old, runaway daughter. The Colonel was the first of many. Although new clients had a hard time finding him, those who succeeded were not disappointed. The market sought him out. Rich, powerful and famous people needed someone they could count on to find their runaway children, drunken wives, or husbands off on a bender. Or it could have been someone else close to them, a brother or sister, mother or father, holed up a thousand miles from home with somebody they picked up in a bar. Embarrassment and scandal were to be avoided at any cost and Walter was seen as the answer to the most terrible question a public person of means could ask—Oh God, is there anyone who can help me?

Years later, in rare moments of nostalgia, he sometimes wished he'd saved at least a dollar of that first thousand bucks so he could frame it as many retailers frame the first dollar they make at their new store. Instead, he had no memorabilia. In fact, he had nothing but the money to indicate he'd ever done anything, worked for any-one, found anybody. Walter never took notes, kept no records, had no files. For the first few years he continued to live at home with his mother and didn't even have a phone of his own. He was a model of discretion and confidentiality. He maintained total privacy and offered the same to every client. In addition to his uncanny success, it was this quality of total privacy above all others that justified his high fee. He was an honest priest and forceful sheriff, both at the same time. For someone to retain his services, they had to know someone who knew someone—just to find him. He worked only by referral, only for cash, paid in advance and totally without supervision.

All that was behind him now. "I don't work anymore," he told Conchita Crystal. As Ike said, Walter was retired. Ike never knew exactly what Walter did. Neither did Billy. But Walter's friends had a pretty good idea it often involved some real danger and, perhaps—just perhaps—questionable legality. They saw the strangers who, from time to time, came into Billy's Bar looking for him. They knew something was up when

he left the island without notice and returned just as unexpectedly after a few days, a week, sometimes longer. Walter rarely said where he'd been. He never said why. Ike and Billy were sure Walter was mixed up in some very strange go-ings on. "Some serious shit," said Billy once, to which Ike had vigorously nodded agreement.

Walter was in his early thirties when he and his wife, Gloria, bought the house on St. John. In those days, Ike too basked in his prime, no more than fifty, looking and acting half his age. The two men had been close friends for almost thirty years. When Billy Smith showed up—as William Mantkowski at first—in the spring of 192, the trio was quickly established. Ike and Walter were already fixtures at a bar called Frogman's. Billy Smith, the name William Mantkowski chose after a month on St. John, bought Frogman's and as an extra bonus, he got his two best friends in the deal.

Ike now served as overseer, the wise elder, CEO emeritus of a family conglomerate of small enterprises. Together with his sons and their sons, he founded and guided everything from taxis to rental cars, charter boats to gourmet catering, specialty construction and a little politics mixed in. A widower for twenty years since his wife Sissy died, he was fiercely devoted to his family. One of Ike's sons was a senator in the Virgin Island's government. Over the years, the family businesses, which supported a large extended clan, enjoyed a warm and beneficial relationship with both local and federal government agencies. With the help of his sons and now his grandsons, Ike held court at the same table in Billy's even longer than Walter occupied the last two barstools near the kitchen.

Billy Smith had arrived on St. John unheralded and alone. It was obvious he was eager to stay that way. Finally, a few years ago Billy met someone, a bushwhacker about his age, not a bad looking woman either. She had something going for her—spunk, spirit, a take-charge attitude mixed with a straightforward friendly nature and a strong appetite for sex. Whatever it was, Helen Mavidies captivated Billy. She was just a middle-aged schoolmarm from New Bedford, Massachusetts, on a Caribbean holiday by herself, but she was certainly a woman. One day she came into Billy's for lunch and, like Ike and Walter before her, stayed. At first she was just there, Billy's sort of girlfriend. Then she began to help Billy behind the bar and in the kitchen. It wasn't long before she was pretty much running the place. Helen had moved into a small rental house, a cheap one as far from the water as a person could get on St. John. She didn't live there long. One morning Walter arrived for breakfast and there she was. Billy and Helen were an item. She moved in with him and they seemed quite happy with that arrangement. Ike told Walter he thought it was a very good thing Billy was getting some on a regular basis. "Man needs that kind of thing, you know," he said. Walter wholeheartedly agreed, thinking, "Here's the two of us who haven't got laid in so long we can't remember, talking about how 'good' it is Billy's getting some."

Billy was at least ten years younger than Walter and just a kid compared to Ike. Despite the age difference, the three men became attached to each other, tied together with a twine destined to form an unbreakable bond. Everyone knew what Ike did. His life on St. John was an open book. Everyone knew what Billy did—not necessarily what he had done or where he had come from—but they knew what he did now. And everyone had his or her own theory about Walter. Over the course of his years on the island, there had been hints, the occasional glimmer of light thrown upon his activities, enough so that Ike and Billy could worry about him and take pleasure and comfort every time he returned from wherever he went, doing whatever it was he did. They remembered Isobel Gitlin and her famous connection to the notorious Leonard Martin. All things considered, Walter's friends were very happy to see him retire.

Now, Conchita Crystal, of all people, had waltzed right into the picture, upsetting everything.

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