

**After the ending:
Jason gives Adam his next assignment
. . . to Primrose**

Red sat on the floor looking at me like she was waiting for Moses to descend from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments. In her version, of course, the First Commandment would be: *Thou Shalt Not Keep Thy Dog Waiting for Dinner.*

Her system was so synchronized with the orbits of the planets that it didn't matter what season it was or whether we were on Daylight Saving Time or just regular old time, she knew precisely to the moment when she was ready to be fed. And it was my fault—"Yes, your fault, Dad!"—if I wasn't there at the precise time, bag of kibble in arm and clean dog bowl in hand.

I had barely gotten my suitcase into the house, having arrived at SFO, picked up my car parked out in the north forty, and driven back home across the Golden Gate Bridge, then through Mill Valley to Highway 1 to here at the hoi-polloi end of Stinson. A neighbor, one of those locals who had the wisdom to buy his place back in the 1950s and hang on to it for dear life, had come over and taken care of Red every day while I was gone. Labradors are the perfect it-takes-a-village dogs because they'll eat anything, sleep anywhere, and love anybody. Sort of like a couple of my ex-girlfriends.

While Red was occupied with The Last Supper, at least insofar as she was concerned, since she ate like she hadn't eaten in a year, I unpacked and threw my clothes directly into the washing machine. I had learned from my years of living out of a suitcase that I never packed more than would fit into one load in the washing machine when I got back, so it didn't take long before I was shuffling off Punta Costa.

On the plane, I had finished uploading all the photographs I'd taken, and had organized them into selects of various subjects that I was going to FTP to Jason.

I could hear the Pacific crashing on the beach outside my back door, and I was startled by how much louder and more violent it was than the Caribbean. It all seemed like such a distant memory now. Even as I looked through the photographs, I felt like I was looking through a stranger's vacation pictures—they were all lovely and dramatic and exciting, but they had happened to someone else.

Red was already falling asleep on the floor in front of me when I quietly stood up and reached over to see what dregs were left in my liquor cabinet. I found that half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's, and plopped back down on the sofa to finish it and my work, toasting my Texas diving-and-drinking buddies, Bobby and Walt.

When my cell phone started ringing at seven the next morning, I was still on the sofa, Red now curled up next to me, and the Jack Daniel's gone.

"Hello?" I said, unsure of exactly where I was or whether I should even be answering the phone.

"Double A—amigo! Welcome back! You *are* back, aren't you?"

It was Jason Hargreaves. I swear the guy had my house bugged with video cameras.

"Jason. What a surprise."

"Oh, don't flatter yourself, you knew I'd be calling! You're here, right? You're not still down there?"

"You mean at Punta Costa? No, I'm here. At least physically."

"Well that's the only part of you I want! As long as you've got two hands to hold your camera and two eyes to see things with—hell, I'd settle for just one eye!—then I am good."

Jason could make anything sound good. He actually had a reputation for firing people and making them feel good about it—and even feeling sorry for him for having to fire them! This guy couldn't write a catchy phrase on a tombstone, but he could talk anybody into anything.

He wanted me to meet him at his office in the city to discuss my shots from this trip. So I let Red out to do her business somewhere off in the privacy of the ice plant, then took a shower, tried to smell like California again, and set off for San Francisco.

Jason's office was in one of those great old red-brick buildings on Front Street down from Levi's Plaza near the waterfront. These were all former warehouses that had served the ships that pulled into the piers along the Embarcadero, and now managed to be chic and historical at the same time.

I smiled past the receptionist, who obviously knew I was coming—she always did—and walked up the flight of stairs made from old railroad ties to the second floor. Jason's office occupied almost the entire floor, as befitting both his personal bulk and his professional stature, and the floor-to-ceiling windows looked out over the expanse of his publishing, broadcasting, and online operations below.

"You know, I was just thinking—," he said after he had me comfortably seated on his broad leather sofa and he was sprawled in his huge leather chair that looked more like a throne from a Spanish king. Then he went

silent. His eyes darted around like they were looking for something he'd misplaced inside his head.

"Yes?"

"I was just thinking," he started up again, "about what you'd brought back from the Yucatan. There was some cool shit there, dude!" Jason always talked like he had just seen *Napoleon Dynamite* for the first time. "The editorial team is laying out some stories already, I've got two producers working on a couple of specials, and we've posted some teaser shots onto some of our websites. Your work will be a catalyst to keep a lot of people employed for a long time, Adam Alex!"

"And the hacienda? Is he going to open that up to you?"

"Gonzalo? Yes, sir! I told you, remember?" *No.* "As soon as they're done with the repairs, we'll have a full crew down there for an extensive architectural shoot and a full episode of *Hidden Wealth, Hidden Wonders*." Then he leaned forward and the leather chair squealed like he'd run over a whoopee cushion. "You're still okay with that, right?"

"What?"

"With the architectural crew? You don't feel slighted that I'm sending them in there instead of you again, are you? I mean, you're not really an architectural guy—I mean, don't get me wrong, I love your eye and all that, but I believe your real talent is in bringing out the character in people and places that can't be seen with the naked eye. You know what I mean?" He sat back like he'd just sold the first Edsel.

"I appreciate your asking, Jason," I said. "No, I don't mind. That stuff is too technical for me. And I don't have the patience anymore for all the lights and fiddling around to make everything look just so. I'd rather capture it as it is."

Then he nodded that giant round head of his. "Do you know what your problem is, pal?" Now he sat up straight like a mechanical fortune teller at an amusement park ready to dispense his wisdom to a wide-eyed five-year-old. "You're a romantic." *I paid a whole quarter for this?* "You see the world as you think it should be, not as it really is. That's what makes you such a good shooter. You can take the simplest, ugliest things and bring out this hidden beauty in them."

"I should say 'thank you,' right?"

"Remember those Noxzema ads? That model we brought in from Dayton? Homely as a washboard. But when you photographed her, she became as elegant and beautiful as an eagle soaring on the wind. You did that, AA. You brought that out of her. You found that inside her. And I've seen you do it with a bowl of cereal and a can of motor oil and you name it.

That's a gift, man! How you see the world is magic—because you let other people see it that way, too!”

“That *is* the point.”

“But every magician will tell you that his gift is also his curse, right? Because you can't *not* do it, can you? The magic becomes not just something you do, but something you *are*. You can't see the world any other way.”

Now he rolled up closer to me again, practically looming over me. “That's why you fall in love with people you don't even like.” He seemed really proud of that one. “You see things inside them that probably aren't even there. That's why you drink too much, too.” *Of course!* “Because if you really looked at life with sharp eyes and a clear head, you'd see that it's not all light and color and beauty. It's ugly, baby. It's hard-scrapple and bare-knuckle.”

“What's not to like?”

He bored into my eyes. “Why do you think I succeeded? Because I was a great ad writer? No! Because I was a nice guy? No!” *Got those two right.* “I succeeded because I learned early in life how to shove a sharp blade between someone's ribs and twist it around so it caused the most excruciating pain but didn't kill. I'm speaking metaphorically here, of course.” *No, you're not.* “But the point is the same: I do what it takes to get what I want.”

“That I know.”

“Look at me, Double A—I'm a fat man. I've always been a fat man. Even when I was skinny, I was a fat man inside. You're all about the image, so you understand this. No one was ever going to love me because of my image. But they *do* love me. And you know why?”

“Because you give out full-size candy bars at Halloween?”

“Because of my power, that's why.” *Oh, that.* “Sure, maybe it's not love in the conventional sense. Maybe it's really fear or admiration or awe. But for guys like me, that's all I can expect. And at the end of the day, it's all the same. The deal is, Adam Alex, none of it is going to change. You're not going to change, I'm not going to change, the world is not going to change. So all you can do is do the best you can with what you've got, put one foot in front of the other, and keep moving forward—until you take your last step. And at that point, all bets are off.”

It was moments like this that made me miss being able to walk around the corner and head up Battery Street to Reno's for a couple of drinks. And if the person with me wanted a couple of drinks, too, so much the better. But Jason Hargreaves, that double-crossing bastard, gave up alcohol when he decided he liked himself better sober than drunk—and

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who could argue with that? Besides, Reno's had lost its magic after Reno died in 1986 and it had slowly turned into a restaurant that served drinks rather than a bar that served food.

"You're the lucky one, pal," he continued, leaning back in his chair like he'd just finished a grand dinner. "You get to deal with the nice stuff, the beauty, the grace, the pretty surface of things. The rest of us, . . . well, have to deal with all the ugliness that goes on inside." He smiled almost sadly. "Never regret your handicap, AA McCay, embrace it – you get to see the world as it should be, not as it is. Not all of us are so lucky."

I nodded and just looked into his eyes, lost on his face like the finger holes on a bowling ball. Because he was right.

"Look at what you just did. The Yucatán Peninsula, man! Beauty, beauty, beauty, that's all you saw. But beauty, my friend, has a price. And that price is sometimes ugly. That's a gorgeous jungle down there. But the people who live in it have a hard life. Do you think they get to swim in the fancy pools and eat the fresh fruit and lie in the sun all day surrounded by hot bodies in small bikinis? No! They work in the hotels, they do the laundry, they trim the plants, they work in the shops. What's beautiful to you and me, pal, is just another jungle to them."

"Does your train of thought have a caboose?"

He sat there staring at me like a parent thinking up the appropriate punishment for an errant child. "I'm jealous of you, AA, it's a simple as that." His eyes grew distant and almost glassy. "But that's probably obvious, isn't it? From the time we started working together, I thought you were the coolest guy with the coolest friends doing the coolest job. Why do you think I loved working with you all those years? Why do you think I love working with you now?" I waited. "Because I can't do what you do. I don't have a gift, I don't have a talent. I can make money, but so what? Millions of people can make money. Only a few people can take a simple photograph and reveal the whole world in it." He shook his head slowly, as if recalling a past that had left deep scars on a small boy who had grown into a very large man. Then he looked up at me and a twinkle reignited in his eyes and his lips cracked into a soft, knowing smile. "Adam?"

"Yeah, Jason?"

"I got an idea."

"Yeah, Jason?"

"How do you feel about gold?"