

**Before the beginning:
Jason Hargreaves gives Adam his assignment
to the Yucatán**

There's nothing like a dog face to greet you when you come up from diving.

Red was a yellow Labrador. That was an ex-girlfriend's idea. She was an actress. She thought the name was "casting against type." I never quite understood the irony. Nor the girlfriend. Hence the ex.

In retrospect, she might have been on to something. For a water dog, Red hated the water. She'd run along the sand chasing the foam as it rushed up the beach in long white arcs, but as soon as the water touched her feet, she'd jump like spit on a griddle.

Yet she was the most loyal female I'd ever known in my life. As I came up about fifty yards off shore, I could see her prancing along the high-water mark. When she saw me, she started barking and backing up into the sand.

Carrying sixty pounds of scuba gear and a bulky camera around my neck, it took me a little time to trudge ashore. But as soon as Red was sure she wouldn't get her feet wet, she dashed up to me, put her paws on my shoulders, and licked the salty water off my face.

"Hey, girl!" I said, trying to defend myself. "Yes, I know, I missed you, too. I wish I could take you down there with me. Come on, let's go see what we've got to eat."

We continued up the beach, me lugging my equipment and Red leaping in the air trying to grab my hand.

At the far side of the sand, tucked between two soft dunes covered with ice plant, was my place. Most people would call it a shack, which it was when it was built in 1938, but even here at the "cheap" end of Stinson Beach, it cost me every dime I could scrape together when I bought it fifteen years ago, and now it was worth ten times what I'd paid for it. Shrewd investor that I was.

I dropped my gear on the porch, peeled off my wetsuit, and pushed open the unlocked door.

Red dashed inside first, then started barking like she'd seen another me coming back from a dive.

I didn't expect Jason Hargreaves to be sitting on my sofa. "How'd you find me?" I asked with more than a little hostility.

"What makes you think you were ever lost?"

It was one of those obscure non-answer answers that had always pissed me off about this guy even when we started working together all those years ago.

“What does that sign mean, ‘Not a County Maintained Road’?”

“Why, did the gravel get your Pirellis dirty?”

“They’re Michelins. I just didn’t know you lived so far off the beaten path.”

“How long have you known me?”

“Obviously not long enough.”

I pushed past him and grabbed the towel spread across the wood-burning stove in the corner. “So I guess you still have friends who know how to find people who don’t want to be found.”

“I still have those friends. But if you didn’t want to be found, I wouldn’t have found you.”

“How is the dream business?”

He scanned the room. “I thought it paid better than this.”

Red barked in that insistent ignore-me-at-your-peril kind of way, so I hung the towel around my neck and stepped into the kitchen. “You do not want to get between her and her food bowl,” I warned him.

I poured Red a bowl of kibble from the bag, added some hot water, stirred it until it looked like beef bourguignon, and set it on the floor. I’d seen her eat spiders, lizards, and old socks before, so I wasn’t too concerned about the cuisine.

Jason had started wandering around my living room, which wasn’t a very long trip. “How big is this place?” he asked with that snooty attitude of someone who didn’t really care about the answer.

“About two million.”

“Whoa. Then I’m over-paying you.”

Two million dollars for a house wasn’t even close to getting me accepted into the rarefied social circle of Jason Hargreaves, but it did lend a little legitimacy to my fee.

“Yeah, my yacht is in dry dock getting a bigger helipad, otherwise we could’ve met there.” He didn’t think that was particularly funny, probably because he actually had friends with such problems.

He sat down on the sofa again, and it creaked under his weight. Jason was a big man with big appetites, the kind of guy who bought two seats whenever he flew commercial, which is why he never did anymore.

He leaned back against the cushion, but I could see he was having doubts about the integrity of my humble furniture. “I’m beginning to understand why Carolyn always books our meetings at my offices in the city.”

CENOTE

“You are out of your comfort zone up here.”

“Are you kidding? Friday afternoon? Sunny day? Stinson Beach? If I were still drinking, you and I would be out there cooling our heels in the water and pouring each other shots of Cuervo Gold until the sun went down.”

“If you were still drinking, Jason Hargreaves, old pal, you and I would still be at Reno’s from lunch playing liar’s poker at the bar and trying to feel our lips.”

Yeah, like those were the good ol’ days. But it did seem like it at the time. That’s what you did in advertising back then. We were just at the tail end of the *Mad Men* era, when there seemed to be no rules and no consequences. Until you realized twenty years down the pike that you’d fucked up your brain, your career, and your life.

Reno Barsochinni played baseball for the San Francisco Seals in the 1930s. He and Joe DiMaggio were teammates. When Joe married Marilyn Monroe in 1954, Reno was his best man. He opened a restaurant and bar on Battery Street at the foot of Telegraph Hill when the area was still warehouses and railroad tracks. But when the area became “agency gulch,” Reno’s became the hangout for everyone in the business. It was in a small red-brick building tucked between bigger nondescript buildings, and that sense of iconoclastic coziness spread inside. The bar was small, but big enough, and the food wasn’t great, but good enough. Pictures of Joe, Marilyn, and Reno in various combinations hung on the walls, and the dark atmosphere gave you the sense that you were in some guy’s basement. It was a great joint. And we all spent more hours there than we could remember. Literally.

I looked at Jason sitting precariously on my sofa, probably thinking back to our Reno’s days as well. “Is that a new belt?” I finally asked.

“What?” He tried to look down at his belt, but his belly got in the way of everything below the top two buttons on his shirt. He never did understand my humor. “What can I say? I enjoy my success.”

“I remember about a hundred years ago when you were just a low-life copywriter you said print was dead. ‘If it didn’t move, it didn’t sell’ I believe were your words.”

“That was yesterday, today is today. I have seen the future, baby, and it is I! Cable sells the sizzle, magazines sell the steak, and online sells everything! Once you get on my gravy train, man, I am never going to let you off.”

Jason Hargreaves was a media mogul, I guess you could say. Not like a Rupert Murdoch or one of those entrenched-family publishing

companies, but like the new-media entrepreneurs who saw content as king and distribution as just the map to every road to success.

He had done pretty well for a guy who started off his career as an advertising copywriter, and not a very good one at that. But he'd always had this knack for pitching ideas and getting other people to pay for them. So he started by investing money from a few of his friends into a failing little travel magazine that didn't circulate much beyond the Bay Area. Within a decade he had parlayed that into a family of publications on travel, food, wine, and expensive hobbies. Then he built an entire network of cable television channels in each area, and then backed it all up with online sites to book trips, schedule restaurants, buy wine, and dabble in rich people's lifestyles. It was quite a package. And so was Jason Hargreaves.

He quit drinking because he decided you had to be present to win. He was going for the brass ring, and he was afraid when his horse came around he'd be too wasted to even see the ring much less grab for it. "No sense in being successful," he'd say, "if you couldn't enjoy the fruits of your success."

And he spared himself nothing. Once he decided he wanted to cruise his own boat down to Mexico. So he went out and bought an eighty-foot Hatteras. He studied and worked and took all the tests and got his captain's license. He drove the boat down to Mexico. And when he brought it back, he promptly sold it. He'd done what he wanted to do, and he had no intention of doing it again. Check box, next!

I was sitting across from him on a straight-back wooden chair I'd picked up at a garage sale. Between us was a coffee table that matched neither the chair nor the sofa. Jason eyed a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's I'd ungraciously left on the table, then he looked up at me with scolding eyes. "I see you still haven't forgiven yourself."

I picked up the bottle and tucked it back into the small cabinet against the back wall. "Yeah, like you have."

"Fifteen years, that's how long it's been. When are you going to stop, AA?" He always thought that was clever, it being my initials and all.

"Maybe when the world slows down. Or I do."

He just stared at me, knowing that was all he was going to get. "I saw Kay the other day." He waited for my reaction. I didn't give him one. "She looked good. She had an engagement ring on her finger. What's it been, five years? I figured she'd get over you eventually."

"And you're telling me this to help me quit, is that the idea?"

"I'm telling you this because I'm your oldest friend. No, check that, I'm not that old – I'm the friend you've had longer than anyone else. Shit,

no, what am I saying?! You don't *have* any friends. I'm your *only* friend, old, young, or whatever. It's just you, your dog, and your cameras. What else have you got?"

"What else do I need? It's my living."

"Living?! You're not living! Look at this place." He pushed himself up off the sofa, much to the sofa's relief, and swept his arm around the room. "I don't care how much this place is worth, this looks like a bachelor pad. It's a mess."

"Maybe that's why Carolyn books our meetings for your offices in the city."

"You're better than this, Double A. You've got talent. You've shot more great stuff for my companies than anybody in this industry. So you screwed up your life, so what? So you can't stay married and you can't keep a girlfriend and you can't balance your checkbook and you can't cook—"

"Are you done?!"

"I'm just saying."

"I'm a shooter."

"Exactly! No one sees more through the viewfinder than you do. You've got this knack, man. When you've got that camera up to your eye, you're like a laser beam cutting through the emotional shield, searing right down into your subject's soul. Somehow you take this technology that any two-year-old can use now, this technology so mundane that it's crammed into every cell phone, you take it and turn it into art or psychoanalysis or something that lets us see what we could never otherwise see. You're a shaman, my friend, you know how to call up the gods and use the juju to capture the soul and show it to the world."

"I'm a shooter."

He rested his meat hand on my shoulder. "You know what you need?"

"A new friend?"

"A new project!"

I should've had my guard up. This was how Jason Hargreaves finagled you into doing stuff you didn't want to do for less money than you wanted to charge.

"I'd rather have a new friend."

"I just thought of this, this is great!" He was lying. He probably thought of it five years ago but was too busy counting his money to tell me about it.

He pushed me down into my chair, and stepped over to a photo on my wall. "Here, look at this," he said, pointing at it. "What do you see?"

"Brain coral."

CARLETON PRINCE

“Wrong!”

He stepped to another one. “And here, what do you see here?”

“A sea turtle eating an anemone.”

“Wrong!”

Another one. “How about this one?”

“Barnacles on the hull of a sunken ship.”

“How can someone who makes his living with his eyes be so blind?!”

He dropped back down onto the poor sofa again. “What you see here, Dear Double A, is opportunity.” That usually meant that he was going to prosper and I was going to suffer.

“I want you to take my readers someplace they’ve never been before.”

“Well, I’m not bringing them here.”

“Someplace exotic and mysterious and dangerous.”

“I just said, not here.”

“I want you to explore a place most people wouldn’t even think about going, must less have actually gone there themselves. But this is also a place that will challenge every fiber in your being, test your talent, and push you to your limits.”

“I’m not joining the Marines.”

“Here’s what I’m thinking, AA: I’m thinking the underwater caves on the Yucatán Peninsula.”