

Laughing Dolphins,  
an unpublished novel of love, art, and coincidence  
by Amber Polo

III. 1. Key West, Florida      October, 2000    Revised 02 10

Thick salty Key West air seeped through the lids of Jeff's eyes his eyes. Buoyant music and the sunny outdoor cafe rekindled memories of his carefree life in the Caribbean.

"If I never hear another Jimmy Buffett song, it will be too soon," Corin said without moving her lips.

During their long engagement, Jeff noticed how often Corin spoke with her mouth closed. "I'm sorry this hasn't been a great honeymoon." Why did he say that? It was sure to set her off.

"Jeffrey, a Caribbean cruise during hurricane season! This reminds me of that awful time leaving St. Croix, three years ago. I could have been killed. A Windjammer first mate lost his life trying to get back to his boat." She shook her head. "Besides, this cruise ship is filled with Midwestern yokels taking advantage of bargain rates."

"I'm sorry—"

"Key West, during this Fantasy Fest thing. Did you see the ads?" She leaned across the small restaurant table. "Nude people covered with paint parading in the streets. Ugh!"

"Corin, I'm sorry." He checked his map. "Let's go see Hemingway's house."

“Hemingway was a hack.”

“Well, how about one of the historical—”

“The founding fathers were wreckers. Besides, I’m sweating.” Corin patted her pale face with a tissue and re-coated her lips with a thick layer of magenta. Leaning away from the loud speakers, she brushed the iron fence that separated tables from sidewalk.

Jeff looked away down Duvall Street and his gaze followed the back of a woman on a pink bicycle pulling a two-wheeled cart oiled with painted coconuts. Her hair swirled as she swerved around a sun-burnt teenager in a bikini on a scooter. A Harley’s roar blocked the blare of yet another chorus of *Margaretville* as leathered biker leered through the fence.

“That’s it! I’m going back to the ship,” she hissed, stood, and smoothed her black silk blouse down over unwrinkled, black slacks.

In Boston, Corin looked sophisticated in black. Even her ankle-length wedding suit had been black and Jeff chose a black dinner jacket and cummerbund, hoping to disguise his bulging girth. Here, surrounded buildings, flowers, signs, and tourists in a riot of tropical colors, she looked as out of place as a penguin in a rainbow cotton candy factory.

*A Pirate Looks at Fifty* blasted from the restaurant speakers. Jeff bought the album and a copy of the book of the same name from the gift shop and mumbled, “Right, Jimmy, but I’m only forty and forty pounds overweight.”

Corin hurried out of the restaurant patio. A six-foot blond woman with a five o’clock shadow jostled her and she grabbed Jeff’s arm. “I can’t tell the men from the women here. They all wear *pink*.”

On the corner of Duval and Southard, a pink-haired girl handed Jeff a folded pink flyer and he offered it to Corin. “Look. You could get a massage.”

Corin pushed the advertisement back at him. “I’m going back to the ship and book a massage.”

Jeff stared at the logo, two dolphins and the words “Laughing Dolphin Massage Therapy,” and sputtered, “I drew that.”

“Don’t be silly.” Corin kept walking.

“I did—in art school. Look at my initials JS on the tail of the dolphin on the right—and on the left SS—Sandy Shellborn—”

“Don’t be silly. Though it does look like that disgusting tattoo you refuse to have removed.”

Corin turned away and waved to a stocky couple in billowing Mickey and Minnie t-shirts.

“You hate Martha and Oscar Weatherhill,” Jeff reminded her, as two Nike-clad shipmates bore down on them.

Corin smiled a pinched smile. “*They* speak English, bathe, and are heterosexual.”

“Hi Ho!” Oscar snorted. “You young honeymooners having fun?” He winked at Jeff.

Martha called, “Oscar saw two guys holding hands and he’s dragging me back to the ship.” Reaching into one of her shopping bags, she pulled out a painted coconut and a stack of postcards. “Look. I bought the entire stock.” She handed one to Jeff and another to Corin. Each card had a photo of a haystack. Bold red letters printed diagonally proclaimed, “This Ain’t Kansas Anymore! Greetings from Key West!”

“That’s silly,” said Corin.

“Sure is,” said Martha. “I’m sending one to everyone back in Kansas.”

“May I walk back to the ship with you?” Corin asked. “I’ve had enough heat and enough of this bizarre place.” She waved an arm through the air dismissing Jeff. “See you on board.”

Corin walked off between the two Kansans. Jeff knew he couldn’t follow her back just yet. She was in a pissy mood and he felt...wonderful. He touched the right side of his neck. A sensation like the

foam on good beer tickled down to his shoulder.

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Jeff unfolded his map and walked down Southard Street away from the crowds and traffic, past square white Truman Annex buildings, and through formal gates into Fort Zachary Taylor Park. He continued until he reached the road to the old Civil War fort and climbed onto the parapet to look out over the water. Where, exactly, did the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico meet?

The walk had been longer, hotter, and more strenuous than he'd expected. Sweating, he stripped off his dark green polo shirt and tucked the damp cotton into the waistband of his khaki Bermudas. The slap of ocean on rocks relaxed him and reminded him of that perfect beach on Virgin Gorda. He climbed down and hiked out to the breakers. Laying back on a flattish rock, he allowed his mind to drift as the surf lapped the rocks and spray coated his face.

All day he'd been thinking about Sandy. From the moment he got off the cruise ship in Key West, he felt excitement stir inside. Like being a young art student again. From time to time over the last twenty years she'd come into his mind, but this was so clear and strong. He closed his eyes, leaned back, and smelled oil paints and pizza in their Boston apartment.

On their first day of college he fell in love with Sandy and they shared their dreams and their love of art for four years. One night she told him about a trip to Florida with her dad. She swam with wild dolphins and one had become sexual. While she talked, Jeff drew the two dolphins. They'd made love laughing and vowed the laughing dolphins would always be their totems. He and Sandy were meant to be together forever...but she disappeared.

He shook his head with regret. Ten years ago, he tried to find her and discovered she'd married and moved to Cincinnati. Later, returning from the Caribbean, he had again searched for Sandy and found she'd divorced and moved to Texas. He searched the Internet, considered hiring a private

detective, then decided that he was obsessing. Telling himself to let it be and go on with his life, he asked Corin to marry him.

Then, damn it, why did Sandy feel so close now? This cruise set Corin's temper on edge and his behavior was making it worse.

He noticed that pesky tingle again. Too much sun. He looked down at his blotchy red chest and the dolphin tattoo Corin hated bright against his pasty skin. He put on his shirt to cover the spare tire that bulged over his too-tight Bermudas.

He's admired Corin since her financial wizardry turned his dotcom money into a fortune. He'd given up his computer work, and after a try at leisured life in a Caribbean idyll, he helped her expand her investment business. They'd become friends, then partners. He allowed her to sweep him up in her dreams. Back to Boston he fell into serious city life, but here in Key West, his thoughts were hugger-mugger—again. He was crazy enough to consider becoming an artist—again.

He crawled back up the rocks and took the shady path between the beach and the pine trees. "I'm not a college kid." The sooner he got back to the ship, the better.

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Jeff guided Corin through the Mallory Square crowd, carrying the copy of John Gray's *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* he bought at an open stall.

A bagpiper crossed their path, tuning his raucous instrument. Corin covered her ears. A reggae band snaked past and the last drummer swung his hips to bump Corin's. She yelped, "I smell pot!"

"Come on, Corin. Stop being such a drag," Jeff pleaded. "Let's just enjoy the sunset. Mallory Square's Sunset Celebration is world famous."

"I made reservations for four at the Hyatt. Mickey and Minnie—I mean Oscar and Martha—will be joining us."

“Why those rude people?” Jeff’s voice sounded impatient.

“Oscar sold an immense farm back in Kansas and wants me to invest his profits.” Corin looked happier than she had at any time during their honeymoon cruise. Her narrow black heels wobbled unsteadily on the brick paving stones. She looked at the milling crowd with distaste. In a long black dress with a slit exposing a thin calf, she appeared to have crashed the wrong party.

“Okay. Just walk with me a little way. Then we’ll head up Front Street to the Hyatt.”

“Fine,” Corin replied without moving her lips.

He knew it was definitely not fine. “Look at the fire-eater. And a juggler on stilts is coming this way. Did you bring your camera?”

“I will remember this day without photos,” she said, as a woman in a chicken costume dragged a leashed chicken across their path. The chicken pecked Corin’s leg and she shrieked louder than the chicken.

Jeff calmed her and found a quiet spot where they could watch the cat tamer put his housecats through their act while Corin plucked white chicken feathers from her dark dress. One of the cats jumped through a fiery hoop and Jeff whooped with delight.

“I’ve seen enough,” was Corin’s tight-lipped response.

“Look. There’s Statue Man.” Jeff pointed at the chalky-painted man holding his expression and body motionless as children tried to get him to break his pose. He lowered his voice. “I feel like I’m with Statue Woman.” Yet even with Corin in this pissy mood, he still felt good.

Martha and Oscar waved from the opposite side of the Square and Corin said, “Let’s go to dinner. I don’t think Oscar enjoys this X-rated Disney World any more than I.” She sneered as a woman in a string bikini, too sunburned and too drunk, swayed past. “I can see a sunset any night.”

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Jeff stalled.

Corin careened off, knocking against the stilted juggler who wobbled, swayed, and yelled an obscenity.

Halfway between Jeff and the Oscars, a woman, dressed in white, blocked Corin’s way and looked into her eyes. “My name is Ariel. Would you like your fortune told? You will find your love far from here.”

“I do not want my fortune told.” Corin pushed by to the safety of her large Kansas friends. When she looked around for Jeff, he’d disappeared.

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Jeff wandered through the crowd, absorbing the noise and colors of the street. He watched happy revelers and bought a copy of Clyde Butcher’s *Florida Landscapes* for the great Everglades photos and then *How To Satisfy a Woman Every Time and Have Her Begging for More*. When he reached the Hyatt and joined Corin and her two new best friends, Oscar and Martha, the dinner conversation revolved around the decadence of Key West and, in particular, the disgusting Fantasy Fest.

“Everything here is tacky!” Corin complained.

“The guidebook says only *Le Oiseau Rouge* has quality art,” Martha told her.

“My brother, Jerry, has galleries in LA, New York, and Paris. I’m sure his galleries are much more discriminating than anything here.”

“This sure ain’t Cape Cod,” Jeff noted, remembering trips with Sandy to the Cape when they were in college.

The others ignored him.

When Jerry attended their wedding, he'd brought back Jeff's memories of Boston. Jerry was a huge success and seemed to have turned back into a nice guy, but Jeff still remembered those sleazy jobs in the 80s.

"And why do the town fathers allow these homosexuals to take over?" Oscar said for the fifth time. "I'd keep those bikers out."

"Did you ever consider they might be the town fathers...," Jeff asked flatly and sipped his rumless punch, "or mothers?" The others ignored him, but Jeff was bored. He didn't care if he embarrassed Corin.

Restless, his eyes roamed the dining room and settled on a Scandinavian-looking couple at the next table. Their pale teenage daughter with neon green hair and a black dress faced him. He heard the girl say, "Dad, like get off my case. I came on this stupid cruise to please you and Mom, but you can't tell me how to dress."

"Ginnie, we let you study in Japan for a year," the prim blond woman whined. "Now finish college."

"I'm an artist, not an art teacher." The daughter rolled her big eyes and noticed Jeff eavesdropping.

He looked away, but not before she her purposely flashed her tongue ring. Embarrassed, Jeff excused himself and walked to the edge of the hotel balcony. Bagpipes, reggae, and Jimmy Buffett's guitar music swirled in the soft moist air.

Mallory Square glowed as the sun slipped behind the horizon. The crowd applauded another spectacular sunset and with a sigh, he returned to the table.

Oscar and Martha ordered key lime pie and coffee. Corin handed the dessert menu back to their waiter. "Oh, that's too rich for *us*. We're on diets."

Jeff remembered the frozen key lime pie on a stick he'd enjoyed on the way back from Zack Taylor Park. Cool, creamy, tart, and chocolate-covered. Definitely rich.

Corin stood up. "Since we aren't having dessert, we'll just pay our bill and go back to the ship." "Love birds." Oscar winked.

Corin's mood improved as they left the restaurant. "Tonight we sail for St. Thomas and I'll finally get to shop." She shook her head. "Unfortunately, we have to walk through this obscene circus to get back to our ship. I, for one, am ready to see the end of Key—"

"Remember me?" a veiled woman in white stepped between Corin and Jeff. "My friend is running for Queen of the Fantasy Fest." She handed Corin a flyer and dropped a necklace of cheap plastic beads over her head. "I'm a body artist. I painted her."

Corin's inscrutable face skewed. "No thanks," Without moving her lips, she crumpled the flyer and grabbed Jeff's arm and pulled him up the cruise ship ramp. As soon as they boarded the ship, Corin ripped the beads from her neck and threw them and the balled-up flyer into a trash container.

"I think you were supposed to make a donation in exchange for the beads," Jeff suggested, wondering why that woman in white purposely looked through him like he didn't exist. "That woman in white looked like Ariel, my artist friend from New Hampshire. But Ariel would have recognized me. Unless she was trying not to see me. Psychics are even more peculiar than artists."

"Who cares," Corin hissed.

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Jeff left Corin in their upper deck cabin and rushed back down the cruise ship passageway. He ran to the trash container stenciled "Garganantuan Princess" where Corin had thrown the flyer and beads. Headfirst, he dove in and rummaged through the garbage. Unsuccessful, he crawled out, stood, and emptied the entire contents onto the spotless deck. In the dim light, he used his foot to separate

pieces of trash. Spotting the necklace and balled-up paper, he pounced.

Moving to the rail directly under a light, he smoothed the paper on the rail. and saw the dolphins and the photo of Sandy. But it *was* her, nude and painted. Rainbow-colored scales flowed over the same beautiful body he'd known twenty years ago. He looked closer, squinting in the light, and then noticed the printing, "Vote Sandy from Laughing Dolphin Massage for Fantasy Fest Queen." It was *her*. More beautiful than he remembered. She was smiling and her eyes—.

The deck under his feet rumbled. The giant boat was preparing to pull out of the harbor. Even as he stared at the photo, the feeling of exhilaration he'd experienced since docking in Key West began to leave him. That tingle had grown into a sting of sharp needles was because she was *here*. He had found her.

And—he was leaving her.

He slipped off his sandals and pulled himself up onto the polished rail. Standing, he stared at the phosphoresce wake of the giant ship and felt himself falling.

### III. 1. Key West, Florida Revised 02 10

Sandy, October, 2000

Sandy leaned her pink bicycle against the wooden stockade fence. The painted sign, “The Healing Garden,” shook as he opened the gate. “Sorry I’m late.” She smiled over her shoulder at the dark, handsome man in a pink Corvette. Her best customer was always on time.

“I missed you.” Jerome Oberon tilted his sunglasses as he slid his long legs out of the sports car and followed Sandy through the gate into a palm-shaded tropical garden. Red hibiscus, as big as his hand, brushed their arms.

She pulled back her sun-streaked hair. “Most locals are on Key West time.” As he walked behind her, she felt him watching her push the bike and half-filled cart of coconuts. Inhaling the sweet smell of hibiscus, her body relaxed.

Jerome was different than the laidback locals. His manners were formal and he often slipped into French, although at times she thought she heard a hint of South Boston that reminded her of her college days.

“I’m not quite a local.” He laughed and raked his fingers through his styled hair. “I have been here on this almost-island only three months. My gallery is open and wish you would create real art for it. I love your sensitive style, not like those affected artists who hound me to exhibit their work. Your magnificent talent is wasted painting dolphins on coconuts.”

She shrugged off the compliment with a dismissive toss of her head as they reached a Bahamian cottage painted in traditional coral, blue, lavender, and lime green. Propping her bicycle and cart against a palm tree, she looked at the mountain of coconuts mounded next to her home. He was right.

Three years of painting coconuts was long enough.

Jerome stepped close and swept her into a hug. “I missed you all the days I was in Boston for business and for my sister’s wedding. Now, I am so busy. Fantasy Fest is bringing *beaucoup* patrons to my gallery. And soon you will be crowned Queen.” He set her down. “I love you because you are without anger and fear and full of beauty and kindness.”

She kissed him lightly and pulled back from his seductive good looks. “Just take off your clothes. Or, would you rather go inside?” she said with a gesture to her bright cottage.

“You know I like to be here next to the water. Just you, me, and the birds,” he said with a Gallic shrug and unselfconsciously removed his Key West business attire—flowered shirt, white shorts, sandals, and sunglasses.

“You don’t have to strip naked,” she reminded him, taking her bag from the bicycle basket.

“I keep hoping.” He grinned. “Everyone thinks we’re sleeping together.”

“Why would *they* think that?” Her flirtatious glance was bold, but her gaze didn’t drop lower.

Jerome arrived in Key West and fell madly in love with the city’s painter of coconuts. Sandy enjoyed his company and insights into the art world. He was charming and sexily handsome and, too lonely, had gone enthusiastically to his bed. Sadly, she realized his personal energy, though outwardly giving, drenched her creativity. When she ended their sexual relationship, he pressed her to stay friends.

Unfortunately, Jerome still held hope she’d change her mind.

She felt a flush and then a tingling under her skin on the left side of her neck, from her earlobe down to the dolphin pair tattooed above her heart. She’d never discovered an explanation for this unpredictable sensation that felt like bursting champagne bubbles. For all Jerome’s charm, she didn’t think he was the stimulus.

“*They* think we can’t resist each other.”

“Face *down*, please. I’ll start on your back,” she said with a laugh. She liked Jerome and she could see he was attracted to her. “Try to relax.” She slipped off her sandals and padded into the cottage to wash her hands and select oils and music for his massage.

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Sandy leaned forward over Chris, massaging his shoulder blades. Her old friend, who now called himself Christa, laid back in a halter-top and fuchsia capris, one of his conservative outfits. He had many friends in Key West, but only Sandy knew his history. When he worked a split-shift bartending at The Golden Cockatoo, Sandy tied her folding massage table on top of the coconuts, bicycled to the bar to massage him in the bar’s patio.

“*S’il vous plait*, Sandy. Marry me! I’ll let you call me Christopher. When your magic fingers massage my neck, I am in love.”

She pushed the tall man’s shoulders down away from his head. As requested, she had slipped Helen Reddy’s *I Am Woman* album into the bar’s sound system. Now *Love Song For Jeffrey*, one of her favorites was played.

“Come back to my place and I’ll show you my secrets.”

“What secrets?” Sandy laughed as she pulled Chris’s long bleached silver-blond hair forward and worked her fingers deeper into his trapezius.

“I have in a sealed garment bag...a charcoal Brooks Brothers suit. In case I need to travel to the mainland.” Sitting up from the table, he raised the back of his hand to his forehead. “Now, you know. Marry me, or I’ll have to kill you.”

Sandy laughed so hard she stopped rubbing his neck. Chris was bright, funny, and incredibly loyal, her best friend after fleeing a hurricane and landing in Key West. She never forgot that Chris and the blond pilot saved her. Pushing his face back into the padded ring, she replied, “Chris, I do love you,

but you'd wear my clothes.”

“Your clothes are *tres* conservative.” Chris waved long tapered fingers.

“You have to take better care of your neck,” Sandy said, working his spinal vertebrae.

“I’ve been practicing.” Without raising his head, he pointed to an eleven-foot tall object that resembled an Eiffel tower covered with feathers and sequins in the corner behind the bar. “*Tres phallic! N’est pas?* Boom-Boom promised to wire it with flashing lights.”

“*Tres* too heavy.” Sandy shook her head as she finished the massage.

“I’ll die if I don’t win the Headdress Ball competition. It will be fabulous. You’ll be the Fantasy Fest Queen and I’ll be the Headdress Contest winner. And I win a gig singing at Diva’s. I’m more beautiful than those drag queens.”

She helped Chris slide off the table. “You *are* a drag queen.”

“Performance mixologist!” Chris moved back behind the bar. “I’m still the sexiest bartender on Duval.” He raised two bottles of rum and struck a pose.

“Pina colada. Virgin,” Sandy requested.

“No problemo. Jerome and I think you must be the only innocent in town, regardless of your un-Key Westy ways, you’ll be the next Fantasy Fest Queen.”

“Jerome Oberon, the new gallery owner?”

“You think I don’t know your classy Euro friend? With Jerome and *moi* promoting your campaign, all you need is a few more donations and *voila!* You are the Queen. Jerome—that cutie—says \$5,000...,” Chris paused and studied her with a cock-eyed look. “Are you in love with *Monsieur* Jerome, *petit cher?* You can tell me, girlfriend.”

“Jerome is wonderful...but...”

“No magic? I sensed it. *Quel damage*. Were you ever in love?”

“A boy in college. A long time ago. But he’s been on my mind the last few days.”

“You wish you could find your soul mate.”

“I’m not lucky enough to find him in this lifetime. A wise teacher told me that sometimes we experience detours, perhaps until we mature enough to meet our twin flame. I believed Seva was my soul mate, but that was not to be. I think I’m a soul destined to never feel that kind of love.”

“*Quel quel damage*.”

Sandy touched the side of her neck, enjoying the champagne bubble sensation. “Tell me about the contributions.”

“Jerome says tonight’s campaigning will put you over the top.”

“I’m only doing this for charity.”

“I know. Have you had your publicity pictures taken?”

“Yesterday Ariel painted me and Jerome took photos. My pores still feel caked with gallons of paint.”

“Ariel, our good *amie*, the most psychic psychic in town, has predicted your success.”

“I trust her predictions and advice. I told her my strange tingling feelings returned. She told me to be careful, that there is someone in town I am not ready to meet.”

“Don’t worry about that. You have many, many good *amies*. You *will* win. They all want to see the *masseuse* with the *magique* fingers who paints *quelle bien* coconuts. Will you go *au naturelle*?”

“Chris! You know I would not do that.”

He wiggled his hips. “I will lend you one of my G-strings.”

“Ariel painted only my face and torso...*with* my bikini for the pictures. She is trying to convince me that a complete body paintjob is necessary to make a good—pardon the pun—showing. I have seen the naked bodies of half the year-round residents of Key West. Perhaps I will take Ariel’s advice.”

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Sandy and Jerome stood in the shadowed alley behind his Duval Street gallery. It would soon be sunset. If Fantasy Fest was Key West’s Halloween, sunset was the Fourth of July—every night.

Sandy unbuttoned her flowered dress and felt it slide to the ground. Cool air touched her painted body. Embarrassed, she bent down and picked up the dress and stuffed it in her bag .

“I’ll put the bag in the gallery.” Jerome’s eyes remained on her. “You look as frightened as a key deer. Relax. You’re beautiful.”

The dimming light, revealed how Ariel’s talent had turned Sandy’s body into a vision of a moist, silky sea creature. Her breasts shimmered with painted abalone shells, while her legs and torso appeared covered in overlapping iridescent scales. An ocean wave rose up behind the dolphins tattooed on her chest and crested along her collarbone. Her hair shone with oil and glitter around her face, glowing in subtle pastels like a mer-princess.

“Wow!” Jerome said softly. “Or, as Chris would say, *magnifique*.”

“Thanks.” She reached up and hung a necklace of plastic beads around his neck.

“Thank *you*. Now that I see you, I think tonight you will need a bodyguard more than a money collector.”

He opened a box of flyers. Sandy’s photo showed through tangled strings of multi-colored beads to be given to contributors. “I want to keep you to myself.” He kissed her softly, careful not to smear her paint. “I am sorry if I pushed you into this silly competition. In many ways, you’re so private. The parties I gave to raise money for your candidacy were also good publicity for my new

gallery. I am selfish, no?"

"No. It's for charity. The parties remind me how many friends I've made in Key West in just three years." She swallowed. "After my finale..."

"Finale?" Jerome's eyes widened.

"I'm leaving Key West after the Festival." As the words left her lips, she realized it was time to leave. "Please don't tell anyone."

"But why?"

"Here in Key West, I give massages and paint dolphins on coconuts. I'm not an artist. It is time to find a new place. Maybe in the West." She looked down the alley, avoiding Jerome's eyes.

"Let me help," he said quickly.

"How?"

"Your haybale photo postcards that said, 'This Ain't Kansas Anymore! Greetings from Key West!' were silly, but gave me an idea. Would you like to travel and photograph hay?"

"Hay art?"

"Haystack shapes are no different than lighted outdoor sculpture. I envision a traveling 'Heartland of America' exhibit featuring your photos and paintings of hayfields and rural towns. I'd pay for your travel. And..."

"And..."

"You come to my Los Angeles gallery for a grand show. And...I would not lose you. No obligations. You could stay with me or find your place in the West, far from Key West, coconuts, and dolphins."

"Your offer sounds too good to be true."

“I’m a promoter. I know the business of art.” “But now, it’s time to go to the Square.” He took a handful of necklaces and began looping them over Sandy’s head.

“What are you doing?” she laughed.

“Covering you up,” he said, arranging the beads over her breasts.

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Sandy watched the golden sliver of sun dive into the Gulf of Mexico. Hundreds of times she’d stood in Mallory Square as layers of clouds reflected an impressionist’s palette. Tonight she felt as awestruck as any tourist as she joined the spontaneous applause that cheered the sun’s art show.

Cat Man waved a salute to Sandy and stuffed his cats into their cages, stacked pedestals, and packed up his whips. The fire-eaters stowed wands and fluid into a carrying case. She twisted a batik cloth around her hips as Jerome wrapped her into her old denim jacket, then packed up the remaining flyers and beads.

Chris chatted with friends from the bar, unabashedly begging a few more dollars for Sandy’s campaign. Ariel finished her last cruise ship passenger palm reading. From Ariel’s sad look Sandy suspected Ariel knew she wouldn’t be here for many more sunsets. Of course, Ariel was psychic.

Tired and happy, Sandy watched the raucous energy dissipate as tourists and locals wandered off for livelier scenes. In a few more days, the parties and parades would be a memory. These were her friends, her community—the scruffy boat people, dive instructors, and wasted artists. “This sure ain’t Cape Cod,” she whispered.

In the freedom in this Conch Republic, the Keys felt like another country. She’d hidden here long enough.

Across the harbor the floating resort called a cruise ship pulled out of the harbor. It would be gone soon. Not her style! Wondering if she would ever find her own style or her own place, she

touched her neck, enjoying the intense tingling sensation. She remembered Ariel's warning. It was not time? But when would the time come?

End of Key West Chapter