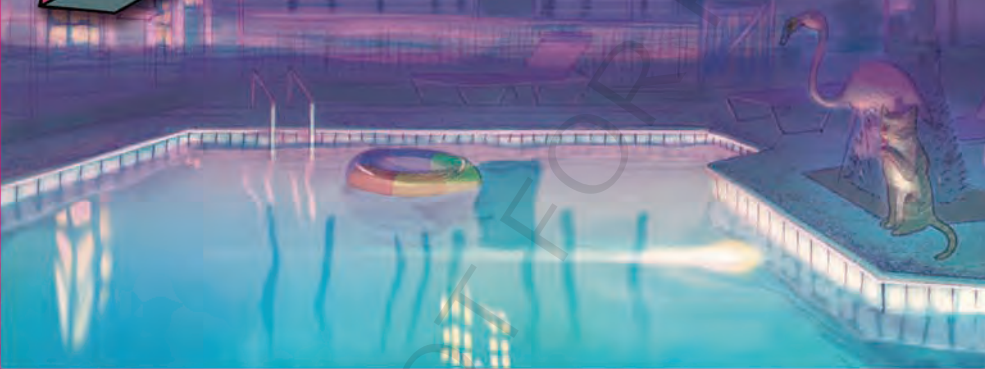
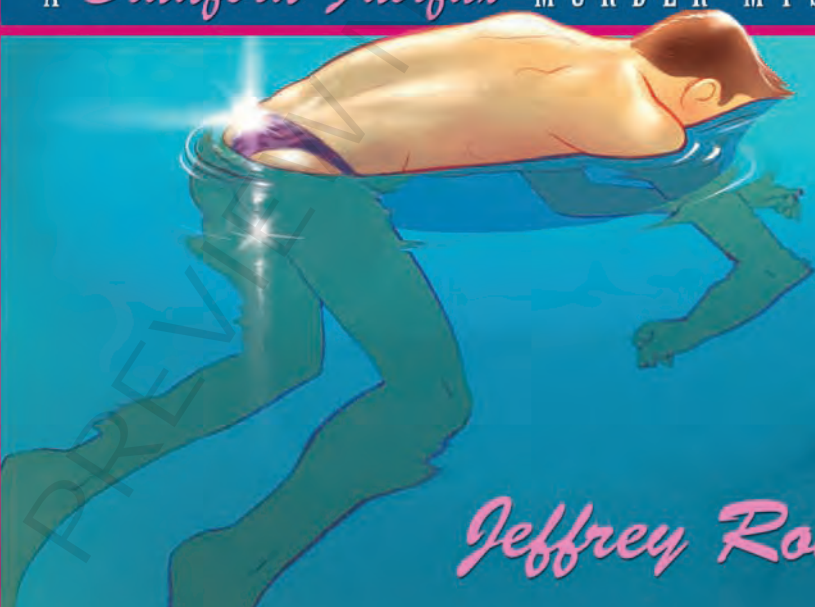


Death In
KEYWEST



A *Bradford Fairfax* MURDER MYSTERY



Jeffrey Round

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A BRADFORD FAIRFAX MURDER MYSTERY

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Cormorant Books

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For Niki, Leo, and Omel

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

The dose makes the poison.

PARACELSUS

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

1

The sun rose over paradise for the 364th consecutive day that year. It was the morning of December 30 in the Conch Republic, otherwise known as Key West. To fans of the much-lauded “Key to Happiness” in the golden days of disco, this was where the rainbow ended and the Rainbow Nation began. To everyone else it was just an overhyped tourist resort with lousy beaches, pricey restaurants, and way too many T-shirt stands. This particular year Key West had broken all records for sunshine, tourists, drag queens, and cocaine. It was about to break another for murder.

On Duval Street, New Year’s preparations were underway. CNN had recently added the famed key to its broadcast roundup of top holiday draws. To mark the festivities, celebrity drag queen Sushi would descend in a giant stiletto live and on camera at midnight the following evening. Billed as *Sushi In A Shoe*, the event had been pumped for months by the town’s promoters. The shoe in question — eight feet long and red as a baboon’s bottom — dangled precariously from a winch over the front of the Bourbon Street Pub. Two men passing beneath glanced up at the same moment.

“If the other one drops, we’re goners,” joked the younger, blue-haired man.

“Maybe size is everything,” said his companion, whose hair held more than a hint of red. “But you won’t catch me getting in that thing. It makes me nervous just looking at it.”

“It’s not that high. Even if it fell, it would just land on the platform beneath. The most you’d do is hurt your tush.”

“My tush is sacred territory,” Bradford replied.

“Amen to that!” said Zach, heartily slapping his boyfriend’s ass.

The twosome had arrived for what promised to be an enjoyable respite in one of the world’s most charming gay resort towns. From the looks of it, the weather had no intention of ruining things now.

Brad’s cellphone rang. He arched his eyebrows at Zach. There was only one person it could be. The call might just spell the end of their trip before it had begun. Reluctantly, Brad put the device to his ear.

“Red here.”

“Hello, Agent Red. How’s the weather?” said a familiar smoky voice.

“Weather’s fine, Grace.” Brad looked overhead at a panorama of pure blue. “Sunny skies as far as the eye can see. How is it where you are?”

“Apart from a light dusting of snow, it’s been a heavenly day. I might even get in a bit of skiing this afternoon.”

After nearly five years of working for her, Brad had no idea where his enigmatic boss holed up on a day-to-day basis, nor did he have the slightest inkling of what she looked like. Old or young. Black, white, or Asian. Who could say? From time to time during these phone calls he thought he detected a slight English accent nestled amongst her clipped syllables, but today there was nothing to suggest a place of origin. Nor did her tone

carry any hint why she might be calling. Brad looked at Zach and shrugged.

“Don’t worry,” she said, as though picking up on his thoughts. “I haven’t called to interrupt your vacation. I just want to wish you a safe and happy New Year. Even special agents get to have fun. I expect you back tanned and relaxed in a week.”

Brad winked at Zach. “Happy New Year to you, too! I hope you get time off for a bit of fun, as well.”

“Oh, I will. I’ll be sitting in front of the fire with a glass of sherry and my five Afghans: Aubrey, Bert, Bethany, Hosanna, and Willie. It doesn’t get any better for me. By the way, I see CNN is covering your little resort tomorrow night. I might even turn on the telly and keep my eyes peeled for familiar faces.”

“I’ll be the intelligence agent skulking on the corner and smoking two cigars.”

“All the best, Red.”

Brad pocketed the phone and grinned at Zach. “Just when you think you know your boss! She’ll be sitting by the fire with five Afghan hounds watching for us on CNN tomorrow night.”

“That’s a relief. I thought you were about to be rerouted to some foreign hot spot where the only thing they celebrate at New Year’s is reactor-grade plutonium and nuclear fission.”

The pair continued down a tree-lined street. The air was warm, the light bright and silvery. They stopped in front of a white-framed conch house.

“Here it is!” Brad exclaimed, as though the hotel’s appearance had caught him by surprise.

The Lighthouse Estate was one of those legendary gay resorts Brad only wished he’d stayed at as a young man, in the days before he could afford such luxuries. Now that he’d crossed irrevocably

into his thirties, he felt duty-bound to introduce Zach, a whole decade younger, to the landmarks of his past. He was passing the torch of their cultural history.

Zach studied the demure entrance hidden behind dozing ferns. “This looks like a fun place,” he said, shouldering his bag as he climbed the steps to the office.

Inside, a large man with a ponytail sat behind a desk. He blinked up with owlish eyes, giving Zach the once-over at least three times.

4 “My, my, my!” he stuttered. “A blue-haired angel! Can heaven be far behind?”

At that moment, Bradford tumbled through the entrance.

The manager clasped his heart. “I swoon!”

Brad grinned. “With a greeting like that, I dare say we’re going to enjoy it here.” He heaved his bag off his shoulders and onto the floor. “We have a reservation under Bradford Fairfax.”

The manager sucked air through his teeth. “Where many would love to be, no doubt.” He straightened his glasses and consulted the register, then looked up at Zach, his face an open portrait: *Compassion Shining Love on a Homeless Orphan*. “And this charming youngster would be Master Zachary Tyler?”

“None other,” Brad said.

“Enchanting! My name is Allie.” He fanned himself with his hand. “I hope the water in the pool won’t evaporate from the heat y’all are generatin’ right now!”

“We brought our new bathing suits!” Zach exclaimed.

Allie looked at him askance. “Whatever for? I’m sure y’all have nothin’ to hide.” He tsked. “Anyone caught wearing bathing trunks at the Lighthouse Estate gets whipped publicly — with my tongue. So behave accordingly, gentlemen.”

Allie handed over a set of keys and a brochure. As Brad bent to pick up his bag, the manager clasped a hand to his cheek.

“Oh, salvation!” he cried.

Brad followed Zach down a walkway to a compound of pink and white stucco suites where a dozen naked and near-naked men lounged on deck chairs under the blazing sun. A tiny kidney-shaped pool loomed before them, as did the spectre of the pool boy languidly skimming debris from the water. At six-two and 195 pounds, Travis Webster was about as big and delectable and pouty as a pool boy could be. His muscles were toned, his mouth cold, and his eyes killing. A permanent woody bulged through his Speedo. Brad looked him over. All that attitude in one package, he mused. Hard help must be good to find.

On seeing the twosome, the pool boy flashed his best trouble-in-mind grin. “Greetings, fabulous dudes! Good to see you! Travis is the name. All the best for the New Year!” He gave the newcomers a casual assessment, dividing them into *Could Be Had With A Little Effort* (the red-head) and *Don't Even Bother Trying* (the younger, blue-haired kid). He cracked his knuckles loudly. “Come down for a massage later,” he said. “I got great hands.”

Brad and Zach skirted the pool and climbed the stairs to a cheerful second-storey suite overlooking the courtyard. They unpacked quickly and re-emerged on the verandah. Luxuriant palms surrounded the estate, while a flock of small green parrots jabbered and flitted overhead. Below, the pool rippled in the morning sunlight.

“Ready for a li'l ole naked swim?” Zach teased.

Before Brad could reply, an angry squawking rose from the courtyard.

“I'll kill myself!” a voice threatened.

They bent toward the scene. At poolside, two men appeared to be fighting. A pale, handsome man flailed his arms at a larger, muscular brute.

“Don’t touch me!” screamed the first, evading the other man’s grasp.

All eyes were on the pair as they raced around the pool. It was hard to say if this was a lovers’ quarrel or an out-and-out assault. Brad suppressed the urge to run down and get involved. Surely the big pool boy would intervene.

He didn’t.

They watched the twosome struggle briefly before toppling over and landing in the water with a gigantic splash.

As the pair rose to the surface, Brad saw his decision had been wise. The man who had been screaming in a suicidal rage moments before suddenly broke into wild laughter. His companion pulled him bodily from the pool and deposited him dripping onto a lounge chair.

The laughter continued as the dark-haired man stood over his hysterical companion. He raised his hand and slapped the other’s face hard. The laughter died.

“Pull yourself together!”

The thin man broke into sobs and wrapped his arms around the big man’s legs.

Brad and Zach glanced at each other in surprise. The pair were definitely caught up in their own little drama. Whatever it was.

Ten minutes later, slathered in sunscreen and wrapped in matching towels, Brad and Zach descended to the pool. The men who'd created the recent disturbance were nowhere to be seen. The courtyard had resumed its holiday cheer as waiters in shorts and tank tops roamed the deck offering cool drinks and visual refreshment. At that moment, however, all eyes devoured the hunky pool boy who was busy massaging a body lying spread-eagle on the tiles.

Brad and Zach deposited themselves at an empty table. A waiter glided past and then quickly turned back. He knelt before the newcomers, letting his finger trace the horse head tattooed on Zach's taut abdominals. "Giddy-up, cowboy! I love horseback riding ... with a saddle, of course."

The finger roamed across to a tattooed pair of wings emerging from beneath the waistband of Brad's towel. "You give flying lessons? Up, up, and away!" he cried, before finally getting around to the business of taking their order. "What'll it be, gentlemen?"

Brad had cut back on his regulation two-a-day gin-and-tonics for the past few weeks, the better to indulge now. But with one ill-timed downward glance at his thirty-one-inch waist and the barely noticeable finger of flesh protruding over the top of his

towel, his hoped-for alcoholic rewards were blown to smithereens, just when he should have been celebrating.

“Uh, just a Virgin Mary,” he mumbled.

“Still saving yourself for me!” the waiter cried. “I’m thrilled.”

“Things seem pretty friendly around here,” Zach noted as the waiter headed back to the bar.

“You know what they say: one finger’s friendly, two’s a proposition,” Brad admonished.

He raised his eyes to the massive lighthouse looming over them from the estate next door. Along with Key lime pie and Hemingway House, it was one of the island’s top attractions.

“Now that’s impressive,” Brad said, unconsciously crossing his legs beneath the towel.

The man receiving the massage under the pool boy’s hands looked up. He had the perky charms of a young Mickey Rooney. “Quite the phallic symbol, isn’t it?” he squeaked. “Ernest Hemingway used to stumble home dead drunk from Sloppy Joe’s every night by following that thing.”

Brad smiled. “Amazing how this place has always been a gay magnet.”

“Oh, but Hemingway wasn’t ...” began the other, then stopped himself. “Oh, you’re right! That thing with F. Scott and the pillow ...”

“And all those picadors.” Brad rolled his eyes. “I mean, really!”

“You’re so right!” The man winced under Travis’s hands. “The silly things we’re taught in grade school ... goodness me!”

Travis looked up from the finger marks he’d been leaving on the man’s shoulders. “Who are those guys anyway? This whole island’s like, ‘Hemingway-this’ and ‘Hemingway-that.’ One of them owns a really big house right across the street.”

“Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald were a couple of alcoholic writers,” Brad said. “And at least one of them was a closet case. Fitzgerald wrote the best novel ever written and then drank himself to death; Hemingway won the Nobel Prize and committed suicide a few years later.”

Travis regarded them, his jaws working his chewing gum. “How come all the really cool people are dead?”

“That’s a good question,” said Brad.

The man lying on the towel sat up and extended a hand. “I say, Ted Goodfellow ...”

“Brad Fairfax. And this is my partner, Zach Tyler.”

“You’re a New Zealander?” Zach asked.

“Very good, young fellow! Yes, a Kiwi through and through. Everyone else just assumes, well ...” Ted indicated the others with a fluttering wave, as though unsure exactly what they assumed of him. His chipper accent made him seem unbearably enthusiastic, as though he might break into song without provocation. “Did you witness that sorry, uh ... whatever?” He indicated the scene that had recently occurred with a waggle of fingers, as though such an atrocity could scarcely be described in words.

“Spectacle? Commotion? Confabulation?” Brad offered.

Ted nodded vigorously.

“Burlesque? Curtain raiser? Harlequinade ...?” Brad went on.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Ted laughed. “The Wonderbuilds, don’t you know ...” Once again he trailed off, as though he were incapable of finishing his thoughts, or, quite possibly, as though he thought Brad did know all about “the Wonderbuilds.”

Just then the waiter returned with a tray of tall glasses, their rims sporting miniature bodybuilders wearing miniature cock rings and holding miniature parasols. Gay, gay, gay! Brad thought.

Zach took a sip of his drink and stood. "I think I'll go for a swim."

His towel unravelled and dropped to the deck. As it hit the tiles, there was a collective intake of breath around the pool. Zach was spectacularly built to begin with — the rower's arms and taut pectorals, the springboard abdomen, smooth thighs, and traffic-stopping calves. And then there was that horse's head etched across his abdominals suggesting who-knew-what adventures? One could only imagine. But to top it all off with *that* was just too much!

Unlike so many other penises, impressive only in their moment of glory, Zach's didn't shrink to an acorn when off-duty. It carried a look of exuberant expectation, like a sail on the verge of swelling with every passing breeze. Its command was hypnotic, as though you'd been out shopping at the supermarket and happened to look up to see a prince sporting an aubergine.

Brad was used to it, but he'd nearly forgotten its effect on others. As Zach stood there, half a dozen men began to find reason to rise from their deck chairs and stroll toward him, pausing for a downward glance that lingered far longer than necessary.

"Your boyfriend's a hit," Ted noted wryly.

Zach walked to the pool and dove in, his blue hair surfacing at the far end. Six more men casually dropped their towels and waded into the water as nonchalantly as possible.

Brad turned back to Ted. "What was that about the Wonderbuilds?"

"Oh, you know the rich," Ted said with a dismissive waggle of his fingers.

"Yes, apparently they're different from you and me," Brad said.

Ted barked a short laugh. “Oh, yes, quite! Very good, Mr. Fitzgerald!” He looked around the pool conspiratorially. “It’ll be good to have someone literate around. This is a ghastly lot. All they know are stock prices and the latest Celine Dion lyrics.”

“I’m a Callas man myself,” Brad sniffed.

“Bravo! We’ll beat down the heathens together.”

Brad turned to the pool where his boyfriend was surrounded by bobbing admirers. Zach caught his look and waved.

“Speaking of the rich and ghastly,” Brad heard Ted say.

Ted was staring at the far end of the courtyard. The two men who’d recently been arguing were approaching now, holding hands and smiling as though nothing out of the ordinary had just occurred between them. The larger of the two was a quick study in Nautilus — a Vin Diesel knock-off, but with hair. His companion had the airy look of a James Dean grown to adulthood, as surprised as anyone to discover himself in his mid-thirties, having miraculously survived the recklessness of youth.

On their way past, the thin man stumbled against Brad’s table. His comrade righted him with a sturdy grip as he looked around, disoriented.

“Mama needs another drink,” he said, putting a fey hand to his temple.

“Madame does not need more alcohol,” replied the larger man in an eastern European accent as thick as marmalade.

His companion shielded his eyes from the sun and pouted. “Then I really will kill myself.”

From the far side of the pool a voice boomed. Heads swivelled to see Allie the manager, hands planted on hips like an enraged

Shelley Winters, regarding the disruptive pair. Had she but a bridge, the pose suggested, there would be no fury like her fury.

"I told you to keep that fucking drunk out of here!" Allie screamed, more valkyrie than the flirtatious coquette who'd greeted Brad and Zach on their arrival.

"I'm not a drunk, you horrible scow!" snarled the drunk.

For a moment it looked as though there might be a scrap between the two, one of whom outweighed the other by at least a hundred pounds. All heads were raised expectantly: here was an entertainment of sorts, a divertissement to be recounted and embellished at dinner. ("Oh, Harold — the scene! That big hairy number at the front desk nearly tore some scrawny queen limb from limb.")

The accented man eyed his unstable companion, tightening the grip on his arm. "You must behave!" he hissed. "There are other guests here."

The pale man looked around the courtyard as though seeing the others for the first time. "So there are," he murmured. He wagged a few loose fingers at the gathering. "Halloo, people!" he called out.

Allie scowled.

"He is behavink now," declared the dark man, nodding to the hold he had on his companion's arm.

"Well, he better keep on *behavink* or he'll be out on his ass again," snarled the estate's manager. He turned and stomped back to his office.

"He truly hates me," wailed the thin man. "I think he's never forgiven me for setting the place on fire last year!"

"Excuse us, please," the other said, steering his unsteady

companion across the tiles toward a deck chair like a man dragging a reluctant shadow.

Definitely a pair on a collision course, Brad thought, making a note to avoid them at all costs.