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Paradise Never Lasts

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PARADISE NEVER LASTS

HECK HAD RETURNED from lunch near the courthouse and was drafting a will in his office at 1 Sarasota Tower when he heard a voice in the hall, boisterous as a man ordering drinks after last call.

“You can’t go in there,” his assistant said from the other side of the door. “You need an appointment.”

The paneled door opened, and Loudon strode into the room with Heck’s assistant close behind.

“I couldn’t stop him, Mr. Hilbrand. He’s not on the schedule.”

“I’m always on the schedule.”

Heck turned his legal pad over, and Loudon dropped into a tufted leather chair.

“It’s all right, Pete, I have a minute. Take a seat, Loudon.”

For anyone else, Heck would have added, “Make yourself at home,” but Loudon Potter Townsend was not anyone. He was the man for whom, nine years before, Heck had scuttled his life and abandoned his career. Like an athlete past his prime, Loudon was thicker at the waist but with the same insolent grin, his hair windblown as though he had been sailing all morning, navy shorts embroidered with lobsters, loafers supple as bedroom slippers. He could dress like a man of no consequence because he had always been and would always be rich.

“What can I do for you?” Heck asked.

“So this is where the magic happens, where cases are made and writs are written?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“I tried calling.”

“I’ve been busy.” Heck shrugged his right shoulder. “You know how it goes.”

“Not necessarily.”

Though he served on several boards and committees, Loudon had not been employed since a brief stint with Lehman in 1996. When Heck had seen him last, he was investing in foreign markets and, in his words, pursuing personal interests.

“I’ve come to apologize, Heck.”

“For what exactly?”

“For being the man I used to be. I’ve been making some changes lately— not drinking as much, not bouncing from one man to the next. I bought a place in Southampton and sold the rest. I’m putting down roots and changing my act. Since the old man passed, I’ve been working the twelve steps.”

Heck leaned forward as though his jacket were weighted at the pockets.

“Which one is this?” he asked.

“Making amends— seven or eight. I’m having trouble with accepting a higher power.”

“I was sorry to hear about your father.”

“You were the only one he ever asked about. What happened with the lawyer? He always wanted to know.”

“You’re looking at it.” Heck raised his hands to indicate the modest office with its framed degrees and stacks of books, dark paneled walls, and hand-knotted carpet. The partner’s desk had belonged to his favorite judge, Henry Friendly, the finest never to have been appointed to the Supreme Court, cluttered with paper clips and bank statements, binders and folders and printed precedents.

“It’s nice,” Loudon said, “charming almost.”

“It’s no Hogan Sterling.”

“They wouldn’t take you back?”

Heck shook his head.

“Your father warned me, but I wouldn’t listen.”

The last time Heck had seen Mr. Potter Townsend, the old man had grabbed his arm, his eyes lashless and stern. “Once you step out of bounds,” the old man had said, “there’s no getting back in the game. Don’t get me wrong. I love my son, but I know precisely how far to trust him.”

“So no Polk and Bartlett?” Loudon asked. “No Milbank and Plimpton?”

“Three years without working, and no one would take me in.”

Heck had knocked around Boston for a time, then dated an antiques dealer in Charleston before moving to Sarasota to care for his mother, who died several years later. Now, he was running the will and trust division

at Parker Harriman, protecting gay and lesbian clients in ways the federal government and Florida Constitution could not legally deny them.

“Do you miss the big time?”

“Every so often,” Heck said, “but I gave up those ambitions.”

“Gave them up for me, you mean.”

“I understood the risks. My eyes were open.”

Loudon studied Heck’s books as though assessing his selections.

“It was fun while it lasted, though, wasn’t it, Heck? Remember the first time we met at that house party on Martha’s Vineyard with that girl, what was her name again?”

“Polly Popham.”

“Whatever happened to her?”

“I don’t know,” Heck said. “We haven’t spoken in years.”

“You were sitting at that empty table by the band, looking bored and handsome, and I came over and said, ‘Where do you suppose they keep the good gin?’ Then I took your hand and dragged you through that tacky mansion in search of some.”

Heck could feel the old pull like a wave towing him under, Loudon brazen and entitled, rummaging through cabinets and desk drawers while Heck guarded the door, heart hammering in his chest, convinced they would be discovered and thrown out. He had never been chosen before, never plucked from the crowd and swept into an estate with Warhols close enough to touch, the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay propped

between Michener's *Hawaii* and Uris's *Exodus*. He stared at the gleaming statuette as Loudon dry-humped him against the wall and kissed the hollow of his neck.

Loudon set down a glass paperweight and picked up the framed letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Louis Brandeis he had given to Heck one Christmas.

"I'm glad you haven't sold this."

"It's the nicest thing I own," Heck said, "maybe second-nicest."

He raised his left sleeve to reveal the platinum watch with the narrow black band and gleaming rectangular face that he had seen one afternoon in Boucheron and which Loudon had purchased the next morning in secret.

"I gave it to you over dinner," Loudon said, "and you told me to return it."

"It was too much. I never asked you to buy it."

"That was the point. Everyone else was always asking for something—money, favors, access—pressuring me into agreements, guiltting me into some harebrained investment. But not you, Heck. You never pushed me like that."

"I should have pushed you in other ways."

"It wouldn't have worked."

"You never know. Things might have been different."

"I was too far gone, too determined to visit every dark room and

bath house. No place was too seedy, no trade was too rough. Remember that club in Amsterdam, those men in Berlin?”

“I remember everything.”

In the beginning, they had visited these places together, following men into steam rooms, fucking strangers in slings, traversing concrete floors slick with cum, but within months, Heck was sleeping alone in hotel suites, waking most nights to Loudon fumbling with the lock, drawing murderous sounds from the throats of young tricks on the couch while Heck pretended to sleep. In Barcelona, Heck turned on his bedside lamp to find a man looming over him, tattoos like razor wire, hands rough from plaster work, his face too handsome to resist. In Berlin, Loudon shook him awake, pointed to two leather-clad behemoths and asked, “Do you wish to partake?” The next morning, their passports were missing along with nine thousand dollars in cash.

Heck pushed his chair back and looked out the window at the lot where the John Ringling Hotel had recently been flattened, nothing but rubble and sand. When he first moved to Sarasota, a circus performer had walked a high wire between the hotel and the Watergate without harness or safety net. Loudon leaned over the edge of the desk.

“I shouldn’t have taken you to those places, Heck. I shouldn’t have kept going when you asked me to stop. I should have known you were enough. You were always enough.”

“That’s nice to hear, but you needed nine years to figure that out?” Heck squeezed his watch band, which sometimes stuck to his wrist. “What

happened? Do the boys require more than drinks to come up to your room?”

“You’re not making this easy.”

“That depends what this is exactly.”

“This is me asking for another chance. I was only happy with you, Heck. No one else matters when I look back. Those cities and clubs and men were only distractions. I took forever to realize the obvious, yes, but I want to be with you again.”

Loudon took hold of his arm, and Heck’s heart began racing, his ears ringing as though some distant alarm were sounding. He concentrated on slowing his pulse. Nine years he had been hoping Loudon would appear with an improbable overture, some reckless declaration, never once considering what he would tell him.

“I’m seeing someone,” Heck confessed.

“You mean this man?”

Loudon gestured like opposing counsel to a tarnished silver frame on the windowsill— a middle-aged man on the grounds of the Biltmore, red-haired, broad-shouldered, grinning, the former Longhorns lineman who kissed Heck in the morning and texted every afternoon to see how he was doing.

“His name is Benjamin.” Heck felt he was betraying him, merely saying his name.

“The devoted boyfriend?”

“Most of the time.”

Sometimes Ben walked Lido Beach in the evening and came back with vague explanations. Sometimes he clapped his laptop shut or turned over his cell phone when Heck unexpectedly entered the room. Heck knew he was up to something when he left the house in a ball cap and showered immediately upon returning.

“Are you domestic partnered?” Loudon asked.

“We are not.”

“Will you ever?”

“I doubt it.”

Loudon turned the silver frame on its face.

“Sounds like trouble in paradise.”

“Paradise never lasts,” Heck said. “You taught me that.”

“So what do you have in its place— a historic bungalow west of the Trail, some little dog to care for?”

“You’re not far off.”

The dog’s name was Dexter. He slept at Heck’s feet and shuddered in dreams as though rooting out squirrels. His picture slipped into the cards at Christmas. Dexter with sleigh bells. Dexter with antlers. Dexter in Santa hat. Loudon had a talent for making the smallest things seem laughable in his presence.

“The house in the Hamptons is right on the water,” Loudon said, “ideal for dogs and watching leaves change and going outside without burning. When was the last time you took a vacation?”

“Two years ago. I had a heart attack and was compelled to take a

break.”

“How are things now?”

“Better, I guess. I exercise more and don’t drink as much.”

“You look as good as the day we met.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

Heck buttoned his jacket over the bulge at his waist, and Loudon touched his shoulder.

“What do you say we get out of here? I’m in the presidential suite at the Ritz. It’s right across the street.”

“I have this will to write,” Heck said. “I have meetings all afternoon.”

“Cancel them.”

“I’m already behind, but I appreciate your coming.”

Heck stood to shake his hand, and Loudon grabbed his waist, sliding his thumb down the bumps in his spine, brushing his lips against his throat. Nine years and two months, and he had not forgotten what Heck liked—the open mouth at the neck, the wide hand at his chest. Heck closed his eyes and was back in the finest rooms in Europe, upholstered chairs heaped with clothes, empty bottles clinking on lacquered tables, sheets creased with the shameless things they had done to each other, the dank smell of room service on the floor.

“Let’s go to my place.” Loudon’s voice was low and compelling. “We can start over again, do things right this time.”

“It’s too late for that.”

“It’s never too late. Not as long as we’re breathing.” Loudon pressed his groin against him, and Heck’s legs began trembling. “It’s still the same,” he said. “It’s been waiting.”

Heck steadied himself against the sharp edge of the desk.

“I have these obligations, these wills and meetings.”

“I never took you for a coward, Hilbrand.”

“I’m not a coward. But how many times can a man demolish his life and expect to build it back again?”

“I don’t know,” Loudon said. “I’ve been asking myself the same question.”

The gloom in Loudon’s voice surprised him. It had been the same on a winter night in Boston when they were first dating and Loudon confessed that, because every option was available to him, he was incapable of making a single lasting decision. He was like a boat adrift in the ocean. Heck imagined them together at sea on a beautiful schooner, drinking champagne with nothing to anchor them, at the mercy of the wind, Loudon’s nostrils crusted with cocaine.

“I’m sorry,” Heck said, extending his hand.

“I’m not here for the handshake.”

“It’s all I can offer.”

“Spare me the prep school manners,” Loudon said. “I want the guy who would fuck at a moment’s notice, who gave with all his heart.”

“You left him in Europe.”

The paneled door opened, and Heck’s assistant poked his head

into the office.

“Pardon the interruption, but Mr. Weinstein wants to move your meeting to three o’clock.”

Heck touched the silver picture frame, its plush velvet backing.

“That would be fine,” he said, his voice cracking.

“I should get going.” Loudon looked down at his shorts as though they embarrassed him. “You know where to find me should you change your mind.”

“The Ritz Carlton,” Heck said. “Or somewhere in the Hamptons.”

Loudon nodded as though agreeing to something— to never stop waiting, Heck imagined, or never stop wondering what might have been. He went out the door, loafers scuffed at the heels, and was gone. Heck’s assistant pulled the latch into the strike plate behind him, and Heck was alone with his work and books, the overturned picture frame. He sat down to the letter he had been reading from a client writing his will for the first time, his eyes tripping over the graceful handwriting, passing each line several times:

Here’s the list of assets, the life insurance, the Morgan Stanley account, the cars, the boat, the house on Roberts Point, everything in my name and owned outright. It all goes to Brandon, of course. Only, I have one small request. I understand this is a legal document, but is there a way to put in writing how much I cared for him and how much he meant?

Heck unfastened the watch Loudon had given him and marked the time on the last blue line of his billing ledger: 1:46. On a yellow legal pad he wrote: *The best times were with him, they could only have been with*

*him, waking beside him each morning, our bodies touching, it's all that matters
in the end, it's all that lasts . . .*

Heck's heart felt tight in his chest. He took a shallow breath and set down his pen—not wanting to keep going, not wanting to note that he had stopped.