

Night Jasmine

Lisa Gaines

“Do it.” Michael’s throat fills with bile, the bitter fluid choking his vocal chords so he can hardly speak. He doesn’t want to have this conversation. He’d rather burrow beneath the bedcovers – hide away from the world – instead of perching on top like a flighty bird.

But hiding is not an option.

He swallows.

Swallows again.

A tender Hawaiian breeze stirs translucent curtains, whispers softly in his ear, teases his nose with sultry fragrances. Out on the white sandy beach children laugh and scream at the ocean tickling their toes. Further out a sunken coral bed breaks the rolling seas into blue-green curls adorned with ribbons of diaphanous foam.

If he looks hard enough, squints in just the right way, dark shadows can be seen in the lifting waves. Sometimes a harmless sea turtle.

Sometimes a roving shark.

Sharks aren’t always confined to the sea, Michael muses, thinking about the man on the other end of the line. Can he, Michael J. Rose, really go through with this? Go through with the plan that – a week ago – made perfect sense?

A better man could. A man with courage and strength.

Michael knows he’s a coward – with a capital “C”. No matter how hard he tries to bury the yellow-bellied beast – climbing K-2, night diving in Australia’s Blue Hole, eating raw puffer fish, even worming his way onto the volunteer fire department back home – he can’t get away from the fact that hidden under all those layers of bravado is a freaking chicken.

That’s why he has to hire someone else to do his dirty work; why he can’t pull the trigger himself.

“There’s something you ought to know,” the man says.

“Look, I know we’ve only got two days left on our vacation, but that should be enough time.” Chicken or not, Michael has to stay strong. For Amy. For the children.

The scene outside the window smudges as he squeezes the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger and clears his throat. “I gave you our itinerary. Just remember – it has to be an accident.”

The receiver slips from his hand on the way back into its cradle. Michael stares at the twisting white cord wishing for the thousandth time there was another way.

But after a zillion wrong choices and a shitload of bad luck, he’s out of a job and out of options. He scrubs his sweaty palms back and forth against the soft nap of the terrycloth robe provided by the Maui Beach Hotel. Picks white fuzz from the robe and rolls it between his fingers.

White robe.

White towels.

White sheets on the bed.

The hotel’s way of assuring that stains from the previous user could be bleached from the fabric.

Too bad it’s not that easy to bleach stains from a person’s life.

Mouth like desiccated liver, he turns back to the bar he’s almost sucked dry. Hell, he couldn’t even pick up the damn phone without ransacking the pathetic hospitality bar. Took three shots of Tequila Gold and a Heineken back to get his hand around the receiver and dial the number he memorized what seemed like months ago.

“You’ve been drinking again.”

Guilt sends Michael’s heart into overdrive. He spins around fast, too fast for his alcohol-numbed brain, and almost loses his balance.

Amy stands in the bedroom door. She’s wearing the new turquoise bikini he bought her yesterday – a splurge they can’t afford, just as they can’t afford this vacation. The suit fits her just right in spite of the slight pudg she hates, the same pudg he’s always found sexy. Especially when she’s been tanning for almost two weeks.

“Just a little,” Michael winces as his words slur. He straightens. Takes a deep breath and carefully enunciates his next sentence. “We are on vacation, right?”

He steps across the ivory carpet, the plush nap tickly soft beneath his bare feet, and pulls his wife into a fierce embrace.

“How ‘bout ordering room service?” he murmurs against her hair. The still-damp strands

smell like night jasmine. So does her silken skin. Amy's favorite fragrance. A gift from the gods.

"You know we can't afford room service," Amy protests. She leans her head against his chest and slides cool hands beneath the hotel robe.

"Don't you worry your head about expenses. Not while we're on vacation," Michael gently chides. He inhales the flowery scent. "Everything's already taken care of, remember?"

He presses his lips to hers, devouring her taste, her feel.

The expensive swimsuit falls to the carpet, victim to his needy, greedy, oh-so-guilty hands.