

## CHAPTER 1

Only a few months into the nine-to-five life and Jack McCoul was sweating more bullets than he ever did running a con. Working hard was hard work. Commuting to an office. Making payroll. Fighting off creditors. And that was only the half of it. The mobile app space was the wild west of high tech. Thieves showed more honor than start-up founders did. When he was on the grift at least he knew who was trying to stab him in the back. By the time Friday night rolled around, all he wanted to do was dive into a shaken, not stirred martini and hang onto the toothpick to keep from drowning.

Jack hoped Katie was mixing the cocktails as he rode the elevator to their San Francisco loft, but when he opened the front door, he got a bigger surprise than biting into an olive with the pit still in it. Bobby Ballena was sitting on the couch with Katie's feet on his lap.

"What's with the suit, bro? Someone die?" Bobby's grin shined as bright as a halogen light. His tan was deep and his curls sun-bleached at the tips.

"What happened to you?" Jack fired back. "Mistake saddle soap for sunscreen?"

Bobby laughed and kept rubbing Katie's arches.

Her smile was the same as when she was eating crème brûlée. Jack noticed right off she was wearing the periwinkle pashmina scarf he'd given her in Kathmandu. But it couldn't be. He'd left it gagging a monk the night he and Bobby stole a 400-year-old solid gold Buddha from a mountaintop temple.

"Hey, babe. Bobby bring you a gift?"

The usual sparkle in Katie's green eyes were softened by a dreamy look as she stroked the kitten-soft neck warmer. "Bobby remembered how much I loved the one I lost in Nepal. Isn't he sweet?"

"As Himalayan honey," Jack said.

Katie spread her toes and settled deeper into the leather cushions as Bobby started working her heels. The reflexology chart said they were connected to the stomach. Jack knew that because she had a life-size body map pinned to their bedroom wall. It resembled the Africa page in an atlas with all sorts of colored patches on the shoulders, back, and feet. Katie was big on massage therapy. Acupuncture, too. It was all part of her holistic approach to medicine and matrimony.

"Bobby's here on business and I told him he didn't need to stay at a hotel," she said. "He was telling me about the school he started in Baja. He teaches kiteboarding and lives in a house on the most beautiful beach in the whole wide world."

"Second most," Bobby said. "First is the one you're always looking for."

Katie oohed.

Vintage Bobby. He was always smooth with the lines. Jack wondered what he'd say about the pashmina. It was no coincidence he showed up with it. The scarf was going to cost him. The question was, how much?

"I'll go make drinks," Jack said.

He stopped off at the bedroom to change into a pair of jeans and a camp shirt. Solid black, no palm trees, and no hula dancers—not ever. A suit wasn't his natural skin but he'd been in court all day trying to block a crew of patent trolls from muscling in on his app. Bobby wouldn't have understood. The closest he ever came to a straight job was back in high school when he sold popcorn at a theater on the weekends. He lasted a month before the manager fired him for skimming all the little salt packets and selling them to shut-ins at a nursing home.

Jack checked his phone for messages on the way to the kitchen. He was hoping for good news from his patent lawyer

but it was still radio silence. It was the latest in a string of setbacks that came with bringing a killer app to market. There was no escaping them—angel investors throwing their weight around and software glitches that popped up with more regularity than drinking one of Katie's prune juice and flax seed smoothies. Even with online banking there was always another report to print out and tax form to submit. Death wouldn't come either from being on the wrong end of a swindle or shanked in prison while stacking time; it would be by a thousand paper cuts.

He decided against shaking martinis into stemmed glasses. Bobby was sure to make some wisecrack about his new domesticity. *Oh, is it martini Friday, dear?* he'd say with a tone. It wasn't too far from the truth. Once Jack was without a care in the world, traveling wherever the next opportunity lay and earning a rep as one of the best artists in the game. But he'd given it up when he got married. Well, most of the time.

Now he settled for special occasions with special names to make them stand out. Like *date night*. Jack couldn't remember when Katie started calling it that. It was probably her best friend Laura who came up with it. She was always reading blogs on how to make marriage work. It was a full-time job for her since she'd hooked up with a Silicon Valley venture capitalist. Katie rushed to Laura's defense when Jack commented that she was another one of Dexter Cotswold's trophies to go along with his mansion and annual membership to the Forbes wealthiest list. "You have no idea how hard she works to keep him happy," she said.

Jack whipped up a pitcher of margaritas. He dumped some pink sea salt Katie professed was cardio friendly onto a paper towel as the blender whirled, wetted the rims of three thick tumblers, and twisted them into low-sodium drifts the color of pale roses. The shine on the sterling silver serving tray didn't get past Bobby.

"Man, have you come up in the world," he said. "No more swilling *chhaang* out of a wooden bowl?"

Katie sat up. "What I wouldn't give for a taste of

Himalayan home brew. Those were the days. I can still remember when Laura and I walked into that adorable teahouse in Kathmandu and found you two sitting there. Certainly a lot more hunky than any of the mountain climbers. What a trip. What an adventure. Waking up to first light hitting the peaks. The smell of incense in the temples. The prayer flags fluttering. It was all so magical.”

She sipped her margarita. It left a yellow caterpillar inching across her lips. “Let’s go back right now. Jump on a plane and go. No more excuses.”

Jack reminded her about the lumpy beds and squat toilets to head off Bobby from saying something cute about how that could land them in a Nepalese jail for the next twenty years.

Katie’s arched brows mimicked a pair of minks getting ready to pounce. “Don’t be so negative.” She patted Bobby’s knee. “Jack’s been under a lot of stress since he started his new business. He’s all serious all the time now. I’m trying to get him to do TM.” She paused. “I’ve always wanted to go back but time got in the way. You know what I mean?”

Bobby nodded. “Time doesn’t stand still. People do.”

That sent Katie oohing again. Jack took a gulp and wished he’d doubled up on the tequila. He noticed Bobby was playing with the periwinkle fringe on the scarf. The wool came from hardy goats that lived on Mount Everest. It was only a matter of time before Bobby got around to telling him why he’d risked coming back to San Francisco.

“What about some dinner?” he said. “I can fire up the grill.”

Katie’s brows arched again but this time into question marks. “Didn’t you get my text? We’re going to Laura and Dexter’s tonight.”

Jack nearly spit out his drink. He shot Bobby a look but the thief was preoccupied with wrapping the pashmina’s fringe around his fingers. “Whose idea was that?”

“Mine, of course. I called Laura to tell her Bobby’s back in town. She’s dying to see him.”

“I’ll bet.”

Katie went to get dressed. As soon as she closed the bedroom door, Jack started right in on Bobby. “How long have you had it in the works?”

“Had what in what works?”

“Whatever it is you’re planning.”

“Who says I’m planning anything?”

“You think you can drop in and I’ll suit up like old times? Wave that scarf around and threaten to tell Katie about us sneaking out of the hotel and hitting the temple, me taking her scarf in case I needed a mask, not thinking I’d have to gag a monk with it.”

Bobby wagged a finger. “Which technically you didn’t need to do it since all the monks there cut out their tongues.” He gave an exaggerated shudder. “And I thought some of the stuff they made us do at Saint Joe’s was twisted.”

“You’re forgetting. I’m legit now. I got a mobile app business.”

Bobby shook his head. “Katie’s right. *Señor Negativo*. You need to chill out, bro. Do some transcendental meditation like she says.”

“Well I’m *positivo* you’ve got something planned. This isn’t about seeing your old girlfriend and reliving Nepal. It’s about Laura’s husband, who Dexter is, and, more importantly, what he’s got.”

Bobby gave it a few beats and then his eyes turned sly. “And from what I hear it’s plenty.”