

Second Chances

The setting sun cast wisps of red, yellow, and orange across a crystal blue Key West sky.

I arranged a pair of pastel Adirondack beach chairs to face the dazzling spectacle. Kate strolled toward me on the sand, a rum punch in each hand. Her short blonde hair hid in the shade of a floppy straw hat, while her sexy curves teased through a back-lit sundress.

I sipped my drink through a straw and grinned.

This was my Rev.2 honeymoon. My kids had grown, my business was skyrocketing, and I was ready to give matrimony another go. Kate had persisted through a practice marriage, too. Now we were, hopefully, far wiser.

She took a seat next to me and slid off her sandals, murmuring, "God's light show." Her toes teased at my flip-flops.

"We'll have to thank Dave for suggesting this place." My business partner had a talent for such things. He'd also arranged my bachelor party in New Orleans, where we'd set new mayhem records on Bourbon Street.

A seventy-five-degree breeze carried reggae beats from our hotel bar. After the sun had sunk below the horizon, Kate led me back for another round of drinks. It was, indeed, a happy hour.

The bartender, a blonde in her forties whose face had seen way too much sun, greeted Kate like a long-lost relative. "Back for more? This must be Ed." She extended her hand. "I'm Mary."

Without asking, Mary refilled our drinks. "This one's on the house." She leaned over the bar, showing cleavage that I did my best to ignore. "So, whatcha got planned for the week?" She waved a hand at the empty stools facing the bar. "You should crawl the Duvall Street bars. That's where everyone else is. Irish Kevin's sing-along is a blast."

Kate patted my arm. "We're kind of old for that. Besides, we have an early morning fishing trip tomorrow, a gift from Ed's business partner."

Mary poured herself a seltzer. "Which boat? I know them all."

I pulled Dave's gift certificate from my pocket. "It's called 'Second Chance'."

Her eyes lit up. "You know the story?"

Kate shook her head. "Story?"

"George, the captain, doesn't talk about it much." Mary pulled up a stool on her side of the bar and got comfortable. "Twenty years ago, the boat was called 'Take a Chance'. It was owned by George's dad when George was just a kid." She dosed her seltzer with a shot of Scotch. "Long story short, it got hijacked. The bastards shot the dad and threw him overboard. Another fishing

boat's crew found his body. A few years later, the boat was confiscated by the Coast Guard—part of a drug bust—who returned it to George's mother. It's been refurbished and appropriately renamed—can't blame them."

I had questions about the hijacking, but didn't want Kate to dwell on the details. She was anxious enough, this being her first boating experience.

Kate tied a knot in her cocktail straw, one of her nervous tells. "This will be our first fishing trip. I was nervous before, now..."

Mary smiled. "The wild drug days of Cuba have moved to Mexico and points south. George has a dozen years under his belt without an incident. He's an ex-boxer. You'll be in good hands."

"Thanks for the story, Mary." I slid a twenty over the weathered bar. "I'd like to find the boat tonight, so we don't lose time in the morning."

"She pointed to the waterfront. "It's on the next-to-last pier, opposite Doc's Seafood." As we left, she yelled, "Tell George, Mary says hello."

We strolled towards the bay. "You sure you want to do this tomorrow?"

Kate drew a deep breath. "Just my luck, Dave would get a refund and be insulted. Besides, that stuff all happened long ago."

It was a tough decision. *Best to let it percolate.*

On the main pier, we wove through the flower-shirted crowd past souvenir shops, bookstores, and frozen key lime pie stands until the pull of southern rock—The Allman Brothers' "Jessica"—drew us into Doc's Seafood. The five-piece band covered the song perfectly.

Our enthusiastic waitress strolled ahead to a just-vacated waterside table. "Gotta try our world-famous blackened grouper." Her voice echoed from my drinks.

When the band returned from a break, I made my way through a maze of tables to the stage and tossed two twenties into the tip box. The lead vocalist, a Caribbean queen, acknowledged with a double eyebrow raise. "What can I do for you, honey?"

"Can you play *At Last*? It was our wedding song, and we're on our honeymoon."

She bent down and pinched my cheek. "For forty bucks, sugar, I'll sing whatever you want. What's the lucky lady's name?"

When the song was dedicated, Kate squeezed my thigh under the table. Damn, things were getting better and better. I hoped our great meal distracted her from Mary's story.

After dinner, we moved on to find *Second Chance*. I laughed to myself. It figured that Dave would pick *his* idea of the perfect wedding gift. Never mind that neither Kate nor I had ever fished. But for the money he'd spent, we had to give it a try.

Boats offering everything from sunset dinner cruises to booze-island sailings to fishing of all kinds lined the dimly lit dock. Some looked like they'd sink at the slightest hint of a breeze. In minutes, we found her: a thirty-five-footer, old but well cared for.

In the moonlight, her freshly varnished mahogany trim cast reflections that shifted with each swell of the bay. Kate stared wide-eyed at the bridge. Mary's story replayed in my head, and my morbid imagination filled in the details. A tingle climbed my spine when a creak came from below deck.

Kate stepped closer to me. "Did you hear that?"

"Relax. These old boys are full of creepy noises." I couldn't look upset. "Hell, I squeak and groan too."

We meandered back to our hotel holding hands in silence. If Kate didn't want to discuss the story, I wouldn't push.

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The dreaded alarm went off at six. Kate was already washing up in the bathroom. I fed my hangover two aspirin, anxious to gauge Kate's mood.

Kate pulled on some jeans and sat on the edge of the bed. She gazed through our balcony doors overlooking the dark harbor, a worried pout on her lips.

I leaned over and kissed her. "Why don't you lie out by the pool and relax this morning? I'll be back by one-thirty for a nice lunch. Then I'll brag about the monster that got away, or whatever you say after paying through the nose to fish."

She wrestled on a white SPF 50 dry-skin top. "I want to go. Dave's gift was for both of us. It's just that I dreamt last night..."

Kate slowly shook her head, as if revisiting a nightmare.

"Want to talk about it?"

"It was like Mary's story, only we were there too. I was certain we were going to die along with the captain."

"I'm surprised I didn't dream about it too." I held up the brochure Dave had given me. "Don't worry. This will be so easy. They'll strap us into our royal fishing thrones, and they'll do all the work. Hell, we don't even need to get up for beer. They might even give you a pot to piss in."

Kate gave me one of her *grow-up* side-eyes as we left the room and walked to the elevator.

We stopped at the lobby bar and grabbed croissants and coffee to go. The Second Chance story crept back into my mind.

Our fifteen-minute walk to the boat felt much longer. Kate's hand tightened on mine and, once again, she was pensively silent. I worried.

#

George was in his mid-forties, with forearms like Popeye's, veins as thick as soda straws. As he helped us board, his weather-creased face broke into a wide smile. "Welcome to my yacht," he offered in a mild southern drawl. "My skipper called in drunk today. Gotta find me a new one." He flipped his hand as if to deflect our worries. "Next four hours, you're not allowed to lift anything heavier than a sandwich. You'll need all your strength for those bad boys waiting to jump on your hooks."

Little did he know that those were the least of my concerns. Kate's dream spooked me.

He pointed to a louvered mahogany door. "The head's down there. You familiar with nautical potty rules?"

A flock of seagulls screamed at each other over a school of baitfish. Kate's eyes widened. "Toilet rules?"

The same as in my friend's RV. "If it's pee, leave it be. If it's brown, wash it down. Just try to conserve flushes."

George nodded. For his entertainment, I added, "... and flush nothing larger than a small casaba melon."

Kate elbowed my ribs. "You'll have to excuse him. He flunked finishing school. By the way, Mary from the Marriott sends her regards."

George didn't answer. He was busy untying mooring lines. Once we started our crawl through the no-wake zone, he yelled back, "Ah, Mary... she no doubt told you the history of this boat."

He pointed to a plaque on the louvered door. There was a picture of a little boy, maybe ten, hanging by his heels from a scale. An older version of the kid, likely in his thirties, stood beside his prized catch, both smiling ear-to-ear. "That's me and my dad—meaner than a swamp gator with a twisted sense of humor."

"As you know, this used to be his boat." He pointed to the upper cabin. "I keep my rifle up there in case of trouble—you know, like sharks."

Kate squeezed my arm and whispered, "His father looks so familiar."

Before she could continue, George yelled, "Hang on!" and took off into the Atlantic. We faced backward in our fishing chairs and spent the next forty-five minutes bathed in sea mist as 350 horses churned up an aquamarine plume. Forty knots skipped us over the small waves. I was relieved to see Kate's wide grin. In the morning sun's heat, the spray raised goosebumps on my arms.

Everything changed once he cut the engines, and we slowly bobbed into a drift. As George baited our lines, Kate's face began to pale.

He handed her a glass jar of sunflower seeds and a bottle of water. "My dad always said, 'Keep stuff goin' down, and bad things won't come up.'" His voice cracked a little near the end of the sentence. "He always had a mouthful of these seeds on what he called his queasy days. Swallowed them shells and all."

Kate chewed on a few and, after a minute, spat them into a tissue. "Sorry. These things grow in your mouth! Got anything else?"

He handed her a bag of pretzels and cast our fishing lines behind the boat. As he adjusted our chair positions, three porpoises broke the water to the right of the ship. I pointed them out to Kate, but she was looking worse by the minute.

George noticed too. He turned her chair to the side. "Pick a spot on the horizon and focus on it. That always helps."

Kate turned green and stared into space. George stood by her side. "Listen, this is your private charter. Say the word, and I'll turn back."

She shook her head. "Thanks, but I'll try a little longer."

I had empathy nausea and went down to the head. After a few forced heaves, I realized I wasn't really sick. I sat on the wooden toilet seat, worried about Kate. She really wanted to make this fishing trip work. *I'm going to put an end to this mistake.*

Glad for my decision, I zipped up and left the closet-sized john.

I was greeted by a silver pistol aimed between my eyes. A tall, slim man in his thirties was on the other end. His sleeveless T-shirt and torn-off shorts were soaked. He held up his index finger with his other hand and whispered with a slight Spanish accent, "Shush. Do what I say, and you get to live."

My pulse pounded in my ears as I scanned the cramped space, looking for a fishing knife or other gear that could be weapons. Clamped to a wall, a six-foot pole with a hook at the end had potential but was too far away.

From a dark corner on the other end of the boat, a second guy stood from a crouch. This one was short, well-built, and wet from head to toe. He waved his pistol at me. "What do we have here, Tito?"

They must have been hiding down here all night. Stubby came behind me and poked the muzzle of his gun in my back. "Walk up there smiling if you know what's good for you." He pressed the gun tighter.

As I emerged from below, George laughed. "What took you so long. You sick too?"

His smile vanished when Tito pushed me aside and aimed his pistol at George, who slowly raised his hands.

The stubby guy threw his arm around Kate's shoulder, pointing his weapon at her head. He glared at me and yelled. "Make a move, and Chiquita is dead."

I slowly raised my hands. "I don't want any trouble. Are you after money?"

Both intruders looked at me with raised eyebrows.

George turned his eyes to the cabin and moved his lips as a signal to keep talking.

I stalled for time. "We're on our honeymoon and have lots of cash back at our hotel."

Stubby smiled at his cohort and shook his head. "Not our plan."

In a lightning-fast move, George slammed his elbow into Stretch's wrist with a sickening crack. The guy's hand whipped downward, and the gun dropped to the deck. George kicked it to the other side of the boat.

I tracked it. I'd be shot before I could reach it. *Maybe later.*

George dashed up three steps to the cabin and reached for his rifle. A gunshot echoed, and he dropped to the floor.

I glanced at Kate, who had her hands over her ears, shivering despite the heat.

He can handle himself. I hoped George had dove under cover and had retrieved his rifle by now. I strained to hear his next move, but the sea's sloshing was the only sound.

Stubby waved his gun at Kate. "Go join your man. Either of you moves, you're both dead."

The following minutes were an eternity of helplessness. *Jesus, has lightning struck twice?*

Tito grimaced and followed his pal up to the cabin. I prayed for the clatter of a scuffle.

Someone yelled in Spanish, breaking the thick silence. George's limp body tumbled down the stairway. Blood covered one shoulder and ran down his chest. As he rolled, I could see the blackened hole in his neck.

Stubby stepped over the body and waved me over. "Hero man is dead. Listen and live. Help us feed him to the sharks."

Kate slid down to the deck, head tucked between her knees. I whispered, "If they wanted us dead, it would have happened by now." I stroked her hair and shuffled towards the body.

We carried George to the side of the boat. I scanned the water for other vessels and sharks. Nothing in sight.

"On three," Stumpy grunted the count. I closed my eyes and tossed the feet over the railing. The splash echoed in my head. Bright lights flashed under my eyelids, and my legs collapsed.

Kate screamed.

When I came to, I lay sprawled beside her on the deck, my wrists zip-tied together.

Tito crouched beside us, right hand hanging at a strange angle. "Calm down, we don't want to hurt you. Let's get you some food, and we'll keep you safe." He nodded toward me and winced. "I heard you're worth some bucks. Once we get paid, we'll let you go."

I wondered how much research they'd done on me and hoped Dave had nothing to do with this. He was always the perfect partner—always trustworthy.

Below deck, Stubby made us ham sandwiches. Neither of us ate. He shrugged and propped us against a large chest that hummed and smelled fishy. I assumed it was a bait box. Fitting. We were bait, too. He wedged a folded blanket behind our heads like a pillow, used more zip-ties, and several coils of heavy rope to lash us against the chest. He warned us to keep quiet and returned to the upper deck, closing the door to the steps behind him.

We sat in the dark with only thin rays of light piercing gaps in the doors above. The wet, coarse wool itched my neck. Kate wiggled closer. I whispered, "Are you OK?"

The pole-mounted hook caught my attention. I tried to free my hands, but the ties dug into my wrists.

Kate rested her head on my shoulder. "Can you believe this? Just like in my dream, except with George's father. He looked just like the picture with young George."

"Maybe you took in that picture subconsciously when we checked out the boat?"

"Yeah, maybe. But it was pretty dark for that. It's freaking me out."

All I could do was reassure her. "This is a kidnapping. Dave will come through for us even if he has to borrow against the business."

She sniffled. "He'd better. This fishing trip was his fucking idea."

The gentle rocking stopped, and the engines revved. We were on our way to wherever. I nudged Kate. "While we can, let's try to get some sleep."

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We awoke to thunder. The boat rolled violently from side to side. Flashes of lightning and sprays of salt water came through cracks in the stairway doors. Frantic footsteps pounded on the ceiling. Two shrill screams pierced through the thunder and roaring wind. I leaned against Kate for warmth to no avail—an eerie chill wrapped around us.

The rolling stopped for a minute, then the wind howled, and we began to spin. Centrifugal force whipped everything on the floor to one side of the cabin. Fishing rods fastened to the bulkheads broke loose and crashed against the floor.

Three more sets of screams, then everything went silent. It all stopped—the wind, rain, lightning, rolling, spinning, screaming—as suddenly as it began. Between my feet lay a bait knife, blade up against my ankle ties. *What the hell?* One push and my legs were free.

We lay very still, waiting for someone to come down. The doorway above creaked open, exposing a serene piece of cloudless sky. My heart fluttered. Aside from the hush of a soft breeze, the space above the door was silent. I whispered, "Let's cut free and surprise them when they come down."

Over the next ten minutes, transferring the knife between us, like a party game, we cut free.

Kate and I huddled together, dripping in seawater. We stared at each other, waiting for something to happen above. A draft blew down the steps. She sniffed. "Smell that?"

The odor was familiar. "I think it's ozone. Must have come from the storm."

She inched toward the stairway. "Yeah, but with some sweetness. What the hell went on up there?"

Neither of us ventured a guess.

Aside from the water gently lapping at the side of the boat. Kate said, "It's like we're in the twilight zone."

Hoping that the kidnappers blew overboard, I grabbed the pole-mounted hook for good measure and gave the knife to Kate. She followed me to the main deck.

We climbed to the top step and paused. A soft, warm breeze bearing that strange odor swept down the staircase. I glanced in all directions. Not a soul in sight. We followed the smell to the other end of the boat. Kate halted suddenly and looked away. I gasped, "Holy shit!"

Our two captors' bodies were posed at the weighing station; Stubby hung from the scale by his heels, terrified mouth wide open, tongue hanging.

Next to him, Tito was lashed to a pole, head turned at an impossible angle, face stretched into an eerie half-smile. His spine poked through the skin of his neck, and his arm hung from a rope, pointing to his cohort, just like in the photo. At his feet was the empty sunflower seed jar.

Kate forced a peek and whispered. "Meaner than a swamp gator with a twisted sense of humor."