

SAMANTHA ARRIVED AT O'HEARNES PUB almost an hour early. Unfamiliar with Redondo Beach, she wanted to give herself ample time to find the hole in the wall Ross had suggested. Mostly, she wanted to avoid overshooting the location and winding up in Long Beach. Years as a resident of the greater Los Angeles area had not improved her navigational prowess, a fact Ethan Maxwell often teased her about.

She took the 405 South and wove through the heavy flow of traffic, then exited onto Artesia and headed west towards Aviation Boulevard. Once on Aviation, she spotted the 7-Eleven and signaled. The little pub nestled unobtrusively after the convenience store. She pulled into the parking lot and breathed a sigh of relief. Without the instructions Ross had e-mailed her last night, she would have never found the place.

A paint-oxidized Toyota Starlet and an old Jeep Scrambler were the only other cars in the compact parking lot. Neither looked like something Ross would drive. She checked her appearance in the vanity mirror, applied her red lipstick, pressed her lips together, then flipped the visor shut. Stepping out of her BMW, she scanned her surroundings just to be safe. Not exactly her type of neighborhood.

"Don't be such a snob, Sam," she admonished herself aloud. She retrieved her purse and briefcase, shut the door, activated the alarm, and stepped into O'Hearnes via the side entrance.

Thick, stale smoke assaulted her as the door closed behind her. She coughed and waved her hand in front of her as if such an act would chase away the carcinogens and gift her with fresh air. To the left of the hazy room stood a long black bar. To the right, a worn regulation-size pool table. A pool stick rack separated the men's and women's restrooms. Tacked beside the rack was an enormous poster of Julie Swanson—bikini-clad and prenuptial—holding a bottle of imported premium beer. A multicolored jukebox crouched against the far wall.

Despite the near-empty parking lot, patrons peppered the establishment. Some sat at the bar, keeping to themselves as they nursed drinks and produced more smoke. Others hunkered among a series of six booths against the far wall. Samantha wondered if Ross had pulled some elaborate joke on her.

She approached one of the black vinyl barstools, leaned her briefcase against its chrome base, and placed her handbag on the counter. Her slim-cut pencil skirt impeded her ability to ease onto the stool, so she backed into it and lifted herself up with the heels of her hands.

She heard a snigger, then, "You just know a man decided the appropriate height for the average bar, am I right?"

A surreptitious side-glance identified the voice as the bartender.

"Most times, I don't have that problem. Even on the odd occasion I wear a skirt like yours, I've got a few inches on you. More in stilettos."

The female bartender stood nearly six feet tall, with impressively long blonde hair. She glided over to Samantha, a slow sway to her hips as she dried a beer glass with a damp rag. When she spoke, the cigarette between her lips bobbed up and down. "What can I do ya for?"

Samantha smoothed her skirt, then reached for her bag. "A Rob Roy, thanks."

Why Ross had refused to meet at her office, she did not know. If his intent was to avoid suspicion, she could have suggested any number of alternatives. Two business executives in a place like this would stick out like the summer sun during Barrow, Alaska's winter solstice. Fleeting, she wondered if Jameson was playing his old games.

The possibility did not faze her. She kept a careful watch on industry standings. LSI was losing its foothold. When Ross called the night before to announce his sudden visit and asked to see her as soon as possible, she had sensed an air of urgency in his voice—an urgency only those people close to Jameson could possibly understand. Maybe he needed a job.

The bartender slid a small square napkin in front of her, then placed her drink on top. "Here you go. One

Rob Roy. Should I start a tab?"

She smiled and nodded. "I appreciate it. I'm meeting someone."

"You got it."

Samantha sipped her drink and tried to get comfortable. The place was a far cry from Spago's. She crossed her legs, squared her shoulders, and jutted her chin to the leering advances of the gentleman three stools down.

"Oh, good. You're early, too." Ross approached her from behind. Without so much as a proper greeting, he waved her toward a booth and muttered his order to the bartender. He looked over his shoulder at Sam. "Did you order lunch?"

"This place serves food?" She collected her bag and briefcase, tossed them into their booth, then embraced him before slipping into her seat. "I'll pass."

Ross's brief yet troubled smile reminded Samantha how long it had been since they had seen each other. Although always in impressive shape, he looked frazzled, beaten down, and—sadly enough—as if he had finally surrendered. It disturbed her to think, had she stayed with LSI, she might look the same in twenty-five years. She had not returned to New York, even to visit, since joining Minor 6th.

They chitchatted through two rounds of drinks, discussing their respective home lives, their families, the hot tickets on the A/C charts, and the enormous changes in the industry.

"I wish you'd brought Josephine with you. I'd love to see her."

Ross's eyes bulged and narrowed at the suggestion. He did not reply. He did not need to.

Knowing how protective Ross was with his wife, Sam wondered again if this meeting might be some sort of trap. Then, as quickly as it seized her, that familiar foreboding released its grip.

It was nothing, she told herself. An unfortunate side effect of working for LSI was its effect on its employees' nervous systems—an agitated state from which she herself had suffered long after leaving.

Poor Ross. After such a long tenure, he might never recover.

He toasted his straight scotch to her third Rob Roy. "You've done well for yourself. You always were meant for greatness. I'm proud of you, Sam."

She smoothed down the dampened cocktail napkin before replacing her glass. "You were always kind to me. If it hadn't been for you, I can't say I'd have stayed as long as I did. I guess I left without thanking you. That was wrong of me. I hope you understand."

He waved off the gratitude. "Honestly, I feel terrible about the way things ended. I never set out to jockey myself into my current position. It's good you moved on when you did. You could have never gone so far at LSI. The old so-and-so has a firm grip, you know?"

Her eyes settled on the large bulge protruding from Ross's pinstriped suit jacket, which lay neatly folded atop their table. She suspected its contents had resulted in today's long overdue meeting.

He appeared uneasy as he took longer sips of his drink, glancing around the bar every few seconds. Perspiration dotted his forehead.

Sam reached across the table and touched his forearm. "Are you okay?"

He procured a monogrammed handkerchief from his trouser pocket and dabbed his brow. "It's the heat. We're usually down here so much earlier in the year. Josephine's reminded me a dozen times. She'd sure give me a big 'told you so' if she could see me now, huh?"

Samantha's presence unnerved him more than he had anticipated. At one time, he had thought of her as a sort of surrogate daughter, though he had never told her. Professional protocol had hindered any true friendship, but he and Josephine had always wished they could have gotten to know her better. She was the only person who could understand his impossible position. He worried that, if he did not pull himself together

soon, years of hidden truths would come crashing down around him like an unforeseen rockslide.

“You really should try the pastrami. I, uh...I try to come in here at least once when I’m out this way.” He visually swept the room, inspecting the small crowd of blue-collar types who had stopped in for a liquid lunch. With a nervous chuckle, he added, “It’s one of the few places I go without our friend knowing my exact location. If I were paranoid, I’d swear he has me followed.”

Samantha’s lips parted. She followed his line of sight. “What in the world is going on with you two? Jameson knows you’re here, right? You said he agreed to give me the tapes—”

“Of course.” Ross waved her off again, stuffed his handkerchief back in his pocket, then reached over to retrieve the bulky packet. He handed it to her with a steadied hand. “I’m sorry this took so long getting to you. I hope it hasn’t slowed things down for Chris.”

She accepted the envelope but examined the contents as if half-expecting to find it booby-trapped. “I’m afraid he had to start without them. I didn’t want him out of the public eye any longer than necessary. These’ll have to wait for his next project.”

“How’s he doing? I’ve heard plenty of buzz. Everyone’s anticipating the new record. Is he well?”

She twisted her mouth to one side and tilted her head. “‘Is he well?’ Are you sure you’re all right? You never liked Chris.”

“I never said I didn’t like him.”

“You didn’t have to. Everyone knew.”

He shrugged and encircled the scotch glass with both hands, running his thumbs along its rim. “It’s complicated.”

“What isn’t?”

He snorted absently and jiggled his glass. “So, is he? Well, I mean.”

“Most of the time. You know Chris. He has this brooding dark side—always one for the dramatics. Like he’s driven by more than just melodies and lyrics. But you should hear some of his stuff. He’s no Dylan, but you’d have never pegged him as such a poet.”

The bartender delivered Ross’s sandwich. He nodded his gratitude, then spread a stiff paper napkin across his lap. “I suppose it makes sense, losing Jordan and all.” He glanced down at his meal. It looked suddenly unappetizing. “And of course, there was Farin.” With a scrunch of his face, he pushed his plate away. He drained his scotch, then held the empty glass aloft until the bartender lifted her chin in acknowledgement.

Samantha leaned in, head low. “What was the deal there? I always wanted to ask.”

Ross tucked his chin. “Have you asked Chris?”

“I’m asking you. Anyway, I always had a feeling Jameson’s little angel wasn’t all she was cracked up to be. I figure there had to be an affair. But with which one—or was it both?”

“Nothing like that, I assure you. Not with Jameson, anyway.” He evaded her inquisitive stare, frowned at his sandwich, then picked up and offered her half. “You really should try the pastrami. Aren’t you hungry?”

She made a face and shook her head. “I’ll pass.”

Truth speared his insides like a spitted pig. He dared not. It could cost him his life—or something simpler, like prison. Neither option was appealing. He dropped the sandwich on its plate, retrieved his handkerchief, and dabbed at his forehead.

In a single movement, Samantha slid out of the booth and crouched beside him. “What is it, Ross? You look like you just saw a ghost.”

He studied her concerned expression. If anyone would understand, she would. If anyone could be trusted, she could. Years of lies and cover-ups assaulted him as if never before that moment had he felt his own conscience. His psyche shredded. All at once, he felt desperate for a confessor.

“I wish I could tell you, Sam. I wish I could tell someone. But I can’t. It’s my life I’m gambling with.”
Her lips parted as her eyes widened. “This is serious.”

He cupped her upper arm and motioned her back to her seat, then wriggled his neck back and forth and pulled at the knot of his tie.

Samantha surveyed the smoky room. “It’s Jameson, isn’t it? Are we in danger here?”

He slid out of the booth, finished his scotch, then reached into his back pocket for his wallet. “I should go. I have to pick up Josephine in front of Gucci’s by four.”

She checked her watch. “It’s not even two thirty. Please sit down. If this is as bad as I suspect, you need to tell someone. And if it’s about something illegal involving the old man, you’d do better to talk and save yourself.”

The room closed in on him. Four scotches had warmed his stomach and numbed his face. His racing heart pounded in his ears. The life-sized poster of Julie Swanson tacked to the back wall smiled at him. As if someone had hit the bar’s volume button, voices sounded louder—the laughter, the flirting, the tall tales. He resigned himself to the knowledge he should not drive. Grudgingly, he sat back down and laid his hands flat on the table, palms down.

In all the years they had worked together, Samantha had not betrayed the smallest of confidences. He calculated the risk-to-reward ratio of unburdening his soul against potential consequences. Dates, times, places, and faces hurtled through his mind. Even if he decided to, where should he start? How much should he say?

“If I—”

Eyes wide and worried, she urged him to continue.

The only question that mattered was simple: did he trust her? A large part of him knew he could. An even larger part knew he had no choice. “There’s no unringing this bell, Sam.”

“What is it, Ross? You’re scaring me.”

With that, he knew he would tell her everything.