

**S**AMANTHA 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.

Only two other cars occupied the compact parking lot. Neither looked like something Ross would drive. She checked her appearance in the vanity mirror, pressed her lips together, then flipped the visor shut. She stepped out of her BMW and surveyed the area just to be safe. It was not exactly her type of neighborhood.

"Don't be such a snob, Sam," she admonished herself. She retrieved her purse and briefcase, shut the door, activated the alarm, and stepped in through 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.

Patrons peppered the establishment. Many 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 considered the possibility 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 it was a man who decided the appropriate height for the average bar, right?"

A quick glance to her left identified the voice as the bartender.

“You see, I don’t have that problem most the time. Even on the odd occasion I wear a skirt like that, I’ve still 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. 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. “I’ll have 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 had started playing his old games again.

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 make herself 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 to a booth and mumbled his order to the bartender. “Have you ordered lunch?”

“You mean this place serves food?” She collected her bag and briefcase, tossed them into their booth, then gave him a warm embrace before slipping into her seat. “I think I’ll pass.”

Ross’ brief yet troubled smile reminded Samantha how long it had been since they had seen each other. Although always in great 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 taking the job at Minor 6<sup>th</sup> Records.

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

“I wish you’d brought Josephine with you. I’d love to see her.”

Ross’ eyes bulged and narrowed at the suggestion. He did not reply and did not need to. Knowing how protective Ross was with his wife, she wondered again if this meeting might put her in danger. Then, as quickly as it had seized her, that old familiar foreboding released its grip.

She told herself it was nothing. One of the unfortunate side effects of working for LSI was that its oppressive workplace conditions tended to infect its employees’ nervous systems—a highly contagious state from which she herself had suffered long after relocating to California. Poor Ross. He would not fully rid himself before he returned.

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

She sipped her drink, then smoothed down the dampened cocktail napkin before replacing her glass. “I learned a great deal from you. 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 his hand in the air. “I’m happy 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’ pinstriped suit jacket, which lay neatly folded atop their table. She suspected its contents had resulted in today’s long overdue meeting.

Ross nervously sipped at his drink. Tiny beads of perspiration dotted his forehead.

She reached across the table and touched his arm. “Are you okay?”

He removed a monogrammed handkerchief from his trouser pocket and dabbed his brow. “It’s nothing. Nothing at all. Must not be used to the warmer weather yet. 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, wouldn’t she?”

He had not counted on Samantha’s presence unnerving him so. She was the only person who could understand his impossible position. He did not relish the idea that, if he did not pull himself together, years of hidden truths might 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 liquid lunch. “It’s one of the few places I can drop by without our friend knowing my exact location. If I were paranoid, I’d swear he’s had me followed.”

Samantha furrowed her brow. Her lips parted slightly as she followed his line of sight. He scanned the bar as if inventorying its occupants. “What in the world is going on with you two? Jameson knows you’re here, doesn’t he? You said he agreed to give me the tapes—”

“Of course.” Ross waved her off once more, set aside his handkerchief, then reached over to retrieve the bulky packet. He handed it to her with a carefully 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 these tapes. I didn’t want him out of the public eye any longer than necessary. These will have to wait for his next project.”

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

She raised an eyebrow and one corner of her mouth, wrinkled her nose, and tilted her head. “‘Is he well?’ You sure you’re okay? You never liked Chris.”

“I never said I didn’t like him.”

“You didn’t have to. Everyone knew.”

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

“What isn’t, right?”

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

“Most days he’s fine. 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 new stuff. You’d never have pegged him as such a poet.”

The bartender delivered Ross’ sandwich. He nodded his gratitude, then spread a paper napkin across his lap. “I suppose it makes sense, losing Jordan and all.” He looked down at his meal. Somehow, it did not appear as appetizing as in previous visits. 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. “And of course, there was Farin.”

Samantha leaned in conspiratorially and lowered her head. “So what was the deal there? I always wanted to ask. Was she playing both Chris and the old man, or what?”

Ross tucked his chin and creased his brow. “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?”

“It wasn’t like that, I assure you. At least not with Jameson.” He evaded her inquisitive stare and frowned at his sandwich, then picked up half and offered it to her with trembling hands. “You really should try this. Aren’t you hungry? Here. Have half of mine.”

Truth stabbed at his insides like a spitted pig. He dare not. It could cost him his life—or something simpler, like prison. Neither option appealed to him. He retrieved his handkerchief and dabbed at his forehead.

Samantha shook her head, refused the pastrami, and slid out of her seat. She crouched beside him. “What is it, Ross? You look like you just saw a ghost.”

He studied her at length. 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.

He shut his eyes and shook his head. “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 brows arched upward. “This is serious.”

He gestured toward her seat, then wiggled his neck back and forth as he pulled at the knot in his tie.

Adopting Ross’ apparent paranoia, Samantha surveyed the smoky room for suspicious characters. In a place like this, it was hard to tell. “It’s Jameson, isn’t it?” she half whispered. “Are we in danger here?”

He stood up, downed his scotch, then reached into his back pocket for his wallet. “I really 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 and involves 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 mockingly 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 took his seat and laid his hands flat on the table, palms down.

In all the years they had known and worked together, Samantha had not betrayed the smallest of confidences. He calculated the risk-reward ratio of unburdening his soul against potential consequence. 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—”

She nodded, urging 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.”

He suddenly realized he would tell her everything.