

The Most Beautiful Insanity

Excerpt #1

Drexel found the girl from the closet again and went with her to her hotel room, one flight upstairs from the party. He sat with his knees on the floor as he worked over the bed, dividing the drug into lines with his Visa card. She had volunteered, as a work surface, a vinyl binder with ALLISON TAYLOR, INC. stamped on its cover. Her portfolio book.

The drug resembled cocaine, but it wasn't cocaine.

"What, you do this stuff like cocaine?" Drexel asked her.

The girl leaned forward on the bed, sitting with her legs drawn beneath her. "Yeah, you snort it, dummy," she said.

Her eyes closed and her lids fluttered, trance-like. She smiled. Her lids withdrew over wet, red eyes. They looked at each other. Music and voices from downstairs percolated up through the floor. A car alarm wailed two times from the street, its third note cut off in mid-chirp.

"Which agency you with?" he asked her. He placed a twenty-dollar bill beneath his nose and leaned down to the bed. He inhaled a line with his right nostril, tapped its side to help it all up there. He handed her the twenty and her portfolio.

The Most Beautiful Insanity

She sat back, balanced the book in one hand, held the twenty with the other. She inhaled a line by running the end of the rolled bill along the book's length. She leaned away and pinched her nostrils together. She pressed her eyes shut.

"Ouch," she said. "My nose. God. Hurts, right?"

Like he'd snorted hot sauce. But he motioned for the portfolio back anyway. Already, there was a new sensation expanding through his skin. Hot air seeped from his pores. He felt helium-headed. "Is it supposed to hurt?" he asked her.

She held her hand out for her portfolio. Accepting the book back, she set it on the bed and looked at him. "Mmmm, I love, love, *love* drugs," she said in a dream-slow voice. "Feel anything?"

"Like my heart's going to explode out of my chest. Like...like..." He laughed, and she laughed too, and their laughter built on top of each other, fed by the fact that they were laughing for no apparent reason.

The girl slid onto her stomach and moved her bent legs back and forth behind her. She whited her thumb from a leftover drug smudge, then kissed her thumb clean. "Hey! The infamous Drexel Waters is in my room. Right on."

He chopped together more lines. "Your name's Heather, right?"

She blew a laugh, fluttering her lips. "Holly."

"Where you from, Holly?"

"My mother." She rolled over and stood on the back of her neck. She balanced her body straight up into the air with her hands supporting her sides.

"Damn, look at you," he said.

She pedaled her legs. "Yeah, I used to be a gymnast. A dancer, too. I love dancing more than anything."

"A dancer? Like a stripper?"

"The ballet! Are you being serious right now?"

"Never."

The Most Beautiful Insanity

"My dad paid for lessons. He pays for everything. You've probably even heard of him. Gary Nash?"

"Who?"

"Never mind."

"He an actor?"

"Don't you watch television? The news? Nothing?"

"Who is he?"

"No, you've never heard of him. I prefer it that way. Wait, did you actually say '*stripper?*'"

Drexel set the portfolio topped with drugs on the floor. He took a hotel pen from the nightstand before lying on the bed next to her. He held her arm in his hand and began drawing on her skin.

She lifted her arm to see. "What are you doing?"

"Be still."

"What are you drawing?"

"Something."

"Ow! Not so hard. I want to draw on you."

He leaned up and grabbed the other pen from atop the hotel stationery. He gave it to her. She uncapped the lid and stared at his sleeved bicep, the 666 there.

Drexel drew a dragon on the underpart of her arm. The drawing started with the dragon's tail at the palm of her hand, going all the way to below her armpit where the last flaming crescent of dragon breath ended.

When he was done, she turned her arm sideways to see the drawing. "What is that, the Loch Ness Monster? You didn't sign it." She offered her arm back.

Drexel instead printed his name with his hotel's phone number beneath. It was the safest means of contact since Ophelia was always going through his phone. "That's a dragon," he said. He looked at his own arm. "I thought you were going to draw

The Most Beautiful Insanity

something on me.”

“I couldn’t think of anything. Let me up.” She patted his head. “I need a shower before I pass out or...Cool, I’ll bet the water’s going to feel trippy.”

“But you’ll wash my name and phone number away. Dude, you’ll need that later.”

“I won’t wash this arm then. Ever again. Come on. Up, up, up. I’ll be right out.”

He moved over and watched her get to her feet, stagger into the bathroom. He heard the squeal of the faucets being turned, the released water hissing through the shower nozzle. She’d left the door open. Was this a hint she wanted him to join her? Is this why she mentioned the way the water might feel? He heard the rhythm of the falling water become muffled, as she must have been stepping beneath it.

Drexel decided to follow her, but his body wouldn’t obey his brain’s command for movement. He looked at his feet and marveled at how far away they were. He wiggled his toes and they multiplied. He hadn’t been the least bit aware this drug caused hallucinations. Was pretty sure it wasn’t supposed to. Shit was off.

The bathroom door opened wide, and the girl named Holly was standing there, burritoed by a white bath towel, her skin ruddy from the shower’s heat. Her wet hair hung in dark strands over her face. She bunched up her hair with one hand, grinned. She dropped the towel.

He stared at her body. Not bad, though he’d never been a big fan of pubic region tattoos. Why decorate something already so beautiful? Thankfully, her tattoo was tiny. A ladybug.

“Let’s fuck again?” she asked him. “With the lights this time?”

Drexel was on the verge of complying when it occurred to him, feeling so removed from his body, an erection might be work. Holly began to walk towards him, but he waved her to a halt. “Dance for me,” he said.

“Now? Naked? You wish.”

He lay across the bed with his hand cradling his head. “Don’t be chicken. Show me

The Most Beautiful Insanity

some ballet.”

She closed her eyes and shook her arms out. She cleared her throat, twisted slightly from the waist and stumbled, almost toppling. She caught herself against the wall. Drexel went to laugh but saw that she wasn't. She made a fist and pressed the palm side to her forehead.

“I haven't danced ballet in...ohmygod...so loo-oong.” She dropped her arm. She looked at the floor, her face clouding. A minute went by.

“What's up? You cool?” he asked her. “You're not O.D.'ing on me, are you?”

She placed a finger against her lips and took two trembling steps away from the wall. “Shhh...Okay, here we go. I'm dancing.”

Holly stood with one foot on tiptoes, bringing the other leg up and pointing it horizontally. She curled her arms away from her body at the twelve and four o'clock positions. She pivoted, but sunk slowly, slowly to the floor, like she'd simply chosen this moment to take a nap.

Using his elbows, Drexel snaked across the bed to see her. She lay there in a pretzeled heap.

“No, you don't,” he said. “Don't do that. No, no, no. Please, don't do that...Ah, fuck!”

The floor stretched away from him. She stretched away. Or Drexel himself stretched away. Everything stretched away.

He reached to wake her, and his arm wiggled down the canyon wall of her bed. With two fingers, he pressed hard against her shoulder blade. Transfixed with the pliability of her skin, he massaged it, played the piano on it. Some minutes later, she hadn't stirred. He got off the bed, knelt next to her. He turned her over. Her lips and chin were oiled with clear vomit. He felt her neck and wrists for a pulse. He felt nothing but wasn't sure he was even doing it right. He placed an ear against her chest—still nothing. He stood and continued staring at her and, again, extended until he was miles above her.

He decided to find someone who could do something about this. A person was dying

The Most Beautiful Insanity

here. Experts were needed.

“Dammit.” He repeated the word until it became a chant beneath his breath. “Dammit, dammit, dammit...”

He stepped to the front door and opened it. He faded through the hallway’s floor and landed into a crouch next to a bar. He struggled to his feet and found himself standing beside a nine-foot-tall drag queen. She wore a rainbow headdress of fluffy boas, scraping the floor behind her. The drag queen seemed to know him.

“There you are,” she said. “I saw Ophelia leave. She go home?”

Drexel leaned against the bar and crossed his legs. “Yes...Ophelia. I worship the dirt she treats me like. And blah and blah and blah, blah, you know?”

The queen placed a hand on his neck and gave it a light shake. “You all right? Your eyes are like golf balls.”

Drexel shook his head.

“Ha! Your fly’s open!” she said, overjoyed.

Drexel backed away from her. He needed new air. He remembered an entrance somewhere off to the left. Through a foreground of smoking, drinking heads, he saw a large rectangle of smeared, moist light, growing brighter.

His brow met the floor before his nose did and his sight went yellow. He heard people call his name. He heard someone yell, “Oh, yeah, baby! Another one bites the dust! Whooooooo! Whooooooo!” And he heard the eighteen-year-old girl named Holly asking him what was taking so long.

That girl! She needed help for some reason. Yes, he remembered now. He was looking for help. They needed help.

Drexel Waters lost consciousness and the room became lit by camera flashes, busy and bright as fireworks. It was a new year.

Excerpt #2

“It’s a miraculous world,” said the man on TV. He was overlooking the smoky-violet distance of a canyon.

Trace watched from his chair, sunk low with his legs crossed, a Jack bottle balanced with a hand atop his lap. He watched the commercial with the same bored patience he did for all of TV. Didn’t care what it said or did as long as it didn’t make him think too much about it.

The wind outside manipulated the window blinds behind him, making them quiver with a sound like rattlesnakes. The wind pushed in the smell of tropical plants, blossoming in January, along with the stench of upset dumpsters. There was the panicked palpitation of salsa music from an apartment building nearby, maybe his own. He couldn’t tell. Didn’t care much. Every now and then came the distant pop and sizzle of firecrackers.

“One little pill makes all your discomfort go away,” said the woman standing next to the man who overlooked the smoky-violet distance of a canyon.

“Wouldn’t you like this to be you?” asked a voice over.

Surely, Trace thought. He set the bottle on the floor and promised himself he wouldn’t take another sip. He’d had enough, thank you. Weird thoughts were sneaking up on him—harmful thoughts: his ex-fiancée, his father, his ex-fiancée again, the dead and maimed always more present in their absence during the holidays. He reached his socked foot out until his big toe was against the TV screen. He touched the nose of a laughing blond woman riding a horse, followed her with his toe, even after she’d galloped off-

The Most Beautiful Insanity

screen. His foot fell from the side of the TV and hit the floor.

“What is that?” the TV asked.

“That,” the TV answered itself, “is a bar of soap.”

Trace had never felt so lonely in his life.

His phone trilled. Trace looked at it on the third ring, walked over and answered it by the fifth. It was Enrique, his partner, calling to wish him a “Happy New Year.” And to ask for a big, big favor. Trace turned down the TV to hear him. What kind of favor?

“There’s been a Section 32 on First and Ocean.”

Trace exhaled. “And?”

“Oh God, please, Trace. I told you what I had planned for tonight. I’m with that girl! It’s New Year’s Eve!”

“You’re right in the middle of things,” Trace offered.

“The *utter* middle of things. Besides, you live closer.”

“A Section 32 though? That’s not our department.”

“Well, they’re asking for Homicide for some reason. One of us has to go.”

“There’s no one else who can? Not one person?” Trace sat on the arm of his couch. “I’m sick. You know I’m sick.” As if to validate this, he snorted wetly and coughed.

“Trace, it’ll take you thirty minutes. Metro has probably done most of the work already. All you’ll have to do is make an appearance. In, out, zip, over.”

Trace stood and stretched, making sure he groaned with it. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Thirty minutes, big guy. I’ll owe you a drink. *Two* drinks. Swear on my mother’s grave.”

Trace visored his forehead with his hand and squeezed his temples. “Make it three drinks. Because I’m planning to stay pissed about this for a while.”

A female voice on Enrique’s end mumbled some-thing and the voice and Enrique laughed.

“Enrique?”

The Most Beautiful Insanity

“Yeah, yeah. I swear,” Enrique said, still expelling hiccups of laughter. “Three drinks.”

Trace hung up the phone and stood looking at the TV. The horizontal dial had fallen out of adjustment and the picture rolled. Still, he could make out a black & white shot of several silhouetted soldiers raising an American flag, as if into a great wind. The picture switched to a test pattern before collapsing into snow.

He stumbled into his bedroom and dressed, trying to remember where he’d parked his car last. He was more or less sure he remembered. He looked fifteen minutes for his 9mm Glock before realizing he’d left it in its shoulder holster, which he found in his closet. It wasn’t until he was in his white Toyota 4Runner (bought used four months ago) and halfway to where he was going that he remembered his badge. It was still in his wallet on the bedroom floor. He’d seen it, told himself to pick it up, but forgot.

Trace pounded the steering wheel with the heel of his left hand. “Fuck me! Fuck!” he bellowed. He stewed for a moment, yelled “fuck” again, and was silent.

There was one thing for sure: This was not going to be some thirty-minute in and out like Enrique had guaranteed. It was New Year’s Eve—or *New Year’s*, Trace guessed it had to be by now—and such a holiday always turned South Miami Beach into a gridded peninsula of bumper-to-bumper traffic. The blue siren on Trace’s dash was useless. Cars wouldn’t get out of his way because there was nowhere to get out of his way *to*. Each street was six different kinds of crammed.

Trace used a breathing method he remembered from Yoga class. His ex-fiancée, Cassie, had talked him into going once. Breathe in through the nose, using the stomach, breathe out through the mouth, using the chest. This helped him concentrate, something he needed now to keep him from, say, not applying the brakes in time and plowing into someone’s rear. Doubting his blood-alcohol level was anywhere near legal, Trace understood that a collision, no matter how minor, could send numerous matters to Hell. Perhaps this was what he wanted. Needed even. Go ahead and bottom-out already.

When he arrived at the scene, he parked sideways across the street, alongside three

The Most Beautiful Insanity

parked squad cars and an ambulance. The neighborhood twirled within a spinning color show of siren lights.

Four short tugs on a flask. One more. Another. A last long one and Trace was ready for this. Walking past the barricades, through the street party, he felt assaulted by music, an electro-beat echoing from every direction. He felt stunned this many people would mill around a tragedy and still require a soundtrack for it. This wasn't the scene Trace had expected. An overdose scene, even on South Beach, normally involved a squalid, isolated setting, not a celebrative, crowded one.

The first officer Trace saw was Carlos Gutierrez, coming out of the nearest hotel. Thank God. It didn't matter now that Trace had forgotten his badge. He'd known Carlos for...ten, eleven years? Trace even suspected Carlos of carrying a kind of subdued adulation for him. Most city cops, Trace was convinced, owned aspirations of becoming homicide detectives. And why wouldn't they? You got to wear a decent suit and carry your badge in your wallet, and you didn't have to drive a conspicuous squad car. No more domestic disputes, no more fender benders.

Still, Carlos nearly walked by Trace without seeing him. Didn't stop until Trace patted his arm.

"Trace, you're here. Where's Enrique?"

"Out on the town. Being Enrique."

Carlos laughed.

Nearby, two paramedics pushed a stretcher through the hotel's entrance. On the stretcher lay a human-shaped mound, shrouded by a dark-pink polypropylene sheet. Carlos waved for the paramedics to stop.

"You're not going to believe who this is," Carlos said to Trace while walking him to the stretcher. "She was found naked." He lifted a corner of the sheet. "Look at the body she had."

"Should I recognize her?" Trace unfolded a handkerchief from his coat pocket and blew

The Most Beautiful Insanity

his nose.

Though Carlos lifted the sheet further, revealing more of the girl, Trace remained focused on her face. It held the expression of the typical heart attack victim: raised brows, ovaled mouth, eyes questioning though sightless, surprised to be dead. Trace wasn't accustomed to seeing this expression on anyone younger than fifty. This girl looked barely sixteen. His gaze wandered from her face to her smallish breasts, periscoped flat, to the pelvis bones bracketing her thighs, to the tiny ladybug tattoo above her pubic hair. Not a single bruise.

Carlos laughed gamely. "What a waste. Did you see her arm?"

"Her arm?"

"Look at her arm."

Trace spotted a second tattoo filling the girl's inner arm. Embarrassing that he could have missed it—the tat was *huge*.

He turned the limb outward for a better look. It wasn't a tattoo. It was sweat-smudged. It was a pen drawing of...a monster? A dinosaur? He leaned in, squinting. It was breathing fire. A dragon. There was something else too, written across the dragon's belly: DREXEL 622-8200 RM 202.

"You called this phone number, right?" he asked.

"About fifty times. No one answers his room. The phone number belongs to The Lord Balfour Hotel, five blocks from here on Washington. His full name's 'Drexel Waters.' Guy's already on probation for a statutory rape charge."

It was sounding too familiar. "Is Drexel Waters a male fashion model?"

"How'd you know?"

Christ, it was him. This had Drexel's calamitous vibe all over it. "I guess maybe I've heard of the guy," Trace said, cringing, praying Carlos wouldn't follow up with more questions. "Has anyone gone to his hotel?"

"Yeah, but front desk hasn't seen him yet. We left a message."

The Most Beautiful Insanity

“A message.” Trace stepped aside when he noticed the paramedics impatiently watching them, awaiting some sign, any sign that it was okay for them to continue.

The paramedics wheeled the stretcher down the lane of celebrants which had formed, starting from the sidewalk to the ambulance’s rear. Their rushed speech made Trace think of turkeys. Many of them were actually smiling, probably already constructing the incident into its retelling. They had come here tonight to rejoice in the end of the year, the beginning of another. It was supposed to be a night for closure and restoration, and a corpse had gone and shown up. That girl right there was d-e-a-d.

“The girl was a model, too,” Carlos said. “From New York. Here’s the fun part. Ready? Heard of Gary Nash? Big real estate guy?”

“No.”

“Gets interviewed on MSN a lot? Anyway, that’s his daughter we just saw dead and naked. This is going to be bigger news than...” Carlos trailed off, at a loss for a good metaphor. “We’ll be getting our names in the paper.”

“What was *the girl’s* name?”

Carlos had to check a notepad: “Holly Nash, eighteen-years-old. Roommate found her around 3:30, about ten minutes after people saw this Drexel character leave the same room, running like a deer.” The radio on Carlos’ hip came to life with amplified, pinched chatter. He brought the radio to his mouth, said something back, replaced it. “The last anyone saw of Drexel Waters, he was getting into a cab.”

The crowd lost its shape as it broke into thinner bands. The ambulance nudged its way through the street, siren lights rhythmically illuminating a stockinged leg, a blink of sequin.

Trace blew his nose again, honking it strong. “Was it heroin?”

“Lab just left actually. M.E.’s vol/tox said it’s methamphetamine. Purest stuff he’s ever seen. The roommate told us that before Holly Nash went upstairs, she bumped into her and asked her if she wanted to join them. Said she’d met *the* Drexel Waters, and he’d

The Most Beautiful Insanity

invited them to 'go back to their room to go flying.' But the roommate wasn't interested."

Trace rubbed his forehead to clear the warm fuzziness from his brain. "Carlos, so...you want to bust this guy for parole violation? Sharing his drugs? Have fun. This isn't a homicide."

"The girl started dying and the guy split instead of helping her. Law calls that 'a total disregard for human life,' Trace. That's a type of murder, no?"

"Was anyone else in the room?"

"Doesn't look like it. Not so far."

"Still possible that he left the room before anything even happened. Could've been running away because he was late for somewhere. Who knows? I'll bet that not one of the witnesses you spoke to could claim sobriety."

"Even so, her father hangs out with the Bush family and the Clintons and those people. You're going to have to come up with *something* so this isn't his daughter's own fault. Watch."

"And we're positive it's an overdose?"

"M.E. believes it. Drug's all over the room, in her nose. Besides, I looked her over myself. No bruises, no strangulation marks, *nada*."

Carlos' radio hissed, and he raised it again to his mouth. "Q.S.L.," he said. He placed the radio back. He pointed up and behind himself. "The room is on the second floor. Did you want to look it over?"

"Surely."

Trace followed Carlos into the lobby. As they ascended the stairs, Carlos nudged Trace and asked him if he'd been having a good time tonight. Trace said he was sick with a cold; he'd been sleeping. Carlos laughed and said he didn't smell too much like he'd only been sleeping. Carlos made several broad waves with his hand beneath his nose, fanning away Trace's alcoholic vapor.

On the halfway landing of the stairs, Trace was afforded an overview of the lobby. It

The Most Beautiful Insanity

had been emptied of people but remained coated in confetti and silly string. Helium balloons huddled together on the ceiling, orphaned, their spiraled ribbons dangling like rainbow-colored moss.

Excerpt #3

The horizon glowed with blood-red cloud shingles while royal-blue waves massaged the shore. The day's dying light silhouetted A-framed couples, the occasional jogger huffing by, the occasional derelict stumbling zigzag.

Trace removed his shades to better see Nash as he continued walking, though Trace and Enrique had stopped. Nash halted a few yards ahead, replanted his hands in his pockets, the wind ripping into his hair. He scanned the beach as though searching for someone and his sight settled on the distant, pinpoint flashing of cruise ships, yachts, fishing boats, ocean freighters.

Nash had a seat in the sand. He crossed his legs and joined his arms around his knees. "The Atlantic Ocean," he said flatly. "I just felt like seeing it. Thanks for bringing me out here. I'm sure you both have far more urgent things you could be doing."

Trace could hardly hear him over the wind. He stepped closer and bent down. He drilled a finger in the sand. "You know, when I first moved here, I was about nineteen, super young. But I remember when there used to be nothing on South Beach but hotels full of old Northerners who'd moved here to die. Just wanted to be warm while they waited."

"This town," Nash said, still staring off at the ocean. "I have no clue how you people could live here. It's too hot. No one speaks English. Drugs everywhere. Homosexuals

The Most Beautiful Insanity

everywhere. Homeless, crazy people. These fashion idiots..."

Trace slap-wiped his hands and duck-walked a few steps further and sat in the sand beside him. He snuck a look back at Enrique who stood statue-still, meditating on the departing sun, the fading light of which darkened him by the second. A stiff wind insisted his tie lay over the back of his shoulder. Beyond him, stretched the pastel, neon mural of Ocean Drive hotels.

"The quality of light," Trace said. "It's ideal for photography, I've heard. That's why the fashion industry keeps coming here, though not like they used to." Nash looked at him, and Trace felt himself blush. "The others you referred to are here because nowhere else wants them," he continued. "We're at the bottom of the country. No place left to go, I guess."

Nearby, a lifeguard unloaded his green, graffiti-coated station. He took out floatation devices and flags and placed them into the back of a white Bronco. Trace had caught Nash watching the lifeguard, so he watched him also.

"Weird, but when I left New York this morning, there were four inches of snow on the ground," Nash said, still watching the lifeguard.

"How's your wife holding up?" Trace asked him.

"Carol?" His hand made a tiny, dismissive gesture. "What can I say? She's completely out of her mind. Our doctor prescribed her some medicine to calm her down. I can't— " He shook his head. "What am I going to tell her? I tell her our daughter died smoking crack, she won't understand it. Not in a million years. *I don't even understand it.*"

A pair of dark-panted legs appeared behind them, and Trace looked up to check their owner: Enrique. "It wasn't crack," he said, and swallowed hard.

"She blames me," Nash went on, his voice ragged. "She was against Holly leaving home. At least for very long and by herself. I let that Allison Taylor woman talk me into it, then I had to turn around and talk my wife into it. My wife hasn't said so, but I know she blames me for this. She'll blame me forever."

The Most Beautiful Insanity

Trace went to contradict him, but kept his mouth shut. Let the poor guy eject what he had to.

Nash lowered his head. "I made such an effort to talk my wife into it because I wanted Holly gone. Not dead, not this. But Jesus. What we went through with that girl. I thought it was best for everyone that she leave for a while. Give us a break from each other."

Enrique squatted and placed a cigarette between his lips. He cupped his hands around a lighter. He attempted over and over to light the cigarette, but the wind forbid it.

"She was a horror. A pain," Nash said. "God, from the day she was born. She was a breech baby." He made a sad laugh. "But, anyway, this was what she wanted. Be a ballerina, a famous supermodel, then singing and making records, then a big movie star, then...whatever else popped into her head. She was flunking out of school anyway. And she—Christ—and she *hated* us. Hated. How *dare* I give her everything she ever needed?"

"You did what you could, sir," Enrique said, as if he could know such a thing. The cigarette remained unlit in his mouth.

There was nothing else said for a great while until Nash scratched his chin with his thumb. "Nn," he said. "I need a shave."

The lifeguard started up his Bronco, and its headlights cut a path of light across them. The Bronco revved once, scooted forward, and turned around. The headlights jostled from the sand.

"Mr. Nash, autopsy puts your daughter's death at about 3:30 in the morning," Trace said, "a little before we have people seeing this Drexel character leave her room, the same guy who drew on her and left his name and phone number behind. According to what her roommate told us, he's the one who likely gave her drugs. I understand you want to prosecute him, but we have to warn you: This sort of thing is nearly impossible to convict in court."

Nash had no response to this.

"I suppose what I'm saying is," Trace added, "we'll bring the guy in. But there's

The Most Beautiful Insanity

absolutely no guarantee he'll see much jail time, if any."

Nash nodded, but the thoughts on his face were from elsewhere. A woman with a child holstered on her hip passed nearby. Nash watched her while he spoke. "Maybe this *was* my fault. I should've spent more time with her. I shouldn't have been down on her so much."

Enrique rested a hand on Nash's shoulder. "Don't upset yourself. Why don't you let us drive you back to your hotel? Get some rest."

"She was a baby, wasn't she?" Nash said to Trace. He turned his full face on him. "I didn't even realize she was eighteen already...*Eighteen*. In a year, when she's nineteen..."

Nash froze. He appeared to be waiting for a response to his mistake. Trace didn't know what else to do but nod. When Nash unbent himself and stood, he joined him. Enrique stood as well.

"What about that woman and John Belushi?" Nash asked. "I've had my lawyer do some research for me."

"John Belushi?" Trace shook his head.

"You're talking about Cathy Smith?" Enrique asked Nash. "Yeah, Belushi's wife had her prosecuted for giving him the speedball that killed him. It was a long time ago, but you're right. It's not unheard of."

Trace scratched the back of his neck and winced from a stiffness there. "Like I told you, we'll do everything we can. If we get this guy for anything, it'll be for violating his parole. The worst might be second-degree manslaughter, for his neglecting to get help. Even then, he'll only be looking at nine months, maybe less."

"No problem." The bewilderment had vanished from Nash's voice. "I'll hire a dog pound of attorneys if I have to. The most rabid I can find. Even if this guy can't be jailed, I'll make him wish he was."

Trace replied evenly, "Sir, you could hire God for your attorney, but unless this guy flat-out confesses he gave her drugs which he knew would kill her, it'll take a miracle to

The Most Beautiful Insanity

get any court to convict with evidence this circumstantial on a charge this vague,” Trace paused, watching him. “But if your mind is set, whatever. We’ll do what we can to help you. It’s what we’re here for.”

“Give me five minutes alone with him and I’ll find out exactly what happened last night, second by second. It won’t be hard.”

“It’d be best to leave enforcement to us, okay?”

“Detective Strickland...”

“Call me ‘Trace.’”

“Trace, my daughter, my little girl, isn’t alive anymore. If this piece of shit played a part in that fact, then I want his head and I will *have* his head. I realize there’s no way I can possibly make you understand how I feel, but there it is. While you guys work to get him, I will work to get him. I’m not leaving Miami until I do.”

“Ah, dammit, *damn*,” Enrique mumbled. He was turning one direction, then another, but remained unsuccessful in keeping the wind away from his lighter.

Nash gave a slow, deliberate look between them before wandering off in the direction of the ocean. He stood lengthily at the surf’s edge before removing his shoes and socks and rolling up his pant legs. He entered the water and struggled against the current until he was hip-deep. There, he stood and regarded the waves in the same uncomprehending way he had his daughter’s body. His figure appeared diminished, overwhelmed by the ocean’s immensity, a dot against all that blue.

A few yards from him, a pelican dive-bombed into the water, then resurfaced, afloat, the pouch part of its beak convulsing with its catch.