

THE OTHER MEGAN

by

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## CHAPTER ONE

“Extra crispy or original recipe?” Jaye asked, walking into the front room of their house.

Willie had been peering intently through her glasses at the computer screen. At the sound of Jaye’s voice, she jerked in her chair, banging one knee on the underside of the military style metal desk.

I’ve got to learn to quit taking her by surprise, Jaye reminded herself. That woman has one hell of a startle reflex.

“What?” Willie swiveled to face Jaye. She rubbed her knee, blinking as if she couldn’t focus.

She probably hasn’t taken her eyes off the screen for an hour, Jaye thought. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Willie waved a hand dismissively. She wore a white, short-sleeved shirt and cotton pants, one pant leg rolled up to the knee and the other all the way down in typically indifferent Willie fashion. Her taupe-colored hair was carelessly collected at the back of her head in a ponytail as usual, making her narrow face look even narrower. In spite of the bobby pins tucked into her hair at strategic points, several wisps had escaped and blew around her temples and neck in the breeze from the electric fan. Yes, Jaye marveled all over again, actual bobby pins. Willie must be the only twenty-six year old on the planet to use them. Before meeting Willie, she would have assumed bobby pins had gone the way of typewriter erasers and were no longer even being

manufactured, but Willie had assured her they were, and, in fact, so were typewriter erasers. Jaye suspected Willie had had the same hairstyle since the age of seven.

She looks so unassuming, Jaye observed fondly—mild, maybe even timid. But her appearance was deceptive. Under that unexceptional façade was a strong woman of conviction. Within her breast beat a heart of boundless passion. Willie’s passions, however, seemed not to extend beyond the cerebral. She was an ascetic, devoting her life to the service of others, specifically, providing free dental care to the island locals. If she possessed unrealized physical longings, she kept them well concealed.

“What did you say?” Willie asked, focusing her light, piercing eyes fully on Jaye.

“I asked which you preferred, extra crispy or original recipe?” Jaye paused at the counter containing several days’ worth of mail.

Willie smiled, stretching her thin mouth even thinner. “Original recipe.”

“Extra crispy for me. With biscuits and mashed potatoes and gravy.”

“As long as we’re fantasizing, can we order a cherry pie with that?”

“Why not? I don’t think they have cherry pies at KFC, but that’s sort of beside the point, isn’t it?” Jaye began pulling junk mail out of the pile to throw away. “You know, I’ve never actually been to a KFC.”

“Then how do you know you like extra crispy?”

“That red and white bucket was a mainstay at lesbian potlucks. Never failed to show up.”

Willie laughed. “Don’t lesbians like to cook?”

“Oh, sure. Some do, some don’t. You’ve got one that doesn’t, unfortunately for you. Just now I was peering hopefully into our fridge thinking about dinner. It looks like we’ve got some of that plantain lasagna stuff left, the thing Isabel Sanchez brought.”

“Pastelon, yeah.” Willie stood up and stretched her thin arms over her head, setting off a popping sound in her shoulders. She was about five seven, very angular and lean to go along with a nervous temperament. “Southern fried chicken sounds really good for a change, doesn’t it?” she said. “Do they even have KFCs in the islands?”

“Yes, actually, a few. The closest one is on Grand Cayman.”

“And how do you know that?”

“I looked it up on the Internet the last time I had this craving.”

“That’s kind of a long way to go for dinner. Plus we don’t have a boat.”

“It’s funny what you end up missing, isn’t it? I never would have guessed fried chicken.”

“What else do you miss, Jaye?”

Willie’s tone drew Jaye’s attention from the mail. The look on her face suggested she was asking a serious question.

“Not much, to be honest. I have everything I need here. Other than better equipment, of course. And maybe air conditioning. Yes, air conditioning would be awesome. The X-ray machine is down again, by the way, if you want to call the guy. But on a private level, I don’t miss much. This,” she raised her arms to encircle the space, “is my personal paradise.”

They both looked around the room with its mismatched furniture, health and hygiene posters, water-damaged ceiling acoustical tiles, scuffed up linoleum floor, counters piled high with boxes of gauze, face masks and disposable gloves and the wall of painted white cupboards bulging with more of the same. Then they looked at one another and both burst out laughing.

Willie walked over to the far end of the room where a long table served as her craft area. This was where she made her birdhouses. A shelf suspended on the wall held several finished ones. On the table were others in various stages of completion, along with bark and wood scraps and other items she had foraged to add interest and whimsy to the avian domiciles. This was one

of Willie's projects to keep her nervous hands and mind occupied. Willie was a chronic insomniac. It was not uncommon for Jaye to wake up at any time of night and find the neighboring bed empty. She didn't normally go looking for Willie, not anymore, as she knew there was nothing wrong. Early on, before she knew Willie's habits, she would get up to see what the matter was and would find Willie at three in the morning sitting contentedly at her work table gluing together strips of wood.

"So I guess it's pastelon tonight," Jaye said.

"It was pretty tasty," Willie remarked, her attention distracted by a bark house with a thatched roof she had been building the night before. She looked it over critically, then turned to face Jaye. "Who was here this morning?" she asked.

"Matteo Florenza."

"How is he?"

"About the same. He can't keep anything down. Still has a temperature."

"Poor guy. Do you think he needs to see a doctor?"

"Not just yet. I'm sure it's the flu. He just has to get through it, but if he doesn't turn the corner by tomorrow, then, yes, he might need more than tea and sympathy."

"Jaye, dear, you're giving him much more than tea and sympathy. You're running a medical clinic in the jungle, treating everything from paper cuts to stage four cancer. You're like the MacGyver of nursing."

"Still, there's only so much I can do. It'd be so much better if we could lure a doctor out here permanently."

"Not likely. The jungle doctors want to go where the action is, the front lines." Willie said it like she too would like to go where the action was. "This is a pretty tame assignment compared to some places in Africa."

Tame, right, Jaye repeated silently. No dodging gunfire and bottle rockets during the workday. That was true. The only real crime in Isla Santuario was generally what spilled over from drug trafficking in South America. The Caribbean island was situated on a route conveniently located between the drug cartels and the customers in the United States. Criminals used it as a transfer point or a cooling off zone. Santuario used to be a quiet, safe, and relatively unspoiled tropical island, Jaye had been told, but recently, two industries were propelling it into prominence: tourism and drug trafficking. As the pressure increased in the old hot spots in Mexico and South America, more and more drug lords were discovering the new sport of island hopping their wares, using Isla Santuario as overflow parking for the mainland. Along with drugs came crime, something the government tried to keep from being widely publicized so as not to hurt the growing tourist trade.

Still, Jaye had been in the peaceful village of Tocamila six months already and nothing alarming had happened at all, for which she was grateful. She didn't need to be dodging gunfire to feel like she was contributing. It was challenging enough working in isolation on a shoestring budget.

Willie yawned and cast a weary smile Jaye's way, then took off her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"Do you have a headache?" Jaye asked.

"Yes. How do you always know when I have a headache?"

Jaye shrugged. "I'll get you some aspirin."

Willie shook her head. "No, I'll wait till after dinner. I haven't had much to eat today. It's taken me all day to digest that huge feast from last night." Jaye recalled Willie's visit to a local family the night before, to follow up on a tooth extraction. She'd been gone for hours, though the home was less than a quarter mile away.

“How is little Mariana?”

“Healing nicely. No sign of infection. She’ll be fine. But I have to remember not to make house calls at supper time. Her grandmother—great grandmother, actually—insisted I stay, and served up everything in the pantry and, I’m not lying, the barnyard as well.”

“What’d she make?”

“Roast chicken, pork tamales, cassava fritters, pigeon peas, a very spicy soup, and a kind of honey cake with coconut for dessert. It was delicious.”

“Didn’t you bring me any?”

“Sorry.” Willie looked contrite. “She was very lively, Mariana’s grandmother, and full of humor. She had no teeth. Not a single one. I asked her if she wanted dentures. She said no, thank you! She hadn’t had any teeth for the last twenty years, she said, and had suffered no ill effects from the lack of them. She said she could bite clean through the leg of a mature billy goat with her gums.”

Jaye laughed. “I hope she didn’t mean a *live* billy goat.”

“I didn’t ask. We all had a good time. They laughed a lot and I’m sure they laughed at me some of the time, the way people find foreigners funny. I didn’t mind being the entertainment. And it was kind of nice, you know, having dinner with a family for a change. Not that I don’t like meals here with you. But it’s been a long time since I sat down to a meal with a real family—kids, parents, grandparents.” Willie smiled wistfully.

Jaye understood that she was thinking about her own family in Seattle, and how long it had been since she had been a comfortable part of it. Willie and the rest of the Willett family no longer communicated. “Philosophical differences” was the explanation Willie gave. It had something to do with money, as Willie’s family was quite wealthy and Willie had some sort of moral conflict with that. *I wouldn’t mind being rich myself*, Jaye thought, momentarily reminded

of her own hard scrabble childhood with an unmarried mother who was rarely around and not much good when she was. Jaye was sure she could be both rich and happy. In fact, she wouldn't have minded if Willie claimed some of her family's wealth. The money would make a huge difference out here. But it wasn't Willie's way and Jaye had to respect that.

“What else do they have at lesbian potlucks?” Willie asked.

Jaye looked up from the invoice she had opened. “Lesbians.”

Willie frowned. “No, no, you know what I mean. What dishes? What do lesbians eat?”

Jaye raised one eyebrow, giving Willie a meaningful look until Willie's eyebrows both shot up in understanding. She burst out with a choking chortle, then clamped her hand over her mouth and shook her head emphatically, giggling into her palm like a teenager.

Jaye dumped a pile of junk mail into the recycle bin, smiling. When Willie recovered herself, tears of merriment sparkled in her eyes. Her face was flushed pink. In some ways, Willie was an ancient sage. In others, an innocent child.

“God, Jaye,” she said, trying to remove the smile from her face, “my mind would never have gone there, believe me.”

“Oh, I believe you!”

Willie sat down in front of the computer and put her glasses back on.

Jaye was almost certain that sex was not something Willie thought much about. She didn't ever talk about it and seemed to have no interest in dating. If she had a sexual history, she never referred to it. Casual high school dating of boys was about all she'd ever mentioned. Jaye didn't find it hard to believe that Willie might be a virgin. That part of life simply didn't matter to her.



Jaye herself was on hiatus from romance. After leaving Lexie, she had wanted nothing to do with it. Her heart had gone numb. She needed a friend so much more than a lover. And she had found a wonderful friend in Willie.

She had everything she needed here, a comfortable home, friends and meaningful work. If she had been raised like Willie, with all the luxuries, maybe this lifestyle wouldn't be so easy to take, but Jaye had lived in worse places than this. Much worse. This was home now and she was happy.

"Quinoa salad," she announced, recapturing Willie's attention.

Willie snorted. "Seriously?"

"Yes. At least in the group Lexie and I ran with. Quinoa salad. Somebody always made that."

"Interesting. Was Lexie into stuff like that?"

"No. She was the meat and potatoes type. And beer. We always brought beer and wine to potlucks. She wanted to be sure they wouldn't run out."

Willie gave her a knowing nod. She knew all about Jaye's history with Lexie.

Hearing a car door shut outside, they turned simultaneously toward the front of the building. Jaye walked over and opened the front door to see Paloma's red hatchback parked beside the guava tree. The hatch was up and Paloma herself came into view a moment later carrying a cardboard box that nearly hid her face entirely. But over the edge of the box Jaye could see her large sable eyes, set deeply into a smooth cocoa-colored face. Paloma's mahogany hair was pulled back and twisted into one long braid. She wore khaki shorts and a blue, short-sleeved cotton blouse, the usual woven reed flip flops on her feet.

When she reached the porch, Jaye held the door open for her. "We didn't expect to see you today. It's Sunday. Your day of rest."

“Day of rest?” Willie interjected, leaping over to take the box from Paloma’s arms.

“What a concept!”

“I thought you’d want to start getting everything ready for Tuesday,” Paloma said.

“There’s more.”

“I’ll help,” Willie offered, dashing out the door.

“You’re right,” Jaye said. “We can inventory and put this stuff away today. There won’t be much time otherwise. But it’s a shame you had to drive all the way out here on your day off.”

“I don’t mind. It gave me an excuse to get away from my family. Sundays at home are like you would not believe.” Paloma laughed her easy laugh, dimples forming in both cheeks. “Everybody comes. Grandma, Grandpa, aunts, uncles, cousins. Babies crying and everybody talking at once. And Papa, he never turns off the TV. With two dozen people in the house, he turns up the volume so he can hear his soccer match, so everybody talks even louder. Every Sunday this happens, every Sunday after Mass, and they all stay until their supper has been digested and almost everybody has been insulted in one way or another.”

Jaye laughed. “Sounds lovely. I’m sure they’re missing you today.”

“Oh, I know!” She shook her head with mock sadness. “I was so sorry to have to tell my mama I would miss our family day because I was on a mission of mercy for the clinic?”

Jaye caught Paloma’s typical sarcasm, a trait she particularly enjoyed in the young woman. Paloma was Willie’s assistant, studying to be a dental hygienist. She was ambitious, intelligent, spirited and confident, and they were both delighted to have her on the team. For her part, she was grateful for the opportunity, attributing her selection to her excellent English. For whatever reason Global Dental Relief had chosen her, it had been a win for everyone.

Willie staggered in under the burden of another large box and set it on a counter beside the first one.

“Will you stay for dinner,” Jaye asked Paloma, “since you’re missing out on the feast at home? We’re having pastelón.”

“Don’t worry,” Willie assured her, “Jaye didn’t make it. One of the village women did.”

“No, thank you,” Paloma said with an awkward look of embarrassment. She tried to mask it with an unsuccessful casual smile. “I’m meeting someone.”

“Oh, really?” Willie grinned at her. “So you used us as a smokescreen with your mama. Well, thank you for the delivery. I’m glad it was you picking this stuff up in Punta Larga and not me. Was it a madhouse?”

“There are a lot of students there.” Paloma rolled her eyes, though she herself was a student.

“Nothing crazier than swarms of drunken young people,” Jaye said with a shudder.

“Weren’t you ever a student on Spring Break?” Willie asked.

“Never like this bunch. I didn’t have the money to go to some snazzy tropical island resort. And I’m sure I never mooned anybody from the back of a convertible.”

“Nor did I. I spent my spring breaks reading in splendid isolation.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” Jaye remarked.

“What is *moon*ed?” Paloma asked, her round face sincerely innocent. Her English was perfect, but the idioms did sometimes trip her up.

Jaye glanced at Willie, who was already looking at her with a challenge on her face.

“Do you want to show her?” she asked, grinning. “It would make more sense coming from you, since you’re a nurse.”

“Like this requires some technical medical explanation?” Jaye asked sarcastically. She shook her head and turned to Paloma. “Mooning,” she explained, “is showing your bare bottom

to the moon, but in this case, it's usually done in the daylight and intended to shock innocent bystanders."

Paloma looked surprised, then covered her mouth and giggled. At nineteen, such things could still startle her. Jaye and Willie smiled at one another. Paloma went out to get the last box.

"For the record," Jaye said, "I never mooned anybody, but I did flash a boob now and then."

"I have a feeling you're concealing a shockingly wild youth," Willie said wryly.

Jaye said nothing, but grinned to herself. Compared to Willie's youth, it probably was shockingly wild. She took a pair of scissors and sliced through the tape on the supply boxes.

"That was nice of her to bring this stuff out," Willie said. "Save one of us a trip tomorrow morning."

"It was nice, yes, but it sounds like she had an ulterior motive."

"Right. She's meeting someone. Do you know anything about that?"

Jaye shook her head. "It's the first I've heard of it."

"I wonder why she didn't want her mother to know."

"Young people like their privacy. Besides, her family is so conservative. Maybe they wouldn't like it. Maybe the guy's not their idea of a dream husband."

Willie shrugged. "She's a good kid. Works hard. Studies hard. She's the only one of her family who's going to have a college education. She'll end up supporting her parents, you wait and see. You'd think nobody would have the slightest objection to whatever she does after how her brother turned out."

Willie was referring to Paloma's younger brother Eddie, who had been swept into a drug trafficking operation at the age of fifteen, nearly two years ago. Eddie's conscription by the

*narcos*, as Paloma collectively called the drug traffickers, was a source of pain and shame for the entire Marra family. They lived in fearful anticipation of their son's early demise.

"Obviously, she trusts us," said Jaye, "so don't give her the third degree."

"Don't worry. I won't pry. But wouldn't you like to know?"

Jaye nodded.

Paloma returned with the last box and Jaye took it from her.

"We're going to be in it up to our necks Tuesday," said Jaye, "so I hope you'll be here bright and early."

Paloma nodded. "Of course."

Willie approached Paloma, placing a hand on her shoulder. "We don't need you tomorrow, though. Have fun tonight."

"Bye, Jaye," Paloma said with a wave.

Jaye winked at her, then Willie walked her out. Jaye opened the boxes to inspect the contents. If her supplier had come through, there would be enough syringes, alcohol prep pads and everything else to meet the anticipated need for their big inoculation day.

As she unpacked the supplies, ticking them off her mental list, she was only vaguely aware of voices outside. She took little notice until she heard the sound of a man hollering emphatically, then a woman's scream. That was Willie!

Jaye dropped a box of adhesive bandages and flew to the door. She flung it open to see a Jeep parked a short distance along the driveway. She froze in the doorway, processing the scene. There were three men, all of them wearing military style fatigues and black face masks, at least two of them armed with assault rifles. Paloma lay on the ground beside her car, unmoving. Two of the men were running toward the Jeep. The third was dragging, nearly carrying Willie in the

same direction, moving too fast for her feet to keep up. She struggled, but the man was huge, his progress unimpeded by her thrashing.

“Jaye!” she called, her voice panicked, her eyes wild. “Help!”

Wakened from her momentary paralysis, Jaye sprinted after the men as they all leapt into the open Jeep, pulling Willie in with them.

“Stop, stop!” she yelled, still running toward them. One of the men shoved Willie to the floor and out of sight.

Another turned around in the vehicle and aimed his AK-47 directly at Jaye. She stopped immediately, expecting a spray of bullets to tear through her body. The Jeep lurched forward, the rear tires spinning momentarily in mud ruts, before the vehicle shot toward the road. The man with the gun kept it aimed levelly at Jaye. All she saw of him was his dark, hard eyes fixed on her. She watched helplessly as they reached the main road where they were swallowed up by a screen of thick vegetation.

She ran to Paloma and took hold of both her shoulders, turning her so she could see her face. “Paloma!” she cried. “Paloma!”

Her eyes were shut and Jaye was stricken with the thought that she was dead. She scanned her body for blood, signs of bullet wounds, but saw nothing. She was about to check for a pulse when Paloma moaned and opened her eyes, focusing on Jaye.

“Did they take her?” she asked weakly.

Jaye pulled her to a sitting position and held her close to her body. She answered reluctantly, trying to stem the flood of chilling thoughts cascading down upon her. “Yes.”

*Thank you for reading this preview. Robbi*