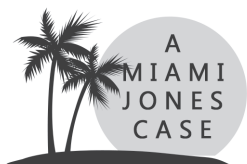


# STIFF ARM STEAL



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*Stiff Arm Steal*

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To my reader, my coach and my muse, Heather.

And Mum and Dad, for pointing my boat in the  
right direction but letting me sail it myself.

Sometimes dreams are fulfilled later rather than sooner. It beats the hell out of never. Thanks to everyone who believed along the way, and those who doubted but had the good grace to keep their mouths shut.

# CHAPTER ONE

**I** SAT IN THE OUTSIDE BAR at Longboard Kelly's looking at the worst drink ever invented. The fall breeze was playing with the back of my shirt, the blue one with white prints of palm trees on it. Despite the season the humidity was up and I could feel the sweat soaking into the fabric. Ron sat next to me with a smile and a Miller Lite. He was enjoying my pain. I was pretty sure that tonic water and a lime wedge constituted cruel and unusual punishment. I made a note to check the law on that.

The guy walked in the rear of the courtyard bar from the parking lot. He didn't belong. At least not here. It wasn't that Longboard's was discriminatory. All sorts celebrated, waited out time and drowned their sorrows here. Some, like Ron and me, were outdoor bar types. Our backsides were practically imprinted into the wooden stools. Others preferred the darkness of the indoor bar. We looked straight into it from where we sat, but nothing short of a hurricane drove us to sit in there. Others still preferred the tables in the courtyard, under the sun-bleached umbrellas. But this guy belonged in a yacht club. His blazer was blue and his khakis had a sharp press from his ankles to his hips. His hair was short on top and shorter on the sides, and his glasses looked like something Don Henley would have sung about in his day. The guy walked over to the bar. It was a strong walk, the walk of an athlete who never got injured—at least not badly. A walk of confidence. Except for his soft skin and unblemished hands, it could have been the walk of an enlisted man. The guy took off his shades and leaned on the bar.

"You Miami Jones?" he said, looking across me at my drinking buddy and business associate.

"Who's asking?" said Ron.

I sipped my drink. It tasted like battery acid with lime squeezed in it. I

was as big a fan of lime as the next guy, but why anyone would waste it in tonic water was beyond me.

“I represent BJ Baker,” said the guy.

Ron curled his lips as if this impressed him greatly.

The guy glanced at me. He was clearly unimpressed with a wardrobe inspired by Jimmy Buffett. He looked back to Ron.

“Is there somewhere we can talk privately?” he asked.

Ron smiled. “You got a name, kid?”

“Murphy.”

“Well, Murphy, take a load off and let’s get you a drink.” Ron turned to Muriel behind the bar. She had a face like tanned leather, strong arms and a chest that exploded beneath her tank top. “Another for me, and one for the kid.”

“Murphy,” I said.

Murphy sat and Muriel banged down two icy glasses of beer. I used my straw to play water polo with the lime wedge in my tonic.

“Cheers,” said Ron, lifting his glass in salute. Murphy did likewise, but with less enthusiasm. “My name’s Ron. Ron Bennett.”

Murphy stopped mid-sip and frowned. “So who’s Miami Jones?”

I smiled at him like Tom Selleck back when he was Magnum. Not that I look anything like Tom Selleck. I’m blond and don’t have a mustache. But I wasn’t worried if Murphy thought I looked like Magnum. It wasn’t about Murphy. It was about me, and getting my mind off this abomination of a drink in front of me.

“You? You’re Miami Jones?”

I winked. “In the flesh.”

Murphy sipped his drink while he considered this news. No doubt the locale had not impressed him. A watering hole with no water view was no place at all in this guy’s mind. But he was under instruction, so he was here. He wasn’t impressed by Ron, whose shirt was plain, no palm trees, not even a magnolia. But Ron had looked like the best option at the bar, and Murphy was under instruction. Now he looked me up and down, stopping for a moment at the board shorts, and considered if his instructions could be wrong. His eyes wandered back to my face, then to Ron and then to Muriel’s backside as she stacked the glass washer under the indoor bar.

He sipped his beer again. “You’re *the* Miami Jones?” I was impressed with the *the*.

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“I hope there isn’t another wretch with that particular albatross around his neck,” I said.

He sipped again. Then he put his beer down on its mat, like he’d made a decision. “Mr. Baker requests your presence immediately.”

I played with my lime and looked at Ron. “Immediately,” I said. Ron nodded and made his impressed lip curl again. I turned to Murphy. “He’s just started a new beer.”

“Mr. Baker isn’t requesting him.”

“He’s my associate. We’re kind of a package deal.”

“Then he can leave the beer.”

Ron coughed.

“You’ve just started yours,” I said.

“I don’t mind. Mr. Baker is waiting.”

“Well, he can wait.”

Murphy spun on his stool and tipped his beer over, pouring it onto the ground. It ran between the dry paving stones. “Mr. Baker doesn’t wait.”

I looked at him. Then I looked at my drink. It was just daring me to leave. Ron picked up on it and pulled his beer in one shot.

“Well, let’s not keep him waiting,” said Ron.

“You’re driving, sport,” I said to Murphy, casting a final goodbye at the sorry-looking lime wedge in my glass.

## CHAPTER TWO

**B** J BAKER'S SPRAWLING HOME SAT in gardens overlooking the Intracoastal in Palm Beach. It was someone's idea of a Tuscan villa, if Tuscany were full of prefab, hurricane-proof concrete. Murphy drove a black Suburban at the speed limit. He even used indicators. Ron and I sat in the back, watching the cranes and pelicans glide across the water. The driveway was as long as a par 5 and as well manicured. Murphy stopped in front of a service entrance on the side of the home. He got out and stepped up to the house. He didn't open our doors. The service entrance led into a kitchen the size of a minor league ballpark. There were two marble islands and a forest of stainless steel. Murphy led us through the kitchen into a long corridor. A dining room fit to seat a battalion was on the right, a staircase on the left. We strode across the marble foyer at the base of the stairs and into a large room. It was all mahogany panels and bookcases. There was a massive desk at one end, a solid piece that looked like it might have come off the USS Constitution. BJ Baker sat behind the desk. He was on a cell phone that looked tiny in his gigantic mitt. There was a Cuban in his other hand. He sucked at it and the end glowed red.

Murphy stopped at the doorway. I assumed we were supposed to stop behind him. I stepped past into the room.

Murphy frowned. "Excuse me," he said through clenched teeth.

"You're excused." I ran my finger along the binding of one of the sets of leather tomes on the bookshelf. Gilt writing told me they were the Great Books of the World. The introduction was three books long. Then there was Aristotle and Plato. There must have been sixty volumes. The spines were as flawless as a model's cheeks. I heard the swoosh of a chair on felt pads being pushed back on the hardwood floor.

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Murphy stepped forward. "Sir, this is Mr. Jones, and his associate, Mr. ... ah..." He looked at Ron.

"Ron." He smiled.

BJ Baker stepped from behind his desk. He was a big unit. I wondered how he looked so good for someone his age. He'd played college ball before I was born. But he was tan and trim. He wore a full pate of gray hair and his gray-blue eyes were like traps. He had a chin of granite, which matched the chest that pushed at the seams of his Greg Norman signature golf shirt. His chinos were creased in the lap. I was taller than most, but Baker could have inspected the top of my head for fleas. He didn't. He held out his huge hand. I offered mine and he grabbed it like he was pulling a coconut from a tree. Then his other hand closed around my wrist and he gave me the double pump.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice." He had great teeth. Straight, white and all accounted for. Not the mouth you expect to see on a retired pro footballer. Some dental guy was driving around in a fancy car on the proceeds of that mouth.

"It's what we do," I said.

"Well, I'll get to the point," he said.

I was glad. I was getting tired of all the small talk.

"I asked around," he said, stepping back to his desk. "You came recommended."

"We aim to please."

"I didn't say highly recommended." He gazed at me like he'd nailed me with that one.

"We like to leave our audience wanting more."

Baker scrunched his brow. "Is your attitude going to be a problem?"

"Are you asking me on a date?"

"What?"

"Cause if you are, then yeah, it's a problem. I don't do that kind of thing. But if you've got some detective type work needs doing, then I can help. Attitude or no."

He looked at me like I was a defensive lineman, summing me up, deciding whether he should step around or just go right through me. "I'm told you played football," he said.

"College. University of Miami. But you already know that."

"You think I followed your career?"



“I think you did more than ask around before you sent your manservant to get me.”

“You were second team.”

“Backup QB. That was me. I took a few snaps here and there.”

“Never started.”

“Nope.”

Baker fiddled with a pencil on his desk. “Why?”

“Two reasons. One, the coach didn’t like me much.”

“Hard to believe. What was the second reason?”

“The other guy was better.”

He nodded. “At least you’re honest.”

I said nothing.

“So you’ve heard of the Heisman.”

“The go-go dancers at the Pink Flamingo have heard of the Heisman.”

“What don’t the go-go dancers know?”

“You won it back in the sixties. Your senior year at USC.”

“And?” he asked.

“You were a first round draft pick. Detroit. Spent a few unhappy years in Motown and got yourself traded to Pittsburgh.”

“Where...?”

“Where you won the Super Bowl in ’75. But you didn’t call me here to give you a mental hand job. You’ve got a whole staff who can do that.”

The frown returned. “I want to make sure you know who you’re dealing with. I am a successful man. I make no pardon for that and I don’t need a practice team quarterback to remind me of it.”

“So we’re almost on the same page then.”

“Almost?”

“I still don’t know why the hell I’m here.”

Baker looked at Ron and then back at me.

“Come with me.”

## CHAPTER THREE

**B**J BAKER LED US DOWN the corridor on the opposite side of the staircase we had come past on arrival. He took long strides but was light on his feet. Through the corridor I saw a large living area that spread out through French doors to a patio and landscaped pool. A waterfall ran down a wall of fake rocks. Baker opened a door and led us to the side. He flicked a light on despite the bright sunshine flooding in through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

I looked around the room. Lots of guys have a room that they use as their sanctuary. They might call it the office, or the den, or the man cave. Perhaps the study. But mostly it was the same room for all functions. A desk for paying bills, a favorite chair and a flat screen for watching the game. A bookshelf with some favorite reads or the trophies of youth. Some sports medals, a ball caught in the bleachers at Camden Yards.

BJ Baker's man cave served one role. It was a shrine to BJ Baker. We had left his office and with it his desk, and the books. This room was all about a golden career. A Detroit jersey hung on one wall, a Pittsburgh jersey on another. Next to the Steelers jersey was one from the University of Southern California. All bore the name Baker and were framed behind museum-quality glass. There were photographs of Baker the player in full flight. A *Sports Illustrated* cover with him breaking the tackle of a hapless Bills defender. There was a front page of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* with the headline *Super Steelers Win, 16-6*. Then there were more photographs, framed and matted. BJ Baker with Chuck Noll, with the governors of a handful of states, with Jack Nicklaus and Greg Norman. BJ In his Fox Network commentary blazer. With President Bush version 2.

The floor-to-ceiling windows made up another wall, through which was a private lanai that wound its way around to the pool. Baker placed his hand on

the back of a black leather recliner that looked like a sleeping bear. He wasn't smiling, but his eyes told me this room gave him a serious hard-on. I couldn't blame him for that.

"So?" he said.

Ron nodded to himself. "Impressive."

"Notice anything?"

"You get your photo taken a lot," I said.

"Anything else?"

"You mean apart from that empty trophy case?" I nodded at the glass case designed to hold a single trophy. LED lights in the top of the cabinet shone down onto an empty space.

"You're everything they say, gumshoe," said Baker.

"Someone stole your Heisman trophy."

"My Bassett hound could have figured that out. I asked you about the Heisman earlier. So that's not even a lucky guess."

I wasn't digging being asked to drop everything to come and salute the chief while he belittled me. If I had something better than a tonic and lime to return to, I would have told him to go play Lord of the Manor with the pet iguana. "Someone knew what they wanted and where to get it," I said. "Nothing else was taken. There's nothing else of value."

"Nothing else of value?" said Baker. He pushed himself off the recliner and stood erect, making himself tall. I figured he imagined it made him more imposing, and I was sure he was often right.

"Nothing of value to the burglar. He didn't go into any other rooms. He didn't take any cash or look for a safe full of jewelry. The Heisman was the only thing of value to him."

Ron stepped over to the empty case and peered inside. "If he was a football nut, what about BJ's Super Bowl ring?"

"What about that, hotshot?" BJ asked, clasping his hands together.

I had to smile.

"You and I both know the answer to that. This guy didn't want your ring because he wasn't just after memorabilia. There's a garage sale's worth of memorabilia in here that hasn't been touched. So he was after the Heisman specifically. Besides which, if he wanted your Super Bowl ring, he'd have to pry it off your cold, dead body, since you always wear it. It's on your left ring finger, which is odd, but I get it."

Baker unclasped his hands. On the ring finger of his left hand sat the ring.

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It was a huge thing, but in the gaudy world of sports rings it was remarkably restrained. A single diamond surrounded by the words Pittsburgh Steelers, World Champions. On the left side the number 19. On the right, 74.

Baker looked at me. “How do you mean odd?”

“Most men, married men at least, wear a ring like that on the right hand because they wear their wedding band on the left. A ring like that makes a wedding band look like the lawn out front of the Taj Mahal.”

“The Taj Mahal?”

“It’s a nice lawn. But who sees it, because it’s in front of the Taj Mahal, for crying out loud. But you don’t care. Lucky for you, you’ve got big hands. You wear your wedding band behind it, on the left, because you shake hands with your right. Then you do that stupid double-handed shake and put your left hand over the top, all friendly like. But you’re making sure the guy you’re shaking gets an eyeful of that ring.”

Baker fiddled with the ring. “You think you’re smart, gumshoe?”

“Yep. And there’s more. The robbery happened yesterday evening, during or after a function your wife organized here. The guy who did it had been planning it for four days, so he was adaptable.”

“How on earth could you know that?”

“It happened last night because that gave you enough time to get the cops involved, for you to then get angry at their lack of progress, and for you to ask around and find me.”

He put his fists on his hips. “Who says I’m angry at the cops?”

I wandered toward Ron and the empty case. “You don’t figure any of the guests for it. They’re all such upstanding citizens. So you think it had to be the help. But not your help.”

I glanced at Murphy. He was stone-faced. “Outside help. Caterers, cleaners, et cetera. You stop in here to take a load off after the event, see the old Heisman’s disappeared. You get the cops in. Hell, the chief was probably here for your function. They canvas the help, get nowhere. You’ve got some sway in this town, so someone pulls an all-nighter. Background checks, surveillance video. Full-court press. You wake up this morning and the chief tells you they’ve got a donut. Nada. So you get all itchy and have to mount your own search. You spend the morning asking around. Not for just any private dick. One who understands the sensibilities of your situation. Someone tells you I played college football, maybe they mention I played pro baseball. But they also mention I don’t suffer fools lightly. So you hesitate.

Waste an hour on it. Then you figure you're getting nowhere fast, and you can handle anything I can dish up, so mid-afternoon your manservant is dispatched to find me. Most people who know me know where I drink. I bet after my office, Longboard's was the second place he checked." I waited and took a breath and looked at Baker. "That about it?"

Baker grinned out the side of his mouth. "I didn't hesitate because of your attitude. I can handle you. I hesitated because of the baseball. It's a boy's game. And who the hell spends their best years playing second-rate minor league ball?"

He waited for a reaction but didn't get one. He'd never understand the answer even if he knew.

"But the rest was on the money." He looked at Murphy and nodded, and Murphy slipped from the room. "How'd you know there was no cash or jewels taken?"

I turned from the trophy case to face him. "You don't keep that sort of stuff in here. It's in a safe, in your office. If there was anything missing from the safe, you would have shown us when we were in there."

Baker nodded. "What makes you think the guy had four days to plan? That was just baloney, right?"

"Four days ago I read a piece in the Palm Beach Post about the upcoming charity event you were hosting. It was held last night." I walked across the room to the French doors. "These doors were open. The photographer was there on the lanai, you and your wife were here, just inside the room. A nicely framed shot, with your Pittsburgh and USC jerseys as backdrop."

"Yes, okay. That's right. So what?"

"So just to your left in the shot, slightly out of focus but unmistakable to any college football fan, was your Heisman trophy." Baker turned his head back and forth between me and the empty cabinet. Murphy stepped back into the room and handed Baker a thick envelope.

"You think they saw the picture and decided to steal it?"

"It's a working theory. You ever done a press photo in here before?"

"No."

"Staff come in here?"

"Only our maid, Carmela. But she's been with us for years."

"Then it's a working theory."

Baker held up the envelope. "Then work it hard. I want my trophy back." He dropped the envelope into Ron's palm with a thud. Ron smiled.

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“And I want daily updates.”

“Look, BJ, I have to tell you, the police will do everything they can. And they’ll do it for free.”

“I know that. I want you to do what they can’t.” He looked at the envelope in Ron’s hand. “There’s more there if you make progress.”

I shrugged. I’d done my moral duty. He wanted me to sniff around for a week for a wad of fresh bills, so that’s what I’d do.

I looked at Murphy. “Give us a ride back?”

“I have a dinner to get to,” said Baker. “Murphy will order you a cab.”