

JESSIE KEANE

JAIL BIRD

PROLOGUE

The death woman was coming. Winston Collins's senses were befuddled with ganja weed, but he knew *that*. He thought he had done a bad thing, but he wasn't too sure what the bad thing had been. His mama had told him he shouldn't be bad, and he had always done his best to walk a good path. But now ... he wasn't sure what was going on. Only that they would *pay*.

He was hyped on ganja and grief. But he could still smell the blood and the cheap nylon carpet, could still feel the heat of the sun being magnified by the big plate-glass window as he stood there, sweat-sodden back pressed tight against the wall. And he could still *see*. He could see the crimson-soaked horror in the chair. And he could seeoh yes, he could see *her*, just passing by the window, all unknowing, her blonde hair catching the sun like a bright banner, her walk quick, urgent, as she approached the door of Jack Rackland's office.

It was her. The death woman.

Praise God and don't worry, be happy ... now how did it go? He was so upset that he'd forgotten the words of his favourite Bobby McFerrin song. Suki would know.

But Suki was gone.

There it was, nibbling away at the edge of his brain like a rat chewing on rotten meat. Suki was *gone*, and Bev was hovering between life and death; he might lose her too and he couldn't bear it, couldn't bear any of it; it was all *her* fault. Lily King had brought death into their happy home. Winston had always been peaceful, easy-going; but not now, not any more. Lily King and her sidekick had ruined his life, and they had to pay for it.

He saw it all again; Suki turning over the cards and her troubled gaze coming up to meet his, her sweet lips saying, look, this is Lily King's card; it's death. And him laughing, oh sure hon, and do you want this dinner edible or ruined? He didn't give all that tarot crap a second thought. Give Bev a shout, the dinner'll get cold, he'd said to her, brushing it aside, brushing that *look* in her eyes aside, that look of purest fear. *God* how he wished now that he had taken her more seriously.

But Suki was gone.

He relived it. Suki turning away, saying yeah, sure, but there was something there in her eyes, some darkness, a terror. Because in her gut Suki knew about

Lily King, she knew there was big trouble coming, and he shouldn't have laughed at her all those times when he did, he should have given her more attention, taken more notice.

Too late now.

Suki was gone.

The pain of it hit him all over again.

All that was left was the death woman. Dealing out vengeance, dealing out a world of hurt to Bev, who might even now be going about the hard business of dying, and Suki ... Jesus, he'd loved that woman. Loved her to bits.

Now, she was gone.

And all because of this woman, and her lust for revenge.

The fire. Oh Jesus, the fire.

Somehow he'd got Bev out, and he'd been going back for Suki, all the while heaving and choking, the smoke – the horrible, rolling black *smoke* – snatching the air from his lungs; but the flames had been too much for him. The flames had driven him back.

Well, now he was here, and so was she. Lily King was opening the door, pushing through fast, and then pausing, freezing as she saw what was sitting in the chair. Winston's hand tightened on the bloody machete in his strong right hand. Now he was going to put an end to her evil ways. She moved in further, breathed out 'Jack...' and Winston was so close he could hear how fast and panicky her breathing was, and he thought, chair. Winston's hand tightened on the bloody machete in his strong right hand. Now he was going to put an end to her evil ways. She moved in further, breathed out 'Jack...' and Winston was so close he could hear how fast and panicky her breathing was, and he thought, *Yeah. Now I've got you.*

He surged forward, raising his hand to strike her dead.

She heard the movement as he pulled away from the wall. Turned, her eyes widening.

Here it comes for you, bitch, thought Winston.

She liked revenge?

Well, so did he.

Revenge was *sweet*.