

STEVEN POPKES

The Birds of Isla Mujeres

AFTERWARD, IT WAS NEVER the people she remembered, never faces or bodies or voices -- even Alfredo's. It was always the wind, blowing from the west side of the island, and the frigate birds, balanced on their wingtips against the sky. They flew high above her, so black and stark they seemed made of leather or scales, too finely drawn to be feathered.

It was March, the beginning of the rainy season, and she had come to Isla Mujeres to leave her husband. That she had done this some half a dozen times before did not escape her and she had a kind of despairing fatalism about it. Probably this time, too, she would return. Her name was Jean Summat. Her husband, Marc, lived the professor's life in Boston. She, it was supposed, was to live the role of professor's wife. This was something she had never quite accepted.

Isla Mujeres. Island of Women.

She sat in a small pier cafe that jutted out into the water, waiting for her first meal on the island. In a few minutes it came. A whole fish stared glassily up at her from the plate. Delicately, she began to carve small pieces from it, and ate. She glanced up and a Mexican man in a Panama hat smiled at her. She looked back to her food, embarrassed.

Boston was cold right now and covered with a wet snow as raw as butcher's blood. But here in Mexico, it was warm. More importantly, it was cheap and people's lives here were still enmeshed in basics, not intricately curved in academic diplomacy.

She left the restaurant and stood on the pier watching the birds, feeling the warm heavy wind, sour with the hot smell of the sea. The late afternoon sun was masked with low clouds and in the distance was a dark blue rain. She had a room, money, and time.

THE AVENIDA RUEDA was clotted with vendors selling Mayan trinkets, blankets, pots, T-shirts, and ice cream. Several vendors tried to attract her attention with an "Amiga!" but she ignored them. A Mexican dressed in a crisp suit and Panama hat sat in an outdoor cafe and sipped his drink as he watched her. Just watched her.

Lots of Mexicans wear such hats, she told herself. Still, he made her nervous and she left the street to return to her room. On the balcony she watched the frigate birds and the people on the beach.

Jean swam in the warm water of Playa de Cocoa. When she came from the water she saw the man watching her from one of the cabañas as he sipped a Coke. She walked up to him. "Why are you following me?"

The man sipped his Coke and looked back at her. "No entiendo."

She looked at him carefully. "That's a lie."

There was a long moment of tension. He threw back his head and laughed. "Es verdad."

"Why -- what the hell are you doing?"

"You are very beautiful, Señora."

"Jesus!"

"You need a man."

"I have a man." Or half a man. Or maybe more than a man. Do I still have him? Do I want him? Did I ever?

"With specifications?"

She stared at him.

Hector led her through the rubble at the end of the Avenida Hidalgo to a small concrete house nearly identical to all the other concrete houses on the island. It was surrounded by a wall. Set into the top of the wall were the jagged spikes of broken soda bottles. She looked down the street. The other houses were built the same. There was a burnt-out car leaning against one wall, and a thin dog stared at her, his eyes both hungry and protective.

Inside, it smelled damp. It was dark for a moment, then he turned on a blue fluorescent light that lit the room like a chained lightning bolt. Leaning against the wall was a tall, long-haired and heavily built

