



The Honeymoon ers

Skip Reardon stands over the body of Amiri Akaru's dead pig, thinking, *Once you've shot your neighbor's pig, things are bound to change.*

The pig—an old pink sow with one small rust-colored spot next to its left ear as perfectly circular as a bull's-eye—is sprawled across the picket fence that, until this morning, had separated Skip's vegetable garden from his manicured lawn. He touches the muzzle of the rifle to the bloody hole in the sow's head and looks at his watch. For a change, his two clients this morning are Americans, like Skip himself. Well, he was American—Wyoming born and bred—until he moved to the islands and married a Maori woman. Now he's not sure what he is. But for the past month, his clients have all been Kiwis and Aussies, and he's looking forward to fishing with his former countrymen, who are waiting at their rented bungalow a mile down the beach. He'd better call to say he's going to be late. This dead pig will need some explaining.

The law in the islands says that a man can shoot another man's livestock to protect his property. But the carcass goes to the animal's owner. Always. Skip admires the wisdom in that. With all the pigs wandering at will, who knows how many could be declared property-destroying nuisances if a shooter were allowed to keep the meat? It's a good law. Even so, he wishes someone else—anyone else—would break the news to the Akaru brothers.

Tensions at home and on the water. by Richard Chiappone

He walks back to the house, sets his rifle against the wall of the porch, and dials the Oceanside Bungalows. Out on the lagoon, baitfish explode across the surface; a school of mullet pushes nervous water. Everything fleeing something bigger. If his clients are watching all the fishy activity, they'll be championing to get on the water. In the distance, frigate birds wheel before a mountainous gray cloud steam-rolling over the reef and heading straight toward the island. By the time the Akarus come to claim their pig, it will be pouring. Nothing like a dead pig and a couple of soaking wet Maori brothers-in-law. He leaves word for the American fishermen at the bungalows. Then he takes a long breath to calm himself and dials Amiri Akaru, his wife's brother.

As Amiri's phone rings and rings, Skip watches two brilliantly white fairy terns race past, bait flashing in their beaks, on their way inland to their nests in the palm jungle to ride out the approaching squall. He wishes he could do that: flee to the jungle and wait out the storms—the one coming from the sky, and the one coming from his wife's brothers. Amiri Akaru answers the phone on the 10th ring. "It's your sow," Skip says to him. "Better come get her."

He calls his wife, Dolly, at her office at the city hall. She offers to come home and control her brothers or to send Tommy, her cousin the cop. But that will only make Skip look weaker in Amiri's eyes. He assures Dolly he's all right, hangs up, and immediately wishes he had taken her up on her offer.

The squall hits the beach in a burst of rain and blowing sand. The downpour sounds like a herd of hooved animals on the porch roof. Water sheets off the eaves. As ferocious as it is, the deluge falls from one big cloud and won't last long. But it's still coming down hard when Amiri Akaru shows up on his motorbike, appearing among the layered curtains of rain like a giant demon from some watery hell. Amiri stops and straddles the idling machine in Skip's puddled driveway. Some days Skip finds the sight of his big Maori brother-in-law perched on the little bike comical. Today is not one of them.

Amiri looks from the dead sow to Skip's rifle and back again and shuts down the scooter. He sets the kickstand and walks over to the garden, where the pig sprawls across the downed fence, green lettuce clamped in its jaws. The sow, old and almost a family member to the Akarus, is—was—one of the biggest on the island, and lies crushing nearly all the plants it had not yet eaten. Skip sort of wishes he'd shot it before it ate anything. But then, of course,

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there'd be no proof that Skip needed to protect his property. With the Akaru brothers, you really wanted some proof.

Skip thinks about picking up his clients before Amiri says or does anything. The storm is already moving on, and by the time the sky burns clear, he could be at the boat launch, across the lagoon, and spotting bonefish. But, as Dolly pointed out when he'd phoned her, leaving her brother standing alone in the rain with his dead pig isn't a great idea. True, Skip is an outsider here, even after 12 years—no amount of sun will make him brown enough for some of the locals—but he isn't completely oblivious to how things are done on this speck of crushed white coral and palm trees in the middle of the South Pacific.

Leaving the rifle on the porch, he steps off into the rain, strides purposefully across the yard, and stands next to Amiri, hoping he looks confidently justified in shooting the man's pig. "Amiri," he says, "I'm sure you can see what happened here."

"She was a good pig," Amiri says. "Made lots of babies." Rainwater runs off his nose and his ponytail. But he doesn't shift his eyes from the dead sow. "Did you at least try to reason with her?"

Skip just looks at him.

Amiri inhales deeply, lips pursed, his lime-green T-shirt tightening across his massive chest. He exhales. "I didn't think so."



Skip takes a step away, out of Amiri's reach. In the 10 years he's been married to Dolly Akaru, there have been dustups with her brothers, of course. What in-laws don't have differences? But so far, nothing physical. Then again, he's never shot one of their pigs before. He wishes he were already out with his clients, poling the skiff across a lagoon that some hotshot travel writer has described as "the most beautiful place in the world." And that guy didn't even fish.

The rain stops as abruptly as it had started, just as Amiri's brother, Hehu, splashes into Skip's driveway in his Toyota pickup. Amiri hand-signals Hehu to back it up to the sow. Hehu, only slightly smaller than Amari, gets out of the truck and looks at the sow and shakes his head. The sight of the two big Akaru brothers standing side by side now—biceps like boulders, necks taut with rage—prompts Skip to drift toward his own pickup. "I've got sports waiting," he says. "Can we talk about this later, guys?"

The Akaru brothers trade glances that drive Skip's imagination wild with possible violent scenarios. But Amiri just nods and drops the tailgate. "I'll pay you for the fence, brother."

"That won't be necessary—," Skip begins to say, almost at his own truck now.

Amiri cuts him off with a wave of one gigantic hand. "I'll just deduct it from what you owe me for the pig."

Skip is in his truck now, already easing it down the driveway. In the rearview, he can see the two brothers struggling to heft the dead sow into their pickup bed. Should he have offered to help? Who knows? Twelve years, and he still isn't sure about things like that. He'll ask Dolly later. She'll know the way to smooth this over. If there is a way. Now it's time to fish.

Halfway to the Oceanside Bungalows, Skip swerves to miss a cat on the narrow two-lane. Like pigs, cats and goats and chickens run free all over the place. No dogs, though. None are allowed on the island. He has never gotten a straight answer why that is. Dogs are one of the few things lacking in the tropical expat life. Dogs and upland game birds. He misses the grouse and pheasants of home. Still, the blooming frangipani and plumeria trees, the stately palms climbing the island's one small

mountain, the surf foaming along the beach, and the abiding sunshine now drying the steaming road all remind him once again why this place is called paradise, and the ass-freezing, windswept plains of his youth are not.

At the Oceanside Bungalows, the manager, Alani Akaru—a cousin of Skip's in-laws—informs him that his clients today are newlyweds. Husband and wife Olympic skiers, of all things. Apparently famous. "The man took a bronze in some event, and the woman a silver in hers!" Alani says. Skip raises his eyebrows, but of course, he's never heard of them. If he were remotely entertained by the manic competitiveness of the Olympics, he wouldn't be living on a tropical island.

The husband looks like a cop—shaven head, a close-cropped goatee and mustache—but a cop who never ate a doughnut in his life. The woman is a good-looking blonde—and even tauter and fitter. Her white-blond ponytail juts out through the back of her long-billed Orvis hat.

Skip hadn't expected a married couple. There are two different surnames on the reservation: first names, Bill and Charlie. *Charlene*, maybe? He almost asks when they trade introductions. But the woman turns away and loads their gear into his pickup with such serious intent that he decides against it. The

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man isn't a lot warmer. Well, however frigid these two ski machines turn out to be, it'll be better than spending the time onshore with the Akarus.

Their marital status shouldn't matter, of course, except that he's guided a boatload of newlyweds in his years there—again, mostly Kiwis and Aussies, or Europeans—who rarely know anything about fish or fishing. Typically, their resort has sold them on the idea that a South Sea Island honeymoon is in-

complete without "the ultimate tropical fly fishing experience." As often as not, they just want to say they caught a bonefish and don't care how it's done. Which means Skip has them drifting the muds, dragging a sinking line and a lead-eyed fly through the murk. Which will produce some big bones but is about as exciting as bait fishing for carp. Still, it is Skip's job to put clients on fish, and that's what he'll do today, whatever it takes.

Bill and Charlie shatter his assumptions immediately. They've got high-end rods, the cork handles dark with sweat and salt grime. Equally first-rate reels. None of it brand new. They have his and hers waterproof tackle bags, also well-worn. They are not first-timers.

"Sight fishing only," Bill says as they load their gear in the boat. "No blind casting in mud."

"No blind casting, period. Right?" Charlie adds. It doesn't really sound like a question.

Skip marvels at how lean she is. She looks as if she rides a bike to work, to the farmers market, to Zumba classes. Do Americans still ritualize local produce shopping? Still do Zumba? Skip hasn't been stateside in years. She lifts her top-of-the-line wrap-around shades and stares at Skip with icy green eyes, waiting for his answer. "Sight fishing only, right?"

"Sight fishing's all I do," Skip lies. "What else is there?"

"Good," she says. Her husband merely nods.

As far as Skip can tell, they haven't said one word to each other yet.

He takes them across the lagoon to Pig Island, which reminds him he is not yet done with the Akaru brothers and their dearly departed sow. He shakes off the thought. Pig Island is a good spot for this tide and this time of day; the water is too deep to wade but clear and sandy bottomed. There is nothing like putting your sports on fish to take your mind off everything else.

Along the jungled shore, the water is a mirror, the many greens of the thick foliage reflecting upside down on the surface. Skip cuts the engine and climbs onto the poling platform. The couple stands, and Charlie holds out her hand to her husband. "A hundred for the biggest bone of the day? A hundred more for the most landed?"

"What about trevallies?" Bill asks her. He looks up at Skip. "Hey! We gonna get shots at trevallies today?" Again, it sounds more like an order than a request.

Skip nods. "Always possible. Sure."

The honeymoon couple face each other again. Both are unblinking and looking as though they're talking divorce, not fishing. Legal separation, at the very least.

"A hundred for the first trevally," she says.

"Make it two." Bill goes to shake her hand, but she yanks it back.

"Put me on a big fish, Skip. I'd love to pay your tip with my husband's money."

"Okay, two hundred," she says. "But GTs only! No blues or golden finned."

Bill nods. "Deal."

They shake, neither smiling.

Good God, this is the honeymoon, Skip thinks. *I'd hate to see them in ten years.*

Charlie produces a coin. "Call it." She flips it and smacks it to her wrist. She wins the coin toss. Rod in hand, she climbs on the deck and looks up at Skip. For the first time, she gives him something like a smile. But there's a calculated coolness to it. Her teeth look like a wall of snow. "Put me on a big fish, Skip. I'd love to pay your tip with my husband's money."

Then the smile goes away, and Skip almost shivers despite the thick tropical heat.

"Sure," Skip says, "only the big ones." He thinks of his own wife, Dolly, her disposition so sweet it almost completely hides her fierce intelligence. Dolly will be on the spot now, choosing between Skip and her brothers. She is devoted to family, church, and her husband—no one would dispute that—but the order of her priorities varies by situation. And this pig situation is like none before.

He forces himself to get his mind back onto his job and stands on the platform, pole in hand, watching Charlie stripping out what looks like a whole fly line onto the deck. He can't help wondering what it must be like to be married to a woman with a name like a man's and an attitude to match. Maybe

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he should ask her to talk to the Akaru brothers for him.

Bill sits in the forward seat and pulls his left shirtsleeve up to reveal his watch. "Twenty minutes," he says to Charlie.

She looks at her own watch. "I've got eight sixteen."

"Check." Bill pushes a button on his watch. Skip realizes he's set a timer.

Man, these two aren't fooling around. Suddenly all the days spent tying on flies for inept honeymoon couples, untangling their lines, unhooking their fish, and otherwise nursing them through a day's fishing seem oddly pleasant memories now. He'd better find them some fish, and fast.

Skip poles half the length of the island before he spots moving shadows nearly at the end of Charlie's turn on deck. "Two bones. Eleven o'clock. A hundred feet out. Coming our way. Get ready." He plants the pole in the sandy bottom, turns the boat, and steadies it. "They're at nine o'clock now. Still too far. Wait until they get closer."

Charlie is pointing with her rod. "Where?"

"A little left," Skip says.

She moves the rod that way and stiffens. "I see them."

Then Bill's timer goes off. "Time's up! Let me at 'em."

Charlie ignores him, rolls out line, and hauls it into a long, tight backcast.

"Charlie! Time's up," Bill says again.

But she already has the rod loaded, and double-hauls a 70-foot cast that puts the fly right in the path of the lead bonefish. Skip can see that it's a monster but doesn't want to make her nervous. "Nice cast," he says. "Let it sink."

Bill says, "This isn't going to count." He taps the face of his watch. "You're overtime, Charl."

Charlie ignores that too.

"Okay, short strips now," Skip tells her. From his high vantage point, he sees the big bonefish move on the fly and he's about to say, *Strike*. But once again, Charlie is on top of it. She strip-strikes and the line goes tight. She raises the

rod and expertly manages the remaining slack ripping through the guides until the fish is on the reel.

Skip thinks, *Jesus, what does she need me for?*

With that much line already out, the bone's first run takes Charlie deep into the backing, but she plays it beautifully. Her line is cutting a small rooster tail across the surface as the fish arcs away from the boat. Skip expects her to scream with delight. But there are no *Woo-woos*. No sound at all. She's all business, shifting the rod against the fish every time it turns.

Bill is still muttering, "This isn't going to count."

Skip expects Charlie to bite her husband's head off, but she's too busy concentrating on the fish. He ties off the pole, climbs down, and picks up the boat net. One more powerful long run, then Charlie deftly steers the fish into the net, and Skip scoops it up.

Bill lifts his wife's fish out of the rubber net mesh, sets it on the deck, and puts a tape on it—nose to tail notch. "Thirty-one and a half," he says. "Too bad it doesn't count."

"Say that one more time, Bill." Charlie gives him a look that could freeze the South Pacific.

"Just saying," Bill says, "you know the rules." And he dumps the magnificent bonefish back into the water as though he were emptying the trash. Charlie hasn't touched it. They don't even take a picture.

Skip says, "That's one of the biggest bonefish I've ever boated, and I've been doing this for years. Might go eleven, maybe twelve pounds."

"Still doesn't count," Bill says. "The score is nothing—nothing." He picks up his rod and climbs onto the casting deck, looking at his bride defiantly. Again, Skip thinks she's going to say something. But she just chews her lower lip and stows her rod under the gunwale.

Skip has never seen anything like these two. The usual honeymooners may know nothing about fishing, but at least they get excited over anything they reel in. He would like to say something about showing a little respect for a trophy game fish, but holds his tongue. It's way too early to lose his cool.

Bill says, "Clock starts whenever our guide decides to do his job and start poling again."

Skip grabs the pole and climbs back up on the platform. He can't help thinking how easy it would be to just swing the pole and wipe Bill off the deck and into the drink. Luckily, his phone rings. He's happy for the distraction, because the first rule of guiding is *Never let the sport know how you really feel about him*.

It's Dolly. He lets it go to message. He will call her back when they take a lunch break. Anyhow, he knows the call is about the pig, and as unpleasant as that is, it momentarily takes his mind off murdering this client. Never a good idea. He sets the pole against the bottom and pushes off with too much force, causing Bill to stagger and nearly go over. "Oops! Sorry, Bill," he says, and thinks he sees Charlie's shoulders vibrate with muted laughter. He's starting to like her.

Bill is as competent as Charlie. Not five minutes into his turn, a medium-sized bone shows up behind the boat, requiring a 50-foot backcast to three o'clock, straight into a growing breeze—a very tough shot, which Bill executes perfectly. Skip has never had two sports of this caliber in the boat at the same time. He's never had two sports this good, period.

"Right now, this is the biggest fish," Bill says as they boat it. "And I've got one more than your nothing. At the moment, Charl, you owe me two bills." His laughter sounds like a small animal dying.

Charlie just nods and sharpens the hook on her fly.

The fishing drops off, as fishing will, and neither Charlie nor Bill get any more shots all morning. At noon, Charlie is just ending her shift on the deck and Skip says, "Let's grab lunch." He climbs down off the platform and starts shipping the pole.

"Wait," Bill says. "We don't have to stop. Charlie can eat while I'm on deck, and then I'll eat while she's up." Charlie nods that she's good with that.

Skip says, "I need a break from poling."

The happy couple exchange glances. Bill looks as if he is going to say something to Skip, but Charlie sets one hand on his

arm and stares him down. "Fine," he says. "Let's waste fishing time eating lunch."

With that, they both sit in the forward seat with their backs to Skip, silent again.

Only half a day to go.

After a very quiet and very short lunch—Skip does not want to give Bill any reason to bitch about that—he takes them to a wadable flat to meet the incoming tide. Bill and Charlie each carry their bonefish rods, and Skip carries a 12-weight with a baitfish fly the size of a brick loop-knotted to a heavy leader. Fishing is very good all day, and with their skills, they each spot fish easily. They have four bones apiece by late afternoon. Not counting that monster Charlie caught first thing—it has been firmly established that they are not counting that one—they are tied now on the total number. But Charlie has the largest bonefish of the afternoon, a beautiful eight-pounder. So now, Bill owes her a hundred.

Again, not wanting to give anyone

anything to complain about, Skip fishes them past quitting time and is about to call it a day when Bill hooks his fifth fish. If he lands this one, it will put him ahead of his bride on the total and cancel out the money he owes her for the largest. Skip was hoping Charlie would prevail. She's a cold fish, but not nearly so unpleasant as her husband, and that stunt Bill pulled this morning with the timer is still rankling. As Bill plays his bonefish closer, Skip walks Charlie away, hoping to spot one more fish for her. But the day breeze has kicked up, and the surface is ruffled. With the sun low and in front of them, it is nearly impossible to see anything. Reluctantly, he will have to shut it down once Bill's fish is in hand.

Then he glances over his shoulder and notices a bulge in the surface of the water as something big charges across the knee-deep flat behind them, heading their way. "GT!" he says, and hands Charlie the heavy rod. He takes her 8-weight and points. Charlie immediately sees the fish and begins stripping out line. Bill, busy with his bonefish, is unaware.

The giant trevally is moving fast. There will be time for only one cast—into the wind. No picnic with the bulky fly. Charlie lets the stiff breeze carry the backcast high behind her, then punches a tight sidearm loop low and under the wind. The fly splashes down a couple yards ahead of the speeding fish. Without needing to be told, she strips the line with long, swift yanks, and the GT attacks in an violent lunge.

The instant the fish realizes something is wrong with that particular mouthful of prey, it almost yanks Charlie into the water. But she plants her feet in the sand, cranks down the drag on the reel, and hauls back with authority—and immediately begins muscling it into submission. The line is so tight it's humming. Although Skip is not really surprised that she knows how to play a GT this size, he's still plenty impressed.

At the end of the tight line, the fish swings in a great circle toward Bill, who has finally noticed that his bride has hooked a monster, and that the thing is on a collision course with him and his bone-

fish. "Charlie!" he yells, "control that fish!"

But it's too late. Instead of turning her rod against the direction the GT is running—as she certainly knows how to do—Charlie lets it swing, applying just enough pressure to steer it right at Bill. The trevally crashes through Bill's leader and cuts off the bonefish, and Bill has to duck as Charlie's fly line nearly garrotes him and knocks his rod out of his hand.

"Sorry, honey!" Charlie says, turning the trevally back her way and smiling fully for the first time all day.

On the ride back to the dock, the honeymooners are even quieter than usual. Skip smiles to himself and looks at the photo in his phone of the broadly grinning Charlie kneeling in the shallows, hefting the big GT out of the water. Skip almost laughs, thinking how she took her time, lovingly swimming the fish around and around until it recovered its strength and tore out of her hands, with Bill bellowing, "That last bonefish should count! You did that on purpose!"

The day had started badly, but now, as the skiff skims across the most beautiful lagoon in the world, Skip is thankful to be here, to live here. Yes, there will be a storm over that the dead pig. And, yes, his wife will be caught between him and her family, of course, and that will cool her mood for some time to come. But, really, the pig had it coming, after all these years. In the past few months alone, it chewed a chunk out of the plastic wheel well trim on his Ford Ranger, ate a nearly new pair of Skip's wading shoes, and uprooted the mango tree Skip had planted for Dolly for their 10th anniversary.

But now, all is well in Skip Reardon's personal paradise. At least one of his two clients is happy today. And so is Skip. Happy that the pestiferous pig is dead at last. Happy that nobody saw him kick that fence flat, making it easy for the beast to walk into his lettuce patch—and his gunsights. And happy knowing that nobody makes Polynesian roast pig as tender and juicy as Amiri Akaru does. ■

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Almost Friends

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minutes later, I was there, back against an oak. I kept one boot dug into dirt to keep from sliding downhill, but nothing nearby looked any better. I sharply cut on a mouth call, and the tom began responding, strutting his way down the side gully.

In my mind the storyline raced ahead of current events. I crafted a compelling tale of vindication—an unlikely reunion with the same wily and gregarious tom from the previous spring that had used this route of travel to elude me. And that tom was about to reach a point where we'd be at eyeball level with 30 yards of open space between us. When he folded his fan, I shot him clean. He rolled to the bottom of the gully and lodged against a chunk of granite. He wasn't overly large, but his spurs would tape out just shy of two inches. No way to verify if this was the same bird that had bested me the previous spring, but I'd like to think so. Regardless, it was a fitting end to my time on Harold's mountain.

Of course, I didn't know it was the end. The following March, Harold pronounced that his nephew was in now charge of hunting arrangements. He was tired of playing middle man, but he assured me I'd still get my allotted time slot each spring. It was not to be. Not sure if his nephew ever set foot in the woods. He led me on and then kept me at bay, always suggesting he'd be out there. Eventually he ignored my emails altogether, and the season expired. Certainly, things could have been handled better, but I wasn't certain if I had the right to be angry. The place wasn't mine, yet it certainly felt like something had been stolen from me. What I missed most was standing on top of that hill as dawn unfolded, listening to roosted birds sound off from all points of the compass, hoping for one that I could call mine. I could only hope that this

nephew I'd never met knew just how lucky he was.

I'd not visit Harold again. I worried he might inquire about the turkey hunting, and I didn't want to cause problems between him and his nephew. Also, we moved, not terribly far but to the point that Harold's place no longer sat an easy stop on the way home from work. I'd see him once and a while at the hardware store, always at a distance with no chance for conversation. I waved once, but he did not return the gesture. I drive by sometimes when I'm in the vicinity. The horses are still there, as is Harold's old flatbed Ford, half brown, half rust. But I drive on, my time with Harold and his hill fading into pleasant memory. One of many such places that will always be mine, without the burden of property taxes.

Over time the numbers add up, a rising tally of places I once knew and lost somewhere along the way. The reasons are many. Death, foreclosure, or maybe the farmer sells the cows and retires to Arizona or Florida after enduring sixty-some Wisconsin winters and thousands of pre-dawn sessions in the milking parlor. Maybe the grandkids are finally old enough to hunt and now have the run of the place—I've added nephews to this list.

I also think of all the Harolds I've met along the way, the almost friends but not quites. Not just the landowners who graciously provided access to their property, but all the people I've shared a boat or blind with over the last three decades. Recalling the faces and names brings a smile to my face. But there are regrets, nagging thoughts of what I might have done to foster certain relationships that in the moment seemed steadfast, yet in the end were fleeting. Harold has helped me realize that true friends are a rare and precious commodity. Sometimes, "almost" is as good as it will ever be. ■

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