

# BIMINI DEEP

## PART 1

They clung to the vibrating anchor rode they used as a shot-line to the bottom. They were at their last decompression stop. One leg and an arm hooked around the half inch line, hands locked tight together to avoid being swept away by the current.

Matt and Christy were diving at the edge of the Gulf Stream. Much like a river within the ocean offshore of Florida. It roared past the reefs strewn near vertical walls that rose from the depths to the pink sandy beaches of Bimini.

They dove here many times before. It was the world famous site of the Bimini Road. Divers and archeologists' paradise.

Slivers of shimmering sunlight danced in the turquoise water as it parted around their bodies. A school of jack crevalle enveloped them in a bright yellow and grayish-blue myriad while hundreds of individuals moved in perfect unison. They darted away from time to time, revealing two large barracudas circling in investigation of the outsiders; their mouths wide open, showing off their weapon systems. Dark shadows of other large cudas moved about in the distance herding the jacks.

A big parrotfish covered in huge green scales, with bright yellow dorsal fins and neon green eyes passed between them without a care. Matt looked at Christy. Through the mask he could see her eyes flashed with anger and disgust. He knew her emotions were getting the better of her. He could sense her need to rip off her mask and scream out.

It was not fear. She had seen death and destruction on the bottom of the oceans before. They both have. But Matt knew this was different.

This was the dynamiting of a coral reef and the destruction of a part of 'The Road'. An ancient treasure. Why?

And, the sunken freighter sitting in the middle of the devastation with a bullet riddled superstructure. Why and who?

They knew they stumbled upon something not meant for the eyes of tourists. The new sign they found and ignored. It was there, anchored and floating on pontoons when they arrived in the morning. \* **KEEP AWAY - NO DIVING OR FISHING - CARIBBEAN SEISMOLOGICAL AUTHORITY** \* It just bobbed around in the swells. Nobody around, so they disregarded it. After all, this was the Bahamas and nobody followed the rules here. Besides, this was their favorite place around Bimini. They dove here for years. The Bimini Road was one of the biggest dive attractions in the world. Even Cousteau had investigated the large, uniformly shaped flat stones lying on the ocean floor, like a road leading into the depths under the Gulf Stream.

Someone had blown up the reef and sunk a ship on top of it, right where the Road's flat stones began to emerge from the bottom.

I sure as hell got a hell of a story here, Matt thought to himself. Since he'd retired from the Navy, he's been doing freelance work for boating magazines while cruising around the Islands in their sixty five foot trawler yacht Sea Story.

He wrote about places like Normans Cay where the iguanas lined up on the beach expecting to be fed as you waded ashore, about the diving on the reefs around Andros and about the people of the Islands.

He told about the magic of being anchored off the beach at tiny Cupid's Cay on Eleuthera, where the church bells tolled across the water as the sun set over an endless horizon. He talked about the dilapidated freighters and mail boats that plied the waters between the Islands. Many times he wrote about the best kept and prettiest little island freighter, the Bahamas Daybreak. Now, she set on the bottom, upright and her hull intact. Just as if some giant hand had placed her there gently and carefully, to sit just right. Her name, her paint, her hardware still bright and clean. Only the large caliber bullet holes in the superstructure indicated the deadly struggle that had taken place aboard her.

Matt thought about coincidences. How sometimes things just fell into place.

They were at Bluffers Cay six months ago, a tiny uninhabited island north of Hispaniola, some six hundred miles away across the Bahama Islands chain. There, they found a large flat stone unearthed by Hurricane Andrew, shaped like the ones that made up the Bimini Road. Unmistakably, distinctly the same thing. They kept wondering what the connection might be between it and the ones around Bimini, so far away.

Then this morning they just had to get down to the Road again regardless of the sign. As they descended through the crystal clear water, the large, ghostly image began to materialize on the bottom. It began to take shape as they continued down and soon they recognized the freight boat Bahamas Daybreak, even before the black letters on the huge bows came into view. Christy grabbed Matt by the arm and her fingers squeezed as they spun around to look at each other in bewilderment. As if looking through a window into another dimension, the freighter set there atop a circle of dead reef without a living thing within its perimeter. Outside of the

well defined border, a rainbow of colors danced as the reef and her inhabitants went on with their everyday lives.

They maxed their bottom time exploring the sunken ship. Two cars on the foredeck and a load of lumber strapped into chucks made up the cargo. They swam through the wheelhouse, through the crew's quarters and down to the engine room. Besides the bullet holes in the wheelhouse everything else was intact and undamaged, except for the slashed raw water intake lines just above the open seacocks in the engine bay. Someone had sunk the Bahamas' Daybreak very purposefully, slowly allowing her to settle upright in a desired position.

They looked for bodies but someone had cleaned up everything.

They tried to get into the Fruehauf reefer trailer on the aft deck that served as a freezer with its self contained diesel compressor, but the pressure on the door made it impossible to open.

Now, as the minutes passed slowly while they waited for the absorbed nitrogen to purge from their bodies, their minds conjured up pictures of a fast powerboat overtaking the Daybreak and opening fire on her crew as they waved in a friendly gesture from the Portuguese bridge that wrapped around the face of the wheelhouse. Large caliber rifles dusting the wheelhouse from top to bottom to ensure the helmsman and whoever else might be inside does not survive the ambush. It was unlikely that anyone got off the Daybreak alive.

Time had come to surface. They carefully surveyed the water above, but there were no signs of other boats that might have brought unpleasant company.

They slid from the BCs and Matt flung himself over the side of the Whaler. Fifty feet away the pontoon structure and the sign rolled in the waves. Caribbean Seismological bullshit, he thought to himself.

"Let's get while the getting's good!" he said reaching for their gear.

"What son of a bitch would do this!" Christy was half yelling as she lifted herself into the boat. She began toweling her long black hair. Her dark eyes flashed with anger as she stared at Matt. "No one should be allowed to get away with this shit."

Matt agreed but said nothing. He turned the key and the forty horse Mercury came to life hurtling the Whaler toward the entry channel to Bimini Harbor. Matt knew Christy was right. They had to find out what happened. But they were in a foreign country and they had to be cautious. Christy, with her temper and emotions would just walk right into the fire. At twenty nine and in her prime, the woman had more balls than most men. She was beautiful, very physical and not scared of anything. She studied the martial arts and was compulsive about being fit. She was the right mate for the cruising man exploring Paradise. And Paradise sometimes was a dangerous place.

Matt had the very best of military training. He was commander of a SEAL unit before retiring from the Navy. He was six two, a powerful man with blonde hair and Scandinavian features. There

wasn't much he couldn't deal with, and he had a taste for adventure, but this, this was giving him an impression that if they were to get involved, they are taking on some formidable adversaries.

He thought about the possibility of someone watching from one of the houses on the beach as the Whaler punched through the surge created by the outgoing tide.

They headed for the small boat approach to the inner harbor and Murdock's Docks, a little marina where their North Sea trawler was moored. Without words they rinsed the dive gear and raised the Whaler up on the bridge deck to be secure in case they had to leave in a hurry.

Christy disappeared into Sea Story's aft stateroom, and Matt walked to the bar in the salon. He pulled a Kalik from the fridge, took a drink and paced back and forth, stopping at times to stare through the large tinted windows. To port lay the rest of the finger docks and the dusty, narrow street that ran the length of the town. To starboard, the harbor was busy with runabouts speeding to and from the ocean, fish-boats and freighters struggled to dock with the wind and the current opposing each other.

Matt tried to figure out the events that might have led up to the sinking of the Bahamas Daybreak. Drugs, robbery or an attempted hijacking by migrants headed for the US coast? No. Not the way she settled down there. That was too perfect. None of it made sense. What about the explosions? Why blow up the reef and sit a boat on top of it so purposeful-like? It was clear to see the explosion had taken place prior to the Daybreak being placed there. What the hell was someone trying to cover up?

He thought of calling friends back home. Should he contact Art Buttler in Washington, or his editor at Coastal Cruising? Or just walk into town and talk to the local policeman?

Christy appeared on the spiral staircase wrapped in a towel, her head cocked to the side brushing her hair.

She placed the brush on the bar and poured herself a glass of wine from a decanter.

"Well, holy shit, what was that?"

"I'm not sure." Matt walked over to stare out one of the windows, and then he turned to face her. "I don't know, but I'm with you. We ought to find out what happened. But I don't want it to turn into a suicide mission. We are in the B-hams you know! Let's lay low, nose around and let things more or less come to us. You know, fall in place like they always do."

A beeping noise came from the helm station. It was the fax machine.

It was the mid nineties and Sea Story had all the toys of the time. Single Side Band high seas radio telephone, fax and weather fax were some of the state of the art electronics that made life easier and safer at sea.

The machine's liquid crystal screen displayed the message "End of page 01. Total number of pages 01"

Matt ripped the page off and read out. "You all saw what they did on the Road. I knew you'd find it. I hoped you would. For now it is best to keep what you folks saw down there all to yourselves. You are being watched. Be careful Princess! The next high tide is a good time to cross the Banks and head east. The sighing of the ghosts awaits you."

## PART 2

Francis Pindle, the Right Honorable Bahamian Minister of Defense was looking forward to the meeting and could hardly wait to satisfy his curiosity. Two years in office, and he had many meetings with American officials but never one like Senator Miles Burton, one of the most respected and influential politicians on the eastern seaboard.

Pindle was more used to dealing with DEA commandoes and Customs and Coast Guard officers. His Defense Forces, consisting of a few thousand men and a handful of ex US patrol vessel hand-me-downs under his command fought hand in hand with the American forces to outwit the never ending challenge of the South American drug trade. The waters of the Bahamas were the highways upon which the drug lords forwarded their products to the markets of America.

As politicians go, Pindle was no different. Ambition combined with a hunger for power, and the necessary overinflated ego. But, he was an honest man who actually did care about more than just his bank account. He did believe in doing the right thing for his country. And now it was his turn. Things had begun to go his way. He was invited by the US Senator, in secrecy, to discuss a high priority item of major significance.

His limousine with an escort of two, white uniformed unarmed motorcycle policemen was trekking across the tarmac toward the waiting aircraft. On the side of the Dash 7 he read "Caribbean Seismological Authority". Before he could wonder what a US Senator was doing flying around in a plane owned by some research group, he was quickly ushered aboard by a man dressed in the standard CIA issue suit and sporting the usual mirror sun glasses. Pindle was escorted into an airborne office that might have been the little brother of the War Room of the Pentagon. Radar monitors, computers and communications equipment lined the walls. Superimposed on a five by five draft table was the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's chart for the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico.

"Ah, Minister Pindle!" Burton came on heavy with that Jim Bakker phony baloney smile of the spider greeting the fly to his web. He stuck out his right hand while with the other he ceremoniously proceeded to remove a pair of thick, gold framed reading glasses.

Pindle looked down on the pudgy, soft little fat man. To him, he looked more of the likes of perverts that hung out near the kiddy pools of playgrounds. Or, at best, one of those lower middle class pencil pushers that worked in accounting offices.

The glasses were an important extension of his manhood, and in what fashion were they removed and how were they held in the hand with the pinky pointing away from the rest of the fingers was designed to deliver that flair of charisma.

"It is a true pleasure to meet the man behind the many successes our countries have enjoyed in our joint efforts in the war against drugs," Burton poured it on.

"The pleasure is all mine Senator!" thundered Pindle's deep voice with a kind of Oxford-Bahamian accent. Successes my butt, he thought to himself. He was disappointed in his first impression of the big shot US politician.

Burton nearly lost composure as the huge black hand clamped down on his puny, stretched out palm and fingers. Pindle was a monster of a man, his head like a bear's but softened with a seemingly ever present wide grin, and he took good care not to get off on the wrong foot by crushing the hand belonging to this most important American.

"May I offer you some coffee or tea Mr. Pindle?" asked Burton.

"I'll have tea thank you." Came the deep voice with the accent.

"I grew quite partial to a good cup during my schooling years in Britain."

The secret agent brought a tray of steaming cups and was promptly dismissed by Burton.

"Minister Pindel," exclaimed Burton slurping the hot liquid, "let me get straight to our business at hand. Both your country and mine are well aware of the rising crisis in Cuba. The people's desperation is mounting. Refugees on their make-shift rafts are washing up on our shores in an alarming rate. Food, medical supplies and the items necessary for a decent everyday existence are becoming scarcer by the day in Cuba. Our very reliable information sources are reporting an imminent collapse of the Castro administration. We know Castro has plans to evacuate himself and his closest advisors, and go into exile within a foreseeable future. We also know, for a fact that before he does, this mad man plans to retaliate against the US. Sort of like, go out with a bang!" Burton took a pointer and placed it on Havana on the chart table as he continued. "Here is Havana and here is Varadero. The two largest military installations. Castro's entire stock of SCUD missiles, which isn't many but he does have them, is divided between these two facilities. And," Burton moved the pointer to the western shore of Biscayne Bay with a heavy sigh for effect, "here we have the Turkey Point nuclear power generating station just south of Miami!" Burton paused for a few seconds to study Pindle's face. The grin grew a lot fainter. "Mr. Pindle, we are really not very sure just how our containment fields would stand up against incoming SCUDs. The walls around the reactor were designed to arrest an internal explosion, not incoming warheads. The safety factors were not designed for that kind of attempt of breach from the outside. In the event of an uncontained meltdown, there

would be a hell of a lot of dead people in Florida and, active fallout would affect your people on Grand Bahama, the Abacos, perhaps as far east as the Berry Islands."

"Excuse me Senator but I find all this absurd. It is difficult for me to believe Castro would resort to such degenerate, if not suicidal tactics." Pindle was no longer grinning.

"On the contrary Mr. Pindle. You better believe it! This is a man who shot and killed his classmate in cold blood, on campus in public for what reason? Do you know the reason Mr. Pindle? It was to eliminate him from the running for class president!"

Burton paused allowing a very serious, heavy expression to build on his face. "Our intelligence people assure us that he is planning the use of those SCUDs even as we speak. His target, besides the Naval Air Station in Key West is Turkey Point. That is reality Mr. Pindle! Now, our Defense experts had already devised a quick responsive interception arrangement. Security however must be very tight on this one. The President, a handful of operatives and you Sir are privileged to what we are talking about here. Let me explain to you Mr. Pindle just how you fit into all this. Under the guise of a private research company we named Caribbean Seismological Authority, we have purchased from your government the island of Bluffers Cay, and signed lease on a piece of ocean floor off Bimini."

"Beg your pardon Sir, but are you suggesting my government is not aware of the true identity of the purchasers of Bluffers Cay, or what they plan to use the island for?" Pindle blurted out getting out of his chair, looking down and over towering Burton. "And why Bluffers Cay?" he continued before Burton could answer, "Nothing but a tiny island with a legend of being haunted. Where no one but the tourists dare to land. Used to be called The Bluffing Wells when I was a boy, mystery surrounded the island forever."

"No Sir, not your Prime Minister or anyone else for that matter knows who or what the Caribbean Seismological Authority is. Nor do they care. Good money was paid for that chunk of rock sticking out of the sea with no fresh water or soil of any kind to support a cockroach!" Burton braved to stand and look up into the big man's eyes as a follow up to his daring, slight raising of his voice. "Mr. Pindle," with reasoning softness he went on, "Bluffers is remote, small and is as close to Guantanamo, one of our triangulation factors, as we can get geographically. The end of our triangle is Bimini. From within this sector we can smell a match stick being lit under a SCUD, and destroy it most likely before it leaves Cuban airspace!"

Burton looked expectedly as Pindle's menacing posture was replaced with a more diplomatic approach.

"I am concerned Senator." Pindle spoke slowly, and in the deep voice Burton had picked up the faint scent of resignation. "Why was it me that your government chose to confide in, after you have purchased property from my people under false pretenses? I agree, in the event of a nuclear explosion anywhere in the vicinity of your Florida Peninsula my country would also be affected. But why is it that my Prime Minister is not involved in this?"



"Yes Mr. Pindle," Burton replied with a sly grin, "your Prime Minister is not involved, because he simply does not measure up to what our intelligence people would consider trusted. What I'm saying Mr. Pindle is, you patrol these waters. We help with equipment and manpower, but you are the law and order in this neck of the woods. And you're a decent and honest man. One of very few in your government, excuse my boldness but I need to be frank. Like I said, you are in the driver's seat, we need your cooperation. What we expect of you from here on Minister, is to realize the events taking place, understand what they mean to the safety of both of our countries and close your eyes to whatever is taking place on Bluffers Cay or at Bimini. Keep people away from there. Let our guys do their job. Allow us to make sure that your kids and mine will not have to wake up in the middle of a peaceful night to a nuclear nightmare courtesy of a senile communist dictator." Pindle was coming around now, Burton could see. He was getting braver by the minute. Nothing like telling how pretty his face was, to take the sting out of this Ali of banana politics, he thought as he continued his pitch, now pacing back and forth, all the while increasing his gestures of flapping his stubby arms around in an effort to accentuate the drama. "We don't know. It could be soon or it could take a long while before Castro makes his move. In any case, Sir, this seismological thing is a good cover and if handled properly, could stay in place indefinitely. It's good for all of North America don't you agree? A nice little insurance policy. And," Burton could hardly wait to get this one out, he knew this was going to put the man away, "I will personally see to it that the cutter Cape Hatteras will be de-commissioned real nice and early, in a couple of years tops, and presented to the Bahamian people. You know she's high tech! Should be a big improvement to what your boys have to make do with now!"

"Senator," said Pindle with the big grin well reestablished on his face, "I heard about a guy selling refrigerators to Eskimos, now I wonder if that man might be you Sir! However, to see the Bahamas' flag flying on the Cape Hatteras, I personally assure you no one will knock on your door or prowl in your back yard."

Pindle was feeling better now. He met with a US Senator who placed him on top of the list. That felt real good. And, he's doing something right for his country and, he'll be the man who gives his Defense Forces their first real serious, modern patrol boat. He grinned some more and shook the fat little hand on his way out. A lot gentler now.

"I'm awfully glad we have an understanding Minister." Burton reached into a drawer in his desk, and with the finesse of a matador he began to deliver his last, deadly touch. He took out a large brown envelope and handed it to Pindle looking at him straight in the eyes. "Of course my government" he said, "would insist on covering any additional expenses that you may personally incur as a result of this, ah, arrangement of ours."

Pindle, with his smile frozen in place took a good hard stare at the Senator and then the envelope which contained more US currency than he could ever dream of, and he took it from the little slimy man. He had to take it. He had to, even though, it made him feel like the fat little worm stuffed in the three piece suit had just ground him deep into the earth under the tarmac.

The Dash 7 taxied for a take off as Miles Burton poured his second martini. "That dumb son of a bitch. Hook, line and sinker." he said under his breath smiling to himself. Then he dialed a Miami number. A sweet voice with a slight Spanish accent came on the speaker phone, "Mayor Augusta's office, may I say who's calling?"

## PART 03

Matt handed Christy the fax. She read it again to herself and looked at Matt with puzzlement. "Jerry? It has got to be Jerry. He's the only one who calls me this 'Princess' thing."

Jerry was the old dock master at Murdock's. They met him over four years ago when they first came to Bimini and the wonderful little old Bahamian appeared on the dock just before sundown bearing gifts. Matt came on deck to see what he wanted. He said he had something for the Carib Indian Princess who lived aboard Sea Story.

Slightly hunched over, speaking ever so soft and slowly Jerry said, "Many lives before, kkarak was your passion Princess", and handed Christy a straw basket overflowing with hibiscus and wild orchids. Somehow, Christy thought of mangoes as she reached for the basket. She loved mangoes. They've always been her favorite. The strange word the old man spoke, it made her think of mangoes. She took the basket and knew it was too heavy for just the flowers. Beneath them lay the sweet fruit, the best she'd ever tasted.

Since then, Jerry had become like an older brother to them both. Sometimes he came aboard in the evenings and they talked about boats and marinas, religion and politics, but mostly about the Islands and the ocean.

Jerry believed he had lived many lives before, as he said we all do. He told Matt and Christy they were both very old and wise spirits, and that he had met Christy in another life where he remembered himself as an Arawak warrior and her, his deadliest enemy, a Carib Princess, whose braves swept across the land of the Arawak in a bloody massacre.

"They must be watching us, that's why he can't just come aboard and tell us what's going on," Christy turned to Matt.

"The sighing of the ghosts awaits us?" Matt looked at her sarcastically. "He's always been a little mysterious. OK, you like to call it spiritual, but now he's getting downright silly."

"Maybe not. Maybe he just didn't want to take a chance on someone else seeing the fax. That's probably why he didn't sign it or mention his name or ours. But he knew we'd know who sent it if he mentioned The Princess." Christy speculated.

"Wait a minute. I think I remember something about 'sighing of some ghosts'." Matt said reaching to the book shelf containing charts, sailing directions and volumes of the Waterway Guide. He pulled the latest edition of the Yachtsman's Guide to the Bahamas. "I'm sure there is something in here in regards to Bluffers. Here it is. It says, 'this isolated and inhospitable out-island offers little to the yachtsman ashore but the natural harbor on the north west side of the island will provide good protection from prevailing easterlies. The island is also

referred to as Bluffing Wells by the natives. It is said to be haunted and the sighing of the ghosts can still be heard on a still night when the wind is calm'."

Matt raised his eyebrows, looked up at Christy and went on reading. "Don't expect to meet any ghostly pirates however, since the sighing is no more than the rising of the water within the underground chambers and exiting through the blowholes, or wells, which were formed to relieve the pressure through the molten lava during the birth of the island." Matt snapped the book shut. "Well, if that don't beat all! We find a slab of stone on Bluffers that we think is identical to the ones on the Bimini Road, we come back here to go down and look again, find a big mess that was obviously not meant for our eyes, and then our friend Jerry sends us a fax full of riddles that tells us we should return to the Bluffs. See what I mean? Things just fall right into place don't they? This is too good!" Matt was getting more excited. "I just wish we could do a more thorough search of the Bahamas Daybreak down there."

"Sure." Christy said jokingly, "We ought to just tie the Sea Story next to the bastard's sign, make our own sign that says LEAVE US ALONE SCUM, and carry out a full blown investigation!"

"Yap, right. I go down and you stay on deck to chase them off! Seriously though," Matt said as they were walking back to the salon, "we need to think of a plan of action and we need to do it soon."

In the evening they walked to the Big Game Club for dinner, and on the way back they stopped for a couple of rum runners at the old Hemingway hangout, The Compleat Angler. From there Matt called his old Navy buddy Art Buttler. They were friends at the Academy in Annapolis and later served together aboard the USS Eisenhower. Buttler, a successful career man, now Admiral and Chief of Naval Operations for Undersea Warfare had not seen Matt for some time, but there was that unmistakable, genuine bond between the two men that is known only to friends who have seen combat together. Matt filed a float plan with Buttler, just as a backup in case they'd go missing, and explained some of their predicament. Matt knew that in foreign waters there was little hope for help from any US authorities, but, at least back home, someone had an idea of what they were involved in, and knew where they were headed.

From the bar they slowly walked back to Murdock's with their arms around each other. The rum runners did their magic of relaxing their bodies but their minds were at full alert.

As they strolled past the marina office, a bunch of locals were playing dominos on a piece of plywood laid across a couple of chairs. Jerry was in his usual spot, sitting in a big round wicker chair that could easily have accommodated two of the little man. His dog Marina was sleeping at his feet. His head was slumped over his chest and in his lap was his portable radio tuned to the Bahamas Radio Network. The nine o'clock obituary columns were being read. Looked asleep as usual, and just as always, never failing, without lifting his head he said, "Miss Christy, Mr. Brown, good evening to you." Then he looked up at them, his brown eyes brilliant and more youthful than ever, and with a certain degree of determination in his voice he said, "Now when you folks sail from

Bimini tomorrow, be sure to stop and visit Virginia at Little Harbour. She's a good woman and bakes fresh sweet bread daily. You have a safe journey now my friends and you be sure to stop in again soon."

"We sure will Jerry, and thanks for everything," said Matt and they walked silently to the boat.

"I guess old Jerry didn't feel like talking about the fax he sent us, and I didn't want to say anything in front of those guys." Matt said walking through the salon door.

"I guess not. And, considering he knows very well much we do not care for that sweet bread they make, I guess we're off to Little Harbour tomorrow right?" Christy commented as she armed the boat's alarm system.

## PART 04

In the early dawn, on the rising tide Sea Story idled her way out of the harbor of Bimini. Not another boat on the move just yet, except the odd skiff catching bait in the shallows for the day's fishing.

The deep water channel hugged the beach only forty feet off the sand for a good half mile before turning sharp to the west and leading offshore into the Gulf Stream. From there, just seven miles to the south they passed through Gun Cay Channel that led them onto the seventy miles of shallow water, the Great Bahama Bank.

As the sun began to hoist its fiery disk above the horizon, they found themselves surrounded by that well known mystique of crossing the Banks in perfect conditions. The sun felt so close, almost there to be reached out and touched. Its heat already like a cutting torch blasted down from above. Humidity slowly raised its hazy curtain to shroud the distant horizon in a circle around them. On top of the mirror flat, crystal clear water only ten feet deep, the big yacht hung suspended and motionless it seemed. On the bridge deck, the only sound was that mesmerizing, relentless humming of the big diesel engines and the faint thump thump thump of the slow turning propellers as they churned away at the thin water. Engulfed in the magic, Matt and Christy sipped their coffee as the autopilot guided the boat levitating above the barren plateau. As the sun rose higher, they could count the blades of grass on the bottom. The odd seashell and many colorful starfish glided past.

Suddenly, the water boiled far off the starboard bow, and a foot or two below the surface, like guided torpedoes, a pod of dolphins homed in on the raked stem of Sea Story. As the trawler steamed along at nine knots, they rubbed their backs on the steel plates of the bows, sprinting forward, to become airborne and turn sideways while above the water to let their eyes catch a few glimpses of Christy leaning over the bow rails with the video camera. They were the welcoming committee for vessels entering the Banks. After a few minutes, growing tired of the game, they shot forward leaving the boat behind to vanish as fast as they appeared.

They just finished lunch and were checking their progress at the lower helm when Matt noticed the stationary echo on the twelve mile Furuno, the smaller of the two radars on board. They'd had the North West Channel Light's tower showing on the thirty two mile set

for the last couple of hours, but its resolution was not as good as the twelve mile one.

The light tower sits in the middle of the ocean, marking a route from the shallows into the deep. The reef strewn channel that leads off the Banks and into the six thousand foot depths of the North West Channel.

"Something odd about the light," Matt said as Christy stood beside him staring at the monitor. Matt lowered the gain and played with the sea clutter to try to eliminate the target adjacent to the larger one marking the light, but it just wouldn't go away.

"Well," he sighed, "it's got to be a boat. Not a very large boat with sharp enough edges to show up this way."

"But why would they sit there in that awful current right in the middle of the channel?" Christy was getting suspicious.

"I don't know but it's got to take some fancy helmsmanship just to sit there against the tide rolling off the Banks. Unless they're anchored, which wouldn't make a whole lot of sense either."

"Right, unless they're waiting for someone. Certainly would be the perfect place to attempt a boarding. Nowhere to run for a slow boat." Christy raised her eyes at Matt.

"I agree" said Matt "Why don't you load the shotgun to be on the safe side."

Christy proceeded to load the twelve gauge Mossberg Mariner pump action and Matt returned to the bridge deck to have better visibility ahead.

Most large yachts had hired crew who also looked after security. Matt and Christy however couldn't compromise their privacy by having someone else on board on a full time basis, and they were quite confident in their own abilities to look after themselves. Matt's background with the Navy provided him with the best defensive and offensive training anywhere, and Christy had studied the art of Kai Chin since the time she was ten. She was also well trained in the use of hand guns and automatic weapons. They cruised without guns on board for a number of years. Then one day in Nassau, while Matt was away on a night dive with some old Navy buddies, two men boarded Sea Story while at anchor, killing their beloved German Shepherd dog with a machete to gain access to the decks, not expecting anyone to be on board. Christy heard the dog's final yelp and ambushed one of them with a dive knife in her fury killing the man, and kicking the other overboard into the awesome current that ripped through the harbor. He was carried onto the Club Med beach with broken ribs, where the police picked him up and charged him with enough offenses to get him off the streets for a good ten years.

Shortly after, they bought the Mossberg and a Ruger nine millimeter semi automatic pistol, and a little nine shot Derringer Semmerling for Christy that was five inches long and weighed twenty four ounces.

Christy joined Matt on the bridge laying the Mossberg on one of the benches. He was checking the Magellan Global Positioning System looking after the ship's navigational tasks. They were on a heading of ninety nine degrees magnetic, cross track error was zero, speed

of advance was nine point seven knots and distance to go to the present waypoint, which was the light tower, was four point two nautical miles.

"We gained seven tenths of a mile in speed," Matt said. "Tide's flowing with us and it will get worst as we near the edge of the Banks. We'll have to come about and face into the current if we're forced to wait for that boat to move."

"Yacht approaching North West Channel Light from the west, Yacht approaching North West Channel Light from the west this is the Lady J, this is the Lady J, come in captain!" came over the VHF radio. By now Christy was looking with the binoculars.

"Come in captain. Coming from the west, come in captain. This is the Lady J, broken down and adrift in the channel, in need of assistance. Over." Came the heavy Bahamian accent.

"I see them well." said Christy. "Local conch boat about thirty five feet in length. Three POBs, one's hauling in an anchor line, helm obscured. Engines smoking."

Christy picked up the mike. "Vessel in distress, vessel in distress at North West Channel Light, this is the motor vessel Sea Story approaching from the west, over."

"This is the Lady J, Sea Story. We lost engines and we need a tow onto the Banks to anchor, come back."

"Roger. Lady J are you anchored at this time, over."

"Roger mam, anchored at this time roger. Over."

"Stand by Lady J."

"Bull shit!" said matt looking through the binoculars. "They're swaying back and forth in the current trying to stay there now, anchor is back onboard. Smoke's just pouring out of the back of the transom as the guy's gunning the engines to assist the helm. I think they're waiting for us underpower so they'll have the ability to maneuver. Shit! They got old Thompsons! Two guys behind a pile of conch shells playing with Mls. That's world war two stuff!"

"All right, let's confiscate them," Christy tried to make fun of it. "We'll give them to a museum."

"Hell, we better get below. I'd feel better behind steel than fiberglass. That forty five caliber stuff does have a lot of punch to it but not enough to put more than a scratch on the hull."

At the lower helm Matt disengaged the auto pilot and turned to Christy. "I have a plan. We need to make sure these guys are what we think they are. We'll play their game on the radio until I can get in real good and close so the angle from their vantage point prevents them from doing any damage to the superstructure. Then, we'll tell them we changed our minds. If they're after us, they'll make a move then, in which case I'll run the sons o'bitches over. You know the channel ain't much more than forty feet in width, we're twenty two, so there is a better than fifty percent chance I can hit them good, and not collide with the reef."

"OK, let's see what they're all about," said Christy reaching for the radio. "Lady J, come in this is the motor vessel Sea Story over."

"Roger, this is the Lady J come back. Over."

"Roger, Lady J we are to come along to your port side and pass you



a line, reverse our engines and tow you onto the Banks. It will be important for you to be ready to receive our line from the port aft portion of our wheelhouse. We will be limited in our ability to maneuver in the channel, how copy, over." Christy turned to Matt "That should sufficiently confuse them."

"Copy good copy good Sea Story, roger, Lady J standing by. Over." The man's voice blared with excitement.

They were very close now. Plainly in sight, the decrepit little old wooden boat working hard against the current, her old engines spewing black smoke. There was definitely no anchor line in the water now. The windows of the cabin were covered or just dirty, but efficiently hiding the man behind the helm. One man was standing beside the pile of conch waving with a big smile.

Matt reversed the engines and slowly came to a halt a hundred feet or so away. He left the gears in reverse to keep station against the current and used the bowthruster to compensate for sideways drift. A couple of feet forward and the little boat would be lost from line of site under the bows of Sea Story.

Christy reached for the mike of the loudhailer. "Ahoy Lady J! Before we render assistance my captain insists on all of you gentlemen to be on deck in sight, and the Mls unloaded and placed atop your cabin roof!"

For a second the man beside the conch shells froze, then jumped behind the pile and just as Matt jammed the throttles full steam ahead they heard one of the Mls begin a steady thong thong thong thong thong.

Two, eight hundred horsepower Johnson and Towers V-892TA aftercooled Detroit diesels roared to life as the sixty ton yacht like a bulldozer lurched forward moving with the tide. At the helm of the fish boat the man throttled up to swing out of the way of the mountainous steel plates of the bows, but all the old engines could do was to allow her to fall abeam into the current before the North Sea's Lloyd's Ice Class hull plates began to push her ahead sideways, then roll her under, to be mauled by the keel and to be spit out to starboard in pieces.

Chunks of debris followed behind them through the channel pushed by the tide. Silently they stared ahead as they came about to make a reverse sweep of the channel for survivors. There were none. They went back on course for the North West Channel's deep water.

"Damn." Matt made a fist and punched the wheel. "Damn stupid fuckers!" He turned to look at Christy. She just shook her head and kept staring ahead. "Wonder why we only heard the one firing?" she asked with a faraway look and tears in her eyes.

"Probably jammed. I heard they used to do a lot of that." Matt said with a heavy sigh. He put the autopilot back on, turned on the collision alarm on the radar and they went off to the salon for a stiff drink as Sea story continued her way to Little Harbour in the Berry Islands.

## PART 05

Sea Story gently rolled in the swells of the North West Channel, a deep and nasty piece of water where the wind driven forces of the North East Providence Channel and the Tongue of the Ocean converge and collide with the walls of the Banks.

The Berry Islands, a fifty mile long group of very small, mostly uninhabited and pristine islets were dotted with pink sand beaches that rose from the sea on the edge of the Banks. Here, the Banks are so shallow, in many places a man can walk from island to island at low tide. This was a smuggler's habitat, second only to Andros Island.

Matt and Christy knew these islands very well from past cruises, although they'd never been to the inside of Little Harbour.

They passed Chub Cay and through binoculars they saw no boats in the popular anchorage, and most of the club's expensive sport fishing boats were missing from the marina basin. This was near the height of the hurricane season, a time of year when few boats ventured into the Bahamas, especially after hurricane Andrew's awesome devastation.

It was a little after five PM when Matt took the helm again, retiring the electronic crew, to weave his way through the intricate but clearly visible channel leading into the middle of the island forming a small, natural harbor.

Soon the anchor was down and they lowered the Zodiac inflatable for the visit ashore.

There was only one homestead as far as they could tell, a frame and stucco two story house at the highest point of the island.

As they pulled the dinghy upon the beach a bunch of dogs came with licks, sniffs and wagging tails. Behind them, a proper young lady of maybe thirteen and a couple of younger boys.

"Welcome to Little Harbour Cay!" the girl greeted them. "I'm Julia, and these are my nephews Andrew and Kevin. My mama's been waiting for a big boat, you guys got to be it! Come, I'll show you to the house!"

Matt and Christy smiled at each other as her carefree and youthful spirit lifted theirs. They walked a serpentine trail toward the house. Tall casuarinas and coconut palms lined the road with underbrush of wild flowers. Christy would've sworn she saw mushrooms that looked like False Amadou growing on the bases of tree trunks everywhere. Heavy curtains of Spanish moss hung from the branches of old bunion trees and wild parrots quarreled amongst each other. Everything was brighter, healthier, fuller and more alive than what you usually find on any small low lying island throughout the Caribbean.

This place must have a lot of fresh water, Matt thought to himself.

In clearings along the foot path grew fruit trees of every description. Bananas, mangoes, dilly fruit, pineapples, kiwi fruit, sour apples, papayas, guavas and even black cherries.

The young girl took their hands to speed up their walk, looked up at Christy and said "Don't worry, you can have all the mangoes you'll ever want."

"This is wonderful," replied Christy in amazement. "You live here all the time?"

"Sure do," answered Julia. "Wait till you see my goats. You're very pretty!"

In the clearing around the house chickens and roosters scratched and goats grazed, while a good number of fat cats laid around yawning. A screen door opened and a large, middle aged lady with a big smile, wiping her hands on a plaid apron was waiving them inside. "How are you dears? You must be the Browns. Come in, come in. I'm Virginia Newton. I know you didn't come to buy my bread, but you're just in time for supper. Sit yourselves all down. Julia, where's them boys!"

"Playing with Christy and Matt's dinghy. I'll get them!" She stormed out slamming the screen door behind her.

"You knew we were coming." Matt turned to Virginia.

"Sure did. Reckon you all know an old fool by the name of Jerry Murdock?"

"Jerry is Murdock? You mean he owns the marina?" Christy cut in. "That he sure does honey," Virginia nodded. "My great grand daddy used to own most of Bimini. Practically gave away all of it except for the marina and the beach house on the ocean side. And, he kept the marina just to keep that house going. That's all he'd ever cared about as long as I'd known him. But then, it keeps him going, so it's all right by us. He's a good man the Lord keep him. There ain't nobody in the Bahamas that don't think good of Jerry Murdock!"

Kids and dogs crashed through the door, but it wasn't long lived for the dogs as they were quickly shooed outside by the jolly woman.

"No dogs in the house, I told you so long as we have guests!" Virginia shook her head as she ushered Matt and Christy to sit and dig in. A big bowl of fish chowder started things up, then conch fritters, fried grouper and a big mess of the traditional Bahamian peas and rice followed. Desert was guava duff, the sweet cooked fruit of the guava served hot on a slice of cake like bread topped off with spiced rum. Then Virginia offered coffee, Nassau Royale or beer. Matt opted for a cold Budweiser and after a few chugs from the frosty bottle he turned to her. "Where does your electrical power come from?"

"We've got two twenty KW Lister diesel generators back in the shed." Came the prompt answer.

"You sure are set up pretty well here. You've a wonderful island. But you don't live here alone do you?"

"No honey, the boys father, my son and my man are out lobstering. Been out nearly three weeks. They be headed for Nassau to sell their catch any day now, then they come home for a week or two.

Say you all getting tired and just want to turn in, or you up to some conversation?"

"Well, I think we'd like to know why we were so mysteriously steered upon your paradise by Jerry," offered Christy.

"Paradise?" Virginia placed another Budweiser in front of Matt. "Miss Christy, this the most fertile clump of land in the Caribbean. Ain't nothing grows nowhere like on Little Harbour Cay! You ain't seen my vegetable fields yet. Got corn, onions, peppers and potatoes, anything your belly desires. But let me start you off by explaining just why you're all here." Virginia poured herself and Christy a cup of coffee and spiked it generously with Nassau Royale. "You two made some dangerous enemies for yourselves when you went down there and saw what you were not supposed to see. But, you couldn't help it you see, 'cause that was your destiny. That ain't me talking now, that's Jerry's idea, but he's convinced me long ago that somehow, the things he says and does are reality. You see, he was born on Bimini, and he was in his late teens when a plague killed off just about everyone on the island including his folks. He built the beach house after my great grandmother and him got married, and then, piece by piece he began to sell off the rest of the land. In nineteen thirty he built the marina on the final chunk of land he had. He saw the days of the wreckers and smugglers was pretty much over with, and instead, well to do Americans began to discover Bimini as a good fishing spot. Shoot, they wanted to buy everything in sight, especially the beach house. In sixty nine, Clayton Powell with some friends of his set my grand daddy down and began bidding on the place at one million US dollars. But no, he said he'll never sell so long as he's alive and he swore he'd be around for a long time. He wasn't kidding either! He'll be a hundred and three this year, bless his soul."

"Jerry is a hundred and three years old?" Christy exclaimed. "Man, we thought he was in his seventies!"

"So, what's so special about the house Virginia?" Matt smiled trying not to sound impatient.

"It ain't so much the house, but what it's hiding my dear. The house is built around a blow hole. Y'all know what a blow hole is don't you? And Jerry put the house on top of it, 'cause that particular blow hole leads to an underground maze of huge caves stretching the length of the island and more!"

"That's not unusual considering most of the islands are of volcanic origin," Matt interrupted. "Blow holes and caves are found throughout the Bahamas."

"You're right Mr. Brown, but that blow hole is special. That blow hole leads to an underground world and a people who's been living down there for an awful long time."

"Are you serious!" Christy said in a wide eyed somber tone.

"Look around my island Mrs. Brown. Ever seen mangoes on a tree at this time of year? Grapes, and Mackintosh apples growing in the Bahamas? We have no wells here on the island. Only a cistern that the rainy season fills. We irrigate with salt water. My vegetable gardens are flooded with seawater on a regular basis, in soil only a couple of inches deep. The little brown fungus you see clinging to everything, Jerry brought it here. Without it Little Harbour Cay

would be like the rest of the islands honey. Stunted casuarinas, coconut palms, and with a lot of tending, maybe a little patch of peas and peppers."

"Are you saying that Jerry gets the stuff from whoever, whatever is down there?" asked Christy.

"You got it. Brings us medicinal herbs, strange looking leafs that we've been putting in our drinking water for as long as I can remember. And he eats only what they give him. You'll never see him eat or drink a dam thing else. That's why he's a hundred and three. And let me tell you, the man ain't never been sick in his life."

"How could he keep something like this a secret for all these years?" Matt raised his eyebrows.

"My daddy Ernest Murdock and I are the only ones alive who know anything about any of this. And I only learned a couple of years ago. Rest of the family and everyone else thinks he's just a wise old man who grows herbs and spices. Now, my daddy was named after one of Jerry's best friends, Mr. Ernest Hemingway. He was the only other person that knew about all this, and was the only one who ever set foot in that house since my great grandma died. They were the best of friends. You ought to hear the stories of them going after marlin. You all heard I guess how Mr. Hemingway liked to box, how they would feed him beer and liquor all day, hook him up to a big fish to get him worn out and then one of the men at the bar would challenge him for a match, well, you know he never lost a fight! Now, Jerry most likely won't admit it, but my daddy says it was the stuff Jerry was giving Mr. Hemingway that gave him all that strength and energy. Then when he died like he did, well, that was real hard on Jerry my daddy says. Anyway, I'm getting off track here, I do that all the time. See, Jerry had Charlie Morgan fly him over in his old seaplane last night, and they landed in the dark, with no lights on that rickety old thing, almost causing me a heart failure. Then I begged the two old fools to stay till daybreak but they wouldn't hear of it and were gone in less than an hour. Jerry just wanted to tell me that you all were headed this way, and that I should tell you everything I know, and that a bunch of white folk had come and discovered the passages under Bimini. He said they would soon find the people who live down there, and they sure don't want to be found. Jerry and those people don't talk a language or anything, but somehow he understands them in some primitive way. He thinks something went wrong down there, something the white folk caused to happen, and the people who live down there are now in big trouble. He said Bluffing Wells has something to do with it too. That's where he would like to ask you all to be heading now."

"To Bluffers Cay?" Christy said with disbelief. "Six hundred miles as the crow flies?"

"I don't know child, but nothing surprises me anymore. I know one thing, you are very important to my great grandfather. Those are Indian people living down there he says, and they'll accept help from only you. They trust you because Jerry somehow told them you were one of them. Or something like that, Lord, I wish he would've stayed, but he said he had to get back to Bimini to keep an eye on things. Oh, and the sign he said, something about a seismographic something,"

"Caribbean Seismological Authority?" Christy cut in.

"Yes, that's it, it's a fake. Just a cover for something bad I guess, and, they were watching you all the time so Jerry couldn't be seen with you to explain things in person."

They sat for a few seconds, quiet, only the shriek of some beetle and the distant sound of a million crickets filtering through the open windows.

"This is incredible." Christy broke the silence almost whispering.

"Yet I have this feeling that it's all very real."

"My dears," Virginia turned to them reaching across the table to touch their hands, "a lot of lives, including your own, are dependent upon how you go about believing that old man's story."

"Virginia," Matt spoke softly, "I never believed Plato's story of Atlantis, and I'm not about to start now. But I believe Jerry. He told me things about my wife that were so uncanny it sent shivers up my spine. And besides, people already died for whatever is down there. We saw a sunken freighter, her wheelhouse full of lead and an exploded piece of the reef where the phony sign is anchored. And, we know someone is after us, we already had an encounter. So, don't you worry yourself. We are going to treat this very seriously. In the morning, we'll be off to Bluffers Cay."

"Virginia," Christy held up her mug, "have you another cup of this lovely stuff?"

## PART 06

Ricky stood there so elegant, so tall in his London Fog, leather briefcase in hand as the driver of the car rushed to open the door. The rain came in buckets increasing the already high levels of humidity as night fell upon Miami. Of course it was dry under the canopy of the airport terminal but he looked so good in that coat. The London Fog allowed just a glimpse of his tailored Italian three piece which magnificently concealed the few extra pounds he gained since his football days.

He shoved his large frame into the back of the limo and adjusted his shoulder holster. Ricardo Mortielli and the gun were inseparable.

He thought of the news flicks, the smash-and-grab robberies, all them whimpy tourists being mugged and killed in Miami. How he wished they'd try that on him. He grinned imagining it. Just let one of those fucking spicks try, he thought. He patted the forty five Magnum. Identical to the one his hero Clint always used in his favorite movies. He really got off on the character, except he wished the guy wasn't such a fucking do-gooder. Ricky even started to write a screenplay where Harry finally sees the light and decides to profit from his talents. Yes, he does a one eighty and turns into a bad dude. Just like Ricky did after the assholes kicked him off the team for smoking pot. Shitbraines. The best offensive tackle the Toronto Argonauts had ever lost.

He grinned to himself again at the thought of how much better off he was now anyway. At thirty five he was semi retired, as he called it, loaded with dough and broads, and was the most connected North American in the world of drug trafficking. Not that he dealt with drugs, no, that was too risky for a smart Italian boy from the Bronx. He didn't even use drugs. He liked to smoke a little weed and some good hash, that's about it. Hell, he was a legit business person. Ricardo Arms and Ammunition never broke any real laws. He sold guns. So what if some jerkoff dreamed up some regulations that discriminated against certain weapons. Those were not laws that Ricky considered reasonable. And, then what his clients used his wares for was certainly not his business. He should have never played ball. He wasted his time doing that shit. He was a salesman. A born salesman. He sold himself to every supplier of raw narcotics from the Middle East to Bolivia and built an empire on selling guns to drug lords exclusively.

The car entered the Florida Turnpike and Ricky mixed himself a drink from the limo's bar. He settled back for the long ride to Augusta's recluse in the Keys. He'd been there before to introduce his buddy Tony Sanchez to the good mayor.

"Mr. Mayor. What a crock of shit!" he said under his breath as he took a drink. Sure is a smart cookie though, he thought.

Augusta was one of his best clients long before his days in American politics. And so was Sanchez, who became a good friend. As all other cartels were blown to smithereens by the Feds, Antonio Sanchez became bigger and better. Practically a national hero in Columbia. The man was untouchable.

And, tonight, Ricky will have all the heavies there. What a night! Sanchez will be there, guys like Benito Garcia, Joey Fodor, all of them. All major players and good clients. They'll be there because Ricky gave his word of no fuck ups and because he is going to introduce them to the man that will revolutionize their industry. Again, he was a salesman. A talented ambassador. A deal maker!

The product was Augusta's, but Ricky had the connections, the trust and the reputation. And, what an outstanding commission structure. The most money deal he ever made.

He had made up his mind to retire full time now, soon.

The car turned off US1 onto the private road at the sign OCEAN REEF RESORT - A PRIVATE COMMUNITY - MEMBERS ONLY. Three miles later they pulled up to a heavily guarded security gate. The driver produced a plastic card which was scanned by the guard and returned. They drove across a bridge and entered the island community of the well to do. Twelve hundred acres of large lots with homes worth millions, and two very exclusive five story hotel condominiums. A very serious private security force and private fire department.

Mayor Lorenzo Augusta's cottage, as he called it, was in fact a lavish display of no expenses spared contemporary Spanish architecture, and a beehive of activity. Guests were arriving by stretched limousines, checked and ushered inside.

In a large hall paved with marble tiles they mingled and admired the stone sculptures by the likes of Jacques Lipchitz and paintings by Van Gogh and Modigliani. Beautiful Latino women sipped fancy cocktails and chattered in Spanish. Men were greeting each other with that perfect blend of affection and machismo.

Senator Miles Burton, Mayor Augusta and Karl Dunitschek, the Mayor's right hand man were conversing beside a marble statuette of St. Christopher. Augusta was of average height, sharp, well defined Hispanic features with penetrating eyes, and a personality that flowed like a Chopin concerto, refined but brutally demanding respect. His voice, almost soft, and at the same time overwhelmingly powerful. Dunitschek, a tall, solid no nonsense muscleman with eyes reflecting an intelligent personality, dark brown hair and Eastern European features stood there explaining something to the Mayor as Ricky approached.

"I want Herb in the study the minute he gets here," Augusta said to Dunitschek and turned to greet Ricky. "Ricardo! Mi amigo."



The two hugged and patted each other on the back. "How was your flight? A big night for us! I'm counting on you Ricky."

"Piece of steak," he smiled. "I'll have them licking at your feet."

Augusta noticed Dunitschek and Herb Creismeyer heading toward the study. He turned back to Ricky. "I need everybody assembled in the study in half hour." He hurried off to enter right behind Dunitschek.

"Herb I'm not impressed." His voice was calm and menacing as he closed the big solid oak door behind him. "No, I'm more than that, I'm fucking disappointed!"

"I don't know how they could screw up" Creismeyer threw his arms up as he began his excuses but Augusta shot him down with one cold stare that he prolonged until the room filled with explosive silence. The big German almost shrank in size, blood vessels in his thick neck began to bulge and his big, round face took on a reddish glow. He nervously scratched his crew cut blonde hair on the back of his head.

"I didn't need this shit right now Herb. What the fuck are you doing hiring Bahamian fisherman to do a job! Is it above you now days to do it yourself? Have I spoiled you so much? What the fuck were you thinking? I know I'm spoiling you right now! Your Nazi countrymen would have you executed for this." Augusta walked to the row of book shelves that lined one of the walls and began rearranging some hard cover encyclopedias. "I thought I was surrounding myself with people who are the absolute best at what they do." He continued torturing Creismeyer with his back to him. "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was the one who fucked up. Right? After all, those two middle aged yachtees are making my export assassin look like a bumbling idiot!" Augusta turned and approached Creismeyer to resume his stare. "How many phone calls do you think those two upstanding citizens have made since their discovery Herb?" Herb's Adam apple rose and fell as he swallowed so hard Dunitschek could hear it standing with his hands hooked together behind his back at the far corner of the study. "Clean it up Herb. Make it right or someone else will!" Augusta left the room just as drops of sweat began to form and roll down Creismeyer's forehead. Ricky in the mean time had poured out his animal magnetism over a gorgeous little dark skinned talent he thought deserved to partake in the pleasures that the intimate knowledge of his body brought to women.

Of course it was all chemistry and it was instantaneous. In fluent Spanish he told his life of football, fame and fortune, and how most women can't keep up to his jet setting, fast paced lifestyle. She whispered to him through her thick, moist lips how she often laid in bed alone, dreaming about being with a football player because they were so big and physical, and how her needs were so much more than most men could handle. Ricky was on the verge of an erection and in seventh heaven. What a great little bimbo. That tight little mini dress she wore, those six inch heels showing off her exquisite thighs, her tiny waist he could put two hands around and touch his fingers together. Man, her wild make up and heavy perfume, her hair that had that just-fucked look.

How can a man concentrate on his work with babes like that around, he thought. He knew he was going to retire after this deal and devote his time strictly to fornicating with international playgirls. But tonight, it's going to be little Rosa Saloma's night when they meet after his important conference with the Mayor.

He mingled, informing his associates their meeting was about to begin. The chosen ones refreshed their drinks and one by one entered the study and staked out one of the plush, comfortable seats as their territory to slump into. It was Tony Sanchez, Benito Garcia, Miguel Rodriguez, Joey Fodor and Alfredo Crespo, each representing a family of cartels from different parts of South America. All exclusively dedicated to the production of cocaine and heroin.

Lorenzo Augusta, Miles Burton and Dunitschek showed up last. A man was placed on the outside of the closed door to prevent interruptions.

"Gentlemen," Ricky was glad to get the show rolling, "you've all been introduced to everyone here earlier this evening, most of us had met before anyway, so I'll get straight to the point if our gracious host Señor Augusta will allow me." Ricky bowed in respect toward the smiling Mayor. "You're all here tonight, because, over the course of the last few years, through my business dealings with each and every one of you, I have gained your trust, and if I may say so, your friendships. As I said before, what I'd like to accomplish here tonight, is to introduce you to a brilliant concept that will take the hassle out of doing business in the US. What am I talking about? Well, I'm talking about shipping. Forwarding your products in a hassle free and safe manner. Let's talk numbers. An associate of Señor Augusta's had computed, using numbers available from certain government agencies and compared to your gross national product, that two thirds of all your products never make it to their destination. I think we all know why, and I think we also know where that particular stretch of the Caribbean is, where shipping becomes rather difficult. What would you gentlemen say to a man who could provide all of you, on an individual basis, with an absolute foolproof, safe mode of transporting your goods across those troubled waters, and guarantee an equally safe landing of that product on US soil." Ricky paused to study the faces before him, which were not as easy to read as most people, but he could feel they were listening. "I asked you to come here because you all run your affairs as true business professionals, and as such, I felt the opportunity presented here today would make sense to you. With cooperation amongst yourselves, and with the use of an efficient forwarding service we can provide for you, you can force all other suppliers out of the marketplace, creating a monopolized business environment that can lead to no other than an increase in production."

"Hey Ricardo!" Joey Fodor spoke with a raspy voice and a very heavy accent. "You sound like you selling us a Seven-Eleven franchise. Cut the shit. We know we lose shipment OK, we know. Cut the shit, let's see the goods before I have to shave again."

"All right Joey, I just want to ask you to keep an open mind to

the incredible business opportunity you are about to discover. OK, you all know Señor Augusta, his connections, his reputation, otherwise I know none of you would be here today. Lorenzo, por favor."

"Gracias Ricardo." Augusta stood up. "I hope you're all enjoying the party. I think maybe apologies are in order for ne habla Espanol, but I felt Senator Burton should be involved in our meeting to answer questions if you have any later on. As you know Miles and I go back a long ways. Miles and I were amigos long before our business ventures with Nicaragua, and I'd like to add that the Senator's influence was very much instrumental in paving the road to what you're about to hear. And yes it is, as Ricardo put it, an incredible opportunity. You see, some time ago an associate of mine was forced to jettison some cargo he was transporting. When he returned to recover the item he discovered some underground passages. Subsequently, and I will not bore you with the details right now, but with a team of scientists in my employ we uncovered a natural tunnel that runs underwater in the length of the area most troublesome within your shipping routes. What we have is a passageway that begins at Bluffers Cay, which is north of Haiti south of Great Inagua, and ends at Bimini. I now own Bluffers Cay and have leased the necessary area outside of Bimini."

The room full of poker faces began to melt down into amazement and skepticism. These guys were up on their geography. They knew if Augusta was talking reality, no matter how unbelievable it sounded, it would yield an unobstructed highway right to the front door of their markets. Simply sail up the unpatrolled international waters of the Windward Passage between Cuba and Haiti, and unload at the tiny island right on the border of Bahamian territory.

Before one could open a mouth to ridicule the idea, Augusta quickly picked up where he left off. "It gets better my friends. It becomes perfect as you shall see. With the influence of our friend Senator Burton, we have seen to it that both of these locations are to become strictly off limit for Bahamian and US agencies, allowing total privacy for our companies to carry on business. As we speak, the Bluffers Cay terminal is nearing completion and an offshore oil drill platform was anchored this morning at Bimini. I am proud to say that both of our facilities boast the latest in communications, surveillance and defense hardware. And, to complete the project, our private research group, the Caribbean Seismological Authority will be operating a freighter between Bimini and our warehouse facility in Miami to insure the safe arrival of your goods in that city. Again, Miles and I had taken the necessary steps to avoid any complications at that end as well. Please, before you have any questions, we have prepared a video presentation which will put the whole thing in a lot more realistic perspective for you."

What followed had certainly put the finishing touches on convincing everyone. Computer animation showed how the tunnel was formed by the escaping gases at the time the crust of the Earth was cooling down. It wasn't one tunnel but rather a succession of huge cavities all linked together. Beginning with a large hole under

Bluffers Cay, it ran parallel to the north east Cuban coast under the Old Bahama Channel, weaving in and out of caverns of all sizes and shapes, then turned north to skirt the Great Bahama Bank and terminated in a cavity so huge, a city twice the Size of Nassau could be placed inside it. The tiny speck of the island of Bimini set on top of the almost perfectly round hole.

A man in a white lab coat explained about the effect of the tides where the tunnel curved upward nearing the surface, the awesome, fast moving currents in the deeper portions, the trapped atmosphere within the domes of the cavities and the modifications that had to be made in places to raise the water levels by allowing air to escape. Another man, an engineer wearing a hard hat, guided a tour of what he called Bluffers Cay Terminal, a large concrete office building, living quarters and workshops, all incorporated into the natural tunnel formations. He explained how a low frequency transmitting cable was strung from there through the tunnel to Bimini, and how self propelled submersible vehicles, thirty feet in length and six feet in diameter, homed in on the signal carried in the cable and followed it along the way. The cable was also used for controllers to communicate with the vehicles, and to receive information from data buoys placed along the route pertaining to such factors as current velocity and direction. Then a model showed one of the vehicles arriving at Bimini, emerging from the deck of a sunken ship that was attached to a hole in the side of the vertical wall of the cavity, and begin its ascent hooked to a towline that lifted it on deck of a freighter moored to an oil platform.

Sanchez, Rodriguez, Garcia, Fodor and Crespo sat there with their mouths open. They didn't know if they should believe it, or simply call Augusta a mad man and burst out laughing. But, could this just maybe actually work? They had nothing to lose. They deliver a shipment and see if it will work. If they lose the drugs, no big deal to them, it won't be the first time. They could afford it. Then, just send someone up to rub out Augusta for playing mad scientist.

Augusta feasted his eyes on his captive audience. He knew he covered all the bases. Questions were hard to come by. Finally, like a bull in a china shop Fodor blurted out, "Cuanto cuesta?"

"The Caribbean Seismological Authority receives the equivalent of twenty percent of the street value of the product carried." Augusta stared at them and they saw him change from his smooth powerful character into a borderline lunatic. But that didn't bother these guys, they knew Augusta well enough. "Ingenious isn't it. Incredible like I told you. Nothing can go wrong. Nothing! I'm the Mayor of this town. This is the biggest discovery since hypodermic syringes!" He laughed, "You and us," he pointed around the room, "within months will become the wealthiest, most powerful people on the face of this earth. Tony! You're the king at home right?

Alfredo! Who's Mr. Bolivia? Sure. You tell them who's going to be chief of policia tomorrow. You appoint the president. You don't like him he's gone. Am I right? You are powerful. You all are. But only back home. And for how long? For how long, unless you advance forward. You cannot afford to stop. You'll be torn down brick by

brick. You cannot afford to stop until we build an alliance that is as powerful in this country as you are back in yours. When I no longer have to smuggle you into the United States under fictitious IDs, and when it is us who choose the president of the United States!" Augusta was beginning to cool and recede back into his usual posture. "The future, your future and your family's future is in your hands. Opportunity is knocking on our doors amigos."

Ricky knew a deal was being put to bed. He could feel it in his bones. He saw Tony give him a thumbs up, low from the hips. If Tony Sanchez went for the deal, the others would follow suit for sure. Little choice they had. They'd be squeezed out of the market place. And they were not stupid men, you can't beat them, join them. Ricky could just jump for joy. This deal meant ten percent of the first year's profits to him. Going by Lorenzo's projections that translated to a little over ten million bucks in his pocket within twelve months! A class A retirement fund. If they could just wrap it up, he needed another drink too. But Augusta further talked about an on hands demonstration run and they all agreed to fly to Bluffers Cay in the morning to personally inspect the facilities. Then, finally, Ricky could excuse himself and return to the party to find Rosa. There she was, displaying herself to four potbellied geriatrics whose pacemakers, Ricky thought, would explode if she set her tight little ass on their faces.

She excused herself from her admirers as Ricky neared their group. "Hi" she purred in English. "I happened to have a nice chunk of Bolivian finger hash, and I think we should leave this wake, go to my place and fuck our brains out."

Ricky loved that trashy stuff. He grabbed her by the arm nearly raising her off the floor and headed for the door. A limo pulled up and he threw her in the car and climbed in behind her.

"The Harbor House," she said to the driver.

She straddled Ricky and buried her tongue in his mouth. He rolled her tight dress to her waist and grabbed her round little buttocks with his huge paws. She wore no panties and his urge was becoming uncontrollable. His hands moved down her thighs and squeezed the firm flesh. She needed to silently scream from the pain and had to keep herself from biting his tongue off, as her right hand searched the back of the seat behind his head. Ricky reached up one hand and ripped her dress from her shoulders exposing her small, pointed breasts. He grabbed her around the waist, lifted her and bit the smooth skin below her nipple.

Her hand found the duct tape and felt the thin, cold shaft of steel. Her palm and fingers slowly wrapped around the wooden knob fashioned for her small hand, feeling around to achieve the correct position, searching for the feel that was just right, where the six inch shaft protruding through her fingers pointed a perfect ninety degrees to her forearm. She tilted back her head and moaned as the man's mouth viciously chewed away at her breasts, teeth grasping and tugging at her hard nipples. She waited for that feeling of explosive, orgasmic energy to build within her. It came easy, sweeping across her, lifting her from the conscious level. Her eyes blurred but she could see the man clearer now than ever.

She no longer felt the pain from his bites. She grabbed his thick hair with her left hand pulling his face from her

breasts and softly cried out "Fuck me, fuck me now!"

Ricky's hands struggled with his zipper as she kept pulling his hair and he allowed his head to be raised until his eyes met hers. He had never seen such a wild ecstasy on a woman's face. Her eyes unfocused, more than bedroom eyes, her tongue circling her lips, her hair flying everywhere. Lights and shadows flickered in and out of her eyes. She threw her head back, shaking it from side to side and he heard her scream just as the excruciating pain exploded within him for only an instant as the ice-pick plunged through his ear canal, and he became limp. Rosa quivered, her mouth wide open, breathing shallow and fast. Her legs wide apart, hips slowly moving up and down, and her left hand firmly between her thighs meeting the rhythm. She shivered once, as it was over, and the feeling that jolted with so much pleasure through her body was almost gone. Breathing deeper, her thrusting hips slowly coming to a halt and her thighs closing around her hand she rolled on her back beside the permanently retired arms executive.

The dark glass rolled down behind the driver and a roll of Scott towels landed beside little Rosa Saloma.

## PART 07

It had been twenty four hours since they bid farewell to Little Harbour Cay. That morning they heard from Art Buttler. He was calling on the Single Side Band radio, using a Digital Select frequency he could scramble from his end to prevent anyone listening in.

Art told Matt he discretely looked into the affairs of the Caribbean Seismological Authority. Under the direction of two well respected scientists, Doctors Norman Schiffman and Bill Gautier, the organization was sanctioned by the North American Council of Scientific Studies, was Florida Senator Miles Burton's pet project and was financially supported by the likes of Miami Mayor Lorenzo Augusta.

"To suggest these people's involvement in criminal activity without concrete proof, would get more laughs at the DA's office than Rodney Dangerfield doing his best routine. That's how our attorneys here in Washington see it," Buttler commented, "but of course that don't mean a damn thing. We're all drowning in a sea of bureaucracy here, and law suit avoidance is first on everyone's list of the do and don'ts of self preservation."

Matt brought up the incident with the Lady J at the North West Channel Light. Buttler became very concerned about their well being, and offered to contact his friend Commander Harold MacShane at Coast Guard District Headquarters in Miami, and ask him to instruct his men to handle a security call from Sea Story with high priority. Matt thought that was a healthy precaution in case of another attempt on their lives. He advised Buttler of his intended destination of Bluffers Cay, via Exuma Sound and Mayaguana.

They had come two hundred miles since leaving that wonderful black lady's island paradise. The easterly Trades, augmented by the Bermuda-Azores High that had moved farther south than usual for this time of year, were blowing a blustery twenty knots and gusting higher. The bottom end of Exuma Sound received full brunt of the Atlantic Ocean as it funneled through between Cat Island and San Salvador.

Sea Story rolled slightly as the eight to ten foot seas came square on her beam. Not a cloud in the sky, just the wind howling between the antennas and the radarmast.

They had seen the odd island freighter in the night but no other

pleasure craft until the large sport-fish that came out of the back of Conception Island. The boat fell behind them on the same course, sometimes disappearing from eye sight, but remaining a well defined blip on radar. Matt and Christy were expecting it to change course for the north east coast of Long Island to troll the productive walls, but she remained behind matching the trawler's speed. Matt became suspicious why a vessel capable of thirty knots plus, would be lugging her engines at slow displacement speeds in deep water.

"Let's put into Rum Cay for a while" he suggested. "That'll give us a chance to see what they're up to, if anything."

Rum Cay is about nine miles long, five wide and is covered in a semi tropical rain forest of rolling hills. The tiny settlement of Port Nelson at the south east corner of the island has a population of less than thirty. A necklace of coral reef encircles most of the shore, requiring local knowledge to find the way into one of the few small coves suitable for anchoring. Matt and Christy had been there before to dive on the wreck of the H.M.S. Conqueror laying in about thirty feet of water just off Signal Point. She was the first propeller driven British warship. Since she hit the reef, to this day, the government had employed a local resident to light a kerosene lantern each night and place it on a wooden tower ashore.

Matt picked his way through one of the openings in the reef and dropped the hook just north of Sumner Point, some two and a half miles from the village. He disappeared in the engine room to make routine checks of oil and water levels, stuffing boxes and hydraulic fluids, and Christy lowered the Zodiac and donned her snorkel gear to hunt up some lobsters. She was just returning with a bucket full of bugs when the sport-fish dropped anchor south east of the point, on the outside of the reef line. Matt sat on the bridge deck drinking a beer and watching with binoculars. He could only see the boat from the flybridge up, as the land between them had a high enough elevation to hide the rest.

He decided to take the dinghy ashore and have a closer look while Christy prepared the tails for the barbecue.

With binoculars in hand, wearing reef runners to keep his feet from being sliced to shreds by the sharp volcanic rock, he climbed to the top overlooking the eastern shore. He stayed low and out of sight to study the vessel through the glasses. She was a seventy two foot Bertram Yachtfish, a one and a half million dollar item. The name on her transom said BEAR WITH ME, and a cute picture of a Teddy bear with his back turned, pulling his pants down to bare his bum was airbrushed below it. A small inflatable trailed behind.

There were six men milling about in the aft cockpit. Beer in hands and Jimmy Buffett's One Particular Harbor blasting from the speakers. They joked around with each other, having a good old time of it. It all looked fine and dandy, just a bunch of executives out of the office for a few days of fishing and relaxing. The only thing that looked out of the ordinary was their catch. There was none. Just meat laid out for the barbecue.

Nobody, Matt thought to himself, brings his buddies on a boat like



that, to the best fishing grounds in the Caribbean and lets them eat beef from the freezer. But, that's exactly what these guys were preparing for dinner. Frozen steaks! All they had to do was throw one of the Penn Internationals over the side right where they sat at anchor, with anything, a chunk of beef, a piece of wiener even and they could've been having grouper steaks a'la Bahamian splendor. No, this didn't make any sense. They left the radar going Matt noticed, as the antenna kept on sweeping the surroundings. Convenient, perhaps to keep an eye on ~~some target~~? He had seen enough, and he was suspicious.

Back aboard Sea Story, they dined on lobster tails barbecued in their shells, basted with garlic butter, and baked potatoes topped with sour cream and bacon bits. Then they sat back with a couple of tequila sunrises and planned out the action for the night. Christy made a big pot of coffee.

There was no way the radars could be used to detect a dinghy approaching, or divers in the water, and the ship's electronic alarm would have been too late for taking action against boarders. If all six men made it on board, defense would be too out numbered. If a boarding party did come, they had to be stopped before getting aboard, and Matt and Christy planned to do just that.

Shortly after dark, Christy donned her SCUBA gear, and armed with a pneumatic spear gun she went over the side. Matt handed her a two hundred foot hose and regulator and started the Third Lung surface-air compressor on the bridge deck. That way she didn't need to use the air from her SCUBA tank and she could just sit on the bottom for as long as it took, waiting for what they hoped would never come. Matt shut down the ship's generator to eliminate all noises, as sound carries through the water so well.

Christy settled down in the dark, twelve feet beneath the surface, just under the hull. Small fish began to investigate her. She couldn't see them, but she could feel their pecks at her hoses and mask. As her hearing adjusted she held her breath, waited for her bubbles to reach the surface and dissipate, and she was able to pick up the low, dull vibration of the Bertram's generator through the water ever so faint. She pushed the button a couple of times on the intercom wire attached to the air hose, to signal that she was in position and everything was OK.

After about an hour, Matt went around turning off various lights to make it look like they were turning in, just in case someone was watching. He poured a cup of coffee, collected his snorkel gear, dive knife and spear gun, and sat down on the large swim platform of the yacht, dangling his feet in the warm water. He put the ear phones back on to keep his contact with Christy and sipped away at his coffee. A light wind began to blow from off shore.

She sat on the bottom, her eyes now well adjusted to the darkness. She could see some light trying to penetrate the water from the full moon above. She was able to distinguish the faint silhouettes of fish moving about, now totally unconcerned with her presence. She was immensely enjoying herself. She lost the annoyance of the noise her exhaled air produced as it bubbled to the surface. She remembered the time she sat out a typhoon fifty feet down,

strapped to a wreck, near the island of Vanua Levu off the north shore of Fiji. It was one of those no frills, barefoot dive operations run by a retired colleague of her dad's. A small plane landed once a week, bringing new arrivals and taking people back to the mainland. The storm wasn't expected to hit there, but changed direction and headed for them. All the aircraft were grounded, there was no way to get off the small, unprotected island, so the owners filled all the tanks they had and got everybody on the bottom, out of harm's way. Out of the way of missiles in the form of coconuts. She was seventeen, and thought it was the coolest thing ever. Most of the others were frightened out of their wits. But, as two hundred miles an hour winds stripped their island of buildings and trees, and as a tidal wave washed everything away, they sat down there safe and sound, completely isolated from the destruction above. And when it was over, it took them two days to clear the landing strip so they could be evacuated.

Water entered her mask as she absent mindedly smiled to herself thinking about how most of them complained and belly ached about the heat and exhaustion, about the rationed water and sleeping on the hard ground. She told them they were suffering from over-civilized-comfort-dependency. That was her term for the soft city dwellers. Even for the macho ones who sucked their stomachs in, flexed their muscles and started the day off doing push-ups on the beach. They couldn't hold a candle to her as she spent the day from sun up to sundown lifting and pulling the huge tree limbs from the dirt airstrip.

She was purging the water from her mask for the second time, when she heard something. She took a deep breath and waited for the previous bubbles to surface. She sat there frozen, listening for a half a minute or more. It was the sound of a small outboard increasingly growing louder. She pushed the intercom button five times, the International code of danger. She slowly exhaled, blowing small bubbles, and switched off her surface-air supply. She put her SCUBA regulator between her teeth and began swimming up, and away from Sea Story, toward the approaching boat.

Matt could also hear the outboard now. He slid in the water with his snorkel gear, and started slowly swimming toward the sound. Christy was only a couple of feet below the surface and could see Matt approaching in the moonlight. She came up to head him off. They held onto each other and sank just below the surface. Matt took her secondary regulator. They breathed deep, holding their breaths and allowing the air to escape in small bubbles, but the chop on top of the water did a good job concealing everything.

The sound of the engine was getting closer, then suddenly it ceased. Ever so slowly they came to the surface. They thanked God for the wind that put the chop on the water and the full moon that was so bright above.

Sixty feet or so ahead of them, four men sat in a small inflatable. Two were cautiously paddling. They wore dark clothing, and gloves on their hands. Barrels of rifles stuck up above their shoulders, and the guns' straps crossed their chests.

Matt squeezed Christy's hand as she reached out for him. She

dipped below the surface, slipped out of her BC, attached her weight belt to it and let the whole thing sink to the bottom. She had another small weight belt on to compensate for the buoyancy of the wet suit, and overweighed slightly, to let her sink effortlessly. Now light and agile, with snorkel in mouth she came back up. They gave each other a thumbs up, and Matt swam forward a little and disappeared below.

She let the dinghy advance, took several deep breaths and with one last big gulp of air she sank.

She watched the dark object move above her as the paddles gently immersed. She moved under the side tube of the inflatable, kept pace and placed the tip of her spear gun under the tube where one man sat and paddled. Matt was under the other tube as she pulled the trigger of the powerful compressed air spear gun.

Air exploded from the chamber of the dinghy as the three foot barbed steel rod came from beneath impaling the rower through the groin. His hands grasped the five inch piece protruding out below his belly button, weaved back and forth and slowly collapsed to the wooden floor of the boat. The man beside him fell backwards into Christy's waiting arms. She sank her dive knife deep into the side of his neck, just as Matt's spear lodged into the chest of one of the men on the other side of the dinghy as he tried to stand up, keep his balance and reach for the AK47 on his back. His partner, staying low, was pulled by his gun strap into the water, as Matt used the momentum of the man's fall to insure a good penetration of his knife into the kidney.

In seconds it was all over. The men screaming, the thrashing in the water. Just deadly silence over splashing of the waves. Without taking a breath they listened for whatever else might be out there.

Matt was still holding the man he stabbed with his head under the water as he was slowly going limp. He lifted the gun strap over his head and pushed him away keeping the gun.

In the dark water Christy clung to Matt, softly sobbing, something about a need for a change in their lifestyle. But she knew it wasn't over. The other two out there on the sportfish still had to be dealt with. Now on the offensive, they were hoping to take them alive, and get some information out of them.

Back aboard Sea Story, Christy checked out the AK47 and Matt loaded his nine millimeter Ruger.

Armed with the weapons, wearing wet suits, mask, snorkel and flippers they swam to shore and crossed to the other side in their reef runners. There the water was rougher, but the flippers helped to speed their swim. When they reached the sportfish, they tied their snorkel gear to one of the rudders in a net bag. The generator hummed away, and waves splashed and banged against the hull, making their boarding unnoticed. They flung themselves over the low transom, landing in the aft cockpit, taking cover behind the two fighting chairs. Two steps up, behind the tinted glass window and door, two men sat in shorts and T shirts smoking and playing cards. From the cockpit they couldn't see the tabletop, or what was on it, except the cans of beer the men lifted to their mouths from time to time. Across from them, an AK47 was propped up against the corner of a bar with stools.

"Cover me, and spray the salon right through the glass if they make a move for the rifle," Matt whispered to Christy and crawled off to the port deck, to make his way forward. That afternoon when he was spying on them, he saw one of the hatches on the foredeck propped up in the open position. It was still that way. He reached in to loosen the knob on the shaft, and carefully he raised it to the full open position. He slid through, landing on the soft, plush carpeting of one of the staterooms. He cracked open the door to the dark companionway that led to the galley, just forward, and below the salon. He crouched behind the large refrigerator standing at the bottom of the five steps. One of the men commented on having a fucking lousy hand. He heard their beer cans hitting the table top. He pulled the Ruger from the inside of his wet suit under his chin and flung himself to the top of the stairs, arms stretched forward, holding the gun on the two and screamed, "Freeze right where the fuck you are!" Matt always believed the use of language most understood and used by lowlife itself was helpful in situations like this. A handgun lay on the table, and as one of them attempted a move for it he pumped two rounds into the heavy mahogany High-Low table, shattering the top to pieces and landing a three inch sliver in one of the men's face impaling him through the cheek. During all this Christy burst in from the cockpit and assumed the position aiming the AK.

"Either of you wish to die by one of your own guns, I'd be happy to oblige! Come on, make your move assholes!" she shouted, her eyes flashing with determination to carry out her threat. It was hard for Christy to look very menacing standing there in a dripping skintight wetsuit, her long hair in a braid fallen forward of her right shoulder, but she made the stunning point that she was ready and able to use the deadly weapon.

"You gentlemen are very close to joining your buddies out there currently chumming up the local shark population." Matt said as he stepped in to kick the 38 Smith and Wesson now lying in the rubble of the once lovely, expensive table. Blood was pouring down the one man's face. He held his mouth open to keep his teeth from coming in contact with the piece of wood on the inside.

"We'll practice our surgical techniques on this guy's face later Christy, but just keep them covered for now," Matt said as he stepped back into the aft cockpit. He returned with some dock line in hand. "OK gentlemen, here is the program. You slowly slide to all fours and proceed out this door. Remember my wife with your gun, she's probably more nervous than she cares to admit. She could blow you away just by accident, so don't make any moves that she might misunderstand!"

The two men got on their hands and knees and slowly made their way out the door and down into the cockpit, all the while Christy's rifle affixed on them.

"All right, now just deposit yourselves here in the soft chairs, relax and pretend you are fishing." Matt instructed.

They set down, and Matt began to tie them up, so that they couldn't move more than their toes and a couple of fingers.

"Any of you care to elaborate as to the identity of the nice man that gave you the nice boat to play with?"

You know, the clown you call your boss?" Matt asked.

"All right," he shrugged his shoulders, "I can see you're not the talking kind. Just sit there and fish, maybe you'll want to talk later. We won't be far." He turned, opened the door leading from the cockpit to the engine room and disappeared below. The fifteen KW Westerbeke generator roared as he looked for the sea cocks. He found the neatly arranged well containing all the incoming cooling water for the engines, generator, and air conditioning. With his dive knife he slashed the rubber hoses, allowing the salt water to pour into the bilges. He found a pair of pliers and put them up the sleeve of his wetsuit.

He came back on deck and proceeded forward to the wheelhouse. He found the DC Main panel with all the ship's twelve volt electrical systems. He switched off the two breakers marked FORWARD BILGE PUMP 1 and 2, and the two marked AFT BILGE PUMP 1 and 2. He found a hand held portable VHF radio, checked to make sure it worked and on his way back to the cockpit he grabbed the AK47 propped up against the bar. Before he was outside, he took the pliers from his sleeve, and when he was behind the man with the bleeding face, he reached over and yanked the sliver from his cheek as he walked past. The man howled and squirmed in his chair.

"Did that hurt?" Christy looked at him with disgust.

"We're going now," Matt said after throwing the rifle overboard and laying the radio in the guy's lap who wasn't doing the howling. "Now if you find the need to chat, the handheld is on channel seven two, and we'll try to remember to turn ours on when we get home. Oh, and by the way, I don't think the radio is waterproof, so I'd keep it out of the water coming into the boat if I was you."

They sat down on the transom, rolled backwards into the water, found their gear and began swimming back.

They worried more about bumping into a body than a shark. They couldn't wait to get on board. They both showered for a long time on the aft deck, imagining what the scene would have been during daylight hours. The bloody, limp dinghy, the water mixed with blood splashing in their faces, in their hair, soaking into their wetsuits.

Matt turned the genset and some lights back on, and switched one of the radios to seventy two. Christy poured two shots of rum, which they both downed and grimaced as the potent stuff went down. Without clothes they stood at the bar looking at each other, shaking their heads.

"The shit we don't get into," Christy said and threw her arms around his neck, laid her head on his shoulder and hung there on him. He closed his arms around her waist and held her.

They drank another shot, and Matt began to speculate. "Their generators should be down by now with an overheat shut down. Should start hearing their sweet songs on the radio in an hour or so. I didn't open up the hoses too much. They won't sink fast. Thought I'd give them time to stew in their juices."

Back aboard the Bertram the generators quit. Darkness overcame the men struggling in vain with their ropes. A constant beep beep beep came from the control panel in the wheelhouse, signaling the malfunction that caused the generators to go offline. A little later, a siren began to wail as the high water alarm was engaged. The men, although neither of them familiar with the systems of Bear With Me, suddenly knew very well what was taking place. The boat was beginning to alter her trim. The transom was slowly dipping and the bows were rising. As the moon danced before them on the water, the top of the transom was moving down, closer and closer to the shimmering waves.

But they couldn't believe their buddies were all dead. That guy and the broad couldn't have taken them all out. Somebody out of the four had to be out there and on his way back to the boat to cut them loose.

An hour later their asses were getting wet and the conversation turned to whether they'll die there and then, or later when Creismeyer gets a hold of them.

Then, back aboard Sea Story, Matt and Christy heard "Hey, get us the fuck out of here! Tell you what we know!"

"OK, tell us." Matt replied after a few minutes.

"Tell you when you get us loose!"

"No go pal. You sing, we listen to your voice. If we like it, we might come over and do something about your situation. Don't bother us otherwise."

A few minutes passed by in silence and a voice struggling with fear came back. "Hey, where are you? I said we'll talk."

"Talk now man, sometimes this old outboard don't want to start too good. Might take us a while to get to you. We ain't swimming no more. We had a shower and all. Too many dead folk in the water tonight."

"Man, fuck! Guy by the name of Creismeyer. Herb Creismeyer! Just a job man! We don't know you or him from shit!"

"Who the hell is Creismeyer?"

"I said we don't know the man! We do the odd thing for him. And guys like him, you know, guys like him don't go around shooting their mouths off about things. He works out of a warehouse on River Drive. That's all we know. That's where we meet him man."

"What's the number on River Drive?"

"I don't fucking know what the fucking number is! Man, we just go there, you got to get us out of here man, we told you what we know! Fuck you man, you promised to get us off this" Christy turned the VHF back to sixteen, cutting the swearing short.

Matt took off in the Zodiac toward the sinking Bertram. Just in time, the big boat's bows riding high, her stern ready to slip under the waves. Matt tied his boat to one of the Bertram's cleats, climbed on board, and with the knife he brought along he sliced the thick nylon rope around the men's arms, leaving the rest to be untied by their busy hands.

"Watch out for sharks!" he pulled away satisfied they were getting themselves freed. "Them fish just had their first taste of human trash tonight!"

"Hey, you can't fucking leave us here stranded on these rocks!" They kept on yelling all the while feverishly working on the ropes.

"Of course not. That wouldn't be very nice. I'll make sure you'll be picked up," Matt yelled back, "who do you prefer, the cops or that Creismeyer fella?"

On the way back to Sea Story, Matt had a disturbing thought going through his mind. Something he and Christy had talked about earlier in the day, just when the sportfish had begun to look suspicious, but dismissed with disbelief.

Art Buttler was the only one who knew which way they were headed.

## PART 08

Rum Cay was slowly fading in the distance when Matt called the island's policeman on the VHF radio to anonymously inform him of a drug deal gone sour just off of Sumner Point and of the two men that made it ashore. One with a hole in the side of his face.

Another picture perfect sunrise greeted Sea Story.

To the east lay the open Atlantic and to the west, and hundred and fifty miles away Long Island. They would cross the Crooked Island Passage, skirt the western banks of the Mira Por Vos Cays and take a south east course to make the long passage near the south west coast of Great Inagua to arrive at the tiny island of Bluffers Cay. But that was before Matt changed his plans.

Christy insisted Art Buttler couldn't be selling them out. During the eight years she and Matt had been together, she had a chance to get to know Buttler and his family. Her heart said no way! Matt agreed, but just had to be sure. Whether it was Art or not, somebody somehow knew where they were at all times. He wanted to lead them away from Bluffers Cay, take them on a wild goose chase and lose them all together.

He called Buttler and told him they were headed for Abraham's Bay on Mayaguana. He made up a story of having to affect repairs to a bent strut received during the Lady J incident. He said nothing about the sportfish, Bear With Me. Matt figured Mayaguana was far enough out of the way, where nobody expecting them to be headed for Bluffers Cay would be looking for them, unless of course, they were in the know. They had friends at Abraham's and thought they'd leave Sea Story with them as bait, and they would find some other way of getting to Bluffers Cay.

Twenty seven hours later, on a mid Sunday morning they pulled up to the fish docks of the little town of Abraham's Bay on Mayaguana. On this Far Out Island, there were no marinas that catered to yachts, but the odd cruiser who came to visit was welcome to tie up at the dock where the local catch was brought in daily as the center of afternoon social activities.

Usually, children came running and the older men were there to help with the lines, but this day they were greeted only by the sound of hymns coming from the two little churches.

Matt and Christy tied their lines, and for the first time since that day diving on The Road, they felt at ease and safe.



They walked to the beach behind the dock and sat in the sand waiting for the churches to let out. Christy turned her head so Matt couldn't see the tears beginning to cloud her eyes. But he saw her hand pull into a fist and her soft shoulders tense. He reached out to softly massage the back of her neck. He knew she was remembering the times she spent on that beach with Dallas when she was only a puppy. It's been three years, and she still broke into tears sometimes just thinking of her. The helpless little bundle of fur, that grew up to give her life trying to protect her. Christy was one of those people that could handle human suffering with relative ease, but her whole day would be wrecked at the sight of a raccoon run over on the side of the road.

She hung her head on Matt's shoulder and slowly pulled herself together. Somehow, Matt knew it was more than just the dog. They were both very good at blocking things out, and hiding emotions, but what they'd been through in the last few days was beginning to take its toll on their nerves.

Boys came running down the beach and they knew many of them. Little girls dressed in long, colorful dresses stood shy in the background. Then, in a big cloud of dust, Charlie Cooper came driving down the beach in his white Ford pickup. The wealthiest man on the island, he owned a good number of properties and a fleet of three big lobster boats, making him the largest employer in Abraham's Bay. He had to be the nicest, the kindest person in the Islands, and also the most obese.

The three quarter ton truck leveled off as he climbed from the driver's seat, sinking to his ankles in the soft, powdery sand. Wearing his church going suit and tie, a kerchief in one hand constantly wiping the dripping sweat from his face and neck, laboring to walk in the sand, he looked to be an incredible dark skinned mixture of Pavarotti and the Pillsbury Dough Boy.

They first met when one of Charlie's boats was disabled during lobster season due to a broken engine mount. Matt offered to weld the mount with his equipment on board Sea Story, and since then, Charlie was in an eternal state of gratitude.

His huge round face was cracked from ear to ear with a smile as big as him, as he shook Matt's hand and hugged and dripped all over Christy. They helped him to the road to get him out of the sand, and walked back to the wharf.

Back on board, Christy mixed up a big pitcher of ice tea for Charlie and Matt drank a Kalik. They discussed some of the things that happened, why they came to Abraham's Bay, and what their plans were. Matt asked Charlie if he could get word to another friend Marty Goodwin and ask him if he could come aboard and look after Sea Story for a while, and if Charlie could spare a couple of his guys to ride shotgun for Marty.

When Charlie heard they needed to get to Bluffers Cay, about all he could do is shake his head. He explained that the Government had made Bluffers Cay off limits and nobody was to set foot ashore. The Defense Force is taking it seriously enough that they sent memos to all the Police, tourist offices, airlines and boat operators all through the Family Islands.

Charlie had a cousin who owned and operated the Palmetto Point Villas, a small resort outside Matthew Town on Great Inagua. He could get them there, and Bluffers Cay would only be fifty miles due south, but he strongly advised against attempting to go there.

Matt and Christy thought it could work. They could play tourist for a while, nose around and find some way to get to Bluffers.

Charlie took off to get the ball rolling, and they spent the rest of the day trying to rest up.

Marty Goodwin arrived the next morning, cheerful and happy to see them, ready for action. Retired for the last five years, he spent most of his life in the employ of the Symonette family as head of security. Now pushing sixty, he still worked out and ran every day, which was clearly visible in his tall muscular frame.

They met tagging sharks for the University of Miami's Shark Research Foundation at Bimini. Since then, Marty had flown to places like Belize to meet up with Sea Story and enjoy diving the reefs together. He was thoroughly familiar with the yacht's mechanical systems, and Matt trusted him to look after things or move the boat if necessary.

Matt filled in the details and warned about another possible attack, but Goodwin liked living on the edge and was more than qualified to look after himself. Two young men who worked for Charlie Cooper also came to stay on board, and the word was out amongst the town folk to keep an eye out for strangers day and night.

Matt was happy with the arrangement and knew Sea Story was in good hands. Armed with machetes, the Mossberg and the AK they had taken from the crew of the Bear With Me, Marty and his two very fit young companions were a formidable defense and there wasn't a man in town who wouldn't come to their help if needed.

That afternoon Matt and Christy each packed a suitcase, the Ruger and the Semmerling, and were picked up by a seaplane at five. The pilot turned out to be the proprietor, Charlie's cousin Dennis Michell.

They talked about tourism and fishing, and Michell raged on about how the US economy is hurting his and everyone's business in the Bahamas.

As they neared the large island of Great Inagua, Matt thought what the hell, might as well give it a try, and asked if they could take the extra few minutes just to circle out to Bluffers Cay to take some pictures.

"I'd be happy to, except we'll probably be shot out of the sky!" said Michell. "That's the other thing," he went on. "We used to ferry people out there from my place so they can be on an island that's haunted. Lots of people came just for that. Now they're keeping everybody away. I know a guy whose fishing boat broke down and went ashore there, he was shot and thrown in jail in Nassau. Do you believe that? Your own government throwing you in jail for being in distress and seeking refuge on the nearest land! They're doing something weird there that's for sure. They call it research but everybody knows it's more than that. Ships bringing building materials, armed men everywhere. No, them politicians don't care about guys like me. They sure complain when I lay my people off

though. Mon, I try to keep everybody on but I just can't keep it up."

"Who was the guy that landed and got shot?" Christy asked.

"Fellow from Salt Pond Hill. Sammy Phoenix. Got five kids. Man's not a lawbreaker, just needed help. They say he'll be in jail for a long time."

"Sounds to me like they're making an example of him," said Matt looking at Christy as they both wondered how they were going to set foot on Bluffers Cay.

The plane landed parallel to the pinkest sand beach they ever saw and pulled itself up on a ramp out of the water.

They rode a tiny Suzuki van along a narrow stone paved trail lined with thatched roof cottages shaded by tall casuarinas and coconut palms. They stopped at number seventeen and the driver ushered them in bringing their suitcases.

"Please check in at the office once you're settled." said the man accepting the tip on his way out.

It was a primitive but comfortable little suite. Off the main room was a good size bedroom and three piece bath. The floor was hardwood and the walls were some kind of paneling badly wallpapered. The holes in the walls representing the windows had no pane, and air conditioning was in the form of a wonderful breeze blowing through, and a noisy fan sitting on a coffee table. Water pressure was next to nil, but the back door opened to a magnificent beach, and suddenly, Matt and Christy knew why people came to this place. The next cottage was far enough away so it didn't even exist. They walked to the water through the shade of the big palms. Sandpipers scurried around in the sand. If they looked hard enough they could see the other cottages nestled in the evergreens, couples laying around looking out to sea, bathing and playing along the beach. As usual in these islands, a lot of the women topless. Beachside vendors, parasail and jet ski renters were packing up for the night. The smell of sweet barbecue lingered down from the restaurant. The sun was setting in paradise.

"Let's have a nice dinner." Christy took Matt's hand. "Tomorrow I'll see if I can use my charms to persuade one of these guys to give us a ride over to Bluffers."

## PART 09

The sun was already high in the sky the next morning when Christy strolled out the back door in a skimpy bikini with a beach towel in hand. Matt followed behind with a magazine playing the tourist. He pulled up a lawn chair in a spot strategically located for beach watching, stretched a little and set himself down.

She walked to the edge of the water, bent down to feel how warm it was, strutting her stuff, being seen. She was all legs, and instantly the center of male attention. Matt thrilled himself at the sight of her.

Local men started to come around. Young and fit, the kind who hung out at the beaches taking tourists for boat rides. They offered her the best deal on jet skis. In passing she told them she was looking for a boat.

She dropped her towel, walked into the surf and gracefully dove, emerging a good two hundred feet away. With fast, powerful strokes she began to swim out to sea. Six or seven men stood there watching, quickly losing sight of her. With much concern they looked at Matt. "Sir, the lady, she your woman sir? Strong current out there. She shouldn't go so far!"

"Just getting her morning workout. She'll be all right man," said Matt with a confident smile. They began to chatter amongst themselves, pointing out to sea as a couple of more guys joined in.

Matt returned to his magazine, keeping an eye on things from behind his dark sunglasses. He could tell she was spotted and on her way back by their excited shouts. "There she is mon!"

Christy rose from the water, her chest heaving with each deep breath as she was winding down. She walked over to pick up her towel. One of the men already had it and was handing it to her.

"Very powerful swimmer miss!" he said with much approval.

"No mon, hey, she's a mermaid mon!" another hollered and they all had big grins.

Christy towed her hair as she turned to them. "It's boring here. My friend and I want to have some fun. We need a boat."

"I have a boat miss! Give you a very good price," said one of them.

"You're on," she smiled mischievously. She stepped close to him. "I want to go play with the ghosts on Bluffing Wells."

"Ah no, no, you don't want to go there miss. Nobody goes there no more. I'll take you to a better place. You'll see."

"No!" she purred. "We want to go to Bluffers, and, we'll make it worth you while."

"No miss," he shook his head. "Just can't do it. Ain't nobody going to take you there." He took a step back with a painful expression on his face.

Christy took his arm and led him away from the rest. "Now, you wouldn't be scared of a ghost would you?"

"No ma'am, I ain't scared of no ghost. Scared of the law!"

"Law in the Bahamas? Since when?" Christy pulled him close and softly whispered in his ear "Laws are made to be broken friend."

"Not this one. I'm sorry."

"All right then, just drop us near by. Swimming distance from shore."

"I can't. I can't do it. Believe me I could use the monies, but no. Listen to me. No! You and your friend have a good time of it while you're here but don't try to go to Bluffing Wells. Peoples who go there don't come back. Let me take you down to Rhode's Cay. Nothing there, just old ruins and iguanas. You do what you want. You be nude, you party, whatever. I can drop you there and pick you up. And I give you a good deal."

Christy felt he was a nice man and sincerely concerned.

"My name is Albert Cross," he held out his hand to shake. "Are you government agents?" Christy couldn't hold back a surprised stare as he went on. "You and the man you're with? Not that you look like one, maybe he does. I just got a feeling that it's not the ghosts you're after on Bluffers."

"I'm Christy Brown. My husband's name's Matt. Not agents, just nosy private citizens." Christy smiled and shook the man's hand.

"You're a very beautiful lady Mrs. Brown. I love beautiful ladies. Stay healthy and stay away from Bluffers Cay! Queer things go on there now days." He said it all the while grinning but Christy could feel the seriousness of his hint.

"I won't forget your advice Mr. Cross." she looked him in the eyes smiling. "Thanks!" she said leaving him standing there and walked back to their cottage.

"I'm losing it. I'm getting old." she talked to herself as she passed Matt still reading in the shade. "I can't even talk a Bahamian into breaking the law."

"I don't know," said Matt with a smirk on his face getting up, "all the guys had left the beach. Probably gone home for an early lunch. Now all the wives and girlfriends are the benefactors of your showing off."

"You ass!" she yelled out laughing. "Ya, and I was told you look like a secret agent man!"

Matt stood in the doorway as she got very serious. "What the hell are we going to do Matt? Steal a boat?"

"I thought about that but they'd most likely pick us up on radar. I had a better idea while I was watching you perform. Jet skis!"

"Jet skis?" she stepped back with a look that said 'are you crazy?' "It's fifty miles across openwater!"

"So, no big deal if it's calm. Two hours' ride!"  
"You know I've always hated jet skis. Like stupid snowmobiles people chase the wolves with!"  
"Have you a better idea? Something came to you during your morning swim? I'm open to suggestions."  
"No." she said with resignation. "OK, jet skis it is, I guess. If you think it will work." Then a smile began to replace the worried look on her face. "I could go for some early lunch right now though."

Later in the afternoon they found a renter of jet skis who didn't wonder where the machines were going during the two day rental, especially since Matt had insisted on leaving a five thousand dollar deposit in case they lost or wrecked them.

They took the machines to the beach behind their room and began the preparations.

The big Yamahas were not very fast but their size allowed for carrying gear and extra fuel. They checked the weather reports and it was favorable. Ten to fifteen knot winds out of the east, seas two to four feet.

Bluffers Cay lay fifty miles due south. They knew the place well. They had anchored in the deep water harbor on the west side of the island before. The harbor was surrounded by a rocky wall that rose thirty feet to the top of the island. At the head of the harbor was an area of trees and vegetation, the rest of the place was nothing but a high ground of jagged volcanic terrain nearly impossible to walk upon. They counted on the harbor to be heavily guarded but the rest to be sparsely patrolled, if at all. They planned on landing somewhere on the north shore.

In backpacks they stowed snorkel gear, flashlights, binoculars, aerial flares, their handguns and a bottle of water. They strapped extra five gallon jugs of gas to each machine.

After dark, wearing the backpacks, wetsuits, reef runners, dive knives and wrist worn dive computers they mounted the jet skis. The dive computers had a good compass and a clock they could use for navigation.

At about half throttle, they estimated the Yamaha Waverunners to be running at twenty plus miles per hour. This speed was easy on the machines as well as on their bodies. They ran along in the troughs of the seas, shifting across the crests to stay on the compass course. A half moon hung amongst millions of stars with the odd lightning strike that flashed across the thunderheads in the distance. A few high level, drifting cloud formations moved under the moon from time to time spilling darkness across the waves. It was so alien for them to be out there straddling those machines like ~~wet motorcycles~~ in the middle of nowhere. No sight of land, no lights other than the heavens.

They felt so out of place sitting on the tiny vehicles, gliding along on top of the black water. Mesmerized they rode amidst explosions of silver spray, hurdling through an empty space where everything was so distant, so dark, and speed and time were beginning to form an unconscious blur.

A flashlight in her face and Matt's screaming voice beside her

shocked Christy back into reality. They came to stop and checked the fuel. After being under way for over an hour, they both still had about a half of a tank of gas left. They were relieved to find that what fuel they were carrying, appeared to be enough to get them there and back.

With the machines turned off, the silence was incredible. They sat on what few square feet the machines amounted to. The waves lapping at them.

"Is this spooky or what?" Christy whispered.

"Why are you whispering!" Matt whispered back.

"Must be the silence," she laughed. "This is too much."

"We have to be less than twenty five miles from the island. Because we're so low in the water we will not see anything until we're right there. Got to be careful as we get close. Let's schedule another stop in thirty minutes."

They cranked the engines and roared off. Now, after sitting in the quiet for those few minutes, the noise was deafening. Slowly they grew accustomed to it again. Then, it was time to stop.

They were discussing the possibility of the area being patrolled by boat when they heard breaking water. They were travelling faster than they thought and were very close to the reef line of the island. Cautiously, slowly they moved ahead. Soon, white water sparkled in the moonlight. They weaved through the treacherous foaming water amongst rocks awash until they were clear on the inside. They approached the breakers on the shoreline as close as they dared and rolled off into the water. They dove to the bottom and tied the machines' ropes to some rocks and swam ashore.

Climbing up on the rocks in the surf was no easy task, but they made it without major cuts and continued climbing up the steep eroded wall leading to the plateau.

They knew where they were. They recognized this, the most inhospitable place in the Bahamas. A few shrubs stunted in their growth by the heat of the rocks and the relentless force of the wind that left so little soil and only in tiny pockets. Sharp ledges and drop-offs everywhere. Blowholes, said to be bottomless sighed with the rise and fall of water. Falling in one meant being sliced to pieces. Every step had to be planned and carried out with total concentration not to break an ankle or fall into a trench lined with what locals called the devil's machete blades, razor-sharp fingers running longitudinally.

To find the harbor, all they had to do was to follow the elevated shoreline to the west. They left the water jug at the point where they emerged from their climb to the top, and noted the time when they began to proceed ahead.

Progress was agonizingly slow. It was easy to see why there was no reason to patrol the area. To approach with any kind of gear or personnel through this terrain was very near to the impossible.

It took them over two hours to arrive at the small patch of wooded area at the top of the head of the harbor. They estimated the distance to be no more than two miles.

They carefully moved through the trees to reach the edge. They laid on their stomachs and looked down into the harbor. It seemed much larger than they remembered. The walls were more vertical, not sloping at all. No evidence of the usual rounded edges at the top where the wind wears the rock. It looked recently blasted in many places.

The basin was under the brightness of hundreds of floodlights. A ship was unloading with a massive overhead crane that spanned the width of the harbor. A concrete block building stretched underground below them, and small trucks and forklifts meandered in and out. Uniformed guards walked the perimeter of the harbor with automatic rifles.

"Some operation," Matt sighed.

"Would you say a little more than we expected?"

"Let's backtrack a little so I can get down to the water and take a closer look."

"You and me both!" Christy grabbed him by the arm.

"Look," Matt tried to see her face in a sliver of moonlight peeking through the trees. "We do everything together correct? You do every crazy thing I do and vice versa right? Don't you agree it is necessary we get off this damn place and tell what we saw?"

"Yes I do," she was looking up into his eyes.

"Then you would agree that both of us going in, taking a chance to be caught, makes very little sense strategically."

"Hate it when you're always right. Wait a minute, what makes you the one who goes in and not me?"

"Well, I know more what I'm looking at down there when it comes to equipment."

"What a crock of shit. Couldn't you come up with something better!"

"I guess not. Anyway, it's light by Six thirty. If I'm not back at the jet skis by five thirty, you get the hell out of here, tow the other machine to the outside of the reef, blow a hole in it and hightail it back to Michell's. You get a flight back to Abraham's Bay and hold up on the Sea Story until you hear from me."

She knew he was geared up for this and there was no way of talking him out of it. They reached a spot that looked good enough for Matt to get down to the water. She threw her arms around him.

"Be careful baby," she whispered softly. "I need you with me for the ride back." She kissed him and he disappeared down the face of the rocks.

She sat there for a while, allowing the dark thoughts of what it would be like without him to overtake her. She could feel that gut wrenching horror. What a curse it was to love someone so much. She had a bad feeling about him going down there. Or about something else. She couldn't put her finger on what it was, but the feeling had been there since the minute they landed here. She shouldn't have ignored it. Maybe she could've done something. Prevent him from even the thought of going down there.

Damn, she could've just kicked herself for it. She'd been trying to listen to her inner voices more. Especially for the last few years since Jerry's been saying all those things about her.



She always was sensitive to the mood of places and people, but sometimes those voices, those feelings were so hard to catch up with and pay attention to.

She zeroed the elapsed time on her dive computer to begin her journey back. She had to keep the normal pace through the jagged volcanic outcroppings in order to time her arrival and be able to find the water jug they had left. But she wanted to stop so bad and listen. But, to what? It wasn't a sound she was hearing, it was a presence that overwhelmed her. Not a frightening presence, but a definite something around her in the darkness. No moon, just darkness.

She passed some of the blowholes and thought she smelled something burning. Hard to see and plan where to place your foot next.

Where did the time go, it seemed she was just kissing Matt a few minutes ago.

Smell of sulfur. Like, when painting the sky with fireworks....

Matt had made it to the surf, donned his snorkel gear, stuffed the Ruger in his wetsuit and leaving his backpack behind he began swimming toward the harbor. His body rose and fell with the waves and he needed to avoid being deposited on the sharp rocks lurking just below the surface. It was a slow process but he finally made it to the deep water and rounded the point leading into the harbor. There was a concrete dock around the entire perimeter of the basin. It was half tide and rising, and the top of the dock was about eight feet above the water. No way for him to climb up there. He swam along where the dock met the water, where the floodlights failed to reach.

As he neared the unloading ship, he could see the letters on the bow, R/V Delphinus. On the side of the superstructure freshly painted, CARIBBEAN SEISMOLOGICAL AUTHORITY.

He swam between the hull of the ship and the dock further into the harbor, and made it to the inner most part of the basin. If he continued along, he'd be turning back out, toward the ocean again. It occurred to Matt that the tide continued to flow below him with greater force than further out. It flowed under the dock toward the interior of the island. Had to be a conduit that led to the caverns under the island. That's probably how the water got to those blowholes further inland, he thought.

He could ~~free-dive~~ it, hold his breath?

He thought he'd take a peek. Go to a point where he can still return swimming against the tide. He hyperventilated himself and dove. Soon as he was under the dock he could see bright lights further in and he knew he could make it. The tide became much stronger within the confines of the tunnel and carried him along tumbling him head over heels. He knew he went beyond the point of no return. Now if he could only make it to those lights without drowning first. The lights grew very bright fast, they were suddenly there and then he saw himself leave them behind and darkness growing around him. His lungs began to burn but the water ahead was getting brighter again. His chest felt like it was going to implode. It was approaching time to begin

swallowing water. He was beginning to lose it but he suddenly felt the rush of the water subside as it emptied into a basin with lights high up above the surface. He fought to the top so close to losing consciousness, but then he was there, gulping air, filling and emptying his aching lungs, fighting to get to the edge of the pool and out of sight. He knew now, that the lights he passed previously were installed underwater as part of a surveillance system. Most likely a close circuit camera recorded every fish swimming past it, and set off an alarm for anything large enough to be human. Some guy probably sits there all day to sort out the sharks and other large fish waiting for an idiot like him to appear.

He had to get out of the water. The pool was perfectly round with a dome shaped ceiling some twenty feet above. What was on top of the concrete surrounding it, he couldn't tell but it had to go somewhere. He sure as hell wasn't about to enter into the tunnel that continued underwater on the other side. He had enough near drowning experiences for one day.

There was a ladder and he cautiously climbed with his gun drawn. He squatted on the dock at the top of the ladder, sweeping the sight of the Ruger around the circular wall surrounding the six foot wide walkway around the pool. Doors all around and dark tunnels or corridors leading off in every direction. He stood up to head for one of the dark hallways. A tremendous blow to his shoulder knocked him backwards, he heard the shot, saw lights come on inside one of the dark holes and he was back in the water. A numbing, burning sensation in his left shoulder.

His Ruger still in his right hand he surfaced. A tall dark haired man with a big nose wearing black motorcycle boots stood above him near the ladder pointing a thirty eight at him. "Throw your gun up here Mr. Brown. It is Mr. Brown I hope. I never dreamed you would come to visit. You're not an easy man to kill Mr. Brown."

Matt dropped his gun to the bottom.

"Get the hell up the ladder, now!"

Matt began to climb up, his eyes affixed on the big man. Two other goons stood by with Uzi submachine guns, wearing the same uniforms as the guards on the outside.

"I'm Karl Dunitschek. Operations manager here at Bluffers Cay Terminal," he gestured with the thirty eight to move Matt away from the water. "My hat's off to you and your wife Mr. Brown. You're both hell of a soldier. I wish I could have known you on a non adversary basis. I thoroughly enjoyed your tactical against Creismeyer's best men at Rum Cay. Superbly executed. The mark of a gifted man of war. Tell me, where do you find a woman like Christy Brown? I understand she's as beautiful as she is deadly. By the way, so far she's eluded us, but if she's here on Bluffers Cay, she will not get off alive. Such a waste."

"Hate to disappoint you Karl, but the chances of you making her acquaintance are rather slim. I parasailed in close enough to shore to swim the rest of the way. She drove the tow boat all right, but she cut me loose and turned around long before your radar could see her."

"Very good!" Dunitschek nodded. "That was something I never

thought of. You score Mr. Brown! Brown one, Dunitschek one. We're even. Love, as they say intennis."

"When the hell did you score?" Matt scowled at him as pain was replacing the shock in his torn shoulder.

"I scored when my men called me to view your video trying to drown yourself in my artificial entry tunnel. My winning score will come in the form of my men placing you in the natural tunnel allowing you to fulfill your ambitions of drowning yourself with a little help from the rising tide. Unless you find your way to one of the caves with trapped oxygen. Of course there are few of those. Many more with gases that make drowning a more pleasurable way to go."

"Who are you people? What the hell is this all about? Do I get my curiosity satisfied, before I get todrown?"

"Your wish is granted Mr. Brown. We are people involved in narcotics. You are witnessing perhaps the most profitable exploitation of nature, ever. More profitable than all the Middle East oil wells, all the Japanese fishing fleet and all of McMillan Blodell's lumber mills put together. And it's environmentally friendly! Goodbye Mr. Brown, my men will show you to this wonderful natural phenomenon. And by the way, do give my regards to the corpse of Herb Creismeyer if you happen to bump into him down there!" Dunitschek turned to walk away as the men nudged Matt with their Uzis to move on.

They walked into the lighted tunnel jabbing him in the back with the gun barrels to keep him moving. His whole upper body throbbed from the pain and his wetsuit slowly filled with warm blood. At least they didn't have Christy, he thanked God for that. Maybe he can still get out of this somehow before losing too much blood.

They emerged into a much larger tunnel half filled with fast flowing seawater. They walked a narrow concrete dock terminating far inside in a ramp sloping down. Matt felt a kick from behind and he was in the drink being swept away, passed the ramp and into approaching darkness as the lights faded behind. The tunnel widened and the water slowed. There was no way swimming back against the current. He let the water carry him along, making just enough effort to stay on top, trying to gather his thoughts. His eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. Chambers and numerous other tunnel entrances passed by. Large stalactites hung from above, with a phosphorescent glow producing some light. He knew this couldn't go on forever. He could lose the high ceilings and with them the air to breath anytime. Some tunnels' ceiling were just mere feet above the water level and had holes with apparent updrafts. Matt figured some might be blowholes, in which case they would naturally continue in an upwardly direction. The water continued moving him along at a good clip. Reaching out and grabbing the sharp side of the tunnel would've meant losing his fingers, but he still had his dive knife. He dog paddled closer to the jagged wall, bouncing off a couple of times cutting himself and seeing the stars as his shoulder came in contact with the rocks. But he stuck with it, waiting for an opening above water level. He saw a large one coming up on the right side. It had water in it but didn't look too deep, and the time was now or never. He was getting too weak to wait for a better one. With his right hand grasping the knife as

firm as he could and struck out to the wall just before it terminated into the tunnel. The blade hooked, and screaming in agony he flung himself to the inside of the whole nearly losing consciousness colliding head on with an outcropping boulder. He was sitting in two feet of water.

He thought about Christy again. He was determined to spare her the pain of losing him on this God forsaken, damned island run by drug pushers.

He sliced the left sleeve of his wetsuit in its length, gritting his teeth in pain, and tied the two long pieces as good and as tight around the shoulder as he could to slow the bleeding. But he knew he had already lost a lot of blood.

He got to his feet and began to move further into the tunnel, slipping and sliding, falling down and cutting himself some more. It was darker in there but he was beginning to feel the draft of air on the back of his neck. Several smaller and some larger tunnels were leading off in every direction. He poked into some but the air was dead and he backtracked looking for the one with the most air movement. He found it but it was just a small tunnel no more than four feet in diameter. He crawled in on hands and knees, cutting himself with every move but now his whole body could feel the air whistle past him and he looked up. He could see stars in the sky. It was a blowhole.

Wait up Christy, I'm coming baby, he said to himself. Trying to ignore the pain, he thought he could scale the fifty foot shaft by jamming himself sideways and moving up little at a time. He put his back against the one side and raised his feet one at a time up against the other. He hung there trying to push himself up with one hand. The sharp volcanic rock cut through his wetsuit slicing deep into his back, and his right hand was already shredded to the bone. He struggled along not getting anywhere. The shaft was too wide for what he was trying to do, his energy spent he fell down in a pool of blood.

He could find another shaft, a narrower one he thought getting up to begin crawling back. The moving air brought the scent of sulfur smoke his way, filled his lungs and he felt himself sinking deeper and deeper into a blank darkness.

"Matt, wake up!" somebody was there calling him. Shaking him gently. Drowsy, he tried to respond but couldn't.

"Darling, we got to get out of here." The words were not so distant now and his eyes came into focus.

"Christy," his throat felt numb. His whole body felt numb. "Are we dead?" he forced a smile.

"No sweetie, we just look it, and feel that way. But as you would put it, we got to get while the getting's good. The sun will be up soon."

He was coming around fast now. "Where are we?"

"Where we left the jet skis. Let me get you in the water and I'll tow you out," Christy nudged him along.

"No, it's OK, I can do it. I'm not hurting for some reason. How did we get here?"

"I don't know Matt. I was overcome by some sulfur, cinnamon or something. Then, I was here beside you only a few minutes ago. But the interesting thing is, we're two days older than we were when we landed here."

Matt looked at his dive computer's time piece. Forty eight hours had gone by.

"Funny, I'm not hungry." She smiled helping him up. His left shoulder was wrapped in what seemed like long narrow strips of slimy seaweed. All his lacerations were covered with octagonal shaped leafs with the texture of peach fuzz on the outside, and they stuck to the pores of the skin like Velcro to its mate.

His shoulder was just slightly sore and his cuts and bruises were unnoticeable. Rapidly, the intoxicated feeling was wearing off and he was back on his feet again.

They slipped into the water to make their way back to the waiting Yamahas. Christy dove to get the ropes and Matt started both of them. After what seemed a long time just to cut some half inch lines, she came up and got on her machine.

"I know one thing," she shouted to Matt. "Someone had taken these machines from where I tied them to the bottom, and when they brought them back they sure tied some weird knots!"

## PART 10

"Drugs. The sons o'bitches are smuggling narcotics underground," Matt said looking at the little electric coffee maker that came with the room. "They found a natural tunnel, repurposed it to their needs, and we stumbled upon them in Bimini by not being the law abiding citizens they expected everyone to be when they put up their sign."

"There are others down there too," said Christy with a glow in her eyes. "I met them. Not that I was awake for it, but I just know it." She unplugged the coffee maker and poured two cups. "Must be those people Virginia was talking about. You know, Jerry's mystical friends. Look at this," she pulled a flat piece of stone from her backpack and handed it to Matt. "I was holding it in my hands when I woke up beside you this morning."

It was full of tiny hieroglyphic markings. It measured about four by eight inches and was close to an inch thick.

"The ghosts of Bluffing Wells," Matt said quietly, staring at the carvings.

"Well, there was actually some ghostly figure, I think I saw after some fumes got to me, after I left you. No. Was no ghost. I mean he was an adult, male human being. A living person Matt. Short and small, very thin, all bones. He talked but without spoken words! And I couldn't move as he was looking at me. Suddenly I heard you blasting some Buffett song about painting the sky in sulfuric sensation and colors shining in a fiery rhyme. I was like, paralyzed. And, I know he took me somewhere where there were more like him. And the writing on the stone must be a message of some sort, so we need to figure out how to read it!"

"I remember the smell of sulfur and later cinnamon."

"That's it, cinnamon!" said Christy. "I couldn't quite put my finger on it. The whole experience, everything I feel is wrapped up in a blanket of that smell. So subtle, but always there. Even those leafs they had all over you had a faint scent of it."

"Some incredible healing process," Matt shook his head in disbelief. "Nothing hurts and my cuts are almost no longer visible. After only two days? I can move my arm and shoulder and feel nothing except for a dull muscle tension. Not as if this is the first time I've been shot. I feel like I've been recovering for weeks."

"Ancient medicine honey. That's not modern man down there."

"I think you're right. Our priorities are pretty clear. Be careful with the stone tablet and get back Stateside as soon as we can get a flight out of here. Find out if their phony seismological company owns a warehouse on River Drive in Miami and try and figure out their method of operation. Maybe this Caribbean Seismological Authority has more unsuspected high ranking citizens on the payroll than we dare to think of!"

A knock came from the half open door and Michell stuck his head in. "Wow, you too look like you've been swallowed by a big fish, chewed on and spat out!"

"I always look like this in the morning," said Christy with a smartass grin.

"Well, at least you're back in one piece. I just got off the phone with Charlie. Word is, the Defense Force is looking to arrest Mrs. Brown for aiding in a criminal act, and Mr. Brown had been lost after he fell in a blowhole while being pursued by Bluffers Cay security. He is presumed dead. I told Charlie I saw you dragging yourselves up the beach an hour ago, and you only looked half dead. I also told Charlie I wish the hell he told me what you were up to, so I would've never let you set foot on my property! All I need is a bunch of trigger happy Defense Force juvenile Rambos scaring my guests out of ever coming here again. Charlie thinks the world of you, and says what you are doing is the right thing, and I owed him a few, so here it goes. I falsified my records, you are now John and Nancy Simpson, and the Browns were never here. And I hope the hell the Simpsons ain't going to be here long either!"

"Thanks Mr. Michell," Christy smiled. "We'll be out of your hair in no time."

"Oh, and Charlie said, you would want to know those visitors you were expecting came and just about blew your yacht and half of Abraham's Bay to kingdom come. On that note, I'd like to offer my services to fly you out of here anytime you're ready. Now would be real good!" Michell closed the door behind him.

"Damn. Again, only Art knew we went to Abraham's!" Matt was angry.

"Art, and the Coast Guard!" said Christy and started kissing him. "I love you so much."

Two hours later they were all cleaned up and looking like tourists again. Michell had come back to advise them that Defense Force patrol boats were stopping and searching every foreign flagged vessel and customs agents at all airports were alerted to consider Mrs. Brown armed and dangerous, and to take any action necessary to make an arrest.

Michell offered to make an unreported flight into the neighboring Turks and Caicos Islands. They landed at Providenciales and made a formal aircraft entry, as if their flight had originated in Puerto Rico, from where exit visas were not required.

Five hours later they were on an American Airlines nonstop to Washington, and they couldn't remember when the last time they slept so good on a flight home.

## PART 11

Matt and Christy always found it a difficult process to re-assimilate into the North American way of life after spending months in the Islands, where things were less complicated and certainly on a much slower pace.

This time the cab ride from Dulles International up Interstate 495 and the Rockville Turnpike to Montrose was their transition period. It had been so long since they rode in a taxi that could do over forty, had a meter and doors that didn't rattle. They felt like kids on a ride at the fair as they rolled along the intertwining freeways amongst thousands of cars.

It felt good to be in Washington again after what they'd been through. Even the crappy attitude of the airport employees and the coldness of the cab driver felt good. Especially knowing that they were not staying for long. Metropolitan life was not for Matt and Christy. Impersonal grind of the big cities, the home of heart attacks, drive by shootings and broken homes. A stressful place whose long term exposure was lethal not only to the body but more importantly to the human spirit. Here were the people, the millions who religiously subscribed to the magazines containing the escapee's accounts of breaking away and living the dream. They read Matt's travelogues and cruising stories, planning and dreaming their own adventures, but few were the ones able to let go of the rut of false security in modern social values, and the hoarding of material wealth that we only think we really need.

Then, suddenly, they are hit by that proverbial bus the day after retirement, and just a day before living the dream.

With these thoughts in mind, holding hands they sat in the back of the cab, silently giving thanks for being different. The chances of getting shot while pursuing their dream was far more acceptable than outside a Seven Eleven on the way home from work.

They turned into the parking lot at the Pine Glen Motor Hotel on Montrose Road. They stayed there before and were glad to see the vacancy sign. Nothing fancy, but clean and in pleasantly wooded surroundings, it was about as peaceful as you could get being so close to the thick of things. It was Matt's favorite place when he used to come to visit with friends and play golf. Art Buttler was a member at Chevy Chase only six miles down the road.

They planned to meet him there, rather than going to his office or his house in case they were being followed.



The next morning Christy practiced her grief stricken widow voice as she dialed Buttler's office.

Suspecting the Coast Guard would know what happened and fill Buttler in on the details, Matt was expecting his friend to be under the impression he was dead, and he wanted to leave it that way until they met in person.

Christy finally got through to Buttler's personal secretary. "Admiral Buttler is in a meeting right now, may I take a message?" "Yes. This is Christy Brown, I'd appreciate it if the Admiral could"

"Mrs. Brown," she was interrupted. "Could you hold please. The Admiral has been expecting your call. One moment please."

"He's been waiting for my call!" Christy said to Matt holding a hand over the phone.

"Christy my dear, this is Art. How are you?" Buttler's voice was concerned and endearing.

"I'm OK now Art. Sure is good to hear your voice though," Christy said in quiet and somber tone.

"I heard what happened from MacShane. I'm very, very sorry. How are you holding up, where are you?"

"I'm at the Pine Glen."

"Hold on. I'm sending a car!"

"No. Art wait!" Christy caught him before he could put her on hold. "Look, it's been a long flight. I just want to rest and clean up. I'll meet you at the club for lunch. OK? Bye!"

Christy hung up quick and smiled, "You're a dead duck darling as far as Art's concerned."

Three hours later, a fine mist drizzled to the ground from a dark, overcast sky. Big drops of water drummed on the roof of the cab falling from the branches of trees overhanging the road toward Chevy Chase.

She shuffled to sit as close to Matt as she could, leaning her head on his shoulder and spoke softly with a faraway look in her eyes. "When this is over, let's go see my daddy for a while. We could ride into the hills for a few days. I miss the mountains and my horses so much."

Matt just nodded and softly kissed her hair. He got along well with her father, the gentleman rancher who taught political sciences at Columbia University, and thoroughly spoiled his only child with horses, dogs and the freedom to do what she wanted. Somehow, out west in the forest it was fitting to have a rainy season, Matt thought, but rain in the city had always depressed him too. He despised the monotonous, metronome like movement of the windshield wipers, the way pedestrians scattered at the sight of water gushing from the tires of a passing truck, and how people turned up their collars before getting out of a cab. All the dismal signs of rain in the city.

The diehards were out there teeing off in the rain. He had played in the rain before. That was all right. The city is not there on a good course.

The car slowed to negotiate the sharp turn through the stone gates.

God, he thought, what if Art is in this thing. Can't even afford to trust a friend anymore? No. He can't be, he said to himself. Must be the rain.

A doorman opened the cab's door under the canopy and ushered them to the reception lounge.

"Mr. and Mrs. Brown for Admiral Buttler," Matt said before the maitre d' could ask if they were members.

"Oh yes, Mr. Buttler is at his table. Follow me please," said the pale, thin man with a stuffy manner, then turned with a swish and pranced before them walking like a supermodel on a runway.

Matt spotted Buttler and reached ahead tapping the maitre d' on the shoulder. "Do you mind, I'd like to surprise him."

"As you wish sir," he shrugged a shoulder, threw his nose up and began prancing back to his post.

Buttler, a tall, thick man sat with his back toward them drinking beer from a frosty mug and watching the rain trickle down the window pane. Matt walked up behind him and whispered in his ear. "Gay waiters? Do you approve of that?"

"You son of a bitch!" Buttler turned jumping to his feet. "You son of a bitch, I knew it! I knew it all along!" He shook Matt's hand for a long while, then he hugged Christy and pulled a chair out for her. Looks of disapproval darted from the other tables nearby as a result of all that ruckus and display of emotion.

"I knew damn well something was afoot." Buttler said turning to Christy. "Lady, I've known you long enough to know how strong a person you are, but frankly, this morning when you called I didn't get the impression you lost more than a pair o' shoes."

"That bad ha?" Christy smiled. "And I even tried to put a little tremble in my voice."

"Not a good liar madam. Which brings me to the question, why did you lead me on like that?"

"That was my doing," Matt exclaimed. "I couldn't be sure if your phone wasn't tapped. Matter of fact I ain't too sure of anything right now. All I know is, this Caribbean Seismological Authority is involved in some very high tech maneuvers in the field of drug trafficking. I was there and saw it. In the process I was shot and left to drown in an underground tunnel. The magnitude of this operation is like nothing you could ever imagine. I'm sure it has got to be the largest and most organized drug smuggling undertaking of our time. The profits generated I'm sure are equally large." "Large enough to lure people from all walks of life. From the common criminal to politicians, cops, maybe even the military." Matt's piercing eyes met Buttler's as he continued. "The sleaze bags were expecting to find us on route to Bluffers Cay. I can understand that. But Art, only you knew we were going out of our way to fix a bent strut. A long ways out of our way. Nobody in their right mind would look for us so far off course at Abraham's Bay unless they knew what only you were supposed to know! And, since they followed us there and tried to blow up the Sea Story, at the risk of accusing a friend who I honestly believe could never do such a thing, I had to conclude that either you, or your contact at the Coast Guard were selling us out to the sons o' bitches."

Buttler never blinked once as he returned Matt's stare, but his hard face softened and the wrinkles on his forehead grew deeper.

"Matt," his voice was of understanding, "although we never needed it before, I now wish I could offer you more than just my word. There is nothing in this world that could ever tempt me into doing anything conflicting with my values and principals as a military officer, and as a friend. I am a happy man Matt, you of all people know that. I love what I do, and I have everything I want. I did not rat on you. However, if I was to walk in your shoes, I'm hoping I would be able to be as patient and diplomatic as you are."

"We really don't think it was you Art," Christy cut in. "It's got to be someone in the Coast Guard."

"How well do you know this Commander MacShane?" asked Matt.

"Very well. He's cut from the same mold as us. Remember when they dropped your DDR Team on board the Coast Guard Cutter Minnesota to look for the bodies trapped in the wreckage of the Spindrift under the ice? Must be Six, seven years ago? It was so cold your surface air froze up and the steam line had to be switched fast with no time to let it cool? Everybody was running around on deck scratching their heads while you guys were drowning in three hundred feet of water below the freezing point."

"Must you be so descriptive?" Christy said impatiently. "We remember all too well. What are you trying to say Art?"

"Well, if you remember, it was the Commanding Officer who finally grabbed the steam line and switched it losing a hand in the process!"

"Yes! MacShane was the CO of the Minnesota." Matt raised his eyebrows.

"Man of impeccable service record and all around good guy! Promoted to District Commander four years ago. Being on the Team you guys probably know more about the Coasties than I do, but I understand that is the hottest area in the country with all the drugs flowing in from the Caribbean. Only the best would ever be considered for the job. Right?"

A waitress brought the drinks they ordered.

"This is one thing you cannot get in the Islands," Christy sipped hers. "A good Manhattan. What do you think of radio transmissions being monitored between Group Miami and the cutters at sea Art?"

"Not a chance! When I asked MacShane to keep an ear out for you, the first thing he said was that a situation such as you were in is handled as a suspicious set of circumstances. So, if he was going to discuss anything in regards to Sea Story with his ships at sea, or his aircraft, it was going to go on a secure channel. Their scramble perimeters are not unlike ours in the Navy. Recomputed at four hour intervals. The fastest computers of the Pentagon couldn't come up with one single override combination without inside help." "Art, tell me everything in detail of how you were informed of my death," Matt looked up from his drink.

"MacShane called me at the house. Told me his communications people were advised of a man and a woman believed to be US citizens, who made an illegal landing on Bluffers Cay which is private property. During the act of trespassing the one male perpetrator was pursued by the island's security, fell into a hole and was washed out to sea. The female accomplice escaped in the

speedboat they were using and was sought after by local authorities. The man's back pack was found with a handgun in it, which was handed over to the Defense Force. They called the numbers of the gun in to MacShane's comms chief, who in turn traced it to one Matt Brown residing at your address in Annapolis."

"The bastards thought of everything," Matt mumbled.

"Well, according to MacShane," Buttler continued, "Bluffers Cay is a pretty important piece of property and a sensitive issue in all circles. Bahamas Defense Force brass is keeping a tight lid on the thing. They keep everybody including themselves away from there. Off limits for our DEA and Customs guys. Everybody."

"I'm telling you Art, this is big enough to have some pretty important people involved. That's the only way it could get to this point." Matt was half whispering trying to keep his excitement to an acceptable level. "Imagine an underground tunnel running the length of the Bahamas from north of Haiti to Bimini. A submarine highway and the traffic is narcotics. It really does exist Art! I saw it. I walked right into their waiting arms, but some mysterious whatever had extracted me after I was shot, and helped us get away. I don't want to get into this right now but I received some very unorthodox medical attention that put me back on my feet as if nothing happened. We brought back a souvenir and we're going to look up Christy's dad's friend Sam Erichson at the Smithsonian to see what he thinks of it, and once we know what it is we'll fill you in."

Buttler looked at Christy and Matt, back and forth, chewing fast to swallow so he could talk. "I think you two have stumbled onto something big all right, and if those people like the Mayor of Miami and that Florida Senator Burton are involved, it's going to be like we used to say on the Eisenhower, 'Heavy Danger'!"

"Agree," said Matt. "I'm going to check with ATF to find out whom, if anyone checked on my handgun. I've a feeling nobody did. They didn't have to, they knew damn well who I was, except they shouldn't have known me from Adam, so the story on the gun neatly explains how they came up with the identity of the two trespassers."

"You know I can pull a few strings," Burton looked at Matt. "Let me know what I can do to help."

"All right, here is one. We think the Caribbean Seismological Authority, or one of its sponsors, owns a warehouse on River Drive in Miami. Can you check on that from here? Get a full address and principals of title?"

"Have it for you in the morning. And you two better get out to the house and make yourselves at home. Kate knows nothing about your escapades except that Matt's dead. I couldn't keep that to myself, so she's been bawling her eyes out and keeps saying if Matt is dead then so is Christy. She'll flip to see you two alive and kicking!"

"Thanks Art but I think it's best if we stay at the hotel. We don't know if we're being tailed," said Christy. "Give Kate our love and our apologies for causing her grief. OK?"

"All right, let me drive you back to the motel then," Art offered. "I'll send you a car this afternoon from motor pool."

## PART 12

Matt was put on hold by the automated voices answering the phone at the Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms' registration databank. This office with a staff of only forty, handled the particulars of every registered weapon in the country.

A real person finally came on the line. "May I help you?"

"Yes, this is Commander Matthew Brown, United States Navy retired, I wonder if you might answer a couple of questions in regards to a handgun I recently lost in the Bahamas. What I'd like to know is, if you would have any record of any persons or agencies that might have called and inquired as to the ownership of the gun in case it was found."

"Yes sir we would," she said and silence followed. Matt waited for a second or two for the explanation which did not follow.

"Well, how would you know? Do you keep a record of these things?" He looked at Christy rolling his eyes.

"Yes sir we do." The girl sighed on the other end, then like as if she had said it a million times she blurted out, "Our computers will deny access to information on any and all registered firearms unless the ATF operator first files all the particular information required on the inquirer, which then remains a public record until the ownership of the firearm is transferred."

"What if the inquirer gives you false information to keep his true identity?"

"Not much we can do about that sir. However, it is mostly law enforcement people who make inquiries."

"OK, could you check on my gun then, please."

"Yes sir. Serial number, make and model please in that order."

"Three o six, dash, o two o three five. Ruger, model KP eight niner."

"Your address please?"

"Nineteen twenty, Severn Grove Hills, Annapolis Maryland."

"No entries sir since your original purchase date."

"Can you be sure?"

"Sir, if you give me a fax number I can send you everything we have on file on your KP eighty nine, which is nothing as I said."

"That's all right, that will not be necessary. Thank you kindly." Matt hung up.

"I guess that's it then," Christy looked at him. "The slimeball can be found in a Coastie uniform."

In the afternoon one of Buttler's men dropped off a dark blue Ford LTD resembling a Secret Service ghost car.

Then Christy called and happened to catch Dr. Erichson in his office, and asked if they could see him. Sam Erichson was a world renown archaeologist who at one time taught at Columbia University. He was now in charge of American Aborigines Studies commissioned by the Smithsonian Institute and worked out of the National Museum of Natural History on Madison Drive.

The rain had quit, but the day was still just as gloomy as they drove down Connecticut Avenue, onto Seventeenth Street and past the White House.

"At least I can drive on the right side of the road." Matt laughed constantly braking for the stop and go traffic and thinking of the time they rented a Jeep in Nassau, and what it was like getting used to driving on the left side.

They squeezed into a spot in the parking lot. After the attendant had buzzed Dr. Erichson to verify he was expecting them he showed them to a freight elevator. On the second floor a door opened into a huge room with no windows, only an array of bright lights suspended from a very high ceiling.

"Welcome to the remains of the Golden Empire!" Erichson came to shake their hands. He was a tall, slim man in his sixties with a long narrow face, gray hair past his collar, and was wearing a lab coat. "My, Christy it's been many moons, but you seem to have defied the passage of time. Good to see you Commander!"

"What are you working on Sam? Looks Inca," Christy asked.

"Oh yes. We're just putting the finishing touches on this one." He led them to a large model of what looked like an excavation site.

"The model of Machu Picchu. The lost city of the Incas, the one site thank God the Spaniards did not find. Nobody did until nineteen eleven, and it took this long to finish unearthing the two thousand acre site. I myself have ten years of my life in it." He pointed at miniature staircases. "More than a hundred of these connected houses, temples and palaces all built of white granite blocks precisely fitted together. This is the Temple of Sun. These are reservoirs and terraces for gardens and vegetables."

All around the room were bowls and jars of all sizes, gold funeral masks, shrouds for the mummified dead, gold Chimu knives and medicine pouches. Erichson showed them to a six foot baked clay statue of a kneeling warrior. "This one dates back sometime before Six hundred AD. It is of the Moche people who ruled the area of Peru for several hundred years. Remarkable isn't it?"

Christy reached into her purse and pulled out the stone tablet from Bluffers Cay and handed it to Erichson. He looked at it and looked at her, raising his eyebrows. He went to his desk and put the stone under the camera of an elaborate electronic microscope and studied the jagged lines appearing on the screen.

"Someone had gone through a lot of trouble Christy," he said not moving his eyes from the screen as the machine scanned the surface of the stone. "Hope you didn't pay big money for it. It's very well done but it's not old! They have used the authentic process of polishing with fast moving salt water loaded heavy with sand particles, and you can see traces of nickel left behind, indicating

the primitive process by which the bronze chisel used for the carving was cast. You see the presence of oxygen along with sulfur and other trapped gases causing the porosity. The metal becomes spongy and weak. Today we eliminate this in the modern casting process by adding to the molten metal something to combine with the oxygen and flux off. A deoxidizing agent like phosphorus is often used. What I'm saying is, the hieroglyphic inscriptions, although I only recognize a few, mostly numbers, are fitting, and the tool used to carve them was made according to the bronze age technology of the time the tablet is supposed to represent, but, the work on the stone is very recent. I mean, what, maybe in the last few days or weeks? All the edges are too sharp and of course still show the traces of nickel. I'm sorry.'

"No, it's OK Sam," Christy shook her head. "You're a regular Sherlock Holmes. Promise not to call the orderlies with the strait-jackets and to keep a secret if we tell you a story?"

She explained how they had come about the stone, which did not leave much of an impression on the old scientist until they showed him a couple of the little octagonal shaped leafs Christy had with her, and talked about how Matt's wounds have all healed up so fast. That greens floored Erichson.

"Konco," he said sinking into an old round wooden chair looking up at them. "It has a long Latin name but we just call it 'konco'." We find them in medicine pouches all the time, shriveled up, mummified. A plant long extinct to our knowledge. Dr. Sonya Varadi did the most extensive research on the konco back in the early twenties. She had a rare specimen very well preserved. She was ridiculed for her findings. She argued that the unique make up of the organism's own cellular structure could theoretically act as a molecular replicator. She was dismissed as an old woman gone insane of course, and I don't think anybody had ever bothered with the weed again."

The konco Christy was holding was as fresh, fuzzy, greenish and sticky as the morning Matt woke up with them all over him on Bluffers Cay.

"I knew something like this would happen someday. I've been afraid of this all my life." Erichson muttered to himself getting up. "If we find something real here, it must never be exposed to any of our military and political authorities or the scientific community. It must all be returned to seclusion."

"Absolutely," Matt agreed. "We think the stone carving is a message, a note from these people. Possibly a cry for help. Is there anything on there you can translate, or recognize? What it might mean?"

"It looks Mayan, which of course could lead to a good number of tribes but most likely Arawak." Erichson began to study the tablet closer. "They scattered all over the islands when the Carib drove them out of the Lesser Antilles in a genocidal attempt." Christy's legs became weak. She saw old Jerry's gentle face and heard his voice say over and over, "My deadliest enemy." She was overcome by an incomprehensible feeling of mayhem and destruction. She knew she was there. People around her were dying.

"Are you OK?" Matt's strong arms were lowering her into a chair. Her body like a noodle.

"Yeah. I'm OK. Just hate being some princess right now."

"After what you told me you've all been through, I'd be falling down too." Erichson handed her a glass of cold water.

"Thanks Sam. Please go on, I'm very interested." She smiled and squeezed Matt's hand.

"All right, see these bars and dots? The Mayan arithmetical system represented a high point of intellectual achievement of its days. Only three symbols were used. A bar which equaled five, a dot for each unit up to four and a drawing of a sea shell for zero. They counted in twenties and the value increased from bottom to top in a vertical column. The lowest group gave the number of units and the one above it the number of twenties, and the one above that the number of four hundreds. There was no provision for fractions of course. Dates were expressed by how many days have elapsed since a fixed point in the past, which we know was a day in the year of thirty one thirteen BC. Instead of weeks, months and years their calendar worked in units of Kin for one day, Uinal for twenty, Tun for three hundred and sixty or eighteen Uinals, Katun for seven thousand two hundred days or twenty Tuns and Baktun for twenty Katuns or one hundred and forty four thousand days." He looked up. "Are you with me so far?"

"Oh sure doc, it's as clear as a bell," Matt joked.

"Well, anyway, this symbol here represents eleven Baktuns and this one here seventeen Katuns. So we add the eleven times one hundred and forty four thousand days to the seventeen times seven thousand two hundred days, which is one million seven hundred and six thousand and four hundred days. Divide that by three sixty five and we get four thousand six hundred and seventy five years. Deduct the three thousand one hundred and thirteen years of their calendar preceding ours and we arrive at the year fifteen hundred and sixty two, after the death of Christ. Of course this is a rather vague calculation of years, we could be out quite a bit, after all our smallest available value is seven thousand two hundred days. However, it is safe to say that we are in and around the days when the Spanish were about to triumph in imposing sixteenth century European ways in the place of native Indian culture in the Americas." He threw the calculator back on his desk. "The rest is going to be much more complicated to figure out. Arawakan languages were the most wide spread amongst all the south American language groups. It was spoken with many dialects in a number of disconnected areas from what is now Cuba and the Bahamas as far south as the Xingu River in Brazil, and from the Amazon to the eastern foothills of the Andes. Hieroglyphic designs, having the same meaning when spoken varied from tribe to tribe. Some dialects of these Arawakan languages are still spoken in some parts of Brazil, Peru and Venezuela. Of course I am far from being a linguistics expert, but this looks like one of the extinct dialects. Likely to be Taino, which is unfortunate because there is very little left of the Taino people. Artifacts are so rare that I think there are only two badly damaged, pieced together hieroglyphic examples in existence. One cannot learn a language without something to work with."



"I don't think I ever heard of the Taino." said Christy.

"Probably not. They were descendants of the early Arawak. Characterized by a highly evolved social and political structure. There are scholars who put the Taino on the top as the most advanced Indian people of the times. They were especially noted for extreme pacifism. Taking one's own life was the preferred alternative to fighting to such extent that when the Spaniards appeared a mass suicide wiped them clear off the face of the Earth. But, not before they destroyed most all evidence of their existence." Erichson walked over to a counter with a sink and a coffee machine. "Come on, pour yourselves a cup. I just made it before you got here." He sat back at his desk and pulled a map out of the drawer. "There is one thing left of the Taino. A twenty meter tall solar calendar sitting right here, two thousand meters above sea level atop the Pico Ojo del Toro in the Sierra Maestra mountains of Cuba. We asked permission to study it in the mid seventies, so Castro blasted out the incredible stairs carved into the side of the mountain leading to it. Getting up there now would take mountain climbing equipment, and of course getting shot in the process."

"So there is no one who can translate these inscriptions?" asked Christy.

"Not anyone within the accepted circle of people we usually deal with. There was a rumor in the late eighties that Labarraque and two assistants, and I use the term assistant loosely, more like hired guns, had snuck up there and photographed the calendar from head to toe."

"Who is he?" asked Matt.

"Dr. Joseph Labarraque. A once foremost respected anthropologist, nowadays nothing but a waste of talent. An outcast. A rebel gone too far. He is the guy who stole and smuggled the books of Galen out of Russia in seventy six. Not that we wouldn't have loved to possess the writings of the man who was personal physician to five Roman emperors and the first man to recognize that the muscles are controlled by the brain, but we couldn't condone illegal activities in the name of science, so we returned the papers to the museum in Vladivostok and blackballed Labarraque. Since then, he had been conducting his private research in a clandestine and often unethical manner from his private island in the Keys."

"Sounds like a guy we could use on our side." Christy commented.

"You might be right," Erichson continued. "Don't get me wrong,

I've known and worked with Joe in the old days and he is no criminal. Just emotional enough to use any means in the name of science if he thinks he is justified. Just might be your man. If he actually was at the site of the Taino calendar and took pictures, and your hieroglyphics are as I suspect indeed Taino, Labarraque should read your piece of stone like the Wall Street Journal."

"Can you get him to talk to us Sam?" asked Christy.

## PART 13

Cape Sable slowly faded behind as they flew over the Gulf of Mexico. The shallow water, like a patch of many colors lay below. Indentations, long valleys and trenches on the sea floor showed in dark gray, surrounded by vivid blue that in spots rose to mounds of green close to the surface.

Like a vapor trail of a jet aircraft, a silver streak slowly advanced below caused by an invisible, fast moving powerboat crossing the flight course of the Galaxy. Boats headed for Everglade City or Naples, Matt thought.

The colors grew more intense and the deep spots became a very dark blue as the Lower Keys began to emerge ahead. Matt could almost recite in his head word for word some of the things he wrote about those islands coming up below.

The Florida Keys, where the warm waters of the Gulf Stream flow past the only living coral reef in the country. It is island time there, nobody moves too fast.

Like a string of pearls, bridge after bridge, constantly reminding the traveler of the railroad that went to sea, US 1 connects one island to another all the way to the climax of Key West. There, the architecture, the gardens and museums flaunt the exotic and elegant blend of New England, Caribbean and Spanish influences spiked with tall tales of the sea, piracy and rum running. Hemingway lived there in his Spanish Colonial mansion of native rock and Italian marble on Whitehead Street, not far from the southernmost point in the Continental United States, ninety miles away across the stream from his beloved Havana.

Matt looked over at Christy. "Can you imagine, Hemingway and Jerry in Bimini in the old days? The times they must have had. Incredible times to live in." She just nodded and smiled. The heavily laden, slow moving aircraft began to lose altitude to line up for her approach to the base.

A little past noon they found a parking place on Eaton Street, a short walk to Duval. Sam Erichson had set them up for a three thirty meeting with Joe Labarraque at his place outside Marathon Key, which gave them a couple of hours to enjoy the romance of Key West before the one hour drive.

They had Cheese Burgers in Paradise at Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville for lunch and they walked to the end of Duval Street, to the outdoor patio lounge overlooking the anchorage where Sea Story had set and rolled in the heavy incoming surge many times before.

They missed their boat and wished she could've been out there amongst the other anchored yachts. They were hoping to catch Lenore Troia who played the little bar in the afternoons but they were too early. She played calypso and some Harry Belafonte tunes but some of her own compositions about life in the Keys were the best.

"Save me save me from the real world, take me back to my home in the Keys," Christy quietly sang her lyrics as they leaned on the railing looking out to sea.

They walked up to Sloppy Joe's bar. The place had a rustic atmosphere and blowups of original black and white photographs of Papa Hemingway. Matt and Christy had a couple of beers and listened to a local musician banging out some pretty good old time rock and roll, but soon it was time to get on US 1 and drive to Marathon at mile marker fifty two.

Labarraque lived on East Sister Rock, a small islet off the ocean side of town. The only way to get there was by the water taxi that plied the waters of the large anchorage in Boot Key Harbor. They were picked up at Pat and Kelly's Marina in the pontoon boat driven by a jolly fat man drinking a can of beer. They weaved their way through the couple of hundred moored vessels and crossed to the other side of the harbor lined with condominiums. Around the corner, past a very expensive looking four story condo they turned into the serenity of Sisters Creek, suddenly leaving the busy harbor and the back and forth scurrying runabouts behind.

A mangrove marsh lined both sides of the creek. Eaglets and great white herons walked the shallow shore plucking their meals from the water and pelicans perched in the branches. High above, frigate birds with their huge wingspans rode the air currents. Mulletts sprinted in large schools ahead of the pontoons trying to get away from being run down, and a pair of spotted eagle ray leaped from the water beside them and leaped again, in an effort to shed clinging parasites.

The driver crunched his empty can, threw it amongst some others in a big green plastic garbage can and pulled a fresh one from a cooler on the seat beside him. Matt and Christy looked at each other and smiled.

The creek twisted and turned, and then widened into an estuary as it emptied into the Atlantic Ocean. A magnificent sandy beach and public park opened up to the left with a subdivision of large homes behind. A little ways to the east set Labarraque's island and the same distance off shore to the west another, smaller but barren clump of land.

"That's West Sister," the driver pointed, "and over there is East Sister. Can't build on West Sister, she ain't big enough for the septic permits."

"Awful nice place to live," said Christy as they neared the large house set high on the tiny island. There was a dock with a vintage Burger motor yacht about seventy two feet, a smaller fishing boat and a Boston Whaler runabout. A pair of ospreys shrieked from their huge nest of twigs and branches atop a lone telephone pole with a big street light half way up it as the driver stayed a few feet off the dock drifting in neutral. Three Rottweilers came charging around the corner alerted by the fussing of the birds.

"Nobody sets foot ashore until Joe tells his dogs it's all right!" the driver grinned at them and spat in the water.

A big burley man in his late fifties with a full gray beard and dark hair past his shoulders appeared wearing blue jeans, flip flops and a black Harley Davidson T shirt.

This must be the caretaker and security person, Christy thought.

He walked up the dock with his hands in his pockets and stood there looking at them. His face full of puck holes, his skin all cracked and hard looking, likely from spending a lot of time in the sun.

"How you making out Bingo?" he growled.

"Can't complain," grinned the driver.

"You the Browns?"

"We are!" said Matt.

"OK guys. It's all right now, just settle down," the man said to the dogs softly and turned to walk away. "Come on get ashore!" he barked back at them. "They'll leave you alone. Just don't move too fast."

He was around the corner of the house and gone before the taxi nudged against the dock. The three dogs stood there, one with lips curled up and growling steadily as Matt and Christy stepped ashore gingerly and began walking in the direction of the house with the Rottweiler squad following a few steps behind. Around the corner was a staircase leading to a balcony overlooking the ocean. The big guy stood at the top of the stairs waiting. A set of heavy glass sliding doors opened from the balcony. The three dogs from behind charged and pushed their way past being the first ones inside. They quickly dispersed to their own, individual wicker basket beanbag doggie beds, and assumed the position of heads up and ears perked expecting a conversation to begin.

"Wonderful dogs," Christy broke out affectionately as she surveyed the room. It was more like a big study, with an intricately carved oak desk, a very serious computer set up and two heavy, closed doors leading to other parts of the house. One wall had a number of wooden ceremonial masks hanging on spikes, and there were very old looking stone daggers and spears everywhere. In one corner stood a four foot stone figure with the body of a skeleton and the head of a hideously snarling lion-like creature. On a shelf amongst some pottery figurines was a front half of a human skull encrusted with gold leaf, sea shells and a mosaic of blue and pink feathers and made into a mask.

The man stood before Christy staring. "You have a lot of Cree in you Miss?"

"My mother was full blood."

"Good blood. Genealogically speaking that is." He nodded. "I'm Joe. A pleasure to meet you." He shook hands with her and Matt.

"What do you have for me Mr. Brown?"

Christy handed over the stone tablet to the man. He looked at it and without raising his eyes from it he forced the words through his teeth: "Tell me. Who the hell made this thing."

"Found it while diving in the Bahamas," said Christy.

"Don't bullshit me miss!" Labarraque thundered. "This is fresh chisel work in a language whose symbols died with its people five hundred years ago. Symbols that are familiar only to one man in the

modern world and you're looking at him. So cut the crap or take your piece of stone and get the hell off my island!"

"We are concerned Mr. Labarraque. If we disclose the location of the frog, will the class quickly arrange a field trip to dissect it?" said Matt.

"All right. I see your point. But you have to understand this is written in a dead language which to my knowledge was never properly studied by anyone other than myself! I took some great risks in order to learn something about the ways of the Taino people. I need to know who made this. I need to know where and how he came to his knowledge."

"Nobody's crazy enough to follow in your footsteps and scale the side of the mountain of the Taino calendar sir. And nobody can learn to grow this." Christy handed a ziplock baggie with the konco in it to Labarraque. He looked at it with astonishment and his voice softened.

"This plant is not supposed to exist!" He walked to the large windows and studied the content of the bag through the light.

"I know you've been made aware of what the politically correct scientific community thinks of me as they look down from their ivory towers. In some of my ways I may be unorthodox, which is of course a very relative term, but let me assure you I would be the last person in this rotten society to hand your frog over for dissection. This is too incredible."

Labarraque pulled a thick note book from the drawer of his desk. It was filled with hieroglyphic symbols and writings in Latin. He covered the tablet with the notebook except for the first two vertical lines on the left side. He took a while paging through his scribblings, looking up at times in a blank stare and shaking his head. "They describe a Princess, whose father, then ruler of the Carib was ambushed cowardly and murdered by a group of outcast Arawak warriors. To avenge her father's death, the Princess began to massacre the Arawak with the intent to not rest until every man, woman and child was dead. Of course that was rather hard to accomplish, but she did displace them from their homeland and scattered them throughout the smaller islands of the Caribbean. The Taino came later as direct descendants of some of these Arawak. This message was prepared by the Taino? Astonishing! The message goes out to the person whom the writer considers reincarnation of that Princess. Apparently, you Mrs. Brown. Your terru, which is their word for a combination of a person's current body and purpose of existence, is unknown to them except for the fact that you are now a modern twentieth century person, which they seem to comprehend remarkably well. They believe that because of your experiences in your previous lives, more specifically the one of the Princess', yields you the understanding of their sociological and spiritual structure. Therefore, you're to help them in the preservation of their world. Unbelievable. These people five hundred years ago would've committed suicide! They had to have contact as they evolved."

"They did," Christy stood there staring out to sea, her eyes

blurred with moisture. "An old Bahamian has been their friend for a generation. He called me the Carib Indian Princess the day we met him, which was over three years ago."

"Pour yourselves a drink, or there is beer and soda in the fridge." Labarraque said as he uncovered another few vertical lines. Matt got two beers out, handing one to Christy. A few minutes later Labarraque turned in his chair, his face radiating with excitement. "This is absolutely the most incredible thing in modern man's history. This I think is more significant than if an extraterrestrial starship had landed in the president's backyard. This is a slice of history believed to be dead, but alive and well today! A tribute to the ingenious of the human race! This is a group of revolutionaries who went into hiding, remained there and flourished for the last five hundred years undisturbed by outside influences, and evolved in every aspect faster than any race or life form I have ever studied. These are no longer people making human sacrifices, but brilliant minds that carved the sophisticated pictures these symbols paint. You have to understand, I spent so many years researching, and learning this language. Everything is expressed in such descriptive form, it makes the reader so much more involved than modern language. I wish you could look at these like I can and see the pictures and events they represent. How far did Sam Erichson take you into the understanding of the Indian peoples of the times?"

"We talked about mathematics, and how their calendars were more advanced than the Roman cumulative system of the same period. About the only thing Sam could read was the numbers," said Matt.

"All right. Well, they were advanced and even genius in some aspects but still very primitive in others. What you need to realize is we are talking about people who, when confronted with something unfamiliar, posing danger or not, would either run from it or worship it. Because they had never seen a horse before, when they saw a Spaniard dismount they fled in fear, thinking that a strange animal had come apart to form two separate evil beings. For the Sun God, in the spring the Arawak priests flayed live victims and paraded around in their skins." Labarraque sat there pouring a shot of rum and downing it. "Did Sam tell you that the Taino's religious beliefs did not allow for violent defense against enemies? We do not know where the belief had originated from, but suicide was the accepted means of defense. Your tablet describes the story of its people starting at the beginning of the Spanish conquest. At that time the Taino worked with two calendars using the long count system Sam told you about. One was the solar calendar, based on the apparent movements of the sun and stars around the Earth, and of course repeated over every three hundred and sixty five days. It determined the seasons, the times for planting and harvesting and yes, it was actually more accurate than the sixteenth century European Calendars. The other, the second calendar was based on a two hundred and sixty day cycle and was used for religious and ritual purposes. Thus each day of the year, was fixed in terms of two independent calendar cycles. Since the solar and ritual years differed in length, it was fifty two years before any one particular combination could come around again. Every fifty second year was of great significance. It was predicted

that the end of the universe would come during one of these, but nobody could tell which epoch was to be the last. You can well imagine, the last day of a fifty two year period was a time of great fear and crisis with the possibility of the sun not rising ever again. Before dark, the priests went to the altar of the solar calendar at the summit of what is now Pico Ojo del Toro. A man was stretched across the altar alive, his chest opened and the astronomer priest kindled a fire in the victim's body cavity. Then, as the night fell, the priests offered their own blood by drawing a cord set with thorns through a hole in their tongue. Their blood dripped onto bark paper in a basket before them, which was then burned in the fire. They searched the heavens for the sign, and when the constellation of Pleiades reached its zenith, they knew the world was safe for another fifty two years. It was during the last year of one of these dreaded fifty two year periods when the Spanish happened to bring down their Inquisition onto the Taino, and this is where the story inscribed upon your tablet begins. We know the Taino committed mass suicide wiping themselves out," Labarraque looked to be in a trance like state, his eyes sparkling as they shifted around between Matt and Christy, "but according to this writing, not all! Before the masses slaughtered their children and themselves they made an attempt of taking the enemy into the grave with them in a non violent way. The last day of the year came and the priests were instructed to forego the usual sacrifice, hoping to allow everything to come to an end, thus finishing off the cancer crawling upon the land in the form of the conquering forces. They prayed to the gods to bring their wrath upon the world and destroy it all. But when the sun rose the next morning, it made it clear to them that they displeased the gods and began taking their lives to make things right. You see, they believed in the pleasures and the freedom of the next life, so going to their death was not so difficult for these people. Except, for the handful of revolutionaries who have been secretly nurturing thoughts of opposition for some time, and were now reassured and even strengthened by the rising of the morning sun. They took their long boats to their cavernous hideout and as their people walked to their deaths, they drew plans of remaining underground, growing strong and one day emerging to regain their world. It is their descendants who prepared this message for you. Their culture, their medicine and most of the Taino way of life remained with them. It does not explain here how they cultivate food and how or how far they travel but they're doing it. The number of generations they express here would indicate they live very long lives, the average lifespan had increased tremendously, however their reproduction rate had slowed down considerably. At this time there are two hundred and thirty seven people alive, after nineteen men and eleven women had begun their journey roughly five hundred years ago. It is obvious they are taking great care for bloodlines to remain the absolute purest, which would go hand in hand with the numbers their world may be able to support in the way of nutrition and food." Labarraque had the cap off his rum, holding the bottle ready to pour but never getting around to it as he kept on spewing out the words with the amazement and dedication of a child who had just come back from his first trip to the zoo. "These people had

long forgotten about avenging the Spanish or ever coming to the surface again. You could say they consider themselves monks. Spiritualists, who found a deeper and more rewarding existence. Through a Dakot, which was their word for a spirit contact but here I think is used to describe the man who calls Mrs. Brown the Princess, and they call Imahhoa or 'Darkman', they had gained an incredibly clear understanding of twentieth century Earth and who we are and how we live our lives. They make it very clear they do not wish prolonged contact with anyone other than the Dakot." Labarraque finally poured his drink as he began to take control of his excitement. "There seem to be some people from the surface, whom they label as destructive antisocial elements of our world, intruding upon and destroying theirs. They're charging you Mrs. Brown with the task of ridding their world of this enemy." Labarraque downed his drink and held the stone tablet lovingly in his hands looking at it as if he'd never see it again. He got up and handed it to Christy.

"That piece of stone is worth more than all the gold in California," he said. "Perhaps you'll need my services as a translator again. I'm not going to push you, but I think you owe me some details now."

Matt and Christy were convinced Labarraque would be needed to communicate with the Taino, and that he was equally as dedicated as they were to keeping the Indians' existence unexposed. They explained their adventures and their finds on Bluffer's Cay. Then, the outcast scientist showed them around his domain, offered up a big steak dinner and invited them to stay the night. In the morning they were off to Miami to meet with Commander MacShane at Coast Guard District Headquarters in Miami.



## PART 14

As Matt turned onto Biscayne Boulevard heading for the commercial docks of the Port of Miami and the Coast Guard Station, his thoughts kept wandering back to the times when he first met Christy. It was at Fort Stevens Station on the Columbia River in Oregon. She was his buddy assigned. The only woman who made it to the final six weeks that was designed to eliminate all but the toughest. They were training to be on the elite team of volunteers for the Coast Guard's Deep Dive Response unit. He couldn't believe such a beautiful girl could be so strong and have so much stamina, or would even want to be doing such a thing in the first place.

One of the highlights was what they called the dunking. Each day, a different student was purposely lost overboard off one of the old forty foot motor surfboats that were designed to withstand a three sixty roll over and right themselves with virtually no damage. The awesome rollers of the Columbia River Bar, one of the most treacherous inlets on one of the world's most powerful rivers provided the training ground. The boat, in the company of one of the new fifty footers headed out to sea on the opposing tide with a crew of three and the trainee. When they were on the bar and the crew was all strapped into their heavy steel chairs, the Coxswain waited for a suitable wave, which was more like a twenty foot wall of water and ordered the vessel abeam to it. Steel plating protecting the helm often buckled as the monstrous sea crashed into the side of the boat, rolling it beneath the surface and washing the unlashed person overboard on the end of a thirty foot lifeline wearing a crash helmet and life vest. As the boat righted herself and was headed into the next wave, the helmsman fought to keep her from rolling again. The Coxswain shouted instruction to the helm and began to search the frothing water around the boat for the man overboard. Once satisfied that the man in the water was conscious and ready to fight, he let him begin the grueling task of getting back on board without help. The boat pitched and rose on the high, steep swells, violently yanking the person around in the water on the end of the thirty foot lifeline. No one could ever realize what it was like until they were actually fighting to gain on the rope as it was ripping their arms from their shoulders and gasping for the minute amounts of precious air in between breaking swells that tumbled overhead.

Spinning eddies of undertows pulled you down and hurtled you under the hull just to let the suction of the propellers pin

you against the protective cage they were encased in and spit you out behind as the stern rose on the crest of the next wave. When you finally gained on the rope and made it to the side of the boat, you knew that letting go meant losing it all. You were numb, and all your actions were entirely instinctive. You hung on, even though the boat pitched and your body slammed hard against the steel over and over again like a rag doll followed by a ton of water from behind knocking the wind from your lungs. Seven men out of the twelve had given up before ever making it half way to the boarding ladder on the side of the hull. Giving up was easy. On a belt they wore a small package containing a CO2 activated balloon that blew to a four foot diameter orange ball when activated. It only took a push of a button to signal the crew to get you back onboard.

Matt had his turn a few days before Christy. Bruised and sore he watched his buddy from aboard the fifty footer, expecting her panic balloon to blow amidst the smart ass remarks from the crew. They were actually making book on how many minutes before she'd had enough, but the minutes went by and she was still out there. By then he had known her for over a week, he had dove with her and seen her work out. He knew that if she made the first few minutes she'd make the rest.

"This is Coast Guard six two six five!" the Coxswain's excited voice came yelling across the radio from the forty footer. "Trainee Tanner had successfully recovered aboard this vessel! I repeat she's on board and no balloon!"

"All right!" Matt threw his tight fists above his head as a glorious feeling overwhelmed him and he confirmed to himself that he was in love like never before.

It turned out she was already crazy about him, and it wasn't long before she moved aboard his boat and they began cruising down the coast to the Baja and the west coast of Mexico. They were married in Mazatlan and after going through the Panama Canal they ended up in the Caribbean with no particular destination.

Now they were pulling up to the security shack as Matt asked Christy, "Remember the dunking on the Columbia?"

"Who can forget it," she answered and smiled. "What a rush! I also remember how sore I was." She laughed out loud.

"Welcome to the station!" the guard said after running their ID cards through the scanner.

Coast Guard Station Miami, being also district headquarters, is one of the largest and most equipped in the country. Situated just inside Government Cut, the main shipping channel leading in from the ocean, it is heavily geared toward the detection and prevention of drug smuggling. Two dozen fast and ready cutters and many smaller patrol vessels are permanently stationed here in the basin across from the plush high-rise condos of Fisher Island.

Cruise ships, freighters and pleasure craft from all over the world move past in the channel day and night, heading into one of the nation's busiest harbors.

Commander MacShane's office was on the third floor of the simple, rectangular gray brick administration building. A

coastguardsman behind a desk full of paperwork announced their arrival and showed them into an office whose walls were nearly all covered with nautical charts and cork boards.

"Commander, Mrs. Brown, nice to see you back in one piece." MacShane extended his left hand for a shake. His right was amputated at the wrist. "Have a seat please. Cooper, how about some coffee!"

"Coming up Commander," the man shuffled off closing the door behind him.

"Art tells me you two were on the DDR team they dropped on the Minnesota when the Spindrift went down. You people can sure do some fancy stuff down there! Sorry I didn't get a chance to meet any of you at the time."

"Well, wasn't exactly the time for socializing Commander." Matt looked at MacShane's hard, wrinkled face and soft eyes. Wasn't really the face of a hero, not the way he imagined the Captain who saved their skin that day losing his own limb in the process. "Let me say this though sir, better late than never, by the time we thawed out in the chopper half way back to Duluth we all knew what happened and who we could thank for preventing us from joining the crew of the Spindrift!"

The coffee arrived in white styrofoam cups just as MacShane tried to awkwardly respond. "Let us talk about what happened in the Bahamas instead," he said as they were alone again. "Art Buttler advised me about the two latest incidents since the fishboat you encountered at the North West Channel Light."

"Yes, six men on a large sportfishing boat had made an attempted boarding in the middle of the night with AK 47s. We took out four of them before they could get to us, and turned the other two over to the Bahamian authorities on Rum Cay."

MacShane's mouth seemed to drop as Matt described their run in with the Bear With Me. "Well, I can only say I'm awful glad you people are on our side," he said shaking his head.

"Unfortunately," Matt said looking the Coast Guard Commander in the eyes, "there is someone around here who seems to be working for both sides. It seems someone knew every step we took, and after eliminating Art Buttler, the finger points to Station Miami. Your people were given our precise float plan by Buttler and were the only ones who knew where we were at all times."

A fire began to burn in the soft eyes of MacShane and his body tensed. His left hand moved from the fragile coffee cup to firmly grasp the edge of his desk as Matt continued. "I'm sorry for having to bring these insulting accusations upon you Commander but I am deadly serious. I need to know the circumstances of how you were informed about what happened on Bluffers Cay."

"I don't care for this conversation Mr. Brown, but I am a reasonable man, I'll play your game for two minutes, after which I will have you removed from my station. My communications chief had briefed me on your illegal entry upon the private island of Bluffers Cay and your alleged death after a Defense Force liaison called my chief to run down the serial numbers of a gun they found.

My chief then traced the gun to your name. All routine, usual procedure. We do it all the time for the Bahamians when our people

get into this kind of thing over there. Now you have one minute to convince me why I should put up with your presence in my office!" "For the record Commander, I speculate that the Coast Guard personnel claiming to have made the call to Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms is a person directly in contact with a group involved in the trafficking of narcotics on a grand scale, is a person peddling information to that group not only to aid in the attempts of murder but quite possibly to supply information about the movements of Coast Guard, Customs and D.E.A. forces. As far as Bluffers Cay, as a private island is concerned, yes I was there, I was shot there by a man by the name of Carl Dunitschek, I was left to drown in a tunnel from which I escaped, and my gun was taken from me and not found. The island is a base of operation for the biggest drug running scheme this country could ever dream up! And, to convince yourself Sir, with all due respect, you need to do no more than call A.T.F. and have them tell you like they told me, absolutely no inquiries have ever been made on any gun I have ever owned."

Deeply in thought, MacShane's face lost all emotions as he stared at Matt and Christy. "Cannot be. I am aware of your service record Mr. Brown, I know you are both exceptional people but you must be mistaken. You could not have seen such things on Bluffers Cay. The company, namely the Caribbean Seismological Authority, who owns Bluffers Cay is involved only in the most noble of scientific efforts, funded by some of our most well known and respected citizens." He rose from his desk and turned to Matt. "A.T.F. did not confirm my chief's call? Cannot be."

"Come on! Yes it can!" Christy snapped impatiently, immediately regretting her tone of voice. "Sir, scientists they are not and research is far from their activities. I know. I was there too. Sir, the two guys we left at Rum Cay talked. Didn't want to, but they talked. They mentioned a warehouse on River Drive. We checked it out. It's owned by the Caribbean Seismological Authority. A recent gift from Mayor Augusta!"

"The so called research vessel Delphinus was docked at Bluffers Cay when we were there. I'm sure she'll be coming up this river on the way to the warehouse. What would it take for you to do a routine inspection of her cargo?" asked Matt.

"Only Customs can legally board a vessel without just cause, and information supplied by private citizens such as yourselves and gathered in a foreign land illegally would not hold up. Besides, being who these people are, I find it difficult to believe even Customs would dare to rain on their parade. The boat checks in by phone upon returning from the Bahamas, which is sufficient for a vessel on a regular schedule, not hauling cargo but conducting an ongoing scientific research."

MacShane sat back down and with a sobering expression he went on. "Look people, let me explain something. I'm a red neck. I believe in the straight and narrow. I believe in the system. Now, I don't mean that I don't see it possible for a good guy politician to take

up a more profitable sideline, it's just that I'd really like you all to be wrong. No offense."

"We wish we were wrong!" Christy cut in.

"I believe what you're saying about the gun, 'cause why would you make it up. It's too easy to prove or disprove. But that would mean my comms chief is at least falsifying information! All this is so damn hard for me to swallow. Why would a man put aside his pride and sell out to be such a slug? All I can say for now, is that if in fact you came into harm's way on account of a deficiency in my department, I am deeply ashamed. I will take all steps necessary to investigate my chief's story regarding the gun and we will go on from there."

## PART 15

Nassau Bahamas. An old port with a checkered history. At the turn of the seventeenth century, after the Spanish had scattered the colonizing English, it became one of the largest and safest strongholds of pirates. The harbor crowded with prizes brought in to be converted into fighting ships or to be broken up for parts to support the existing fleet.

Ashore was a community of scattered canvas shelters and wooden shacks for the storage and sale of liquor. Pirates in rags, most often in a drunken stupor stumbled over men and women copulating in the sand. A foul stench and a miasma of wood smoke overhung the place, unwashed bodies, beef scorching on open fires, rum, refuse and human waste abundant everywhere. The captured and brutalized women with nowhere to go, and infected with syphilis and gonorrhea milled about in a daze in between randomly being thrown to the dirt to be penetrated or just to be generally abused by a rum-filled sailor passing by. Men laid about bleeding to death from results of rum induced knife fights. They, who submitted to discipline aboard a ship, were ruled only by a primitive form of passion ashore, turning this tropical paradise into hell on Earth.

Then, Captain Woods Rogers cleaned things up, and the colony grew slowly enjoying modest prosperity until the Civil War, when the harbor once again crowded with ships, schooners, and low gray steamers designed to stealth-like slip through the Union blockade. Money brought by the island's contact with Confederacy once again filled the bars and brothels of Nassau with men ready to risk death for gain. When it was all over, prohibition brought more lawlessness in the form of high speed motorboats running cargoes of liquor to Florida and large schooners that became floating warehouses sitting twelve miles off the US coast on Rum Row. The Volstead Act later slipped Nassau into a time of lethargy. Fishing, sponging and peaceful trading flourished but could hardly be called a time of prosperity until the end of the wars brought the new era of tourism.

Today, downtown Bay Street vibrates with calypso rhythm and reggae in a never ending flow of tourists who disembark from the cruise ships arriving from the four corners of the world. What was Hog Island is now Paradise Island. Bright, well tended and safe for the millions of well-to-dos who come to the casinos and five star hotels.

Quite the opposite of what one finds on the other side of the big bridge. On the Nassau side, rumbling beneath the surface far

away from the T-shirt shops and the well patrolled downtown sections, the old time romance and often dark reality of this exotic port still pulsates relentlessly.

In the wide, tide ridden harbor glittering yachts, cruise ships, dirty old freighters and broken crafts of the Bahamian conch and lobstermen mingle, until out of the past, one of the few engineless Haitian cargo sloops steals the show. With her huge, patched triangular sail, her bright red, blue and green paint scheme and her dark skinned sailors in rags of all colors she tacks her heavily laden oldtimbers up current to Arawak Cay's cargo terminal.

People still live in the trees in Malcolm Park, ready to pounce on anyone having the looks of an easy mark, and those in the know can still find opium dens along East Bay Street. Cocaine, pot and women are openly sold on the streets. The beggars are many and they are aggressive.

Matt and Christy figured the owners of the sunken Bahamas Daybreak had to know something, and after MacShane had called A.T.F. and was himself sufficiently convinced of their story, he agreed to smuggle them back into the Bahamas to see what they could come up with.

The cutter dropped anchor in sixty feet of water just before the reef line on the north shore of Paradise Island. A large red Zodiac inflatable was lowered and two coastguardsmen taxied them to the desolate pink sand beach down from Club Med.

"Remember Sir! Same time, same place tomorrow are my orders. Otherwise we leave without you. Good luck!" one of the men said as they pushed the boat back into the incoming surf.

It was a little after eight AM. They each had a towel in hand, wore bathing suits and looked like authentic Club Med tourists. Christy had a beach bag with some clothes and cash in it.

A few people were coming down for an early dip, while most were still engulfed in the breakfast ceremony. A tall, young woman with her bare breasts bouncing jogged passed them squeezing out a Bon Jour between breaths.

They had a cool, refreshing freshwater shower at one of the gates leading from the beach into the compound, and slipped into shorts and T shirts before walking through the magnificent grounds of Club Med. Bunion trees hundreds of years old, gardens of orchids, swimming pools, fountains, old stone statues and fruit trees lined a narrow cobble stone foot path. They walked past the activities and dining area, the main swimming pool and the tennis courts, and through the gate leading to the outside. They hailed one of the cabs sitting on the side of the road.

"Drop us on East Bay by the traffic circle please," Christy asked the driver.

The old Chevy wagon pinged and knocked as it struggled to make the eighty five foot incline of the Paradise Island Bridge over to the Nassau side. Traffic slowed to a crawl here as the underpowered tiny Suzuki vans and older trucks and cars held up traffic making it over the hump that allowed the large ships to pass under.

Making the other side, the driver drove around the circle and pulled onto the right-away leading to Potter's Cay under the

bridge where the conch and fish vendors' stalls began. Matt gave the man ten dollars for the six dollar fare and they got out. The broken pavement leading under the bridge had vendors on one side and fishboats docked on the other. Moored stern to the quay were an assortment of run down vessels, some selling their catch, others just rotting away being used for shelter by the many homeless. Under the embankment, young boys and girls sold seashells and coconuts they collected. Or, themselves.

A dead body was really not an event here, and the beggars competed amongst themselves around the foot of the bridge, where some tourists sometimes wandered to get the real flavor of the place.

Matt had a favorite trick to ward off beggars by pretending to be packing a gun. He took a paper bag and scrunched it up into the shape of a pistol and stuck it into the waist of his pants slightly allowing the shape to lump out. They were then taken to be narks or druggies, so everyone steered clear of them.

They walked through the market where produce and fish were sold. Swollen rain clouds with dark underbellies hung seemingly only a few feet overhead ready to swoop down on the big bridge. They threatened to burst into a summer drencher so typical of Nassau. Stifling haze of humidity mixed with soot spewing from chimneys of freighter's ancient diesels choked the air above the market forcing the stench of a million rotting shells of conch piled high into a mountain in one corner of the harbor to spread over half the city. Lungs unaccustomed to the heated moisture gasped for air and frail tourists would have gagged from the aroma. But, no tourists came this far under the bridge on Potter's Cay. No whites except for the Conchy Joes, the white Bahamian fishermen from Spanish Wells and the Abacos. Matt and Christy were easily taken for Conchy Joes.

At the end of the cay, under the high span of the bridge, freighters, tugs, barges, longliners and mailboats were moored to the seawall. The clanking of hammers was ever present as the crews chipped away at the rust crawling up the topsides and spreading across the decks of the vessels. Cars, furniture, frozen meats, livestock, cement and bricks, lumber and everything imaginable was being loaded or unloaded. People in old vans with hand painted signs sold hot meals, while others pushed carts around loaded with fruit, peas and rice and conch salad. People walked around with little brown bags drinking a beer and waiting for their departures. Trucks and cars ran around constantly honking their horns hauling the cargo on and off the boats. Some men set around wooden cases passing a bottle, laughing and playing dominos.

Matt and Christy bought conch salad and walked around eating the raw meat soaked in spices and lime juice mixed with onions and green peppers from a plastic bag with a plastic spoon. They passed the skeleton of a stripped Chevy pick-up and an old woman squatting down behind it relieving herself. A band of young boys swooped down upon them from nowhere, pushing each other around while attempting to sing and dance and insisting to be paid for it.

One of the many ship's agents approached slapping and kicking the kids out of the way, shouting obscenities at them, then turning to



Matt and Christy with a calm, well practiced offering of a salesman.

"Looking to ship furniture to Abacos Miss?"

"Ah, beg a pardon?" Christy pretended not to understand the man's heavy accent.

"You need to ship cargo?" the man stepped closer handing her his card.

"No," Matt stepped in as the big white male in charge, "actually, we are staying at Club Med and just looking for the Bahamas Daybreak."

"Yeah, we took her to Bimini last year and flew to Lauderdale from there with Chalk's, instead of going from Nassau and it was so cool. Right honey, and that's what we want to do again this year!" said Christy excitedly putting her arm around Matt and looking real sweet.

"The ship was lost at sea Miss, but now Bimini Mack takes passengers regularly," said the agent.

"Oh no, that's terrible!" Christy was falling apart. "And what a nice man he was. What was his name, the owner, he let us see the bridge and everything."

"Captain Newborn. Bill Newborn, God rest his soul. He went down with his ship they say."

"Honey, what if we were on the boat?" Christy squeezed Matt's arm in fright.

"I'll be darn," said Matt. "Did Mr. Newborn own the Bimini Mack as well?"

"No sir, but his brother James does. When were you thinking about leaving Nassau?"

"Sunday is our last day at Club Med."

"All right, Bimini Mack be tying up in less than an hour and won't be leaving until about eleven tomorrow. Lots of time for you to check with James about his weekend schedule."

"OK, we'll do that," Matt said handing the man a ten dollar bill which was expected for his services.

They hung around and waited for Bimini Mack's arrival. She discharged her passengers and her crane began to unload the skids of cargo. Her skipper walked around with a clipboard ticking off items that were lowered onto the dock. He was a thin man, not very tall, in his late fifties and very dark, looked more Haitian than Bahamian. His teeth were either badly rotten or missing all together.

"Would you be Mr. Newborn?" Matt asked walking up to him.

"Yes sir, and your name?"

"Brown. Matt Brown, but you won't find us on your shipping list. We'd like to talk to you about the sinking of the Bahamas Daybreak and how she sits there on the ocean floor, near our favorite dive site. If you have time for it."

Newbold put the clipboard down on top of a skid load of Coca Cola cases and looked Matt and Christy up and down for a while, then almost unnoticeably motioned to his men on the freight deck. The four of them, scraggly looking and dressed in filthy, dark blue coveralls full of holes jumped from crate to crate, onto the deck and down to the dock. Their intentions, to defend the captain of their ship was unmistakable.

"You cops?" asked Newborn.

"No. Tourists." replied Matt.

"It is illegal in the Bahamas to carry a gun. Even for tourists."

"Oh," Matt laughed, "I will slowly remove it. It's just a paper bag. I couldn't find a garbage can."

Newborn raised his eyebrows, dumbfounded with the white man who's worried about throwing a piece of paper down where there is garbage already everywhere.

"OK, come!" he said and led them up the gangplank, across another narrow plank over the cargo hold and into a shack behind the wheelhouse with an old picnic table in the middle.

"Awful sorry about the loss of your brother and your boat Mr. Newborn," Christy tried to break the ice. "Lately, we've had some less than pleasant times ourselves just trying to stay alive on account of what we've seen laying on the bottom full of bullet holes just outside of Bimini."

Newborn's face grew long and the white of his eyes began to grow larger.

"We came upon her by accident while diving on the Bimini Road," Matt took over. "We found no bodies, although we cannot be sure, we couldn't search everything. The wheelhouse was used for target practice by large caliber automatic weapons, but the rest of the ship is intact. Somebody had slashed the cooling lines. She did not go down fast, matter of fact it looks like she was very carefully set down in a precise location. Since then, three attempts were made to put our names in the obituary columns."

"How do you know she's the Bahamas Daybreak?" Newbold asked very quietly, motioning them with a trembling hand to sit.

"The name is bright and clean on her bows and transom. Besides, we know her well. Our courses have crossed on many occasions. We've been cruising your waters for years."

"Mr. Brown," Newborn leaned forward to look at them with his long face from across the table. "I think I've known all along that my brother's boat just didn't go down in bad seas as everyone thinks. My brother used to deal with men who could easily have done this kind of thing. You see, working these boats, gets tough sometime. The temptation to make a lot of moneys in a little time is big. The offers are always there. Right now, out there on the dock, I could show you a dozen men who can load me up with a cargo that would pay me more than Bimini Mack makes in five years! Some of us gives in sometimes you know." He picked his rotting teeth with his trembling fingers silently staring off into a corner. Christy and Matt sat there looking at him. It looked like the man was coming apart at the seams as he continued. "We used to own Eleuthera Express too, but we lost her to the bank. That's when me and my brother went our own ways. He swore the Daybreak was always going to have work one way or another. Not so much lately you understand, but years ago he didn't care what the cargo was. Now I think they did this because my brother would have nothing to do with them anymore. Men like them, they'll do this just to show

force. Just to scare the next guy out of saying no." His voice was

becoming more forceful. He was pulling himself together.

"Sir," Christy spoke looking Newborn in the eyes, "we were hoping that by talking to you we might come up with something we can use back in the States to convince the authorities to investigate the company and the people involved. You see, they are rather highly respected, powerful men. The kind nobody wants to take on, unless they know they have a damned good shot at it."

"Bad people miss. Very bad people." Newborn got up to close the door. "It all started back when Samoza was thrown out in Nicaragua and your country was supporting the Contra Rebels. My brother with the Daybreak made many well paid trips up the Rio Tamarina to unload shipments of American weapons for the waiting Sandanistas."

"What? Sandanistas?" Matt and Christy exclaimed.

"Yes sir. The Sandanistas. Bill only told me all this a couple of years ago when he was good and clean and things were going real good for him. But he always worried about his past coming back to haunt him. Guess he was right. There were these two guys who ran everything. An American, Miles Burton, and a guy from Columbia called Lorenzo Augusta. I heard they're both big shot politicians in the States now."

"The two names we had in mind!" Matt blurted out.

"They were into everything. There was some defective ammunition left over from the Vietnam war, they got a hold of it somehow and sold it all to the Sandanistas too. My brother had a hell of a time living with himself after he found out about the hundreds who died with jammed M16s in their hands. I think that's what made him tell me all this after all these years, just to get it off his chest. Then a couple of weeks ago he said he heard from them again but refused whatever they wanted. Told me to be careful in case they come after us both."

"Could you not go to the police with what you know?" asked Matt.

"No Mr. Brown. Not me. My brother and I lived here since we was boys, but neither of us legal. Our parents came from Haiti and we're just one of the many illegal businessmen here in the Bahamas. My word would mean nothing in the courts here. Can I ask you? Can you give me the location? I could raise the Daybreak. She's still worth good money."

"Can't get near her anymore," Matt shook his head. "When we came across from Miami yesterday we saw what looked like an oil drilling rig sitting on top of her, and it was well lit up and probably guarded. There is this phony organization supposedly doing research at the site. It is a very big operation Mr. Newbold. Best stay away from it. Right now we need to find something on Burton and Augusta. Something from their past, anything!"

"There is two men in Nassau who know Burton real good I think." Newborn got up and stood behind his chair, his hands grasping the backrest. "Miller and Johnstone will have something to say about him all right. You ever been up over the hill on the other end of Mackey Street? There's a place there called the Goom Bay Club. A real rough neighborhood bar."

"I've stopped in there once, maybe twice for a beer a couple of years ago," said Matt.

"Well, I sure wouldn't take the lady there, but you look like you

could handle yourself. Somehow you need to get to know the men who own the place. Two Americans, Vietnam vets. One of them, Ward Miller is a black man, the other, the white guy is Jeff Johnstone. They pack guns and sure don't like nobody they don't know, but my brother knew a guy who used to keep bar for them. This guy told my brother how Ward and Johnstone served under Burton in Vietnam and they had a real hard-on for him on account of something that took place back then. Them guys knows everything that happens in these islands and they just might know more things about Burton. But they'd have to know you, which is tough. They don't give the time of day to nobody."

"Oh, I think we can think of some way to gain their undivided attention. We need to. It's a good lead Mr. Newbold," said Christy.

"Now, like I said, it's no place for a woman to go with her man. Not for a lady like you Miss. It'd be suicide for both of you. Your man would do better without you Miss."

"Well, we sort of do things together," said Matt, "and this lady can handle herself. But, thanks for your concern. By the way, did you ever see a sixty five foot North Sea trawler called Sea Story?"

"Yes sir! See her from time to time anchored off Club Med."

"I guess we never properly introduced ourselves. Sea Story is our boat, I'm Matt and this is my wife Christy." Matt got up to shake hands. "It's been a pleasure talking with you sir. You've been most helpful to us."

"Hey, I know you folks!" Newborn's face lit up and his rotting teeth came in full view as he grinned. "Why you were in the papers and all. What three years ago? You're the American lady who cut up one of the Osborne boys and threw the other over the side from your boat! You were the talk of this harbor for six months! Bruce tried to break jail last year and got himself another six years in Fox Hill!"

They walked outside and down the gangplank as Newborn kept going on about how those Osborne brothers had been robbing people for years and sitting in bars bragging about it, and how they finally picked on the wrong boat, and then for it to be a little lady like Christy to finish them off like that. As they stood saying good bye on the dock he shook Christy's hand for a long while grinning. "Good luck at Miller's place. You'll be fine. I know you'll do just fine."

The sun finally came out and was burning up the haze. Steam rose from puddles of water on the hot asphalt.

"Should be interesting," Christy took Matt's arm as they walked back toward East Bay Street.

"I guess the quickest way to get to know those guys would be to make a nuisance of ourselves," Matt said.

"I think so," Christy said nodding her head. "I'll dress like a bimbo, play it for a while, punch some guy out when he comes on, then you can punch his buddies out and we'll both break furniture until we get to see the owners."

Christy's training gave her an edge on the average street fighter and that, combined with her enthusiasm for showing off made her a fierce adversary.

"One thing we should try to avoid," Matt said to her, "is

embarrassing people. Some men don't handle very well having the shit kicked out of them by some five ten, hundred and thirty pound babe they would otherwise consider for centerfold material."

"Oh, you're so sweet. But, I hear you and I promise not to get carried away."

They walked to the Nassau Harbour Club, took a room and slept for the afternoon. They had a late dinner at the restaurant, swam and sat around the pool until ten.

A cab dropped them off two blocks from the Goom Bay Club. Christy cut her shorts real short and made a T shirt into a halter top. Matt was wearing jeans and a flowery short sleeve shirt.

"You look like Magnum P I," Christy roared with laughter as they walked the dark street.

"So? He's a good looking dude!" Matt flexed his arms in the shirt about a size too small for him. He bought the shirt and the pair of jeans from a waiter at the Harbour Club as he realized he shouldn't go to the Goom Bay Club in shorts and T shirt like some lost tourist.

An empty soda can was rolled along, now and then by little gusts of whirling wind on the deadly silent street. Far away, somewhere on the other side of town a dog yelped as if he was being skinned alive and a dozen others barked and howled away.

Man these people turn in early, Matt thought to himself as the eeriness of the place sank upon them both. Sounds of squealing tires far away, a noisy exhaust somewhere, but no cars in this part of town. The shacks lining the street were mostly all dark, just candlelight flickering behind a windowpane here and there, and muffled sounds coming from the odd television set.

"I think this is a very poor neighborhood," Christy whispered and sighed walking close to Matt.

Ahead, a faint red neon sign stuck out from a building, GO M BAY CLUB. Across the street was an old garage, burnt out, no doors on the service bays, gas pumps laying down in pieces. Light played on the walls inside and men conversed in loud, exaggerated voices. The smell of hashish lingered in the still air.

A dark figure seemingly floating across the street approached Matt and Christy. Dreadlocks hung past the tall, thin man's shoulders. The strong, caustic smell of urine enveloped him.

"Everything all right mon? Smoke mon? Lines, some ludes mon?" he puffed away on a thick spliff holding it out to Matt. "Check it out mon. Dynamite pot!"

"Not now man!" Matt said sternly reaching for the door in the dark archway where the neon sign's light failed to reach. The man vanished, only the aroma of his smoke and body odor to remain behind. Matt looked at Christy, she looked up and down the street and shrugged her shoulders. "Goners man."

Iron bars crisscrossed the heavy door, and the latch holding it closed belonged on the back gate of a cattle truck. It was a massive door, about three inches thick and gravel ground under it as it opened. Heavy cigarette smoke poured out.

The place looked bigger than Matt had remembered it and he took

time to glance around to orient himself. At tables to the left sat older men, some smoking pipes and playing dominos. On the right, in a darker back corner were several men and women laughing and carrying on. Midway along the wall was a bandstand, and closer to it sat a bunch of teenagers wearing colors of a gang. A guy on the stage was doing reggae tunes accompanied by an electronic band. Across from him was the bar with some stools and a dark space in the background with tables and their occupants barely visible. A big wooden sign hung from the ceiling, PRIVATE - KEEP AWAY.

Matt and Christy proceeded to the bar and ordered a couple of Kaliks. There was an old pinball machine in the corner and Christy took her beer, began to play and bounce around as if she was the only one there.

Matt had not even finished half his beer before the people in the dark corner near the entrance began snickering loud enough to be heard over the music. A woman's husky voice hollered across. "Hey white bitch! That tight little ass ain't gonna make no moneys around here!"

"Yo honey, we have real men around here! They might break your sensitive little parts girl!" another one yelled and a big laugh followed.

Christy took her beer and put it on the bar beside Matt and pranced back to the section of laughs. She stood there looking at them with one hand on her hip and the other playing with her hair. They quietly chuckled amongst themselves.

"Big mamma, I guess you're right. I sure don't want no big fat slob drooling down on me dripping sweat and all. But then, I can be a lot of fun even if I just stayed on top." She shrugged her shoulders, putting on a southern drawl just for effect.

That stunned the crowd for a minute, so she just turned and walked back to her beer, chugged it down and asked the bartender real politely for another one.

"Here we go," Matt murmured under his breath to her as he watched two women approach in the mirror behind the bar. They looked like guards from an institution for the criminally insane on a day off and ready to paint the town. They were tall and heavy, with enormous breasts that struck forth resting on their large abdomens, and wide hips swinging from side to side. On legs meant to support a grand piano they wobbled forward with murder in their eyes.

"So, you think you're better than us white bitch? You calling us and our men fat you little whore?" They came half way to the bar and stood there with hands on hips. The band quit, and Matt saw him and his instruments disappear in the back.

Christy strolled forward with her beer in one hand and stood a foot or two before the women, hands on her hips swinging her ass. "Me, a whore? Look who's calling the cattle black honey pies? I guess y'all get a preacher to make it good before you collect your five bucks for the night?" She laughed and pretended to look back at Matt for approval which, just as she thought, the two took for a chance to launch at her. She took two steps back, and planted a high kick with each foot gently across the mouths of the women, repeated by a full blow to their chest sending them crashing through the teenage gang back to their own tables.

Never even spilling her beer, she stood there while the women picked themselves up, all none the worse for wear, except for the furniture.

A very big, very black man stood up at the back, threw his bottle of beer back across his table and lurched ahead shaking a big fist at Christy. "I ain't gonna let this little sleazy white shit push decent women around. Hey asshole, tell your little whore to step aside and you come out and fight a bit. You're gonna die motherfuck!"

He walked as far as Christy and stood there looking down at her. "Come on big man, make your move." she purred dropping her beer bottle to the floor. Matt hoped he wouldn't go for it. Christy would've been up one side of him and down the other before he knew what hit him.

"Hey, I ain't gonna hit no woman!" he stepped back dumbfounded, bellowing at Matt.

"Christy! Christy relax." Matt downed his beer and climbed from the stool. "Listen to the man! He don't want to thump you, he wants to thump me."

"Not fair to pull me out now!" she squeezed through her teeth and flashed her eyes at Matt on her way back to the bar.

"You're one dead fucking son of a bitch!" the big man stood there breathing down on Matt and blasted off with a big right out of nowhere. Matt had shook off better ones he thought as he dropped down to a devastating shoulder block and like a freight train drove the man all the way backwards into the heavy door cracking the frame around it. The back of the man's skull snapped hard against the wood but he still had to be finished off with a couple of hard rights into the kidney and a series of powerful jabs between the eyes. As he slowly slid to the dirt floor Matt shook the hair out of his eyes and addressed the deadly quiet barroom. "We didn't come here to exchange insults or blows to the head, but if you folks wish to continue with the violence my wife and I are quite willing to play along."

"Actually, we would just like a moment or two alone with the proprietors. Sorry if we made the wrong impression," added Christy with a smile.

"She's the white gal who killed Danny Osborne and was in the papers right!" a woman's mousy voice came from the dark corner.

"Enough Mr. Brown!" a stocky black man in his late fifties walked calmly from the darkness behind the bar. "I'm Ward Miller. What in the hell do you want from us!" His voice was menacing and impatient.

"Need to talk Mr. Miller. Maybe rehash some old memories." Matt said returning his looks of deep stabbing hate for the intrusion. Miller turned to walk into the darkness and Matt and Christy followed. Through a door they entered a room furnished with a leather couch, two leather recliners, an expensive desk with a high back leather chair, a salt water aquarium beside a big screen TV, and an old pan-head Harley Davidson in show room condition with a plastic bag under it for catching the drips.

"Sit." Miller pointed at the couch. "You come in here with your woman trained in military hand to hand combat to screw with the heads of our people. I'm not impressed so far Mr. Brown!"

"Commander Brown that is! US Navy retired! We do read magazines too Mr. Brown!" A tall, slim man with long, scraggly hair and a very bad complexion walked in slurping on a big container of pink liquid full of ice cubes. "I am Johnstone. How is my partner treating you? I'm sorry if we are a little edgy, or even fucking irritated, but we're not used to seeing Orville Duncan going down in ten seconds flat. Why didn't you let the missus have him Mr. Brown? It might have lasted a few seconds longer. Tell you what, take your very healthy little lady, go back home and work out on some good old boys in a cowboy bar and leave us the fuck alone."

"Are you finished with the sarcasm Mr. Johnstone?" Matt spoke up. "Are you going to allow me to justify my actions? In a few hours my wife and I are going to be smuggled back out of this country the way we were smuggled in. We had little choice but to cause a scene. Would you have invited us readily into your motorcycle showroom if we just simply told your bartender we'd like to make your acquaintance?"

"Not too fucking likely," Johnstone replied with boredom.

"All right then, the only other thing I could have mentioned to your bartender is how my wife and I have come to know that our good Senator Burton is a scumbag, and we were hoping we might get a chance to meet with the owners of this bar, who served with him in Nam, in order to see if we can come up with something to help us throw a fuck into him before he throws a few more into our country!"

Matt and Christy felt the two men's astonishment as they just stood there staring.

"Simply put," said Christy, "we just don't have the time to pussyfoot around right now. Burton and Mayor Augusta are spearheading an operation which could cause the death of some old and very special friends of ours, all in the name of profit derived from running drugs. We were there. Saw their set up, and have been running for our lives ever since. Their cover is good and they are powerful. Then we heard about you gentlemen not being all too fond of Senator Burton, so we were hoping there might be a good reason for it. Something you may want to tell. You know, maybe some old skeleton in his closet. Something to shake him up with a little, or dirty him with, so we can convince a judge for a warrant."

"Dirty him?" Miller slumped into one of the recliners. "Man's so filthy flies won't land on him!"

"But here in Nassau, none of it is much of a secret Browns!" Johnstone set down behind the desk. "Our beef with him goes back thirty years or so. That's when he fucked us over royally."

Johnstone tipped back a bottle of hundred and fifty proof Carta Roja rum and passed it around. "In sixty five he was a Lieutenant Commander. We were three stripes seamen aboard the destroyer they put the son of a bitch in charge of to escort a fuel tanker to our base in Ca Mau Bay. Piece of cake, routine mission. Child's play man! We knew we'd never see action, we were never even supposed to set foot ashore. Hell, on our way back Burton wanted souvenirs to show off at home he was in



Nam. There was a black market in a village fifteen miles south of Ca Mau Bay. He volunteered four of us to go shopping with his list of goodies. He put us ashore with a Jeep, two M16s and two 45 sidearms. Sure as fuck we hit a mine. The guy driving died instantly and the VCs were all over us blowing the shit out of us. When the shooting stopped they came out in their black fatigues thinking they got themselves some high ranking officers, us wearing our tropical whites, you know they had never seen those uniforms before. Ward and I were the only two alive so they carted us off as their prized possessions. Ward was hit bad so they picked on me." He stuck out his thumbs. The nails were nothing more than scar tissue, and more scars around the knuckle joints. "Bamboo sticks and red hot stainless steel wire under the nails man! Couldn't imagine so much pain if your life depended on it! When they had enough they just drove the wires right up the thumb and out the joints and threw me back in the cage." Johnstone looked at Miller, then Matt and Christy, but his eyes just seemed to go through everyone in a far away stare. As if he was looking back at the hell they were plucked into way back then. Without expression, in a quiet voice he went on. "You know, one day the gooks brought in a frail old man and a skinny little girl about twelve. They made us watch. About thirty of us in cages. They walked around the old man on his knees, smoking joints and sticking their 45s in his mouth until one of them pulled the trigger and blew his head everywhere. Then they took turns at the girl, raping her every way they could. That went on for a long time. She never shed a tear or said a word all through. She passed out a couple of times but that didn't keep them from it. They pissed on her face to bring her around. Then they stood her in front of our cages. Blood was dripping from between her thighs, all smeared down her legs. One of them took a bayonet and sliced her from the crotch to the throat. They spread her ribcage, ripped her beating heart out and whipped it at our cages laughing their fucking heads off. I sometimes still have nightmares about her dazed stare, as her big brown eyes were looking right at us just before he sliced her open."

"Six of us got away alive that night," Miller took over after a long silence. "After we got out of the Naval Hospital in Charleston they gave us a dishonorable discharge in lieu of a Court Martial. See, Burton's story was we jumped ship. So we took the deal and said fuck the world. I had relatives here in the Bahamas, we bought this place and we never once been back to the States since."

"Did you not at least try to argue his allegations?" Matt asked with disbelief.

"Come on, a couple of seamen against the word of a Lieutenant Commander? Back then? No hope in hell! Diddlers have more rights today than we did in those days," Johnstone said angrily.

"Someone had to put you all ashore with the Jeep. There had to be some trace of the rifles issued to you. Four armed men do not disembark from a destroyer without direct orders from the CO! I think you were bitter, and disappointed in your country and you just gave up too easy. You let the son of a bitch have his way! I'm sorry. Perhaps I have little understanding of what your situation

was, but we could sure use your blessing and help right now to look into this. This could help us tremendously to put pressure on Burton." Matt spoke with excitement not meaning to offend.

"Brown," Johnstone rose from behind the desk, "Ward and I came here to get away. You're right! Patriotism, the flag, all that went out the window with our discharges. Hell man, we didn't deserve that. You could say our eyes were opened to the twisted and miserable things people in high places could get away with. Today, it ain't no different. Like they say, same shit different island man! But here, we are sheltered. We don't need to deal with politics or well bred attorneys. Hell we don't even have to read the papers! We came here and done a damn fucking good job of forgetting. But we didn't forgive! You want my blessing and Ward's blessing to go after Burton? Go right ahead, but limit our involvement to administering the fucker's last rights on his deathbed! I ain't going to spend my days in courtrooms entangled in judicial mumbo-jumbo where the right or wrong, or the guilty or innocent is so far removed from the reality of things that only how much you spend on your fucking mouthpiece is what matters! I guess you can't say we have a lot of faith in the system. But we'll do what we can to help, just in case you can tear the son of a bitch down. I think if anybody can, you and the lady has a damned good chance. You're a surprising woman Mrs. Brown!"

PART 16

The system was fine tuned through the numerous trial runs, all the bugs were ironed out and everything was running to the expectancy of its engineers.

Bluffers Cay Terminal had launched its first payload and Dunitschek celebrated.

"We have touchdown in Bimini!" one of the controllers remarked from behind his computer panel.

On a monitor, the sunken hulk of the Bahamas Daybreak appeared. A remotely operated hydraulic arm attached a tow cable as the submersible vehicle entered through the connection between the hull of the boat and the tunnel. It began its ascent to the waiting R/V Delphinus on the surface.

Augusta stood amongst his men. Through the monitor he gave thumbs up to Dunitschek with a sigh of relief and walked to the waiting chopper. Seven more cargo vehicles were received and loaded before the R/V Delphinus cast off her lines to begin her trip back across the Gulf Stream, about 45 nautical miles to Miami.

An older, dark skinned woman raised Dunitschek's attention. "Mike Bray is on the Miami line for you Karl!"

Dunitschek walked in his office and picked up the phone. "What you got Michael?"

"It's that Brown woman. Bahamian Customs nabbed her boarding a flight back Stateside and put her on the plane with a deportation order."

"What? They were supposed to hold onto her! Shit! Fuck man, these people can't do anything right! Where the hell is the broad now?"

"We got the word from the Defense Force some three hours after she flew out of Nassau, so no doubt she's out of Miami International by now. It doesn't take long. Procedure for a US citizen being deported back home by a foreign country is to be interviewed by the FBI, and if no US warrants are pending they're let go."

"MacShane know yet?"

"Of course. As always, if he needs to know, he's first on the list! That's how I stay in business."

"Shit. By now she's all surrounded with grieving relatives. Let's just hope nobody believes her story if she tells one. OK Michael. Keep me posted. We are officially open for business."

"You got it." Chief of Communications at USCG Miami Group, Michael Gordon Bray threw down his cordless and kicked back with his Glenlivet on rocks, on the balcony of his luxury condo overlooking South Beach.

"This one's going places!" one of the I.M.I.C. men said looking at the LCD display flashing the word RECORD.

Commander MacShane stood on the edge of the pier as the

Courageous' bowline was received and made fast to a bollard. Then, port engine forward and starboard reverse brought her stern in against the concrete. Beside the fact that the crew had no idea who the extra two personnel were, why they were dropped off in Nassau and picked up a day later, or why total radio silence was ordered, it was a near-routine patrol mission.

MacShane breathed a sigh of relief as Matt and Christy stepped ashore.

"I sure am glad you're back! Let's get to my office people!" he said with urgency walking away from the dock.

"Sounds like we might have had you worried sir," Christy said closing the office door behind them.

"A real mess we have here," MacShane shook his head. "A real mess. After I called ATF about your gun and you were on your way to Nassau, I called in the Internal Military Investigation Committee. We set up my comms Chief Bray with a phony call from Bahamian authorities about Mrs. Brown being arrested there and deported back to the States. Before he went off duty he briefed me on it, then when he got home the first thing he did was to get on the blower and called a Sat Com number registered to the Caribbean Seismological Authority. Sad but true! And the man's a career officer! Since then we learned he lives high on the hog in a pretty fancy spot. Not the kind of place you keep on a coastie's pay. Want to hear the tape?"

They listened to Mike Bray's conversation with Dunitschek, all the while watching the Commander shaking his head and pacing up and down.

"At the risk of sounding like I'm feeling sorry for myself," MacShane shot the machine off and stood there staring at it, "I'd like to say this is going to look real bad on my record. But, at least, thanks to you folks, I get to open up my own can of worms instead of somebody else doing it for me. I think we could have the biggest and dirtiest narcotics investigation this department has ever had to face! And I'd sure like your involvement and input."

"Commander," said Matt, "if you take this Bray guy out now, you'll get none of the major players, and by now you know there are major players. You have no jurisdiction in the Bahamas unless you are invited to intervene, which is unlikely since they have power over that administration as well. At the most you can hit the warehouse and the Delphinus, confiscate a lot of drugs and make some arrests but it won't be the guys you want." Matt proceeded to tell of what they learned about Burton and Augusta's involvement with running guns.

"From selling arms to the enemy to becoming a senator," MacShane looked utterly disgusted. "Now that ought to throw another big heap of dirt in the face of this nation. Is this country going to hell or what!"

"Sir! Give us a few days," Christy asked. "Let us dig up some old records. We think we might have something on Burton to cut him down a few notches. Maybe we can make him sell out his buddies so we can figure out how their game is played. Then we can go in and kick ass!"

"I cannot afford to wait too long in light of the IMIC reports. My entire staff could end up under their microscope

and the Pentagon will be breathing down my neck in no time at all."

MacShane was getting all worked up as he continued. "All right, I think we can play a few more cards to see just where we stand. I'll hold up on Bray's arrest for forty eight hours to see if you people can come up with something on Burton. After that, I'll have to take the son of a bitch out, which will give me the probable cause to hit the warehouse and the Delphinus. I know you're right! I know Burton and Augusta will slip through, but there are no other choices from my point of view at this time."

## PART 17

Art Buttler picked up Matt and Christy at the airport in Washington. They talked on the phone in the morning and Matt asked Art to look into the logbooks of Burton's mission to Ca Mau Bay.

"One of my guys makes it his hobby to be an authority on Nam," explained Buttler as they drove along the airport road toward the city. "Finding a warship's records back from sixty five could take a lot longer otherwise. As it is, you'll be impressed to know we have located the officer who issued the arms to the four sailors who went to the market for our beloved Senator." Art had the kind of Smile that said he hadn't told everything yet and he continued. "Man's name is Curtis Webb, resides in Youngstown New York and spends most of his time doing volunteer work at the Fort Niagara Military Museum. Remembers Ca Mau Bay quite well. Recalls issuing the M16s and the sidearms and taking the four men and the Jeep ashore." Art's face was glowing with excitement. "He also recalls later falsifying his stores' records as instructed by his CO, our Mr. Burton. It appears he was told the four men left on special assignment, classified of course."

Christy threw her arms around Buttler and planted a big one on his cheek. "You're the greatest! The best news since this whole thing started. Come on, tell us more! When do we meet this guy? Is he willing to testify?"

"I am a little ahead of you guys," Buttler gloated. "A legal eagle from our Niagara Naval Air Station is taking a statement even as we speak! A faxed copy should be on Bob Shoemaker's desk in a couple of hours and we're meeting with him at nine hundred tomorrow."

"R.J. Shoemaker?" Matt looked at Buttler with disbelief. "Mr. Secretary of the Navy?"

"The one and the same pal! A good friend. He's treating this as his pet project. Hey, the man's a long time Burton hater himself!"

They stayed at the Pine Glen again. Their moods were high, they got a room with a hot tub, ordered champagne and put the Caribbean Seismological Authority on the back burner for a few hours.

"Been a while since we dressed this proper," Christy commented the next morning putting on makeup. The rather conservative dress she

had on had transferred her into a proper looking business woman.

Her hair was up, and the dress had a low enough neckline to expose her prominent collarbone but gave only a hint of her curvaceous shoulders. The makeup she seldom wore accentuated her high cheek bones. Her dark eyes and long black lashes were fitting for a Cover Girl commercial.

"You truly are a magnificent woman," Matt walked up behind her looking in the mirror. "Damn good thing too, since I'm so hung up on the finer female form such as yours!" he smirked with his hands around her waist.

"And you're the sweetest man I ever loved. Not to mention your other important attributes!" she turned placing hands on his buttocks.

Poking and kidding each other they climbed into the back of Buttler's car.

"You two are acting like a couple of kids who partied the night away if you get my drift!"

"Yes, well, just relaxed a little in the hot tub." Christy said.

"That's right," Matt laughed, "after having to go without for days, I finally had a chance to once more explore the important issues of life, such as the Big Three Fs."

"Oh yes," Art chuckled, "the Big Three Fs. I remember those academic terms. Was it not Annapolis? Is that not Brown's laws of physiques pertaining to the theories of the Finer Female Form?"

"I can just imagine what bunch of macho assholes you guys must have been," Christy commented with a smile, shaking her head looking out the window.

"Sirs! We are entering Pentagon security perimeters." The driver looked back trying hard to look nonchalant.

They checked through and entered the Kelleher Complex.

"This section of the Pentagon was named after Captain T.J. Kelleher." Matt explained to Christy on the way to the elevator. "He was head of the Department of Marine Engineering at the U.S. Naval Institute at Annapolis from nineteen thirty five to nineteen forty eight. He was married to Art's great aunt. Art's father gave me the nineteen forty one edition of the textbook 'Naval Machinery', which was first printed in nineteen thirty five and was the work of Captain Kelleher, and was personally signed by him."

"That's right!" Buttler turned to Christy in the elevator. "Which of you can describe a Bethlehem Yarrow end-fired, drowned coil type, desuperheated, deaerating ship's boiler?"

"Don't listen to him," Matt said. "He's obsessed with the stuff. It's a hobby."

"This is Mr. Shoemaker's floor," their escort gestured. "Please follow me."

They walked along a corridor with soft plush carpet, textured wall paper and rich mahogany doors. At the end was a circular bullpen filled with computers, telephones and a Mercator projection map of the world with LED displays denoting positions of ships. Past the bullpen was a reception area furnished with Colonial sofas and chairs. Paintings of battleships and photographs of destroyers and aircraft carriers hung on the walls.

A female officer ushered them through a set of stained glass doors into a large room with high ceilings. Video screens and bright

lights were suspended above an oval table full of papers.

"Good morning Commander, Mrs. Brown! How are you Art?" Robert Shoemaker came forward shaking hands.

"Good morning Mr. Secretary. An honor to meet you," said Matt.

"Good morning Sir. A real pleasure," Christy followed.

"The pleasure is all mine Mrs. Brown. Art tells me you're on our DDR team! The only lady ever to make it. Quite an achievement for someone so lithe and pleasing to the eyes. And Mr. Brown, I'm aware of your service record. Outstanding indeed! I'd like you to meet Bernie Kennedy, legal advisor to my office and a personal friend. Art, I think you and Bernie met before."

The officer poured coffee and they all found places to sit.

"First of all," Shoemaker spoke while spooning sugar in his coffee, "I would like to say whatever is being said here today is completely off the record, and is done so on a level of discussion between friends, and strictly on a civilian, personal basis. I do not at this time directly or indirectly, or in any way represent the Navy of the United States, nor her views on whatever subject we may discuss." His eyes scanned the faces before him as he went on. "My friend Art here bought me lunch yesterday and made me privy to what you have discovered on Bluffers Cay and told me about the people whose alleged involvement you suspect. Now you found something on one of them and you want to use it to make him talk. I hate as hell to be the first to tell you, but it will not be quite as simple as you might think. I was in Nam too, and I know the crap our boys had to go through there and back home after! We all know what Miles Burton did was not an isolated case. We would like to hang all the Miles Burtons from the highest yardarm, but, unfortunately it's not a simple task! I have here a copy of a statement given to one of our legal people by an old seaman by the name of Curtis Webb. It substantiates the allegations made by," he shuffled paper around, "Mr. Miller and Johnstone. And it burns my ass to tell you it is not worth the damned piece of paper it's written on!"

"Well," Bernard Kennedy took over quickly, motioning to Matt and Christy with his hands to hold on as they were both about to blurt out their disbelief, "it isn't that it's no good, it's just that it is not something we, as the Navy can work with. It happened a long time ago, and Burton's been a civilian for too long. It could be argued that the four men did in reality go off on a secret mission and the records were wiped clean. For us to go after him would be absolutely futile. We would have to show proof of his actions being outside of the duty we charged him with, which we could not do."

Matt and Christy looked at each other with growing understanding, but it was also obvious they did not like what they were hearing. "Don't be too discouraged," Kennedy continued. "Let me see if I understand this correctly. You have reasons to believe that Miles Burton is involved in criminal activities along with another prominent Florida politician. You'd like to use this Vietnam incident for leverage to persuade him into spilling the beans.

If you would allow me to make a suggestion, my feelings are, Mr. Johnstone and Miller would have a very good case in



civil litigation. In a civil court of law, when a plaintiff charges with negligence leading to bodily harm, and can show physical evidence such as scars, and an eye witness, be it a foreman on a jobsite knowingly allowing a laborer to use an unsafe tool, or an officer during war ordering his men to subject themselves to undue risks for his personal gain outside of his charged duty, the burden befalls on the defendant to show otherwise. Which, Burton could not do without having tangible proof that the U.S. Navy in fact did charge him with sending the four men off on a clandestine mission. In other words he couldn't supply evidence in his defense any more than we could supply basis to prosecution. So, if you want to put pressure on Burton, the way to do it is through Miller and Johnstone. Have them threaten the Senator with a civil suit. He's got good lawyers, they'll tell him flat out he's looking at a serious situation. He's not a fool. He will realize his political career is over if he is successfully sued."

"Folks, there was always something about Burton I didn't like. And, I have a feeling you're going to figure it all out and put him out of business in no time." Shoemaker rose from his desk reaching to shake Matt and Christy's hand while excusing himself to hurry off to another meeting, leaving his office for their use and volunteering the services of Bernie Kennedy for further discussion on legal technicalities.

## PART 18

The disappointment wore off fast, and Matt and Christy were all fired up and back at it again by the afternoon. They located Miles Burton meeting with environmentalists at the Pinellas Park Convention Center in St. Petersburg. Matt called Johnstone in Nassau and was able to convince him to come to St. Petersburg, try to restrain his emotions and play a little head game with the Senator. Matt and Christy flew in and got a room for themselves and one for Johnstone at the Madeira Beach Motel. They picked up Johnstone at the airport the next morning.

Burton was not having a good time of it. Old hippies and assorted long haired and bearded intellectual freaks along with concerned housewives and other do gooders he never had any use for, were picketing outside the Convention Center and causing all kinds of raucous during his speech. It was imperative that he put an end to this proposed bill concerning a moratorium on waterfront development. The people paying for his services would be dangerously upset if he didn't deliver.

He was nursing his headache with a few stiff martinis sprawled out on the sofa in his suite when one of his aids brought the sealed envelope someone had left at the front desk for him. The content had floored him. For minutes he just sat there staring at the photocopy of Curtis Webb's statement. Names and places were redacted except for Ca Mau Bay, Johnstone, Miller and Burton. He was not a man easily shaken, but it was very bad timing for this shit to start hitting the fan now, he thought. Who sent the paper and what was his next move? Will the fucker go public with it? Should he call Lorenzo before he finds out from the morning papers?

His aid was calling. "A Mr. Johnstone insists you'd want to talk to him. Security won't put the call through, but he's on house line six two if you care to call him."

"All right. Leave it with me," Burton snapped rubbing his forehead. He paced back and forth. Augusta wanted no surprises now that Bluffers Cay was operational.

Maybe the asshole just wants some money and he'll go away, he thought. Best talk to the jerk before he causes more shit. He dialed sixty two. Johnstone picked up the ringing telephone in the lobby. "Johnstone here."

"This is Miles Burton Johnstone. What can I do for you."

"You can start by being concerned about your future."

"Not at all Mr. Johnstone. Not at all. The paper you sent me? All fabrication. No facts Johnstone! Proves absolutely nothing!"

"I don't know? I know its all fact. I was there. I've got

the scars to show, remember? Besides, the man who signed the statement would be rather happy to talk about it in court while you defend yourself against my lawsuit."

"What lawsuit? You're crazy! I'm a civilian and what you are alleging happened a quarter of a century ago. You're a little late don't you think?"

"Just took me this long to get up the courage. I was psychologically scarred as well as physically. See I found out there are no statutes of limitations on negligence causing bodily harm. Call your attorneys Senator! You acted outside of your duty and became a civilian the minute you ordered us to shop for your souvenirs. That little fiasco was not relevant to your orders as Commanding Officer. You subjecting us, the men you were in charge of, to unnecessary risks which resulted in two deaths and in the pain and suffering that Miller and I had to endure. Then you covered it all up! You wrecked our lives man! I can just see the papers now," Johnstone laughed. "Florida Senator Miles Burton accused by two Vietnam vets for a cover up of negligence leading to death and suffering during his tour of duty in nineteen sixty five. Nightmarish tortures by the Viet Cong!" Burton was quiet on the other end. "Do you think just the accusations will be enough to damage your bullshit career, or will it take a full blown investigation and trial to put you out of the political picture. It's payback time Burton!"

"Look Johnstone," Burton spoke quietly, "I don't know what you're after but I'm sure we can come to an amicable solution."

"Right. We need to talk." Johnstone nodded to Matt sitting across the lobby.

"I'll have to get back to you. I'm late for a meeting. What room you're in?"

"Dishonorably discharged sailors can't afford this place Senator! Call me at the Madeira Beach Motel! Don't take too long though. I'm in an impulsive mood. I just might drop by the local newsroom!" Johnstone hung up.

"He's got the bug," he said walking up to Matt. "Said he'll call me back. He's got a meeting to go to. So he says."

"All right, how about joining Christy and me for some grub then?" "Thanks, but no thanks. It's been many years. I think I'd like to be alone. Walk around a bit, see what I can see."

"OK. But please call us and let us know the minute you hear from him. And, thanks again Jeff. I know this is not easy for you." Matt walked outside to take a cab back to the motel.

Burton had a few more drinks and thought over the whole thing. He got the impression the guy was after a payoff. He didn't mind that too much, but you give the scum money once and he'll just keep coming back for more. He thought about some connections he had in Tarpon Springs. They could be here in a couple of hours. Let those boys take the asshole for a ride and deep six him offshore somewhere. Then he'll get them to find

Miller and shut him up for good too.

Later he called Johnstone and told him to meet him around nine thirty in the underground parking of the Convention Center. Told him he'd be in the back of his limo and he'd be alone.

Johnstone walked around the back of the pool and out through the men's showers and walked outside at the back of the parking lot. He felt more comfortable without Matt tagging along as back up. He wasn't sure just how he was going to react when face to face with Burton.

He had time to kill, so he bought some burgers and fries from a vendor on the beach, and sat in the sand and watched the sun set over the Gulf of Mexico.

Dark images of the jungle danced in the blazing disk as it sank below the horizon. Small dark figures began to move about out of nowhere. A dense rainforest erupted in the unmistakable sounds of the Chinese AKs. Puk puk puk puk. Puk puk puk. The man sitting beside the driver was blown clear back into his arms. His chest pumping blood from gaping wounds. Half of his face not there and his neck shredded by bullets.

Ward kept collapsing. Falling down. He kept picking him up. Carrying him, pulling him along. The black demons kept jabbing him in the back of the head to keep moving.

Thin wire rods glowing red in the flames of the kerosene stove. He heard himself scream and felt his bowels release their contents. He rolled in the sand, burying his face, biting down hard into the dry salty substance silently screaming as the waves of terror washed over his body. A little girl's expressionless face, caved in cheeks, huge brown eyes stared at him from the darkness behind his eyelids. An immense feeling of sorrow.

The veins in his neck bulged. He wept choking, his mouth, nose and eyes full of sand. Slowly it was all drifting away. His muscles began to relax. He felt drained and he just laid there. Then, without even being aware of the lights, cars and people, in a daze he slowly walked to the Convention Center.

"A little late Johnstone! Which overpass did you sleep under?" Burton rose from the back of his car with a martini in hand.

That voice snapped him back. He stood there with sand around his eyes, his nostrils and in his hair. He looked fatigued and demented. He walked slowly toward Burton.

"I dreamed about killing you over and over. So many times, I wore it all out. It just don't excite me anymore. You're nothing but a pitiful, fat old man without a backbone. What was it like all these years living with it? Did you ever allow yourself to think about it? I bet not! You cowardly slug! You don't have the jam to think of it do you?"

"I don't have to think of it you freak! Your miserable lives aren't worth nothing to me. I've better things to think about. Money! Power! The ability to make you bunch of fucking lemmings run to drown yourselves when I tell you to!"

"That'll be enough Mr. Burton!" said one of two men stepping

out from behind a pillar pointing large handguns with silencers.

"What in the hell do you mean? Am I paying you to mouth off to me? Just put the fucker in your car and get him the hell out of here!" Burton lashed out with anger.

"You're both getting in the car Mr. Burton! You have an appointment with Mr. Augusta."

"The fuck you mean Augusta! I hired you for a job that's none of Lorenzo's business," Burton's drink hit the pavement and he was shoved into the back of a four door Saab before he could finish. Johnstone was nudged with a silencer to join him.

The car rose three floors up and exited the underground garage. They proceeded along 34th Street, across the Pinellas Bayway toll bridge and drove to the end of the pier at the deserted Fort De Soto Park. "You fuckers are going to regret this in a very unhealthy way when Lorenzo finds out!" Burton pretended but he could feel unpleasant things were about to happen.

They were led aboard a waiting thirty foot open fishing boat with three, two hundred horsepower outboards idling at the dock. They shoved off, rounded the breakwater and the driver throttled up to full speed. They gave Egmont Key a wide berth to the north and settled into a westerly course heading off shore.

The speedometer hovered around fifty. For more than an hour they pounded on the three foot short chop, wind and salt spray slashing across their faces. It became cold and it felt like eternity to Burton. Johnstone didn't care. He was actually enjoying it, all the while knowing very well he'd be the last one to get out of this alive. Just to see Burton shiver and bounce all soaking wet, surely craving a drink was worth dying for.

Suddenly they slowed, stopped and the engines were cut. Now the silence was deafening. The other men just set there without a word holding their guns on them. The stars shone above but blackness enveloped them.

"Come on guys, what the hell is going on. You can tell me. Lorenzo keeps no secrets from me."

"You pissed yourself yet old man?" Johnstone said quietly with eyes fixed on the fat little man.

"Come on guys! If it's this asshole just dump him! You know I'm worth a lot more than his fucking ass is. What the hell is he paying you? Come on, I'll triple it!"

"Maybe you fucked these guys over too Burton and you just don't remember anymore."

"All right Johnstone, you both shut the fuck up or I'll anesthetize you with a whack on the head!" one of the men screamed losing his temper, brandishing a fish billy.

They bobbed around in the swells and from time to time the lights of a passing ship could be seen in the distance.

More than an hour had passed before a voice came on the VHF.

"Fishing fools, fishing fools. This is night rider. Come in."

"Night rider, this is the fools. We chummed them up and they're on the surface," the guy at the helm answered.

Soon they could hear the sound of a small aircraft approaching.

Flying low it circled around and touched down on pontoons near the boat. The engine whirled to a halt, the boat was moved against one of the pontoons and a line was made fast to the plane. Lorenzo Augusta jumped on board wearing T shirt and jeans. A handgun was stuck in the waist of his pants.

"Lorenzo!" Burton cried out. "What the hell is going on!"

"You tell me amigo." They couldn't see Augusta's face but his voice cut Burton like cold steel. "I thought my partner knew I ran a hands on operation and I liked to know what's going on at all times. Why did you not come to me with your problem amigo? I had to find out from the long ways around that you were in some kind of situation. I do not need any fucking situations at this time!" Augusta thundered two inches from the face of the trembling Burton. "Who the fuck is this guy?"

"The fucker was under my command in Nam. Thinks I done him wrong so he was going to get me for a few bucks. I thought I'd just handle it myself. Lorenzo, my friend, it was going to be a clean job!"

"I don't need this shit coming out of the woodwork now when we are supposed to be such flawless citizens." Augusta stared far out to sea where a ship's lights were blinking in the distance. His voice was calm and he spoke quietly. "Been thinking amigo. I've got too much invested now to take chances on who else might pop up from your past. I don't need you anymore. I'd be better off without you now. Just like you said we were better off without Ricky once he served his purpose. I liked Ricky, but I let him die because I knew you were right. It made sense." Augusta turned back to face Burton. "Your philosophy amigo! You were the teacher. I learned well!"

"Lorenzo you cannot be serious!" Burton was having a fit. "You need my influence in the Bahamas and in the"

"No amigo! You've planted the seeds but I will grow the crops. You want to do him?" Augusta turned to Johnstone. He looked at the gun offered to him. Burton sounded like he was having a heart attack. Whining as he was trying to breathe and holding his chest. One of the other men had his gun fixed on Johnstone, while the other two laid the struggling Burton across the side of the boat with his head hanging over the water.

"Just put it right there on the back of my ex partner's head and pull the trigger." Augusta pulled the clip from the gun and flicked eight rounds out leaving only one. "There. Now you can't get in trouble with us, but there is one left for the Senator!" Johnstone kept looking at the gun and looking up at Augusta, although he couldn't see his face very well. Burton continued to whine.

"No," Johnstone tried to laugh shaking his head. "I'm having too much fun just watching his partner fuck him right up the ass."

"Suit yourself!" said Augusta. He stood behind Burton, jammed the 38 against the back side of his head and pulled the trigger. Burton's legs kicked back hard once and he slumped over, hanging on the side of the boat.

"I much regret your involvement Mr. Johnstone, but you have such a perfect motive for this murder suicide."

Augusta was pouring chloroform on a rag. They held Johnstone

with his arms twisted around the back of the fishing chair as the rag was pressed over his mouth and nose. After a brief struggle he went limp.

Augusta slipped on a pair of gloves and reloaded. He wiped the gun clean, then holding the barrel and with the safety on he wrapped Johnstone's fingers around the stock and put the index finger through the trigger guard. One man knelt in front pushing the knees to keep the unconscious body from sliding down and out of the chair. Augusta jammed a pencil behind the trigger. He knelt down and clamped Johnstone's hand holding the gun between his palms and raised it to the side of Johnstone's head. The other man from behind, also wearing gloves, took the safety off and at Augusta's signal he pulled the pencil out. The pressure from Johnstone's finger pulled back the trigger and the shot blasted its way through the skull. The man in front let go of the knees allowing the body to slowly slide out of the chair and onto the deck.

## PART 19

Matt and Christy had a gut wrenching feeling that something had gone very wrong when Johnstone had still not returned to his room by midnight. They made the usual calls to the hospitals and the Sheriff's office. Not one Johnstone was admitted. Matt then called the hospitals again, but this time looking for Miles Burton. He was told he was not the only one inquiring. Obviously Burton was missing too. Too much of a coincidence.

Matt called Harold MacShane in Miami to brief him on the situation. Twenty minutes later MacShane was back on the line.

"Matt, the IMIC people recorded a conversation between Bray and Mayor Augusta at nineteen hundred hours. Augusta was looking to know if we had any reconnaissance flights or ships in the south east Gulf, offshore of St. Pete. We had nothing for two hundred miles other than the station, which had little action until about an hour ago. That's when they got a Pan Pan from the pleasure craft Delight. Apparently the Delight had a near collision with a vessel adrift with two POBs, both with gun shut wounds to the head. They were airlifted to Miami Memorial, one dead, one on life support. The dead guy is Burton, the other one's Jeff Johnstone. It has the looks of a murder suicide." "No. Come on! I just can't buy that," Matt sighed. "That's not the impression I got from Johnstone. I really don't think he has it in him to murder in revenge."

"Matt, the press is not to get a word of this! The FBI is going to want to brief the White House before this goes public. By the way, you realize I have to pull the plug on Bray. I'm going to arrest him when he reports for duty in the morning. I don't know how Augusta fits into this one, but if he is involved in what happened out there I've got to have Bray decommissioned before I'm asked what the hell I'm waiting for."

"Commander," Matt tried to remain calm, "the FBI, the DEA, the Senate Investigations Committee, they will all want a piece of Augusta. If he gets suspicious on account of his stoolie going down and flies the coop, we have accomplished nothing but cause more death!"

"I agree Matt. All right, here is how I'll play it. I am going to advise the FBI of what we know about Bray and his conversation with Augusta. From there on I'll be acting on their advice on how and when Bray's arrest should be made. In other words I'm making him available to a non military investigation. This will buy us some time. That's the best I can do."

"Thank you Sir. I understand your position. We're going to catch the next flight to Miami. I'll be contacting you from the hospital."



It was after nine AM when they walked through the doors of Miami Memorial. Soon as they inquired about Johnstone they were approached by two investigators from the FBI. Federal Agents Burley and Gibson were in charge of the case. Commander MacShane had already briefed them on the contents of the I.M.I.C. tapes. Matt and Christy explained how they met Johnstone, talked about the going ons at Bluffers Cay and at Bimini, and the foiled attempts made on their lives.

"We realize the taped conversation between Mayor Augusta and Mike Bray is indicative of some degree of involvement on the part of the Mayor," Gibson explained, "however, to what degree and in what way, we have no way of knowing at this time. That is why we have to pull Bray out even if it means playing Russian roulette. There is no other way. We have advised the Commander that we will arrest Bray and turn him over to him if he does not do it himself. We are hoping the Commander will realize how volatile this thing is and will cooperate to the extent of releasing Bray into our custody without a court order that could delay the matter. We are prepared to make a deal with Bray to expose the people behind the Caribbean Seismological Authority. He turns States Evidence and we'll give him the usual witness protection deal. In the mean time, we will be charging Johnstone with the murder of Senator Burton."

"You've got to be joking!" Christy exploded. "You've heard a taped conversation where Augusta is assured by his stoolie he can go and play his game safely offshore of St. Petersburg where two people later are found shot in the head and you can't put the two together and figure out who shot who? If Burton was Augusta's partner in illicit affairs would you not find it entirely possible that if there was a reason to eliminate the partner, the involvement of Johnstone was a perfect opportunity?"

"Mrs. Brown, off the record we smell the same rat you do." Burley stepped in. "What we are saying is we have a press release to make. The Senator just cannot go missing unnoticed. Right now, what we have to work with is the evidence at hand. The guy lying with the murder weapon by his side and powder burns all over his right hand. Come on! Look at the motive! It is a very good one and the whole thing can be looked at as an open and shut case at this time. If and when we get a confession out of Bray good enough to point the finger on someone else, things may turn around for Johnstone. And, if he lives to talk about it, you never know what he might tell us. By the way on a more positive note, we understand he is not doing too bad."

"What can you tell us about his condition?" Matt asked.

"Only that he came in alive, and for this kind of gun shut wound to the head, that can be promising. Come on, let's see if we can get an update!"

They entered the Intensive Care unit and the room where Johnstone laid under guard with an array of tubes and wires connected to his body.

"He is breathing on his own and is stable right now," a nurse checking the monitors turned to them. "I have to ask you to leave the room though. You can ask at the nurse's station to talk to Dr. Borden."

"I'm Dr. Borden." The neural surgeon looking after Johnstone came walking up just as they left the room. "We have an extremely fortunate man here. The type of bullet used and its angle of travel through the skull had caused only superficial damage. It exited very clean through the left temple. No important blood vessels were affected. The coma he is in is caused by the swelling of the brain, which we call edema. The fact that he was found in time to treat this condition with high doses of cortisone will be instrumental to his recovery. The edema should subside within a few days, at which time the man should be able to answer questions. However, in a case like this we can expect at least a partial loss of memory at first, but I am confident only minimal loss of motor functions, if any, will occur since the motor cortex of the brain was not injured. Intravenous antibiotic therapy will be continued for ten days, along with a continuous monitoring of all vital signs until the edema subsides. I will advise your office when Mr. Johnstone regains consciousness. Please keep your security discreet. I assure you the patient is not about to leap to his feet to mount an escape. Incidentally, did anyone remove anything that might have covered the man's right hand?"

"There is nothing in the report doctor," Gibson answered.

"Don't mean to butt in like some amateur Sherlock Holmes, but this man is not the first I treated with self inflicted gun shut wounds. The residual powder burns were much too irregular. More apparent in between the fingers and on the inside of the palm than across the face of the hand. As if he had something covering his hand and the gun. Like a bag over his hand."

"That may be an important factor in the investigation. Our lab team didn't seem to come up with anything out of the usual in regards to the powder burns though," Burley said pulling a note book from the inside of his jacket.

"Well, I was the first to work on Johnstone. Frankly, by the time your lab people arrived, our trauma team had handled the patient to such a degree I would find it difficult to believe your guys could come up with anything clean. At any rate, I'll have a full report on my findings to your office by the end of the day."

PART 20

Bray's nickname was The Bull. He was a stocky, powerful man in his late forties, with a round face and small beady eyes.

In the old days he loved to brawl in the Mexican border-towns, high on wine and peyote buttons and hot on the trail of a sultry young señorita in a dingy old cantina. He'd go to the bullfights on Purple Microdots.

He was just a recreational drug user, and that was all before the days of the compulsory urine tests.

It was during one of his leaves when he met the man who introduced him to Augusta. Lorenzo seemed to have it all. The girls and the fine cocaine were never ending.

Then, Lorenzo made him an offer he could hardly refuse. He was propositioned for a makeover. Clean up, quit the dope and become a career officer. Augusta needed someone on the inside and Michael was handsomely rewarded for the effort.

He traded the drugs for good alcohol and emerged into the world of fine clothes, expensive cars, and a condo on Miami Beach. During his leaves he really traveled. Instead of a bordello in Manzanillo, he became hooked on the girls of Hong Kong and Singapore.

It wasn't long before he was senior man in the radio room and had the entire South Florida and Caribbean Operations at his fingertips. He put on weight and he was comfortable.

Augusta's needs were simple. The position and movements of aircraft and cutters in the Florida Straits and the Caribbean.

Then, he became Chief of Communications and Augusta was elected Mayor of Miami. They had come a long ways.

He was a pitiful sight as he stood there while his and Augusta's last conversation crackled on the speaker of the tape recorder on his Commander's desk.

"How many years do you think you have left of your disgraceful life Mr. Bray? Maybe thirty?" MacShane punched the off button of the recorder and it sprung into the air ejecting its batteries in the process. "Consider spending them at Portsmouth mister! Hope you're real fond of Virginia. Not that you'd see much of the country side." MacShane walked to the window, turned his back at Bray and looked across Government Cut. "I'm from the old school Bray, and I don't think the people of this country should be stuck feeding someone like you for the next thirty years. Lucky for you, in this country people have evolved past the point of simple and swift punishment." MacShane turned to stab Bray with his eyes. "How would you plead to a charge of accessory to first degree murder, information peddling and aiding in a criminal activity while performing the duties of a commissioned officer!" It really was not a question.

Bray didn't dare to admit even to himself, but he was almost glad he was caught. As if the inevitable finally happened. Lately he felt so uncomfortable and burdened. Maybe he was getting older and wiser. Or maybe his eyes were opened not only to the finer things in the material world, but perhaps also to some of the values associated with living a decent life. He had climbed so high. He was respected and good at his job. Life would have been so perfect now without the past and Lorenzo Augusta.

His heart pounded and his chest muscles tightened as he realized it was all over. He sank into himself, thinking about how he could go on like that for years never once considering the magnitude or the likely consequences of his actions. Something must be really wrong with him, he thought, must be retarded in some way to be so blind.

"Bray! I am waiting yes, or no?"

"Sorry, I wasn't listening?" He looked at his Commander sheepishly.

"I asked if you had any desire to talk about your involvement with Augusta and Dunitschek."

"Carl Dunitschek runs the operation. He's Lorenzo's number one. He had been my only contact lately. That's the first time I talked to Lorenzo for a long time."

"Do you know what Augusta was doing in the Gulf of Mexico?"

"No. I never cared to know too much. I know there was a time when they smuggled illegal aliens, guns and some heavy duty weapon systems, and now they built what Lorenzo calls an invisible highway between Bluffers Cay and Miami. They use it for getting the dope through the Caribbean undetected. I can't see him doing anything with drugs in the Gulf."

"You're right Mr. Bray. It was not a shipment of drugs. A US Senator was murdered at the location you gave to Augusta, after you assured him he was alone out there and safe to commit a crime."

"Burton." Bray murmured.

"So you knew!" MacShane had to keep himself from hauling off and slugging Bray as his strong left hand tensed into a fist.

"No. But they had been partners for a long while. I always figured one was going to rub the other out sooner or later. Can you protect me if I testify against Lorenzo?"

"No, I can not. However the FBI is willing to offer you the Witness Protection Act. That is if I turn you over to them, which I'm not convinced I should do. I don't have to you know! I'd rather see you rot in Portsmouth for the next thirty years than see you start a new life and live happily ever after. Maybe marry a nice country girl, one who'll never know your disgraceful past, and have a family. You could call yourself a late bloomer, and pretend you were never a criminal of the lowest kind!"

"Sir. I have their complete trust. I can deliver them to you!"

"Don't sing your song to me mister! A turncoat is a turncoat and your own hide is all that matters to the likes of you."

MacShane looked of disgust. "I'm afraid your credibility with me will never again amount to anything more than one big fat zero! I'll let the feds deal with you, if, they can assure me your testimony will be good enough to convict Augusta and his

associates. If not, your ass is mine and I will see to it that you live out the rest of your natural life inside the Naval Stockades in Portsmouth Virginia!" MacShane walked out leaving Bray to stew in his juices. But Bray was feeling a lot better now. All he had to do to save his ass is to sell out Lorenzo. He didn't have to think twice about that! The feds would give him a new face, a new name and help him re-assimilate into civilian society. Maybe even a little pension to settle down with somewhere in the mid west. Beats the hell out of Portsmouth. His self confidence was coming back. He didn't do too bad for himself after all.

He was later removed from the base and transferred to the Federal Bureau of Investigations' high security holding facility. He gave statement after statement, repeating everything over and over again, exposing Burton and Augusta's joint ventures in all kinds of illegal activities. He talked about how the R/V Delphinus was used to transport the cocaine up the Miami River under everyone's nose, and how Augusta counted on his political status and the front provided by the Caribbean Seismological Authority to be able to operate blatantly.

Bray also talked about tracking the movements of Sea Story and relaying her locations to Augusta's henchmen. As far as Augusta and his people were concerned, Matt had died on Bluffers Cay at the hands of Dunitschek, and Mrs. Brown was back Stateside hiding somewhere and too scared to say anything.

## PART 21

Harold MacShane picked up Matt and Christy at the Bal Harbour Inn, a little after eight. He was driving a brown Mercury Sable station wagon and was wearing T-shirt and jeans.

"How is Johnstone this morning?" he asked.

"Much the same," Christy said. "The swelling is on the way down the nurse told us. Have you seen the papers?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid I have." MacShane was shaking his head.

"What the hell is about reporters anyway?" Christy burst out.

"Must they exploit and blow everything out of proportion? Do the readers really want it done that way? Crazy Vietnam vet murders his ex Commander before attempting to take his own life! Florida Senator Miles Burton brutally murdered execution style bymadman with thirty year grudge! And that's the Miami Herald! Sounds more like The Inquirer! Can you imagine how the man's friends and family feels reading that crap! And one day they'll find out he didn't do it, but of course that will never make it in the papers."

"I called Johnstone's partner Ward Miller in Nassau last night," Matt cut in ending Christy's emotional outburst. "He's convinced Johnstone could not have done it. Miller says Johnstone likes to act the part but in reality it isn't in him to murder in cold blood. Even if it is a revenge thing. Exactly the way I read the man's personality. Christy's right. I think the papers are being a little too rough on a guy who's technically still innocent."

"Queer times we're living in Browns! It's becoming an over complicated world that oftentimes just doesn't make a whole lot of sense. As much as I understand the need for it, I sure don't like this Witness Protection business. To give a man a new life at the expense of the taxpayers as if he never done a damn thing wrong? I think of it this way. If I was a guy like Bray and wanted to do the kind of things that he did, hell, I could always have it in the back of my mind that if something goes wrong I'll just sell out my buddies and I'll be sitting pretty turning States Evidence. We're giving the sons o' bitches an almost no lose situation. We're making it so crime does pay, after all!"

MacShane was getting worked up so he just quit talking. Matt and Christy stared out the windows in silence.

They turned off Biscayne Boulevard and onto Port Road, leading into the heart of the Port of Miami and into the parking lot of a large white brick warehouse. A sign in big black letters was affixed to the front of the building facing the street, **SNIF BEARINGS AND ENGINEERING**. On all the corners hanging off the roof were closed circuit cameras. In the first row of the parking lot adjacent to the driveway was a van with dark tinted windows, a raised roof and a fancy airbrushed paint job. An extension cord ran to a receptacle nearby. MacShane slowed as he passed. Matt and Christy looked at each other as they noticed the van gently rock as if someone inside was moving around.

"I never met the men who sit in that thing all day," MacShane smiled giving the explanation, "but they must be dedicated I give them that. They're lot security. This is US Customs Special Narcotics Intelligence Facility. 'Snif' for short. Being on the DDR team gives you your clearances."

"Now I know why you're out of uniform Sir," Christy smiled.

"Nobody comes around this place in a uniform. Hell, half of these guys don't even shave! They look like a bunch of hippies and bikers."

They parked the car and walked through a door with a big sign SHIPPING OFFICE. Inside, the room did look like a shipping office. In one corner a few boxes were piled under a sign OUTGOING. In the other corner was an old round coffee table with trade magazines on it. A sign was hanging, NO SMOKING - LUNGS AT WORK. Big posters showing cut-away views of industrial bearings were all over the walls and a calendar from NTN Totowa of Japan, with the usual, very large breasted blonde wearing nothing but a yellow hardhat and a butt-floss bikini. She was decorated with a magic marker mustache. There was a steel door with a sign, EMPLOYEES ONLY.

"Your plastics Commander!" a receptionist walked out from behind a plywood counter. "You put them on now, wear them while inside the building at all times and remove them prior to walking past the exit sign." She was an amply built brunette in a low cut blouse and tight blue jeans. She had long, dark blood-red fingernails and the voice and personality of a grinding disc. Matt wondered if that was part of the job and she might just turn into a regular Suzy homemaker after work.

They clipped on their plastic Coast Guard picture IDs and she led them through the door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY.

"Signs signs everywhere a sign, do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign," Christy sang quietly to herself tagging behind.

"Hey, decent! Neat old tune! The Five Man Electrical Band!" the guard dog receptionist turned to Christy with a big smile on, her voice about an octave higher. "Right on! 1971" She grooved her hips to the imaginary rhythm. "The guys hung those signs, you know, in case a lost trucker comes wondering in."

"Hey, I dig it, it works." Christy went on.

"Right! Hey, I'm officer Wall. Patricia right? You guys give the inside door a couple of seconds and I'll see you on your way out."

MacShane turned to Matt in a low tone. "If I had icebreakers to commission down here, I'd name one after your wife."

They stood in the ten by ten concrete room as the steel door closed behind Patricia. Then a buzzer sounded and MacShane opened the other door motioning Matt and Christy to go through. They found themselves on a noisy, endless floor of desks loaded with paperwork, phones and computer terminals. The bare concrete floor was interrupted only by pillars. No walls, no partitions just some well defined spaces depicting different departments and teams who worked together. The whole place was one gigantic open room of four walls. Monitors and projection screens hung from the roof's steel girders in places. One corner had a pool table and vending machines.

There were men with tattoos and beards wearing muscle shirts typing away at terminals as if that's all they did all their lives. Women in jeans, shorts, halter tops and T-shirts milled about. MacShane was right. It looked like an assembly of hippies, bikers and assorted street people with only the odd, more conservative looking agent.

"There is nothing more powerful in law enforcement in the US of A than these people." MacShane had to raise his voice to be heard as he led the way along a path amongst the desks and equipment to a large table mostly covered with nautical charts.

A long haired but clean shaven young man came out of the chaos wearing jeans that bulged with the muscles of his huge thighs and an open, short sleeved shirt revealing an enormous chest and shoulders.

"Bob Delaney," he introduced himself to Matt and Christy.

"Commander MacShane, sit yourselves down, the rest of the crew is on their way."

"Good morning!" said Tony Gibson arriving in the company of two scraggly looking Hispanic men.

"All right, let's get the show on the road!" said Delaney opening a briefcase. "Good to have you with us Mr. and Mrs. Brown. The Commander had filled me in on some of your exploits. It's going to be great working with you both on this one. You gave them quite a run for their money. I think that's really cool. You all know Tony, and these are Customs Officers Eddie Aguirre and Joe Decenzo. They will be in charge of the operations in the field and I will coordinate things from here. By the way, our department's code name for this operation is 'Earthquake'. We are authorized to discreetly cause an earthquake in order to bury their cave, tunnel or whatever they might have built, rendering it useless to whomever may get this kind of idea again. We are also working in concert with the FBI and the Coast Guard of course. Mr. and Mrs. Brown are under the umbrella of the US Coast Guard, directly reporting to Commander MacShaue. The FBI is with us as a result of their investigation of the Burton murder case, and its ties to the people also involved in the smuggling of narcotics according to the sworn statements of Michael Bray. Tony, would you fill us in on that."

"These are photocopies of the final product," Tony Gibson handed out papers. "This is a twelve page statement signed by Bray in accordance with the proceedings ordered by Mr. Justice G W Keller. Of course the IMIC tapes are now out the window. It is material we cannot use in court."



Our deal goes like this. Bray turned himself in to the FBI to become a protected witness and Commander MacShane had agreed not to pursue a military Court Martial. To put this statement into a nutshell, I have broken it down to the pieces most pertinent to our immediate course of action. First of all, from what Bray tells us, and we have no choice but to take his word, he routinely checks with Bluffers Cay on a weekly basis. Obviously, time is of the essence and we need to make our move as fast as we can and keep our fingers crossed in the mean time. If they initiate a call to him, we'll have to let him make the contact. Let's hope it does not come to that. Our psych profilers advise against trusting Bray in an interactive situation. Talk about not trusting anyone, according to Bray, there are a number of DEA agents as well as some of Miami's finest on the Mayor's payroll, as well as the Bahamas Defense Force. Shipments of narcotics are received from various ships at Bluffers Cay and are forwarded aboard small submersibles below the surface to Bimini. Here they are loaded aboard the Research Vessel Delphinus, which in turn sails up the Miami River to their warehouse at 39 River Drive. Now this is important! The operation is in the infancy stages. Augusta, who likes to run things first hand according to Bray, makes almost regular visits to both sites in the Bahamas as well as to the River Drive address. His number one man is a guy by the name of Carl Dunitschek. He runs the show from what they call the Bluffers Cay Terminal. To say that it's a high tech operation would be an understatement! The latest in security, including night vision laser optics and the deadliest automatic rifles in the hands of professional killers. Dunitschek himself is a mercenary, well known to international terrorist groups. He has good organizational and management skills. Used to run a camp they called the Killing School. Rumor has it some of the IRA's technical people were trained by Dunitschek. The CIA has quite a file on him. He is considered amongst the top ten most dangerous paramilitary antisocialites in the world! The importance of the arrest of Carl Dunitschek cannot be overemphasized" Gibson paused to open another folder of papers. Eyes were glued on him. He continued. "Another important item is Senator Burton's murder, which, in light of Mike Brays confessions is no longer a simple open and shut case. We have not withdrawn the murder one against Johnstone just yet in order to keep him under guard for his own safety, but we are considering Lorenzo Augusta as our newest suspect. We know that the Browns with the help of Johnstone were trying to put pressure on Burton to get him a little concerned so he may come in and tell us a few things. What if someone was watching Burton for Augusta and maybe advised the Mayor about Burton's upcoming encounter with Johnstone? That would have given Augusta a good opportunity to get rid of a partner who is likely to become a weight around his neck, and have it all dumped on the guy with the most visible motive."

"Agreed!" Matt said with enthusiasm as Christy gave Gibson thumbs up as he continued. "As we stand, we cannot find a judge who will indict, or even discuss indicting Mayor Augusta on any charges based on the confession of Michael Bray alone, which the

legal profession at this time in point considers nothing more than a story." Matt, Christy and MacShane were all about to blurt something out in disbelief but Gibson cut them short. "Remember! The IMIC tapes are nonadmissible in a civilian criminal trial. All we have is a man who turned himself in with an outrageous story involving a respected and powerful political figure. Now, we could bring the Mayor in for friendly questioning about his relationship with Bray, but we all know where that would get us. The century's biggest bust would no doubt just ooze out between our fingers right down the drain. With Bray's story we can get a warrant to bust the boat and the warehouse, but still no Augusta and no Dunitschek, and after the phone call I received from our director this morning, I get the feeling that if we don't get those two we'll never work in this town again."

"Tony is right!" Bob Delaney stood up pulling a large blue envelope marked TOP SECRET from his briefcase. "This level two communiqué came straight down through the National Security Agency's Washington office with the blessing of the Attorney General. It gives me carte blanche in the use of any means to apprehend Carl Dunitschek and any one of his known associates, so long as I do it on US soil, within US territorial waters or on foreign land leased or owned by US interests."

"Now we're cooking with gas!" Christy exclaimed.

"The way I read this," Delaney threw the paper on his desk and focused his eyes on Matt and Christy, "is that Mr. and Mrs. Brown are being volunteered as private citizens to accidentally stumble upon Bluffers Cay with an organized assault, while we take advantage of the Caribbean Seismological Authority's lease, and land on their platform at Bimini."

"Can hardly wait to bring you Mr. Dunitschek!" Matt was all smiles. He knew Art Buttler's hand was in it. Art had close ties to the NSA. It was beginning to come together just right, so Bluffers Cay Terminal could be destroyed without revealing the Taino.

Matt was working out a plan in his head. In the afternoon he sent a fax to the dockmaster at Murdock's Bimini Docks:

- How's it going Jerry! We're heading your way in a couple of days, can you make sure we get dock space? By the way we got some nice native drawings from a friend of yours, we assume. He can sure communicate with his pictures. The man's got a lot of talent. We want to meet his relatives around Bimini. Later man! The crew of the vessel Carib Princess -

## PART 22

On a cold December day in 1888, in a remote part of what is now the Mesa Verde National Park in south-western Colorado, Richard Wetherill and his brother-in-law Charlie Mason rode horseback tracking cattle that had strayed from the family ranch. Near the mesa's edge, where the sandstone cliffs dropped sheer to the talus below they dismounted, walked to the rim and looked across a canyon they never explored. Wetherill blurted out a cry of astonishment. Half a mile away, in the cliff forming the canyon's opposite wall loomed an overhang that sheltered a natural cavern more than four hundred feet in length and a hundred feet deep. Inside, stood the pristine ruins of an ancient city dominated by a tall, round, three story tower. They named the ruins Cliff Palace.

Obsessed with a passion for discovery, Wetherill, this cowboy-turned-archaeologist spent the next fourteen years of his life stumbling upon one great Anasazi ruin after another.

With the backing of millionaire brothers Talbot and Frederick Hyde, Wetherill dug over a hundred and ninety rooms at a site called Pueblo Bonito, and shipped thousands of artifacts to New York, which the Hydes donated to the American Museum of Natural History.

While digging at Pueblo Bonito, at the end of a series of chambers and catacombs hundreds of feet below the surface, where pockets of methane gas had to be burned off, he came across an enormous empty room which he named Deep Cave, and thought was one of the Anasazi people's ceremonial chambers. The entire chamber was carved within a huge deposit of salt, it's ceiling studded with deep craters. Carvings, depicting tubular shaped plants that hung down by their roots from above were everywhere on the walls, spewing forth human figures from their inverted orifices. Anthropomorphic creatures stood guard near the entrance. This room, the only one Wetherill ever found empty, gave him much to think about. He changed his mind about the chamber being used for ceremonial activities. He theorized that the room had housed an extinct form of vegetation which thrived in the salt and absorbed the poison gases or perhaps produced large amounts of clean air to make life possible in the catacombs.

He was ridiculed by his more learned and jealous colleagues. A campaign to halt his unsupervised research was launched by Edgar L. Hewett, president of New Mexico Normal University and an archaeologist who had his own eye on the Anasazi ruins.

A prolonged inquiry by the General Land Office ended in 1902 in a decision to forbid Wetherill to continue digging. For the last eight years of his life this self taught scientist turned not another shovelful of Anasazi soil.

In 1910 he was gunned down by a young Navajo man while driving cows along the Chaco Canyon wash. Disinterest and a progression of landslides forever covered up the tunnels leading to Deep Cave, and the only pictorial account of giant saltwater Velutinums ever found.

Eighteen hundred miles away and eight hundred years after the Anasazi artist had carved the walls of Wetherill's Deep Cave, the muscular tissues of a living giant Velutinium exhaled its nine million cubic feet of pure oxygen to quickly mix with the humid, salty atmosphere. Like distant thunder, the Earth trembled deep beneath Bimini as the great hanging fungus emptied its gelatinous pockets and shrunk back to its size to start the cycle of assimilation and the storage of pure, oxygen rich air that would carry its spores, the Mocono, forth again in an effort of reproduction.

Taino women below caught the falling, dust-like particles on their tightly woven tarpaulins stretched between a circle of bamboo stock, each a good twenty feet in diameter. The scent of cinnamon became overpowering as their catch increased into mounds. The spores' intoxicating effect befell upon them, but the job did not allow for giggling as the younger women picked up the elders' censoring thoughts.

When thoroughly dried and sifted, the dust made from the spores was used for meditation and healing, and was used by the so called Travelers.

A special group of men with a special gift handed down from father to son were the ones they called the Travelers. With the aid of the Mocono they entered an almost supernatural status allowing them to perform the incredible tasks their society depended upon for their everyday existence. It was the Travelers who discovered the small rugged island where the progression of watery tunnels began. They hid there from the others who did not understand their way of thinking. Their way of daring to be different. Daring to be proud and wanting to live on.

The Travelers could sink deep within the caverns and tunnels, and drift with the tides for hour, holding their breath between pockets of trapped atmosphere. They found the enormous cavity at the end of all the tunnels where the creatures they named the Children of the Sun lived, and this wonderful place became the new world of the Taino.

Over the centuries, some of the tunnels had shifted and could no longer be used, but from time to time when night fell upon the world above, the Travelers were there, stealthily moving about in their long boats that went to the bottom with them at daybreak. They often visited Darkman, and through him they learned about the people who lived on the land above and about the ways in which the passage of time had affected the world.

## PART 23

Equipment began to arrive and the pile of boxes and crates was getting bigger and bigger on the Station's dock in Miami. Food, water, dive gear, weapons, explosives and boxes of ammunition waited for loading. By far the bulkiest items were the dive gear. Matt and Christy had access to the Navy's latest and best, but they weren't sure just exactly what kind of diving they would be doing. Their group of the Coast Guard's Deep Dive Response Team was under the guidance of Navy physiology guru Dr. Ed Thalmann, who just approved the latest of Alan Krasberg's closed circuit rebreather systems, some twenty five years in the making. A dozen of these 'No Bubbles No Troubles' units were already sitting on the dock, but their use would be limited to about a hundred and fifty feet. To make contact with the Taino, Matt and Christy figured on depths much greater. They had four MK-IX JIM suits flown in. These units were certified to nine hundred feet and had their own life support systems.

They contacted Joe Labarraque with an invite to come along as interpreter and Taino expert. He asked if he could bring along his associate, a man who accompanied him when he sneaked up the Pico Ojo del Toro right under Castro's nose. Matt and Christy knew they could use another capable man and they agreed. Labarraque also offered the use of his yacht for the mission.

Matt's friends, ex Navy SEALs Tom Lewis and Mitch O'Grady, who served under his command were on their way to complete the team. The two could easily have passed for brothers. Big, large framed men who smoked and drank and never worked out but were as hard as nails just by nature. O'Grady and his daddy, and his daddy's daddy had all been good old boys in the Navy of Uncle Sam's. Lewis was a Newfie from Canada who was caught working illegally in a machine shop in California during one of the last years of the Vietnam war, when young men were kind of scarce, and Canadians often filled their places. He'd rather go to war than home, launching a twenty year career. Both men had excelled in the performance of special duty and on many occasions have been awarded for bravery.

Tied to the seawall, aboard the cutter Courageous, Matt and Christy killed time with Commander MacShane discussing their course of action.

They were looking at photographs of Bluffers Cay recently taken by a KH17 satellite when an officer came to advise that Labarraque's yacht the San Antone Rose was about to enter the base. Built in nineteen sixty eight, the San Antone Rose served her first twenty years on the Texas coast as the official Governor's yacht. She was seventy four feet in length and twenty in the beam.

A long, sleek lady, built in the Burger yard when Henry Burger was still there to oversee every step of the constructions of some of the finest yachts ever built in America. In her main salon still stood the Stein grand piano put on board by Governor Ellis for Liberace to play on a moon lit night cruise of Galveston Bay back in seventy five, to entertain President Ford and family.

Labarraque bought her at an auction. Her brightwork was unkept and her old diesels were tired, but she was still as sound as the day she was commissioned. He repowered with twelve hundred horsepower Manns, able to push her semi displacement hull over thirty knots and easily cruise at twenty five. The layers of old varnish was stripped from her houses and she was redone in white Awlgrip from the waterline up. Her deck hardware was replaced, she was rewired, re-plumbed, and equipped with the latest electronics. Inside, the old-world charm of rich, hand rubbed dark wood and lace curtains remained and were blended with the tasteful upgrades of one of Lauderdale's finest yacht interior decorators. She was reborn a modern yacht, but all the while her classic lines retained the grace and elegance of an era gone by.

Idle men from the cutters along the dock gathered to witness the arrival of 'The Rose'. Effortlessly she seemed to glide through the water, her engines totally muffled through the forty foot long wet exhausts leading from her machinery housed under the wheelhouse. Fenders in place she gently came to rest against the rough concrete bulkhead. A tall, muscular man in khaki pants and black T shirt with short, crew cut hair tossed a coil of heavy, two inch dockline ashore. The sternline was handled with much less ease but with equal expertise by a man and woman in their fifties.

Matt didn't like what he saw. Labarraque said nothing about bringing those two along.

The boarding ladder was folded down and Labarraque disembarked followed by his crew.

"Good to see you again so soon!" he shook hands. "This is Neil Zein," he pointed at the man with the crew cut, "and this is Captain Ron Janis and our first mate Ruth. They're going to look after the boat for us while we're doing business ashore. They are trusted old friends from Marathon and often look after the Rose for me when I'm away."

Understandable for a man to want someone to look after his boat while he risks his life ashore, Matt thought to himself while shaking hands.

The afternoon was spent loading the equipment aboard, checking the mechanical and electrical systems and either securing or removing everything that was not bolted down. The piano was brought ashore and gently transported to a storage building. Most of the rest of the furniture was also removed from the main salon to allow room for the sleeping bags and personal gear of the men. To keep everything low and out of sight, most of the gear and ammo was jammed into three of the four staterooms below.

Labarraque volunteered to sleep with the men in the salon, giving his owner's cabin to Matt and Christy. The crew's quarters were spared for Captain Ron and his wife.

O'Grady and Lewis arrived late in the evening. Matt called a meeting to acquaint everyone and talk about the upcoming task. His plan to overtake Bluffers Cay involved the Taino. He explained that a successful assault on the operation could only be hoped for, if it came from a direction where it would not be expected, the tunnels under Bluffers Cay, where he was dumped by Dunitzschek's men. To gain access to the tunnels from the outside however, they needed the guidance of the Taino. Matt was planning to take Christy and Labarraque to the people Jerry Murdock was in contact with at Bimini, to find out how to reach the ones at Bluffers Cay. He was hoping Labarraque could handle the communications end of it.

O six hundred hours the next morning the San Antone Rose made her way out Government Cut. They slipped past whistle buoy number one. Big lazy rollers came head on and the boat's sharp bows cut through them, rising and falling ever so gently. In the quiet, misty dawn, light began to form over the landscape of large swells without a ripple on their backs. The eerie sound of the long, drawn out whistles emanating from the buoy as the rising waves forced air through its chambers slowly faded behind, and dead ahead, a blinding fireball began to rise above the sea.

## PART 24

Ten miles off Bimini, Labarraque hoisted the Bahamas' courtesy flag. Usually an approaching vessel would first run up her yellow Q flag until a formal marine entry was granted by the island's customs and immigration authorities, but this time they were cheating. They needed to make an impression as if they had already checked in somewhere else in the Bahamas. They were coming to Bimini to do a little fishing and take in the sights.

Dressed in Bermuda shorts, swimming trunks and covered with suntan oil they sprawled out to catch a few rays on the approach to the harbor. Christy had a cowboy hat on with her hair under it, and Matt had not shaved in days. It was unlikely anyone other than Jerry would recognize them. Ron and Ruth Janis were involved with a large pitcher of ice tea on the aft deck slumped in the wicker chairs. Matt was at the helm in the air conditioned wheel house and Christy and Labarraque were readying some dock lines. Neil Zein, O'Grady and Lewis remained on the foredeck consuming Budweisers. Typical yachtees, arriving to enjoy a perfect morning.

By nine o'clock they were securely tied to the face dock behind Pirate's Lady, a sixty foot dive charter boat that made weekly pilgrimages to Bimini. The dock was crowded with people hauling tanks and gear everywhere. They mingled and blended in with the charterers.

Jerry Murdock came walking down the dock to welcome the new yacht. Christy was aboard Pirate's Lady, laughing and carrying on with the crew but she saw him approach and her eyes met with Jerry's. A soft, welcoming smile told her how relieved he was now.

"You must be our dockmaster," Ruth Janis was waving Jerry aboard. "Please come on up and out of the heat. May I offer you some ice tea?"

Jerry walked up the boarding ladder and along to the aft deck. Ruth anxiously led him into the salon. Matt stood inside the door. He took the frail little hands and gently cupped them between his large palms. As the two men looked into each other's eyes, for the first time Matt understood what Christy always tried to tell him. How Jerry could talk with his eyes.



"Thank you for bringing her back to us sir," Jerry said just as Christy showed up in the companion way. She closed the door behind her and she wrapped her arms around Jerry. She was overwhelmed with joy. "Thank God for lifting you from harm's way Princess." She heard Jerry's words but was unable to find any of her own. She felt though she had already told him somehow, how happy she was to be there.

Labarraque came in and they spent a few minutes discussing their plans. Labarraque was astounded by Jerry's account of the regular visits from the Taino people, who used the blowhole in his beach house as a passage to the surface.

"We have to find a way to reach their people at Bluffers Cay once we get there, and we need to communicate our plan of action to them," Matt turned to Jerry. "They'll have to guide us to the complex underground, from the back of the island. Joe here, is with us to interpret the language in its written form. Is there any way to get one of their leaders to come to the surface at your house to meet with us? If we have to go down there, we're talking about a very high tech operation. We can do it theoretically, but we'll be taking chances. We can be pretty sure they live in an oxygen environment not unlike ours, but how deep do we have to go to get to them? That is if we can locate them at all and not get lost down there."

"My only contacts are the one particular group of men who move between their world and ours," Jerry said.

"I would think getting to the surface would be physically demanding enough to be an art practiced by only a few," Christy offered.

"Not only that, but certain customs must be observed in their society I'm sure," Labarraque said speculatively. "If I'm correct, an event of such magnitude as this, where the person they consider a wise old spirit, the Princess, is making contact for the first time, would have to be conducted in accordance to their customs. I know eye contact, or rather being the first to behold a major event with one's eyes, was reserved for the highest chiefs and elders in their society five hundred years ago. It is safe to assume, that if we are to get off on the right foot, so to speak, we should make the effort to go to them and not expect a proud elder to have to come to us. Even though it is their lives we are attempting to save. Not to mention," Labarraque smiled mischievously, "to be honest with you, I would be willing to take any and all risks just to get a glimpse of a living, working Taino village."

"I must admit," Christy added, "the adventure of going down there intrigues me to no end as well."

"If I may say so," Jerry spoke softly, "I know you will be successful in reaching the people I call my Indian Brothers. It is the way it was meant to happen."

"Tell me something Jerry," Christy leaned forward in her chair with a cup of coffee in hand. "How do you suppose we could get our gear to your house unnoticed. We're not talking about a couple of BCs and tanks. This stuff is like a suit of armor and the gear for the three of us amounts to quite a bit."

"Since they anchored the machinery off the beach I have not seen any of the white men who belong to their group and used to come sniffing around town. I think they feel very secure now. I could get Todd Ramor to rent us one of his buses. People just hauled a load off to Chalk's ramp from the Pirate's Lady to fly back to Lauderdale. It'd be no different. We could load you up here and when it gets dark we can pull up to the house and unload."

"Sounds like a plan Jerry!" Matt said. "You still have those body-bags kicking around? We'll put our JIM suits in them and pretend we have a big secret catch of tuna, ready to ship to Japan. Let's set up the truck for this afternoon."

Todd dropped off the van at five o'clock, first picking through the ashtray to save the few good roaches amongst the cigarette butts.

"Mon, you sure you want to drive my bus mon? She's my best bus. You scratch up the paint or bang up my mirror I got to get you paying for it mon. Best you let me drive. I drive for you cheap."

"I don't think so Todd," Matt handed him three one hundred dollar bills and watched his eyes grow wide. Takes him two weeks to make that. "I want to do the driving, so if I bruise my cargo, I've only myself to blame."

They began to load the van parked on the side of the narrow one lane road in front of the marina. It was a seventy nine Chevy, loaded with bondo and painted up in the most ungodly, pukegreen color background that sported airbrushed murals of long legged females bulging with muscles and pointed breasts, toting laser pistols on some planet of fantasy, wearing nothing but high heeled combat boots. On the doors, white stick-on letters said KING TODD BUS SERVICE. There were lights of all descriptions all over the thing. Lights behind the grill, lights under the custom running boards, flood lights on the roof and purple sex lights inside by the sun visors. Antennas everywhere, not hooked up to anything. A fake cellular antenna stuck on the windshield. An expensive omni directional TV antenna on the roof and a six inch black and white TV on the dash. Fancy, but rusting chrome mag wheels, tinted windows and competition, low restriction mufflers that thundered to high heaven completed the package. It was a well known package to Matt and Christy and everyone who ever spent any time in Bimini. Todd had three of these things roaming the streets at all times, mostly just cruising with a buddy or two, drinking beer and smoking ganja.

They used the bodybags to sneak the JIM suits to the van, and made a number of trips with a large cooler getting the bottles of gases out.

Jerry, in the mean time was expecting another visit from his Taino contact and Matt gave him a thousand foot spool of nylon shot-line to see if he could get the man to take one end of it back down with him, so they'd have something to follow.

Labarraque began studying the Navy's manual for the MK-IX Partial Pressure Compensated dive suits. He was a certified diver and had logged many recreational dives in the past. What was in store for him however was more like sending a man to the moon who had never flown anything but an ultra-light. Knowing the basic principles of diving and being aware of the mental stresses involved at greater depths only made him more nervous. He was certainly not afraid of the adventure, he just wasn't sure how his subconscious was going to handle the task. Good thing he didn't know how concerned Matt and Christy were. They wished they could handle it some other way and not have to take him down there. But they didn't show it. They made it sound like it was going to be a picnic. All he had to do is familiarize himself with the suit and its functions, and it was going to take care of him.

Matt sent Zein, O'Grady and Lewis fishing with local guide Bonefish Tommy. That was not only a good cover in case someone was watching, but also a good distraction for the men from the doldrums of waiting.

The afternoon passed quickly and they had an early dinner on board with Labarraque.

"It's time to give you your crash course in deep sea life support," Christy smiled clearing dishes off the table.

"I'm a little confused," said Labarraque with a questioning look. "I have seen the likes of Cousteau using rigid suits on TV. This one doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me. You wear a pressure suit but you still need to decompress? Why can't this thing remain at one atmosphere?"

"There are a good number of variations on the JIM suit," Matt explained. "A guy named Jim Jarratt perfected a suit he dove to five hundred feet in Loch Ness back in the seventies. Since then they had come a long ways, but the common denominator had always been a heavy, bulky, armor like construction best suited for work on the sea bed, or like the WASP suits, which had to be fitted with electrically driven propellers to maneuver the operator. In most cases, these suits rely on surface support for their environment, or are directly supported by a diving bell or habitat. Of course, a submersible would be our safest and best vehicle to descend to the Taino, but getting one to Jerry's blowhole would cause the same amount of attention as getting a surface support facility in place for a regular JIM suit. We chose the MK-IX because it is most suited for our dive. It is built of a light weight, composite material similar to carbon fiber with moveable joints and offers the most maneuverability. It is the newest our Navy had come up with."

"Unfortunately," Christy placed a big pitcher of ice tea on the table, "we have not yet invented a material light enough for a man to freely move around with, and at the same time, strong enough not to implode under the pressure."

"OK, so the suit is only partially pressurized, placing my nitrogen absorption, say, to what it would be at a hundred and fifty feet, but I am actually working near five hundred?" Labarraque said beginning to understand the reasoning behind

what he was earlier reading.

"Exactly," said Matt. "But it isn't just a straight cut fifty fifty deal. To about two hundred feet we're pressurized to one atmosphere. Then the pressure division begins to taper toward the ambient, internally maxing out at just above ten atmospheres.

"OK, I understand. It's automatic?"

"Right," said Christy. "Your rate of ascent is computed to safely decompress your own unique metabolism. A doppler ultrasonic flow meter monitors your circulating bubbles, calculates your non detectable bubbles, and constantly computes, updates and displays what your ascent is going to look like. All your vital signs are monitored and displayed as well, and heat loss is prevented by the heating of the pressurized environment mixture."

"Christy and I had taken the MK-IXs to their rated nine hundred feet, but we know a couple of Navy guys who had worked at twelve fifty with them and were more comfortable and felt more at ease than in a WASP suit," Matt added reassuringly.

"Why Heliox and then Tri-Mix? Why not air or Nitrox?"

"Nitrogen narcosis commonly occurs at depths below a hundred feet and oxygen convulsions become a hazard around two hundred," Matt explained. "As far as Nitrox is concerned, reducing the nitrogen percentage increases the oxygen percentage which increases the risk of oxygen toxicity limiting the diver's ability to breath the mixture for more than a few minutes at extreme depths. NOAA's Nitrox-1 for example has an oxygen partial pressure of just under one point eight at only one hundred and fifty feet, at which depth you could work with it for about twenty five minutes max. The only thing Nitrox is used for is to increase the depth at which nitrogen narcosis occurs and to give you more bottom time on account of absorbing less nitrogen than when breathing air. For our needs of greater depths, the MK-IXs will start off on a mix of helium and oxygen, offering significant decompression advantages and eliminating the problem of narcosis. Heliox is less dense and is easier to breath as well."

"The computer's communication program will help clean up the Donald Duck effect!" Christy added as Matt went on. "However, helium is less soluble than nitrogen, so body tissues saturated with helium contain less gas, but the rate of absorption and elimination is more rapid, creating the potential for bubbles to form earlier during the ascent. So it warrants a deeper first decompression stop, but of course the MK-IX's computers will instruct us accordingly, as needed."

"OK, what about the Tri-Mix?"

"The MK-IX will switch us to breathing Tri-Mix when the inside pressure reaches seven point six atmospheres. That

usually means we're down around eight hundred feet, or about twenty five atmospheres external. Tri-Mix is nothing more than Heliox with the injection of a small amount of nitrogen. The amount will depend on your own individual requirement as measured by the life support computer. It is done to eliminate the symptoms of High Pressure Neurological Syndrome usually occurring close to three hundred feet, breathing Heliox. The depressant effect of the nitrogen counteracts the stimulating effects of HPNS, which is brought on by the pressure on the brain cells and the elevated levels of carbon dioxide. HPNS is no fun. You uncontrollably shake and twitch, lose coordination, become confused and drowsy. That's why we like the MK-IXs. On board with you is the best hyperbaric MD monitoring your every body function."

"How about just giving me a mild anesthetic and waking me up when we get there," Labarraque joked.

It was after nine, and the streets were dark. Matt turned the key and the three fifty roared to life.

"God, I wish it didn't make all this noise!" Matt shook his head while Christy laughed. They pulled into the lot behind the customs building and made a U turn.

There was a narrow laneway leading across to the ocean side, but they turned south instead, toward the Chalk's Airline terminal consisting of a ramp coming out of the water, a parking lot and an open ~~wooden~~ shack with a few benches. They drove to the south end of the island and picked up the road running north along the west beach. A little ways down they slowed near an empty lot and shut the lights off. They could clearly see the brightly lit drilling platform anchored offshore. Beams of floodlights illuminated the water all around. Three red strobes in a vertical progression reached to the top of the rig to warn aircraft.

Matt looked at Labarraque. He just shook his head. Without a word they continued to Jerry's house in the dark.

Jerry had just enough lights on to see what they were doing. He came out to guide them between some bushes to park near an aluminum door leading to a screened porch in the back of the house.

They shut the engine down and a peaceful silence enveloped them. Dogs barked and the sound of the surf washing the beach came in waves.

Jerry led them inside. There was a large circle, about fifteen feet in diameter and built up around with fieldstone, rising about two feet off the floor in the middle of the room. Nothing else. Just four mahogany wood paneled walls.

"I put the lawn chairs out. Figured you might need the room. And, there is your trail of breadcrumbs," Jerry smiled pointing at the spool of line Matt gave him laying on the ground with the line trailing up the side and down the hole. There was very little line left. Christy picked up the spool and started to count three foot increments from her left shoulder to the tip of her fingers on the end of her stretched out right arm.

Matt, Labarraque and Jerry stood quietly watching her.

"Less than a hundred feet left of the thousand," she said raising her eyebrows.

"Fine," said Matt shrugging his shoulders. "At least we know they're not deeper than a thousand. Besides, the blowhole could be meandering all over the place. Let's get on the ball!"

They both knew that blowholes did not meander much and were relatively straight up and down, maybe slightly slanted, but Matt didn't want Joe Labarraque conjuring up images of such depths and getting himself all worked up. He just wanted to get him down there where his mind could be occupied by the actual event, and hopefully strong enough to withstand the onslaught of anxiety that can sweep over the uninitiated with devastating effects.

They began to haul the contents of the van inside, all the while Matt wondering how the hell they were actually going to get in the hole all suited up. Getting in the water was usually accomplished by means of davits that lowered them in. The suits complete with pressure vessels and batteries out of the water weighed nearly two hundred pounds.

They unpacked the suits and assembled and attached the life support modules containing batteries and the breathing and environment gases. They had extra modules in case extended decompressing times became necessary.

Labarraque had not seen the suits up close before.

"Those are going to be my fingers?" he exclaimed looking at the mechanical hands at the end of the arms.

"Guaranteed to pinch a half inch steel cable in two," Matt looked up at him from his work. Jerry was coming through the door dragging a twelve foot piece of TV antenna tower and a length of four by four.

"Figured you'd be needing something to get yourselves down there. Hope this will do."

"I think so," Christy was nodding. "We'll put the four by four through the tower and lay it across the top of the well, letting the tower hang down to make a ladder. One thing's for sure, it'll be strong enough."

In another hour it was all set up, and they were suited up with their extra modules in place. Matt had a watertight container. In it were Labarraque's notes, some tools and underwater construction explosives he was hoping to put in place and later set off to close up the hole the Caribbean Seismological Authority had blasted into the side of the Wall.

They looked like they were going for a spacewalk. Matt did a final check of Labarraque and Christy's gear and she checked his. They began to help Labarraque install his helmet.

"When you lower it into place, keep your head straight and your eyes looking straight ahead not up or down, and without moving your shoulders roll your head back on your neck to allow the internal regulator to slide down in front of your face." Matt was demonstrating. "The mouth piece is much like a jet pilot wears covering your nose as well, except the pilot's is strapped on. When your suit is activated the regulator will slide back to come in firm contact with your face and will not let go. You can shake your

head inside the helmet, laugh, curse, do whatever you want, there is no way you can shake the regulator until you're either decompressed, or deactivated the suit in a pressure equal environment like a habitat. You can breath and exhale through either your mouth, your nose or both. Breathing is not on demand Joe! You breath when the suit gives you a breath, so your respiration is at a controlled rate. You can't hyperventilate, and if you pass out the MK-IX breaths for you. If you need to get sick, your regulator will automatically increase oxygen partial pressure until you're OK, and a continuous venting of the lower half of the regulator will be initiated until you're finished. Try to remember to breathe through your nose while puking."

"When Matt says if, he means to say when Joe!" Christy smirked at them sitting on the side of the hole. "The combination of the gases and the fact that the mixture is heated will induce vomiting if you're not used to it, even though they put something in the gas to keep it to a minimum."

"Thanks Christy. I'm looking forward to a good upchuck. Let me tell you, I have done a few interesting things in my life, but I must admit this beats all. Let's do it!"

They hugged Jerry, carefully wobbling around in the clumsy suits. Without words, he was just nodding his head. His face radiated with reassurance.

Christy installed her headgear twisting the helmet to snap into place. Matt helped her climb onto the antenna tower placed against the inside of the blowhole. The water was only about ten feet down. She lowered herself into the black liquid and was afloat. On the left arm of the suit above the wrist was the covered control panel consisting of a keypad. She flipped up the lid and activated the MK-IX. The computer did a self analysis and a check of the seals in less than three seconds. On the inside of her helmet, just above the clear bubble that allowed for peripheral line of sight, on a small screen, soft glowing green letters flashed by - ALL SYSTEMS CHECK : OK - ENVIRONMENT AND LIFE SUPPORT ACTIVATION COMMENCING -.

The screen began to fill with information. A pair of short, wide fins emerged from the bottom of the stubs that made up the boot part of the suit. She slowly sank letting the powerful light on her helmet scan the water below for a few seconds and she resurfaced. She pointed up her right arm and clicked the two calipers of the mechanical arm together twice, signaling that everything was OK. She kept the light on and Matt helped Labarraque down. The legs and feet, like an elephant's, were hard to maneuver and only the edge of the round boots fit onto the cross-members of the tower. He was finally in the water beside Christy. She switched off her light to keep from blinding him. He raised his arm and popped open the computer panel. The large keys glowed in the dark with their symbols well illuminated. Labarraque didn't even have to look. He knew what and where everything was by memory. That was the one thing Matt and Christy emphasized on. He had to be able to find any of the eight buttons without actually looking at them. Then he could call up a help screen on his monitor that

explained the different combinations used to trigger all the mechanical and computer functions. He was surprised how flexible the joints were now that he was in the water. The keypad on his arm was so easy to reach, he could actually feel and recognize every symbol on all the eight keys. He pushed the unique combination for the activation of his suit. Then he waited a second and swallowed. Secretly he really didn't ever care to breath anything other than nature's own mixture. The idea of a machine dictating his breathing didn't exactly thrill him. But, he was now so close to the Taino.

He pushed the long bar at the end of the keys. The self check message passed by above his eyes. He heard a series of faint clicks and hissing, like airlocks closing in a science fiction movie. He jerked as the regulator snapped over his face. Soft, pliable silicone stuck to his skin like a giant leach and didn't let go. In a second, cool, thin air forced its way down his throat. His chest rose and his stomach felt like being in a falling elevator. He felt himself rise inside the suit with each breath, his shoulders coming in contact with the soft padding. His lips and tongue were going numb. He wanted to breath faster but the damn thing wouldn't let him. He felt a thump on the side of his helmet and he heard the computer enhanced voice of Christy calling him.

"How are you doing? We're plugged into each other. How do you like it so far?"

He couldn't figure out how to talk, but somewhere in the back of his mind thoughts of plugging into Christy in a more pleasant way flickered for a moment. He must be doing all right, he thought to himself and petted her back with his arm.

"You're OK Joe. Read your signs. Your blood pressure is higher than a kite, but that's to be expected. Just don't fight it. Relax. Here is Matt."

He turned and noticed another soft glowing bubble. They all had a glowing red LED ring around their waists too.

"What do you say Joe? Ready to plunge to the depths?"

"Ready when you are Matt," he managed to say, surprising himself. His breathing was becoming more even and comfortable. The gas coming in was no longer cold. The numbness was leaving his mouth. He raised his eyes to his monitor. His heart rate was definitely dropping and his blood pressure was leveling off. On the other screen the internal pressure showed one ATA but the depth indicated thirty nine feet. Water temperature was dropping.

"Do you guys realize we're at forty feet?" he found himself say with no effort at all.

"We've been sinking straight down and dragging you with us," said Matt. "Call up your depth probe chart. Echo is bouncing back about fifty five feet below us. Must be a bend in the shaft or the wall diameter reduced somewhat. If you're up to flying solo, make sure your buoyancy compensation is on neutral automatic and we'll let you lose. It's time we began swimming from here on. Remember to pop your flippers."

"OK Matt, lets do it."



"I'll lead on and Christy will bring up the rear. Keep about six feet between us." Matt turned on his light. He had the shot-line sliding between his pinchers as he began to descend.

Their lights flooded brightness over the jagged, rocky walls for the first time since creation. Small, multicolored fish darted in and out of crevices looking larger and closer than they really were in the refracting, bending beam of light. The wall was teeming with life. Quivering and shifting it seemed as thousands of crawly creatures never before harassed scrambled to hide.

Seemingly the water had no substance. Absolutely transparent, they floated in it. Magical and mesmerizing, they could have easily forgotten which way was up or down. But the computers insisted the surface was rising away from them high above. They came to the ninety five foot spot, where the shaft narrowed to about ten feet but continued almost straight down.

Matt set his transducer to the narrowest beam and after staying very still for a moment, he managed to get a reading down to another hundred and sixty feet, but beyond that point the soundings just bounced off the walls. There was a single, but strong echo less than sixty feet ahead as if something was sticking out of the wall. They continued on. Water temperature was down to seventy two degrees.

Labarraque was fascinated. They were at a hundred and twenty feet and yet the internal environment of the suit was still at one atmosphere.

Slowly, in the distance Matt began to distinguish a faint, flickering light. He shut off his light and they stopped. Labarraque and Christy could now see lights too.

"I think I'll check what that is," Matt said. "You guys stay put until I get back."

"If it's all the same to you Matt," Labarraque sounded determined, "I didn't come to be left behind. You can't tell me you're leaving me here to look after Christy, it's more like she's staying behind to look after me. We all go!"

"OK," Matt said smiling to himself. "I'm picking up that echo right where the lights seem to be concentrating."

They moved on. At a hundred and thirty five feet they could clearly see the streams of lights rising from the deep and entering a wide hole in the side of the tunnel. Eerie shadows played on the walls all around them.

"What do you make of it Joe?" Matt asked.

"I don't know. Like nothing I've ever seen."

"Nothing in here is like anything we've ever seen that's for sure!" Christy said. "They're certainly not your everyday, run of the mill bioluminescent shrimp you see in the Gulf Stream." Suddenly, as they swam deeper, a small cluster of the lights broke away and headed for them. They whirled around each of them fast enough to create unbroken circles of lights like car headlights in slow motion photography. Their screens began flashing. - DANGER CONTROLS LOCKOUT INITIATED - HAZARD OF ELECTRICAL INTERFERENCE -

LIFE SUPPORT HOLDING AT MAX 142 FEET : ENVIRONMENT 01 ATA - ASCENT  
OK - DO NOT DESCEND -

"OK, we had this happen before getting too close to big permanent magnet motors of an old diesel electric sub," Christy tried to sound cool. "If there is electromagnetic interference, the system shuts down to minimum in order to avoid stray current impulses that could trigger false computer commands."

"Right," said Matt. "All we got to do is lose these electric whatever they are."

"Wait! They're slowing down. They're beginning to attach themselves to the support modules. They must like the batteries." The three of them just hovered motionless while the phosphorescent creatures ranging in sizes from five to ten inches neatly arranged themselves completely covering the modules containing the batteries and gases. Once stationary, they had the shape of cigars, and a see-through yellowish skin within which, bright glowing stars revolved around each other in the creature's body fluid. The glow was a bright white with a tinge of red, like sunlight dancing on the backs of small ripples on a pond in the late afternoon.

Matt saw flickers of orange bouncing off the sides of their helmets. He remembered his friend Jim Rucker of the US Naval Oceanographic Office once talking about how the water molecules so readily absorbed most of the longer wavelengths of light that we see. Like red, orange and on through to green. The shorter wavelengths such as blue and violet being so much easier for our eyes to distinguish under the depths. Yet, these creatures were far from the bluish glow so characteristic of anything alive producing light in the world's oceans. He also noted the slight rise in water temperature since they encountered the creatures.

"Incredible," Christy whispered. "They're huge."

Then the message on the screens changed. - CONTROLS LOCKOUT  
CANCELLED - ALL SYSTEMS CHECK : OK - RESUME OPERATION -

"I wasn't concerned!" said Labarraque with a sigh of relief.

"I was," Matt commented laughing.

As they sank deeper, nearing a hundred and fifty five feet, the hole in the side of the tunnel opened up, revealing a wide horizontal offshoot to the west, swallowing the myriad of brightly lit individuals.

"That tunnel is leading straight off shore," Christy commented.

"You're right," said Matt. "That's what was bouncing my soundings back earlier. If it curves deeper before it exits, it might be heading out to where the Daybreak is."

Following the lead of the rope they continued to descend amidst the millions of light-bugs rushing passed. The ones stuck to their modules remained, but there were no others attempting to attach themselves.

There was no need for the beam of their lamps anymore, and the light provided by the fast swimming creatures in a continuous streak became comforting.

They were reaching a hundred and ninety five feet. Matt wanted to check Labarraque before they hit below two hundred feet.

"In about ten feet your suit is going to start increasing pressure to assist the hull with the increasing exterior pressure. Remember when you blow against the regulator's inhale stroke to equalize, it does not know what you're doing. Think of it as trying to steal a chance to equalize. Don't screw up your ears! Descend only at the rate you're comfortable with. Once you get the hang of it you'll see how easy it really is. OK? Let's go."

A mixture of oxygen and neon began to build pressure inside the suits as they passed two hundred feet. It was no problem for Labarraque to equalize his ears. He just moved his jaws and blew little puffs through his nose against the incoming pressure of the regulator. His only problem to sound the alarm of anxiety came in the form of a nauseous feeling and the rising of the contents of his stomach. He fought the ever increasing urge to vomit.

Christy was still monitoring Labarraque's vital signs and trying to make no big deal of it.

"Why don't we stop here for a while and let this poor man get rid of his dinner," she offered.

"Don't fight it Joe. You'll feel like a new man as soon as it's all out," Matt said just as Labarraque lost it and began puking into his regulator, hacking and choking uncontrollably. There was. Not much Matt and Christy could do for him except to stay quiet and hope he can figure out how to breathe only through his nose while the regulator kept purging its lower half getting rid of the mess. Privacy was not a luxury available to Joe Labarraque, but rather he felt like he was puking, swallowing it and puking it out again, while on a telephone party line that he could not hang up. He almost had no time to be embarrassed though, before it was all over. He was breathing normally and was feeling a hundred percent better. "Hope I didn't get any on you," he said trying to make light of it.

"That's really crude Joe. Really crude," said Christy. "And here we were, not making any fun of you or anything."

"Just wait until he finds out it's all on the dive recorder," Matt cut in laughing as he motioned to began continuing their descent. Soon they were nearing six hundred feet. The MK-IXs' environment was now just over four atmospheres, as if they were diving in only one hundred feet of water. At this point they unlatched each other's extra life support modules and secured them to the nylon line as a backup, in case they needed them on the way up.

As the brightly glowing creatures streamed passed them with the intensity of a thousand headlights in a stampede, it was more and more difficult to see anything, especially fish and other living things that might have inhabited the walls of the tunnel as it relentlessly dropped deeper and deeper. Little life could be expected at these depths. Nearly blinded, they just kept sinking and sinking, following the shot-line.

Water temperature was rising drastically, soon surpassing the ninety degree mark. The MK-IXs discontinued heating the environment and breathing gases.

"These things must be emitting tremendous amounts of heat," Christy commented.

"Good. Helps conserving battery power," said Matt.

Sounding with the depth probes became useless.

Suddenly a faint sense of vibration enveloped them and they all turned to look at each other not wanting to break the silence with words. Like distant thunder, but felt more than heard. As if it came from just behind the walls of the tunnel. Then it was gone, slowly faded away. No one spoke.

They were at eight hundred feet, and have been under way for twenty eight minutes. The diameter of the shaft remained an almost uniform ten to eleven feet.

They were all expecting something to come into view, soon hopefully. Matt and Christy could not believe Labarraque. The man had nerves of steel and the stamina to go with it. That half hour would drain most people unfamiliar with the experience of such depths both physically and mentally, to the point of just wanting to abort and get out at any cost. But, not him.

Was it those blinding little suckers rushing passed that put them in such trance of tranquility, Matt thought trying to make sense of it all, knowing well Christy was thinking the same thing. Being engulfed in light rather than darkness had to have something to do with it, he thought.

It was becoming uncomfortable inside the suits due to the surrounding warm water. The MK-IXs were designed to handle the loss of body heat due to the drop in water temperature and not the contrary. Who would have ever considered ninety plus degree water anywhere a diver would use such a suit. The breathing mixture was cool enough to cause their throats to ache and at the same time their bodies began to perspire at an alarming rate. Sweat rolled down their foreheads and into their eyes, stinging, and no way to wipe them.

"This could become a serious situation and we have no way of dealing with it," Matt said.

"Sure as hell wouldn't expect anything to be able to produce heat this far down," said Christy with a sigh.

Matt computed what their ascent would look like after forty minutes if they had to get as far down as a thousand feet.

"I give us another ten minutes," he said, "and if things don't improve we're going up. We'll have our first decompression stop at six hundred and fifty feet. At that level we can live with the water temperature, but if we spend more time down here and have to start to decompress deeper, where it's warmer, we'll be screwed."

"These people do not live in the water, so if we can get ourselves out of the water I'm sure we'll cool down," Christy said.

"We'll just have to worry about the heat again on the way up, but I think we'll be alright if we get a break from it for a while." "Sounds good to me," said Labarraque "Besides, I'm not even half cooked yet."

"Hold it, we're at the end of our line," Matt suddenly jolted back, holding out his arm to avoid a collision with Labarraque.

"The line is tied to the wall and we're on the bottom. We would have seen it long ago if we weren't blinded. Nine hundred and thirty five feet. The tunnel does a complete one eighty from here

going straight up."

The tunnel diameter squeezed to about five feet at the bottom. One after the other they dipped under the hanging ledge to come up on the other side continuing upward. The word ASCENT began blinking on their screens to warn them to adhere to the MK-IX's instructions.

They just hovered standing upright and gazed up to what looked like the surface no more than fifteen feet above. Three narrow vertical cracks that seemed to reach down into the crust of the earth led off to the east, and were lit up with all the creatures moving through in an upward journey.

The MK-IXs were showing nearly a hundred degrees of water temperature. Slowly they raised a couple of feet upward in amazement. Even though they came down here expecting to find an underwater cavity, they could hardly believe their eyes now that it was realized.

"The pressure within the cave has to be more than the weight of the water just to keep from flooding it," Matt explained for the sake of Labarraque, "so when we emerge we will be entering an atmosphere that is greater than the water we're getting out of. Theoretically our life support should remain operational, but certain sensors such as water temperature, salinity content and the depth probes will all dry up and go haywire."

"We're at nine hundred and ten feet. I get almost six hours of total ascent time as far as decompressing is concerned if we spend another thirty minutes here," said Christy.

"We have plenty of gas and batteries with the extra modules," Matt added.

"Thirty minutes?" Labarraque murmured. "Just thirty minutes? I didn't realize how little time we would have."

"We didn't come to sightsee Joe," Matt turned to Labarraque. "We find out what we have to, and we get out. I'm sorry. Now let's get with it!"

Approaching the water surface they rose above the lighted creatures and visibility became a hundred percent again. They retracted their flippers and adjusted buoyancy to the negative. With hearts pounding they walked on the obviously manmade stairway carved flat into the rock. Matt and Christy had no idea how their equipment was going to handle this. It was not intended for cave diving, but when Matt consulted Dr. Thalmann, he said, "Pressure is pressure, you should get along OK. I can hardly wait to study your dive recorders!"

They walked erect, slowly rising from the water. The weight of the suits now became a burden they all had missed to consider. But, it failed to fully register as their eyes beheld a world that dreams are made of. As far as they could see, all around in a hundred and eighty degree semicircle were flatlands and hills gently sloping, covered in green and purple vegetation. Circles of flower gardens and orchards containing a multitude of colors dotted the landscape. All was sharp and clear like a touched up color photograph.

Narrow strips of shimmering, silver rivers teaming with the light creatures divided the land and meandered all through. High above

they reflected from a ceiling studded with quartz, dark blue azurite and green apophyllite. Enormous, puffy dark brown tubes looking like giant fungus hung from roots amongst the crystals.

Matt, Christy and Labarraque were awestruck. They began slowly walking a well worn trail leading through a thicket of shrubs that grew a fruit they swore looked like big juicy plums. Then Christy noticed and said, "Konco! There is konco clinging to everything!" They recognized the fuzzy little leaves all over the place.

"The konco must play a major role in the sustenance of all plant life down here. Dr. Varadi's theories were correct.

With a cumbersome effort they wobbled on. The screens of the MK- IX's flashed unintelligible messages regarding the outside environment, but it all went unnoticed. They reached the edge of one of the creeks. The path followed the serpentine as it glowed brightly teeming with millions of the light creatures rushing along. On the other side of the trail were orchards of trees growing a variety of fruit they could not recognize. Among the trees, carrying woven baskets were small, dark skinned humans moving about dressed in long, flowing, multicolored silk like cloth tied around their waist. They were gently, lovingly caressing leaves and young branches which seemed to reach out for their attention. They made no eye contact and completely disregarded Matt, Christy and Labarraque staring.

"My God," Christy whispered as she watched what looked like a large bread fruit, seemingly just releasing itself from its branch as a woman with long, slim arms reached up and cupped her small hands under it.

One of the huge tubular shaped fungus hanging down behind the orchard wriggled and puffed up inflating itself even larger.

The river now jutted off to the right and the trail led toward a clearing elevating slightly to a hilltop. There were large parcels of tended fields of some sort of grain. A man with his back to them stood at the top waiting. He began walking down the other side once they were closer, as if he was showing the way.

They realized the suits had cooled and they were comfortable. Alarmed at how long they had taken so far, Matt and Christy were surprised to find only six minutes had gone by since they emerged. It felt infinitely longer. Silently they continued on.

They reached over the top of the hill and down the other side to the edge of a small village. Living mangrove roots thick with konco formed the vertical walls making up all shapes and sizes of roofless rooms and partitions atop short, thick green moss covered ground. Narrow vanes of creeks filled with the bright light creatures cut through the land everywhere. Like the walls of the dwellings, living mangrove roots were fashioned into small bridges across the creeks.

Matt and Christy looked at Labarraque standing there. A smile looking incredibly out of place rounded the big man's

hard, chiseled features.

"This is not a five hundred year old Taino village," he said softly.

"You don't look disappointed Joe," Christy commented.

"This is more than I could ever dream. We are seeing a society who learned, or evolved to live as one with its environment. There is a spiritual connection here between man and everything that is alive around him. This is man's salvation. And this is the proof that he can do it."

"I get a feeling," said Matt in a somber tone, "it may not be so easy up where we live."

"From these people we could learn," said Labarraque making the impression that it would probably never happen.

Ahead, the trail widened and led to a large clearing. There was a well of some sort off to the side. Steam rose from it and a man raised and lowered a weighted down basket. Women set on ground resembling a fine clay tennis court, and were engaged in weaving baskets and containers. They were small in stature and very slim, but all well toned and muscular. Even the oldest of the women looked in great shape, their bronze skin healthy and tight on their firm bodies. There was no sign of jewelry, body piercing or paint. Some of the women in their hair wore pieces of dried mangrove forming intricate designs and painted in various colors that complemented their garment worn below the waist. No one raised their eyes to Matt, Christy and Labarraque.

As they reached the end of the clearing they noticed some women in the distance quickly gathering beneath one of the very swollen fungi hanging from above. They carried a large diameter round net. Suddenly the fungus erupted with a loud crack spewing its spores upon the net. They could feel the wave of its powerful air as it swept passed them.

"The thunder we heard in the blow hole." said Matt.

"A very big, upside down, hanging mushroom," commented Christy, "resembling a Velutinum. A rare fungus. Pretty small, grows mainly on the west coast."

They turned and noticed the man they first saw with his back to them on top of the hill. He was standing at the entrance to the largest building visible. It was also the only one not round but rather triangular in shape. Matt, Christy and Labarraque made their way to the arched opening. Inside, along each of the three walls set an older man facing them and with their backs stood some younger ones and some women. Unmistakable kindness and hospitality radiated from the three elder's face. The room was filled with overwhelming peace and contentment. Even Matt and Labarraque could clearly feel it. The elders rose and approached within a few feet just staring into their visitors' eyes.

Somehow, these moments which might have otherwise been very awkward, had passed with ease and Matt, Christy and Labarraque soon felt as if they'd known the Taino leaders for some time and could be comfortable in their presence. The others now turned to face them and had taken positions sitting down against the

walls. The elders motioned for them to step into the middle of the building. There was a circular seating arrangement made of bamboo type, usually steam-bent, fashioned wood.

With great difficulty they managed to come close to sitting in the stiff suits.

There was a well, like the one they saw earlier walking through the clearing where the basket makers worked. A young woman whose long shiny black hair hung braided through a series of mangrove roots grown in a figure eight and painted bright yellow, hauled away at a long rope and finally retrieved a steaming, covered basket.

"I think she's about to serve us our welcome meal," Christy whispered cautiously. "We better do something!"

"Joe, it's your show." Matt said opening the container he was carrying and handing Labarraque his note book. "Try and excuse us without offending anyone."

"That would not be the case here," said Labarraque somewhat irritated. He carefully drew some figures on his slate board and handed it to one of the elders. The three men smiled warmly and one wiped the board clean, wrote on it and handed it back. It only took Labarraque a few seconds looking through his notes and turned to Matt and Christy.

"They know we can't leave the suits and remarkably enough, they understand why. The serving of the food will symbolize how they wish we could partake in it. That's all. They believe the food they grow would bring us closer to an understanding about each other and strengthen all of us spiritually during our dialogue. They are sorry that it cannot be so, but understand at the same time.

They think Christy especially would have a better understanding and thus gain considerable growth in her own consciousness. They thought of us as the ones who destroy everything good and understand nothing. But, now they know we just never had the unique opportunity they have had at one point in time. We all slowly struggle to grow inside, they say. They trust us, the three of us that is, they say, now, because we made the effort to be here and brought no harm."

As Labarraque's words came out, Christy seemed to know just what he was about to say. And more, she heard the elders silently communicating something meant only for her. But like a dream that too had just slipped from memory, she couldn't remember anything. "Ask them more specifically what the problem is and how we can help Joe." Matt felt so at ease, almost too relaxed. Was he drifting off into a daydream? His training and his experience were dictating him to snap out of it. Time was of great concern. The slate was handed back and forth again. Then he heard Labarraque talking.

"The lights in the water, they call them Kua Niccu. Babies of the Star or Children of the Sun. Something like that. Without them life would not exist down here. They are I guess a species of squid, a biological entity. They breed in one of the other chambers and somehow they collect what minuscule amount of solar radiation makes it down this far. They take a long time to mature, at which point they enter this chamber. The hanging mushrooms have roots that



reach to the surface to collect air and assimilate oxygen which they pump into this chamber to carry their spores. The Kua Niccu thrive in the over oxygenated water and finish their life cycle by shedding their collected energy here in a big way, as we can see. The machines moving through the chambers attract the Kua Niccu which follow them and die off in the process at a faster rate than their reproduction can handle. In other words they're on the endangered species list and going fast! The mushrooms, the mangroves and all other vegetation need the Kua Niccu. Without it, it all dies. And, the Taino has no other place to go. They lived here for a long time. Their society, the care and nurturing they provide for the things that live and grow down here, their physiology, everything about their existence has evolved into being an interactive part of this chamber."

## PART 25

Matt and Christy sat in the salon of the Rose drinking coffee discussing their plan with Jerry. The seven hours of sleep they allowed themselves was not enough. They were still exhausted.

"We made them understand that we will seal up the hole once we have taken care of the rest of the operation," Matt explained. "We got directions from the Traveler and on the way back we made a little side trip and placed the charges."

"That's not something we're going to tell many people," Christy snickered.

"No. No one's going to know about that," said Matt. "We're going to seal up the hole. No one will be the wiser."

Christy poured more coffee as Matt went on. "We're using Urinov charges. They are widely used in under water construction. They deliver a directional punch that in the hands of an expert can be used with amazing control and accuracy. I'm not an expert but I think with a little luck we will achieve two things. We'll blast the Bahamas Daybreak clear away from the Wall, and jam the hole full of debris as if it was never there."

"My Indian brothers embrace you and the Princess with eternal love for what you're doing." Jerry spoke nodding his head.

"We're going to need you as our back up Jerry," said Matt. "We already set the charges for a thirty minute countdown and they'll be set off remotely from an ultra sonic transmitter. The transmitter self activates when dropped in the water within a two thousand foot perimeter of the Urinovs. I plan to get back here and out to the rig as soon as we have Bluffers Cay secured. I'll make sure there are no divers in the water and drop the transmitter. Keep an eye on things for a half an hour and bingo, it's all over. On the other hand, if something happens to me and Christy the hole still has to be closed. That's why you'll have the second transmitter and we've got a sat com module for you. If you don't hear from us in time you get out there, as close to the rig as you can, and drop the transmitter. The place will be crawling with agents, you'll have to insist to be taken to whoever is in charge and you tell them you mined the place. They'll have what's left of the thirty minutes to get their divers out of the water."

"A lot of creatures will perish in the shockwave unfortunately," said Christy, "and so will any diver within a half mile radius." "You have to be convincing when you tell them you're going to blow the Daybreak and then you'll have to defend your actions later."

Matt placed the small yellow cylindrical shaped transmitter in front of Jerry on the table.

"Don't worry Matt. I'm an old man who can get away with things around here. I'll just say I blew it up 'cause I couldn't see the ugly rusty thing sitting there on top of that lovely reef anymore."

Two hours later they were making twenty five knots on a southerly course heading for the Santaren Channel that would eventually hook up with the Old Bahama Channel skirting the north east coast of Cuba. Captain Janis was instructed to make full steam on the shortest route to a point in the northern edge of the Windward Passage at twenty degrees fifty minutes north and seventy three degrees fifty minutes west. The men aboard the yacht went about readying gear and checking the weapons. Labarraque set around quietly, unable to think of anything but the Taino. When he agreed to Matt's request of not making any notes he knew he didn't need to. He would do it later. He also knew this was his big chance to regain his good standing in the scientific community by giving the world the greatest artifact ever unearthed, a tribe of living, breathing history. He said all the things Matt and Christy wanted to hear, but as they emerged from the water nine hundred feet below the surface and his eyes beheld the landscape deep beneath Bimini, he planned to return someday soon, showing off his discovery to the rest of the world.

Then, it all began to take on a whole different perspective. As the gentle leaders scribed the images upon his slate board he felt as if he had done this before. But, not on the mountain in Cuba. He understood the images before even consulting his notes. As much time as he did spend studying the Taino calendar, he knew it never gave him the knowledge and understanding he somehow received just standing there amongst the Taino people in their triangular meeting room. That understanding suddenly and drastically changed his outlook on life along with his ambitions. Like some great wisdom was bestowed upon him. He knew everything about the Taino who died five hundred years ago, and everything about the Taino now alive beneath the ocean. And, he no longer felt the need to share any of it with the world.

A call came in on the cell phone from Tony Gibson with the good news.

"Johnstone is out of the coma, but we're not releasing it to the media," he explained. "Right now he has no clue who he is or what happened. Dr. Borden however says he'll regain all of his memory with time. About the only thing we can get out of him is some letters and numbers he keeps repeating. We thought they might have been his serial numbers back in Nam, but that didn't check out."

"What are they?" Matt asked.

"Kilo uniform six niner two zero."

"This is a long shot but it sounds like a boat or aircraft registration number or radio call sign," said Matt after a couple of seconds of silence.

"That's something we never thought of. I'll be in touch soon as something breaks." Gibson hung up.

Matt and Christy spent the good part of the twenty one hours it took for the Rose to cover the five hundred and ten miles sleeping. They were finishing a late lunch when Captain Janis reported being hailed by the warship USS Mitscher.

"I wasn't quite sure if I should break our radio Silence."

"Right on," said Matt with relief. "No problem. I've been expecting it. Please send a message that I will be contacting Commander Balaconis via sat com. Use low power on the VHF Ron!"

Matt set down at the yacht's navigation station and entered the secure frequency reserved for the Mitscher's Commanding Officer.

"Commander, It's damn good to hear from you. Wasn't sure you could make it."

"Was somewhat of a short notice all right!" Balaconis replied. "How is that wonderful wife of yours?"

"She's just fine Roy, and is looking forward to seeing you again. How is Susan and the girls?"

"They're all out in California visiting the in-laws. I was ten miles out of Nassau headed for Norfolk so I can get my own ass on a plane and join them, when Buttler called. Matt, it better be good and it better be short!"

"Sorry Commander. I tried to get the Miami, she's not far from here working under the AUTECH buoy but Commander Jones didn't think there was enough water to get his boat where we need to go. If I knew more about subs I would have known he was too big. So, Art said you carry a small submersible."

"Roger on the sub and I know what you're up to. Buttler filled me in. I'm sitting a couple of miles outside of their radar range. Nobody else out here, although we did mark a Defense Force hundred footer in the Caicos Passage on a westerly heading. We've had you on radar for about fifteen minutes. You need to take up a due east heading and you'll have a visual on us in thirty minutes. Stay about five hundred yards off my bow. I'll send a tender to your vessel. You and Miss Christy have permission to come aboard."

"I thank you Commander!" Matt put the mike down. He thought about the man's incredible career. One of the finest and one of the brightest in the Navy, now in command of a nuclear armed, Arleigh Burke Class destroyer.

He met Roy Balaconis back in the eighties while he was still in the service. Balaconis, then a lieutenant, served as Combat System Officer aboard the USS Elliot. Matt and his men were assigned to assist aboard the Elliot during the search and rescue operations conducted for the survivors of the Korean Air Liner, the KAL 7 shoot down. They became friends, keeping in touch as much as their schedules allowed. Balaconis went on to earn his Masters of Science in Weapon System Engineering and served as Executive Officer aboard the USS Bunker Hill. Bunker Hill responded to the Colonel Higgins hostage crisis and later supported Operation Desert Shield earning a Navy Unit Commendation. In 1991, Balaconis as Current Operations Action Officer, was the principal adviser to Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of Defense for Tomahawk strikes against Iraq. Then, after active involvement during construction, he assumed command of the Mitscher upon her commissioning in December of 1994.

As Matt took the few steps toward the wheelhouse to instruct Ron Janis of the course change he wondered if the rest of the men aboard the San Antone Rose would realize the magnitude of the rendezvous with the newest ship in the deadliest, most capable class of AEGIS guided missile destroyers in the world.

They all crowded around the helm as the great warship, the length of two football fields grew closer over the horizon.

"She sure is a sight to behold," commented O'Grady who almost never had anything to say.

"DDG 57 boasts greater firepower and accuracy than any combat system in recorded history," Matt began to brag as if the ship was his own. "Balaconis can hit a stop sign more than a thousand miles away with one of her Tomahawks. He's got sonar that can detect a sub hundreds of miles away and take it out with his Harpoon Antiships, and his Close-in System can fire forty five hundred rounds a minute to destroy incomings. She carries a five inch deck gun with a range of more than ten miles. Her SPY-ID Phased Array Radar, believe it or not, can detect objects smaller than a bumble bee travelling past the speed of sound at altitudes many times higher than commercial airliners fly. And, let me tell you that's all very conservative since her true ranges and limits are classified. I know she can do zero to thirty two knots in under two minutes and cruise in excess of thirty knots. Well in excess of, I would think. Not bad for eight thousand ton net displacement. Mind you, she's got four LM-2500 gas turbines for engines, generating a hundred thousand horsepower combined. Those are the engines that fly jumbo jets!"

"Now there is an engine room I wouldn't mind to take a peek at," Janis said glancing at Matt.

"Don't hold your breath Ron! I've known the man for fifteen years and I know I'll never see her machinery as long as it's classified."

"I guess that's only right," Janis smiled as he throttled down and disengaged the autopilot driving the San Antone Rose.

They set like a tiny speck in the ocean with the huge bows of the destroyer looming over them five hundred yards away as instructed. Huge anvil shaped thunder clouds were building in the distance signaling the onset of the usual afternoon storms, and a stiff breeze began to blow from the south east. A tender was already lowered beside the ship and soon it was under way to the yacht.

"I'm going over to the Mitscher to discuss my plan of action in detail with the CO," Matt said. "I plan on bringing the submersible along side of the Rose to load our equipment, so let's make sure everything is ready to load when I get back. I don't intend to be longer than I have to. I'd like to be under way by eighteen hundred hours. Bluffers is twenty miles away, could take up to three hours to get there."

The diesel powered twenty six foot Zodiac was pulling up beside the Rose. The two seamen gave a salute to Matt as he climbed in. Of course they had no idea what this maneuver was all about.

## PART 26

The Mitscher was on her way back from recent deep sea trials of the first of a new class of US attack subs, the USS Seawolf. The Mitscher was there to provide escort for the number of surface support ships. She carried one of the two Deep-Submergence Rescue Vehicles on scene. This little submarine is just what Matt needed to get to where a full size one could not go to.

They ran seventy feet below the surface. The three man crew of the DSRV talked little and asked not a question. Once the boat was trimmed and level there was almost no sensation of motion. The sun had little effect on the water as it began to ride low, far away on the western horizon. The ocean, like a dense, azure universe parted around the glass dome before the two pilots in the beam of powerful lights. The third man was arranging gear near the small airlock with a practiced touch of a cat burglar not making the slightest of noise.

"Habits from a bigger boat?" Christy whispered smiling at him. "Four years on the San Juan and a couple of more on the Groton. I lower the toilet seat gently even at my house." His voice was hushed.

"One quarter mile to your position Commander and closing," the pilot looked back at Matt.

"At your convenience Captain. Anywhere around here is good enough for me." Matt had calculated a rough position near the southern tip of the island. The Taino Traveler had described to Labarraque in surprisingly accurate detail, a small, horseshoe shaped reef.

Matt had no problem locating the place on the chart.

They could see the outer perimeter of the reef. The ballast tanks were dumping water. They were coming up fast. The odd, faint popping noise from the expanding hull signaled the decrease in water pressure. The DSRV came to rest on the bottom in fifteen feet of water. Two at a time they entered the small airlock, suited up and exited the boat. Matt in the company of Lewis was the last to leave. He shook hands with the crew and thanked them as they wished him good luck.

Knowing they were going to be working in shallow water, Matt and Christy opted for the use of closed circuit re-breathers, which were less cumbersome than compressed air, and offered hours of gas supply. Everyone had the burden of towing a neutrally buoyant capsule containing first aid, guns, ammo, tools, boots and bullet proof vests.

Darkness was upon the waters. The faint swishing sound of the DSRV's propeller quickly faded as she dove on her reciprocal course. There were no air bubbles to break the silence, which to Labarraque and Zein, who never used rebreathers before felt out of place and eerie. Matt was in lead following a compass course that would eventually put them face to face with the south curve of the horseshoe reef. Hugging the swaying fan corals, with only one light directed toward the bottom to remain undetectable from ashore, they skirted to the west looking for the inside. As it was deeper in here, they could afford to use their lights more liberally. Matt motioned to spread out and look around. The inside of the reef was not battered by waves as the outside and elkhorn, staghorn, finger coral and tube sponges were everywhere. Groupers slept in holes not bothered by the probing lights and lobsters retreated backing under ledges.

O'Grady signaled for everyone's attention. He was hovering at the mouth of a cave whose ceiling rose nearly half way to the surface. He swam inside with Matt and Christy following. The hole stretched back a good fifty feet. At the very back, two of the biggest groupers they had ever seen stared back at them. In the middle set two boats, each about twenty feet and resembling rather beamy canoes. They had long up-curving bows and stern, and were made of bamboo or mangrove stocks. Thinner branches grew out of and hugged tightly around the thick longitudinal pieces, weaving all through them, holding them all together structurally. It all looked like nature just grew it that way. Matt, Christy and Labarraque knew it was the intervention of the Taino who painstakingly and with great skill influenced the natural growth patterns to their needs. There were four long oars inside each boat, and boat and all was held from floating up by two heavy, doughnut shaped piece of brain coral the size of a small car tire. The brain coral too, looked as if it grew all naturally, with the hole in the middle.

Someone on the outside was clanging a dive knife on his oxygen bottle with urgency. It was Zein. In the beam of his light, not quite touching the bottom with his feet levitated a naked man with his eyes closed. Zein lowered the light and the man opened his eyes. Like the Traveler they met under Bimini, he was somewhat shorter, and his muscles not nearly as pronounced as the other Taino. His age was hard to tell as with all of them except the adolescent. Matt, Christy and Labarraque froze awestruck at the site. The man turned in slow motion and began swimming away from the reef toward shore.

Arms at his side and legs together with grace and fluid motion he moved through the water effortlessly. They followed and wondered how long can he hold his breath and how did he know they were there. They moved in an easterly direction along the jagged volcanic shore just out far enough not to have to dodge the sharp outcroppings. They came to a narrow ledge a few feet below the surface. The Traveler stopped to face them. He held out his arms straight with the palm of his hands facing each other, drew them slowly together until they almost touched, and turned to disappear under the ledge. It took only a second or two for everyone to realize what he was trying to say. This was a narrow place where they could not fit through with the BCs holding oxygen bottles and a series of valves on the front and the scrubbers on the back. They wiggled from the BCs and one by one slid under the ledge behind Matt more or less crawling in negative buoyancy. They had to hold onto their lights, float the BCs ahead of them and haul the containers behind in a tunnel that was wide but nowhere more than two feet in height. It was a slow and agonizing process, their hoses and wetsuits getting constantly caught up on sharp lava formations hanging down or sticking up everywhere. After three hundred feet and what felt like eternity they plopped out into a wide, round chamber. They donned their BCs relieved to be neutrally buoyant and at ease in the water again. They shone their lights all around. The traveler was nowhere. There was no way out of the chamber other than the same way they came in. Disoriented and confused they almost didn't notice the surface only a few feet above. They rose cautiously. Heads out of the water and looking up they could clearly see a circle of black, star studded sky. It was a blow hole. Around the perimeter of the chamber they could clearly discern a tide line of about two and a half foot range and a dry cave stretching back about thirty feet with high ceilings. Matt found a spot that looked about the best for getting out and carefully climbed up. Everything was razor sharp dark gray lava formation. He unclipped his spare oxygen bottle and used it to break off some of the most offending protrusions and helped everyone out of the water.

"You're already bleeding. We must be doing something right," Christy mused looking at his torn wet suit and a nasty gash on his knee cap.

"Just puts him in the spirit of things and makes him meaner!" said Lewis getting out of his BC.

Matt had included steel shank work boots in all of their containers and it was time to dig them out and put them on. He also had a battery operated fluorescent lamp he switched on and placed on the ground. They could now see the entire interior of the cave. There was a tunnel opening at the back. The Traveller in the company of four others stood nearby, all barefoot on the sharp rock. Labarraque prepared a slate board with greetings and approached them.



Christy was having a weird experience. She thought she saw a pinkish, smoke-like glow that swirled around the Travelers. She didn't see it while looking at them, but when she turned to look at something else it caught her eyes. Maybe it was an optical illusion caused by the fluorescent light, she thought, but when she looked their way again, just from the corner of her eyes, it was there. Denser around the feet and along the arms where they stood close to each other.

Labarraque turned as they all gathered around. "We can breathe from here on. One of the Taino will guide us to the back of the complex." He motioned at a man stepping forth.

"I need two of us on the outside to get in from the docks while the rest of us come from behind, and to send a message from the surface to Bob Delaney in Miami when we're in position and ready to go in," said Matt. "Also, don't forget to tell them we're going to blow the tunnels closest to the complex and they need to get out." Labarraque was drawing on the board as Christy spoke up. "I don't know how I know this, but we can get to the surface halfway between here and the complex. That's how they got to me the last time we were here. He'll show us where it is."

The Traveler placed his hand on Labarraque's slate board as if signaling, no need to say more, and he smiled and bowed his head to Christy.

"Are you sure they understand what we need to do?" asked Matt raising his eyebrows at her.

"They understand Matt," said Christy.

"I think they know what goes on before it happens," Labarraque murmured clipping the board back on his belt. Zein, O'Grady and Lewis just looked at each other. The Taino Traveler seemingly floating across the jagged ground entered the tunnel. Christy gently pulled Matt back by the arm as they began to follow. "I hear them talking to me. Most of it is like a dream that you just had but already forgot, but some is much clearer. I really do feel their thoughts Matt. I did down in the village too."

Matt smiled and squeezed her hand. They followed their friends. Some places the tunnel narrowed or lowered to the point that they had to crouch down on hands and knees to get through. They still had their containers. Matt wanted to keep them as long as possible since they contained fresh batteries for the lights, first aid kits and refreshments as well, besides the weapons and ammunition.

They were going deeper underground and the water level was rising. Soon it was above their knees, making it exhausting to walk. The Traveler's pace didn't change though. Eventually he slowed so they could keep up. They turned into a wider tunnel heading west and passed many others on either side. Dry and higher ground followed for a bit, but suddenly the water rose again and was up to their chest.

"I thought you said no more water!" Matt yelled at Labarraque in mock anger.

"I did no such thing! I said we could breathe!"

Their only choice was to swim. A half a mile later they were still swimming. Eventually the Traveler led them out of the water climbing up to an opening into a wide tunnel. They'd been under way walking, climbing, crawling and swimming for over an hour. A quarter of a mile away they came to another wide tunnel. Christy thought she knew where they were. The Traveler asked for the slate board.

"Leads to the outside near the basin where the ships dock," Labarraque pointed at the tunnel reading the board.

According to the plan, Lewis and O'Grady would be going in from the outside. Their job was to prevent Karl Dunitschek's possible escape in a boat and to provide a frontal assault on the complex if needed. After spending time studying Dunitschek's records and mug shots they knew they could easily pick the man out in a crowd. His capture was the second most important objective. Number one was to destroy the complex and the artificial tunnel leading under the island. Matt knew they could have blown the whole place to kingdom come, planting the charges with the help of the Taino guide, but he wanted to spare as many lives as possible, especially those of the scientists, engineers and administrative staff. Not to mention what the live capture of Dunitschek meant to him.

"You guys lay low until you hear from us Tom!" Matt called after the two men as they were ready to disappear. "You'd be vastly outnumbered and very open if they spot you on the dock before we take some of them out inside!"

"Aye aye Sir!" Lewis joked with a big salute. "We won't move unless our friend Karl invites us out for breakfast." They faded into the darkness of the tunnel. They had good schematics of the place derived from satellite pictures and Matt's memory, and had the gear to scale the top of the docks.

Matt, Christy, Labarraque and Zein continued on with the Traveler. After a half an hour of dry, relatively easy walk they passed a large crater. The sound of fast running water came from below and they looked with the flashlights. It was a wide river of frothing water. Had to be connected with the artificial viaduct from the outside for the tide to move through that fast, Matt thought.

"This has to be the main waterway they're using," he commented looking down at the black water. "The one I had the displeasure of being dumped into."

The tunnel curved to the left and they followed it slowly losing the sound of the water for a while and then picking it up again getting stronger and stronger. They came to a very small opening on the left and the Taino motioned for them to get in. Matt said he'd take a look first and crawled in on hands and knees. He was back in seconds.

"We're there," he said getting up. "Twenty feet in puts us right on top of the main waterway not far from the dock leading into the facility. Thank this man for getting us here Joe and again, make sure he gets his people out of these tunnels. I'm planning on

setting one hour charges, starting right here."

Before Labarraque could write anything, the Traveler took the slate board and with large strokes he slowly drew only two groups of symbols, and was gone before Labarraque finished the interpretation. "He is grateful for our presence here. He wishes us a long and spiritually fulfilling experience in this lifetime."

The Taino man closed his eyes and bowed his head as he passed Christy. She sensed him moving farther and farther away in the tunnel but still she could see bits and pieces of his thoughts. She saw a number of Taino men with the speed and grace of a seal approaching in a dark, water filled place of sheer terror. Matt was there, and another man. Then, a magnificent beach. A beach she knew all about, and a little brown dog with a big smile and a red bandanna on. Then, it all slipped away her.

At Matt's instructions they opened the containers and loaded the assault rifles, stuffing extra magazines in their wetsuit. They all had a tiny, waterproof walkie-talkie and night vision goggles. Matt had a tube packed with the explosives ready to deploy, with a one hour countdown ready to activate with the simple push of a button. Matt had never gone on a mission without packing some rope and now he was glad he included a piece of three eights, forty feet long in everyone's package. He tied the four pieces together to make up a hundred and sixty feet, coiled it up neatly and put it around his neck. He crawled in first and they followed. There was a small ledge hanging over the water, long enough for everyone to take up position. There was light coming from the inside of the complex, enough to see the water rushing passed below. They wondered how they would get across and to the ramp. It was just far enough away to make it impossible to swim up to it against the current.

"I can do it," said Christy hanging her gun, radio and goggles on an outcropping and taking off her boots and vest, knowing exactly what Matt had in mind. "Don't forget my ammo," she said unloading the front of her wetsuit.

Matt tied one end of the rope around her waist, ready to pay the rest of it out if she made any progress. She climbed forward on the ledge as far as she could and made a deep dive into the middle of the rushing water slicing her toes on the sharp rock as she kicked away. After a long while she emerged a good twenty feet upstream from where she hit the water, but the other sixty feet or so was not going to be that easy. Her strong arms beat away at the water with agonizingly slow effect. Labarraque and Zein were amazed that she made any headway at all. But, she was doing it, gulping a big breath of air and burying her head and shoulders into the water, gaining ground and raising her head again for air. If someone walked out near the ramp they surely would have seen her. Matt had a rifle ready to cover her, but he knew it would be game over for all of them. The minutes ticked by, the water parted and rushed passed Christy's body, and her arms began to ache with intensity she'd never experienced before. She knew she was passed her limits, driving herself too fast but she couldn't afford to slow. On the ledge the men stared in frustration, unable to do anything but pray she makes it before someone comes. Matt already tied the end of the rope to the wall and was ready to jump after

her expecting her to pass out and be swept downstream any minute. Never slowing though, she kept punching away and slowly, but surely getting there. She still had a good thirty feet to cover. She was beginning to lose consciousness of the pain, the water around her and the rhythm of her breathing, but she knew well enough what she had to do and kept doing it. The ramp was getting closer and closer. She couldn't raise her head enough to look ahead, but she knew it was there and it was coming toward her. In her mind she could see it. Flashes of the Taino Traveler zoomed in and out of her thoughts. She somehow knew she was pulling in energy and gaining strength from him. Then the water began to yield and she felt her body picking up momentum. She knew she could slow up now a little at a time. She was pulling out of the grip of the tide, perpendicular to it, away to the side and nearing the ramp. Soon she was crawling on all fours out of the water, collapsing on the slimy concrete, rolling on her back, throwing her arms out to the side and silently laughing like mad. Her mouth wide open and her chest rising with each deep breath, eyes looking at, but not really seeing the ceiling above her, she laid there in complete euphoria.

"Unbelievable," Neil Zein broke the silence of the men, shaking his head. Matt tugged on the rope and Christy finally set up, smirked and stuck her tongue out at them. Sliding around on the slope of the ramp she found a ring sticking out of the concrete and tied the rope to it.

Matt was the first to cross, taking Christy's gear with him. Pulling himself along, he couldn't believe she actually swam against that current. Helping him get out, she slipped and fell right into his arms.

"You are an amazing woman," he whispered after a long kiss.

"I think I had help," she whispered back.

Labarraque and Zein made it across. It was a little after midnight. Weapons ready they cautiously moved in. Matt remembered the place well, he knew the tunnel from the ramp and the dock led to the circular room with the ocean in the middle and the doors and other tunnels leading off in all directions. Behind one of those doors was the control room and security monitors. But how many people were going to be working at this time of the night?

Matt was hoping security would be lax. He tried raising Lewis and O'Grady, worried that the signal may not get through. He was surprised when it did.

"We're in position." O'Grady's voice came crackled but readable.

"I'm on the south dock and Tom is across from me on the north."

"Nobody comes or goes without our permission Commander!" said Lewis in his usual half laughing Newfie manner he never lost all these years.

"We've got a Sea King on the helo pad, about a hundred and fifty foot freighter MV Rosa Maria with Bolivian registry and a bunch of amigos partying aboard, a fifty two foot Midnight Lace and a lot of small runabouts," O'Grady came back. "Permission to scuttle the runabouts. We could manage the people better if they didn't scatter everywhere in the damn things. They're under the docks where the lights don't shine, nobody would miss them. Besides, the turkeys they've got for guards are too busy snoozing and smoking. So far we saw not one regular patrol. I think you were right Matt. They're not expecting any visitors."

"OK, deep six the boats Mitch," Matt said quietly. "But give me

ten minutes to place my charges and get in a little closer. I want to get in a better position in case they make you. I guess you better let Delaney know that we're in and the next time he hears from you it'll be time for his move. Then you can start quietly eliminating the guards. One of you keep six behind a good cover at all times!"

Matt handed Christy one of the C4s and she disappeared under the dock with it. Further in, they found a wheelbarrow and some sand and gravel mix ready for laying concrete beside a trench that was jack-hammered out for a conduit. Matt hid a C4 in the sand. As they continued they found fresh concrete and an empty electrical box. What a lovely place for another bomb, Matt thought. That would be enough to bury the tunnel and probably bring down half the building attached to it.

They arrived at the large circular room where Matt first met Dunitschek. The lights in the ocean pool were on and everything looked the same. Nobody in sight. Light was showing under two of the doors. Sounds of a short wave radio conversation and the noise of telex machines or printers came from behind one of them. Matt didn't think that was security. More like the control center. He was about to step out from the tunnel when the door opened and a tall, slim man in a suit and tie came outside with some papers in hand, smoking a cigarette. Matt's big arm flung around his neck yanking him into the tunnel squeezing the wind out of him without a sound. They took him back a little farther.

"Where are you going?" Matt asked with a wild look in his eyes holding him by his neck up against the wall.

"To sleep," he answered coughing up the words.

"What do you do around here?"

"Computers, electronics."

"Where is Dunitschek?" Matt jammed his gun barrel into his stomach.

"I don't know. Only security knows where Mr. Dunitschek is at any given time. I'm telling you the truth."

"Where is security?"

"Last door on the left."

"How many men inside?"

"I don't know. Sometimes two, maybe just one now."

"How many in your control room?"

"Nobody. I was just finishing up."

"Where is your and your fellow white collar workers' sleeping quarters?"

"Down the hull in the other corridor."

"You're going to show where it is to my two friends here, so they can explain to you all that we're taking over your island, loading up your dope, and we're going to blow this joint to pieces soon after we put several bullets in your Mr. Dunitschek. Your employment is hereby terminated! If you're nice and quiet you may not even get shot. But give my friends a hard time and they'll blow your high IQ brains right out the back of your head!"

Matt handed him over to Labarraque and Zein, warning them to be careful, take control of the workers' quarters and hold everyone there until it's safe to make a run for the docks. Matt and Christy then headed for the control room.

They listened outside but it was all quiet now. Matt opened the door ready to spray the room with bullets but there was no one there. He hid a C4 in one of the desks. He called O'Grady. Lewis and him already had five of the guards out of commission and counted another dozen hanging around. Matt instructed O'Grady to let Delaney know they were about to be under fire.

They didn't know if the door to the security room was going to be locked from the inside. Not likely, Matt thought. Either way he was going to bust it down and have Christy backing him up, ready but not shooting if they could help it, to keep things quiet as long as possible.

They stood outside the door listening. It sounded like only one man was inside, carrying on a radio conversation in Spanish with one of the guards outside. The guard was suspicious about some of his fellow commandos missing. The man in the room suggested he check the Rosa Maria where they might be playing cards with the crew. When the conversation ceased Matt waited a few seconds and gave the door a well planted shoulder block from about five feet away. The frame cracked and the door flew open with a loud crash against the inside wall. Christy was behind with the AK. A stocky man with the build of a gorilla stood beside a coffee machine, a cup in his hand and a real stupid, stunned look on his face. A couple of radar screens, monitors and radios filled the room.

"Lose it slow and careful!" Matt gestured at his shoulder holster. He pulled a forty five stainless Smith and Wesson out by two fingers and tossed it on the floor. Christy pulled the office chair into the middle of the room, seated the man and tied his wrists behind his back with plastic cableties.

"What da fuck!" he finally spoke sizing up Matt and Christy with his big, bulging eyes, his face turning hard and the veins on his neck beginning to swell. "How da fuck you get in! What da fuck you want!"

"I guess it's hard to get quality help for the night shift," Christy glanced up at Matt while wrapping the gorilla and the chair together with duct tape.

"Where is Dunitschek?" asked Matt placing the gun barrel between his eyes.

"I don't tell you fuck all asshole!"

"Yeah, I don't think you will," said Matt. "You know you sound too much like Stallone!" In the wink of an eye he picked up a leg and booted him hard in the shoulder, ripping it from its socket and sending the man hard backwards on the floor in the chair. A loud grunt was all that came from the immobilized gorilla.

They could see guards butting out cigarettes and readying weapons on the monitors. They walked around shouting names looking for the ones missing. Radio calls began to pour in, in Spanish and English. Matt called Labarraque. "Joe! How are you making out back there?" "I'm all right Matt. I've got eight people together in a lounge, all very co-operative. That's all of the brains, but there is a lot of muscle out there apparently. Neil's out looking around. We've got some good architectural drawings of the hole place. There are individual rooms, a dorm, a gym, and a mess hall behind us and a big kitchen. Across from where you are is

the work shops and stores. The generators are a few hundred yards north of the main building."

"Zein here Matt! They're coming out of the woodwork. Dunitschek and three men with automatic weapons are headed for the shops. Another three are headed your way."

"Thanks Neil! Look after Joe. Joe, you stay put and out of the way! We might need you as navigator with the map. Mitch, come in!"

"O'Grady here. Copied your traffic Matt, go ahead!"

"Can you see the shops?"

"Roger. Large roll up doors, wide open, well light inside."

"OK, you guys make your way to the shop. As you know, priority is Dunitschek, let's get him alive if we can!"

"Permission to disable the helo?"

"Do it!"

"All right, we're coming in!"

"Let's go!" said Matt to Christy. They poked the door open and backs to the wall they moved along. The sound of gun fire erupted on the outside. O'Grady and Lewis squeezed off a few rounds into the superstructure of the Rosa Maria sending her drunken crew into a shooting frenzy at the guards on the dock. Next they holed the Sea King's fuel tanks causing an explosion that spewed debris and burning fuel all over the place.

Three uniforms came running out of one of the tunnels to be surprised and cut down by Matt and Christy.

"Joe, come in!" Matt called on the walkie-talkie as they moved along carefully checking out each dark corridor. "How do I get from control to the workshops?"

"Take the last tunnel in the south west corner. You go past the utilities room on your right and the next on your left is the back of the garage. The tunnel then leads to the generator room."

O'Grady and Lewis were in the middle of an all out gun battle. Men poured out of the building blasting away at the Rosa Maria, dropping left and right from the fire returned from aboard. A couple of brave men on her decks were chopping the docklines with machetes and smoke billowed from her dry exhausts as the diesels fired up ready to get out to sea. Lewis, hiding behind a forklift, had the usual smirk on his face turned into a wide grin thinking about what chaos they started amongst good business associates. O'Grady was heading his way from the other side, staying low, jutting in and out of cover. He was no more than five steps away when two slugs from the Rosa Maria knocked him like a sledge hammer face down on the dock.

"Shit!" Lewis yelled to himself crawling out into the barrage of bullets. He scooped up his buddy, threw him across the seat of the forklift and set on him. He turned the key on the propane fired engine and took off for the garage doors sweeping the way ahead of him with his AK. Inside were a couple of the cylindrical vehicles used for the transportation of the drugs, a Jeep, an old Bell helicopter, forklifts and a big

mobile cherry picker. Using the big tires of the crane for cover, Matt and Christy were exchanging fire with some men behind a line of toolboxes. Never slowing, Lewis scooped up the jeep with the forklift, zoomed past Matt and Christy singing 'the Mary Ellen Carter rise again!' at the top of his lungs. He piled into the toolboxes, plowing them along with the men behind until the whole mess came to rest against the wall. By then O'Grady was getting his wind back and getting off the forklift, sore, but all in one piece thanks to his vest. Bullets began to fly from the direction of the big doors now and they all got on the other side of the cherry picker.

"Cover us," Matt said to Lewis and O'Grady. "Dunitschek slipped out the back just as these goons pinned us down! We're going after him." Stooping low they ran for the back door while their friends opened up with continuous fire on the men on the outside.

Matt called Labarraque. He and Zein were heading for the tunnel leading to the shop. He asked what they did with the staff.

"We found a big walk-in freezer, blew the power out and locked them up."

"O'Grady and Lewis are under fire in the garage. You can bail them out from the outside! Seen Dunitschek?"

"He didn't come this way Matt."

"Christy and I are going to check the generator room. There can't be many guards left and Lewis said the freighter had pulled out, but still you need to be careful out there. If you wrap things up before we get back, evacuate the engineers and there is a guy in the security room with a dislocated shoulder. Put everybody on the Midnight Lace if she's still there and move to the outside of the harbor. There's going to be fireworks soon."

Suddenly the lights were shut down and the almost undiscernible hum of the generators quit.

"Dunitschek." Christy whispered. "We know where he is."

"Joe, come back," Matt quietly talked into the walkie-talkie. There was still a lot of gun fire out there.

"I'm here Matt, we're just coming up behind four of the guards firing into the garage. We get rid of them and I think we're finished."

"Roger that. Tell me something. On those drawings, did you remember seeing a door to the outside from the generating room?"

"I've got it right here, hang on."

"He's good," Matt said to Christy.

"Two doors." Labarraque came back. "A small and a rather big door by the looks of it. Like a garage door. Oh, and another helo pad!"

"OK Joe. Thanks." Matt put away the walkie-talkie. "I guess that's how they airlifted the generators in. Through those doors. At least we didn't hear a helicopter take off. The son of a bitch could be anywhere by now on foot though."

"Or, that's what he wants us to think," said Christy as they put on their night vision goggles and proceeded on in the darkness. "It's no picnic getting anywhere out there. Where would he go? To double back here and come up behind us would take him hours."

"Maybe he just wanted out. He could hide out there and never be found. For all he knows we could have the DEA and a hundred men force. I don't know what Tom and Mitch did out there but you got to



admit it sounded good."

They went around a corner and up ahead, in the bluish tint of the night visions they could see a door. They expected it to bust open and a bunch of men to pour out shooting while they stood there in the open. Dropped low to the ground they cracked the door open. Nothing. Just somebody banging away at something in the back. They moved inside. It was a large room with high ceilings. There were two big generators, a smaller one and a large reverse osmosis water maker.

They snuck along the wall to the back of one of the generators, and between it and the water maker they moved toward the noise. Looking out from behind the small generator they could see lockers, table and chairs, a workbench, a tool cabinet near the back of the building, and a door in the corner. Straight ahead, taking up almost the entire wall was the folding garage door. A big man was sacking away at it with a crowbar and ball peen hammer. A lantern set on the floor behind him. There were marks on the smaller door too, but he had given up on that one already. All Matt and Christy could do is to keep from laughing out loud. The man stopped from time to time to listen for noises then resumed his work. Christy moved behind the lockers near the table. An Uzi was propped up against one of the chairs.

Matt stepped out from behind the generator, shined his flashlight across his own face and in a low tone of voice said, "Why not just climb out one of the generator exhausts Mr. Dunitschek?"

The man froze. He stood there for a while and slowly turned around. Matt had his AK47 across his back, had the flashlight in one hand and the goggles in the other.

"Brown?" Dunitschek's eyes squinted and his head lurched forward cocked to the side trying to focus what he was seeing. "You, you're dead. I was assured you were dead." He took a step sideways toward the table nonchalantly. "You get around Mr. Brown, I give you that. Not bad. Not bad at all," he launched at the chair and the Uzi, but Christy stepped out from behind the lockers and whacked him over the back of the head with the butt of her gun.

"Let's get going," Matt said picking Dunitschek up on his shoulder. "I don't believe I'm going to carry this son of a bitch out of here."

"Just think of all the license plates he'll be making."

"Ten minutes and counting. Not bad. I wonder why he couldn't open the doors?"

"I think our Taino friends had something to do with it," said Christy.

"I knew you were going to say that." Matt was groaning under Dunitschek's weight.

It was all quiet on the outside as they made their way toward the back door of the shop. Christy called O'Grady on the radio.

"You're all awful quiet out there, what's going on?"

"All secure and all over. How's you and Matt?"

"He's carrying a lot of weight on his shoulders right now. We're coming out!"

Christy opened the door to the garage for Matt and he squeezed through with the limp body, across the shop and out to the dock. A bright spotlight burned on the end of the bow of the Midnight Lace lighting up the dock. O'Grady, Lewis, Labarraque and Zein stood there clapping as Matt threw Dunitschek on the ground. Lewis had a bottle in hand and a big grin on.

"Complements of the bad guys," he handed the champagne to Matt.

"Well planned and superbly executed if I may say so," Labarraque shook Matt's hand. "A hell of a party. Thanks for the invite."

"Unbelievable," said Zein shaking hands.

"Not over yet," said Matt. "Let's get back to the Mitscher."

Aboard the Midnight Lace they tied up Dunitschek and put him in the company of the gorilla and the rest of the hog tied Bluffers Cay employees. O'Grady just fired up the engines when a flash lit up the darkness behind the complex and the shock wave of the first explosion filled the basin and reverberated between the rock walls. The Lace spun around on her heels by her twin screws and her engines lifted her on a plane toward a cluster of lights reflecting from the low lying clouds like a small town on the horizon. The Mitscher and the Rose moved in and were standing by ten miles off shore.

Matt was on the radio with Commander Balaconis.

"Just one more thing Roy and I'll be out of your hair." "That sounds real good Matt!"

"I need your chopper to get me and Christy to Bimini to complete this operation."

"OK, you got it," Balaconis sighed with relief.

It was 0 four hundred hours. The SH-60B Light Airborne Multi-Purpose System helicopter used aboard the Mitscher for antisubmarine surveillance hovered near the drilling rig anchored off Bimini. They were still photographing bodies for later ID. Matt took the opportunity and dropped the Urinovs' activator. He called to make sure there were no divers in the water.

Eventually they cleared a spot and the chopper set down long enough for Matt and Christy to jump out.

"How did it go?" Joe Decenzo asked while shaking hands.

"Pretty good. Looks like you guys had a lot of action," Matt looked all around. Fires were burning, bodies were being carried off.

"Well, we took no chances, which was a good thing. They wouldn't go without a fight. We're counting twenty three dead, eleven in custody. We had no casualties, but I've got one man in the ICU, another three in stable condition and two with superfcials. That reminds me. You'll be happy to know your friend Johnstone is doing well and all charges against him have been dropped. FBI had picked up the pilot who flew Augusta's plane and he spilled all the beans. That's the good news." Decenzo paused for a minute. Christy's happy face began to grow long with suspicion. "We can't

find Augusta. He was here but he disappeared."

"Where?" Christy freaked. "Did he jump and try to swim to shore? He'd never make it!"

"No," said Decenzo. "We had plenty of people on the beach. He didn't show up there. The only thing I can think of is that he tried it and drowned."

"No way," Matt said bitterly. "He's not the kind of man who checks out that easy."

"What if he had Scuba gear," Christy argued. "There's got to be all kinds of gear on this rig!"

"There is, but how do we know if any of it is missing?"

"The Daybreak," Matt said engulfed in thought.

"Yes!" Christy jumped with excitement. "Let's go while we have time!"

"Where is the gear? Have you seen it?" Matt asked Decenzo as he stared at them inquisitively.

"In the back of the roughneck's shack," he pointed.

Within a couple of minutes they were suited up and climbing down the long steel ladder to the water. They had twenty minutes to find Lorenzo Augusta before the Urinovs, which could no longer be disarmed, set off to explode within the Bahamas Daybreak.

They sank as fast as they could following the steel tow cable, not turning on their lights until it was absolutely necessary. If Augusta was on the wreck there was no way of surprising him. Eventually they had to turn on lights. A few visible things had been changed on the Daybreak. Tripods were welded over the enlarged cargo hatch to facilitate a system of rollers.

They split up at the bow and each took one side. They met at the cargo hold. Matt dipped under the deck. Nothing but the empty hold and a big hole in the bottom of the hull leading into the tunnel. They split again continuing aft. Christy saw the open door of the reefer unit first. She signaled Matt banging her knife on her air tank. They approached carefully and lit up the interior of the freezer. Several bottles of air stood in one of the corners. The son of a bitch's stock pile, Matt thought. There were fresh marks in the growth under the door. Somebody had opened it very recently. They backtracked toward the wheelhouse. They found the growth disturbed around one of the busted out windows. Matt checked the time. It was less than ten minutes before the charges would go off, and they needed about six minutes to safely reach the surface. Matt gave the signal to head up just as a machete swung down over Christy from atop the wheelhouse. She saw Matt look up suddenly and she instinctively dove. The blade missed, ricocheted off her tank and sliced the low pressure line of the regulator in half. Matt shoved Christy out of the way as Augusta dove on them wielding a dive knife furiously. He grabbed the hand with the knife and whacked it down on a piece of glass sticking out of the window, dropping the knife on the inside of the wheelhouse. Christy was out of the BC in no time. She bent the short piece of hose left on the first stage in half to stop the air escaping. There was no octopus, she had to release the hose and use the free flowing air to breath while helplessly watching Matt and Augusta locked together struggling to overpower one another. Time ticked away. Finally, Matt managed to free a hand and cold cocked Augusta on the jaw

instantly putting him out of action. He looked at his watch.

They had about a minute left. He grabbed Christy by the collar with one hand while she was clutching the air tank and BC in her arms, Augusta with his other hand and began to tow them, kicking his flippers hard and as fast as he could, down into the hold and through to the other side. He knew they wouldn't survive the shockwave on the outside, but considering the directional effect of the charges, a little luck, and if the hole closes up in the early stages of the first explosion, they may live through it inside the tunnel. After that, when all the air is gone, who knows. Maybe the Taino will come and bail them out.

He kept kicking and going on as fast as he could to get as far away and into the tunnel as possible. They could feel the surge in the water coming for them even before the sound waves reached. They all sank to the bottom. The compression built into a crushing pain inside their chest cavity, breathing became no longer possible and the dark tunnel of terror faded into oblivion.

## EPILOG

Marina was making her rounds. Not that she had to. After all, she wasn't just a street potcake. But she liked to sniff around in the mornings when the world was still so fresh. Of course in a way she was a potcake, after all she was born into a family of street dogs, but the Man at the marina adapted her when she was a very young puppy and gave her the name Marina. That made her a pet, not just another stray potcake in Bimini. She wore a collar with tags and a red bandanna. She had good food to eat, the kind the dogs across the Stream got, and a soft and cozy place to sleep where the Man himself slept. And, the Man was always kind and gentle, and she associated his small black hands only with loving touches.

She cocked her head sideways and her nose twitched tasting the air as she noticed the three humans lying on the beach near the wreck of the Yankee Lady. There was something familiar in the air. She'd find out soon, as she always made a point of sniffing around the old wreck whenever a storm uncovered it from the sand. Something was wrong though, and she knew it as she approached with her tail between her legs. One of the men frightened her. He lay in a weird position with his knees hard up against his chest and his arms tucked in under his chin. He had a wild look on his face and a daze in his eyes as he just stared ahead. But the other two, the woman and the man, yes she knew who they were! They always gave her treats on the dock. She wagged her tail and snuck closer to the woman. She licked her face a couple of times and stood back waiting for the results. The woman's eyes opened. She blinked a few times and smiled. "Marina. Hi little Marina. Matt, wake up! Look! It's Marina." She reached out and petted the panting little face. "What are we doing here Marina?"

The little brown dog's body wiggled and her tail wagged a mile a minute. She yelped and barked and danced around in a circle, chasing her tail as she always did when she was very, very happy.