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A TREVOR CAMERON, TERRORIST HUNTER NOVEL
by Clayton R. Douglas

DEADLY FLASHES OF SILVER

Chapter One

More than a dozen barracuda floated motionlessly above me in the clear green water, watching me with flat, menacing, unblinking eyes. Not one of them was less than four feet in length. I watched them warily as I continued along the sandy bottom, bubbles trailing from my regulator, hoping they didn't mistake my long, curly tail of hair for some kind of bait.

Isolated patches of sea grass waved leisurely in the slight current. Brightly colored fish darted through the leaves of these underwater forests. A sand shark blended in with the large expanses of barren sandy deserts separating the lush growth, only exposing himself to my eye as I swam over him. Unlike the barracuda, he sped away, kicking up a miniature sand storm as he ran from a larger, more dangerous predator. Man.

I spied a coral formation ten degrees east with the telltale antenna of my quarry waving from beneath a ledge.

Ignoring the 'cuda, I swam to the formation. I was not pressed for time. The water was only eight to twelve foot deep and decompression was not one of my worries. In fact, I thought as I inserted my tickle stick under the rocks, I had no worries at all.

But the day was still young.

The tickle stick is the only legal way of catching lobster without licensing traps. This rule is designed to give the lobster a fighting chance against man though not much of one.

You aren't allowed to spear them. Instead, you put a stick behind them and tap them on their tails. The lobster, not being the brightest of creation's crustaceans, turns

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around and back up in their defensive posture. Unfortunately for them, they backed right into my net bag.

Soon, I had enough for supper if I could get by the hungry barracuda. Experienced divers tell novices that the barracuda is not a danger but all have stories about less than pleasant encounters with the predators. Many have scars to show for it. Blood and shiny objects attract them. Like my Rolex. I hoped none of the lobsters in my bag hurt themselves and added to my risk.

Barracuda are extremely fast. They can cover thirty feet in the blink of your eye. Only a cousin, the wahoo, can move as fast. Wahoo are prized fish. Barracuda are the scourge of the fisherman. They attack hooked fish, leaving an angry angler with only the head of a tasty yellowtail or grouper. Caught and brought in the boat, they make an impressive fish for the tourist to have his picture taken with but smell like a sewer in summer. Most experienced fisherman will never pull them in. Cases of ciguatera poisoning have been recorded in people desperate enough to eat the meat of the larger ones.

Suddenly, two of them made a lightning charge towards me. They were twin flashes of silver as the afternoon sun reflected on them through the water. They stopped inches from me, suddenly becoming motionless, their impassive gaze heightening the frightful visage of fangs below cold black stares.

We stared at each other for tense seconds. The tickle stick in my hand was little defense against this fearsome foe. I would have much preferred to be armed with one of the weapons contained in the scarred gun cabinet aboard the *Sea Deuced* floating serenely somewhere above me.

Suddenly, they lost interest in the pale human waving his stick menacingly. A flick of their tails and they were gone. I was lucky they did not attack.

I wouldn't relate the story to my friends on board. Clark would just say, "What else is new." He believes me to be graced by Lady Luck. It does no good to point out I've been blown up, beat up, shot, lost my girl, my trailer and all my possessions in the last year. He points out anyone else would be dead, and that the guys responsible are dead while I am still walking around.

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It's always been hard to argue with him.

The Sea Deuced sat in eight foot of crystal clear water on Card Sound just north of Key Largo, the town, and near to Key Largo, the island. My friend Clark had graciously descended from his town house to grace the decks of my houseboat. Maybe it was because I had two of my nymphet friends, Julie and Carol, on board when we stopped by to invite him down to the Keys on an impromptu lobster hunt.

We had been out for three days, moving casually south along the Intracoastal, stopping for a night at Elliot Key and a second night here on Card Sound. Julie Forbes and Carol Carabello were airline ticket agents, temporarily out of work as their airline was one of the latest to file bankruptcy. Julie and I had been out on a couple of dates, enjoyed each other's company and she and Carol were happy to spend a few days drawing their unemployment, snorkeling, sunning and making love aboard the Sea Deuced.

Most of the hunting and fishing fell to me. Clark was not that physically active and I only had a single set of diving equipment on board. But Clark was content to be pampered by the girls while standing guard horizontally in one of the deck chairs.

I could almost picture his hairy, well-padded torso being generously covered with sunscreen #15 by maidens wearing dainty thongs and nothing else.

We were anchored near a small, unnamed island on the nearly deserted sound. Turkey Point nuclear plant was over towards the West. It was a Thursday. I try not to venture out on the waterways on weekends. Unfortunately, anybody with enough money can buy a boat and put it in the water. Only a few learn how to operate them safely. On the weekdays, the odds are better. People out on the waterways on weekdays are professional fishermen or people like me, who have enough leisure time and intelligence to learn to operate their boats in harmony with the environment and the rest of the boating community.

My recently renovated, diesel powered houseboat was a hundred yards away when I surfaced. I could hear the quiet chug of the generator keeping the air conditioning running and the batteries charged. The current had taken me further than expected but was not too strong to win against. I had half a dozen legal lobsters in my bag. The mighty hunter returns home, triumphant.

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Clark spotted me as I began my swim back and waved lazily. Once he caught my eye, he pointed towards the clear blue, cloud-sprinkled sky.

I followed his gesture and saw a twin engine, propeller plane circling overhead. It was painted military green and looked like an old World War II cargo plane with no discernible markings. Maybe a C130. There are a lot of military installations in the Keys and the southernmost tip of Florida. Homestead Air Force Base was minutes away by air. The Coast Guard station at Islamorada is not much farther. I guessed it to be some type of training flight.

Goes to show, I am wrong from time to time!

I made it back to the boat and climbed aboard the teak swim platform mounted just above the waterline. Two eager beauties helped me with my gear and my catch. Julie washed off my gear with a freshwater hose and stowed both in a locker behind the cabin. Carol squealed and giggled as they washed down the net bag bristling with writhing antennas before taking it down below to a waiting pot, filled only half way with boiling water, just in case some incompetent seaman made too big a wake near us.

I climbed to the upper deck and sat down beside my long time friend and gratefully accepted a glass full of lemonade from him. We watched our half-naked crew bustling about in admiring silence.

It's only been six months since I was forced to switch from a cramped thirty-three foot travel trailer to this forty foot by fourteen-foot houseboat. The move was involuntary but I still marvel at how much pleasure I get living on the water. Especially with this kind of company!

Reading my mind with his usual aplomb, Clark echoed my thoughts. "They are lovely girls, Trevor. This kind of life could grow on me."

"I've been trying to get you to go out on the boat with me for the last six months, Clark." I remarked with more petulance in my voice than I intended

"I wanted to be sure you learned how to operate this vessel before I risked my life on it!" he said with enough sincerity to solicit an automatic response.

"Come on, Clark! " I protested. "You know I can handle this boat!"

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Clark smiled. "It really has nothing to do with the boat, my friend. It is being around you that is the real risk. I know you much too well. You risk your life once or twice a day, many times without being aware you are doing it! Need I point out you ride a motorcycle in Miami? In tourist season? Diving alone in the middle of nowhere? Besides, I had a bad experience on my last boat ride, remember?"

Clark will not let me forget I had to have him arrested by the Coast Guard to save his life. He does not bring it up often; just enough to remind me of my tendency to attract trouble once in a while. I decided to keep my mouth shut.

A scream came from the galley. Julie called out of the galley window. "Uhh, Trevor. These things are still alive! How do we get them in the pot?"

"I'll be right down, Julie," I called. As I rose from the deck chair, the heavy hum of an aircraft permeated the tropical air.

"Look, Trevor!" Clark pointed again. "That's the same plane. This is the third time they've come around. They made the first pass while you were under the water. I'll bet it's a drop. They are waiting for a signal or for someone to get here."

"Don't get your hopes up, Clark. You are retired, remember!" I got in my cheap shot. Clark used to sell high-grade pot. I got him to stop and move to Miami. I returned from my adventures in Key West and was shocked to find the DEA agent who helped rescue Clark moved in as a roommate. Talk about strange bedfellows! It was the last thing I expected.

Once, I gingerly asked about the house rules. It seems smoking a little pot now and then is still allowed. They seemed to get along well. Clark did some work for my company and was retired from the drug business. To Tony Miata, pot was the least of his agency's problems. They both enjoyed a smoke in the evening. Clark had a mellowing effect on Tony and vice-versa. Clark did no more deals.

That doesn't mean he lost his eye for it. The thought had just hit me; maybe they weren't waiting for someone to get here! Maybe they were waiting for someone to leave. Except for a few fishing boats there was no one in the area but us!

I told myself it was just my imagination. It had to be a training flight.

I was wrong again.

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The plane made a tight circle just past us, so low we could see the black man in the doorway as he pushed the crates out of the door. Parachutes blossomed and the watertight, black plastic containers came floating gently down to the green water's embrace.

So Clark was right and I was wrong. A strange feeling began to grow in my gut. Not since my battle with the brutal, murderous giant, Carmine, who had killed my woman, had I felt this kind of uneasiness. I had settled back into civilized behavior despite the urgings of my DEA friend, Tony, who felt I had certain instincts that could be utilized by his particular law enforcement agency. I had regained my strength and sanity and avoided trouble and him . . . as best I could.

I went inside and dumped the lobsters into the pot of water. The marine radio tuned to the weather channel was broadcasting continued good weather for Fowey Rocks down to Islamorada. I walked over to it and switched to Channel Sixteen.

“Coast Guard Station at Islamorada! Coast Guard Station at Islamorada. Come in please.”

“Coast Guard Station at Islamorada to the vessel calling. Switch and answer on Two Two Alpha. Channel twenty two captain!”

I punched in channel twenty-two.

“Coast Guard to the vessel calling. Identify please.”

I thought about for a split second. “Sorry, Coast Guard. I better hold off with that until you tell me if there is some kind of military operation going on down around Card Sound.”

“Coast Guard to the vessel calling. You are breaking up. Repeat, you are breaking up. Are you in distress? Please identify yourself!”

Like hell I will. I think I've already said too much. They answered immediately on sixteen so why couldn't they hear me on twenty-two?

So I asked myself; if I was dropping drugs and there was someone watching me do it, what would I do if they tried to call the Coast Guard? The answer was frightening.

You have to think of yourself as a commando on a mission to a foreign country. If the locals spot you, you must prevent them from revealing your presence. I listened

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closely to the radio. When the Coast Guard quit transmitting, I could hear the roar of a high-powered outboard over the radio. Someone, or more than one, were keying up their mikes. I could not be heard over them. On a hunch, I programmed the radio to scan.

I looked out through my window. Bundles were starting to hit the water. Three speedboats were racing towards them in a well-coordinated drill. As I watched them, I could see two men in each boat. Each boat was rigged for fishing, poles whipping in their holders as the boats bounded over the flat water. The men on board were dressed appropriately, wearing ball caps, light shorts and T-shirts.

I had seen them fishing on various parts of the bay earlier in the day. I, nor anyone else, had thought about them at all. Now they had assumed another image and not one that boded well for the health and well being of my small entourage.

The radio was still broadcasting the roar of an outboard when it picked up another, nearer broadcast on channel sixty-nine.

“Retriever 1 to Mother.”

“Report Retriever 1.”

“We got a civic-minded observer down here trying to contact Coast Guard on twenty two. We been jamming him.” The accent was foreign.

“Where is he?” This one had a cultured, almost British accent that could blend in with the faculty on any college campus.

“Not sure, Mon. Could be on that houseboat a mile away. That's the only boat in the area!” I had heard enough islander to doubt that this was an inhabitant of the Caribbean. He sounded more like a poor actor trying to fake an accent.

“Too close. Pick up the shipment then take him out!” The order was given by one used to command. The voice was utterly calm, totally confident that his instructions would be carried out to the letter. It was a ruthless voice, uncaring of who was on the offending vessel.

Each passenger aboard the three boats were scanning the horizon with binoculars, looking for something other than the obvious bundles floating with their collapsed chutes on the water. One had obviously spotted the “Sea Deuced”.

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My heart began to pound with the effects of the adrenaline suddenly coursing through my veins. The girls had drifted back outside when I shouted out the door. “Clark, get the girls and get inside the boat, quick!”

The first boat picked up a couple of their intended targets, bundles floating five hundred yards away, then headed straight for us. I grabbed my own set of binoculars and put them to my eyes. As I feared, I saw automatic weapons in the hands that had held fishing poles only moments ago.

Clark and the girls came inside with questioning looks. “Get down in the bilge! I don't have time to explain.” I tossed Clark the nine-millimeter Smith and Wesson automatic I keep in my desk. “Stay with them. Keep quiet. If anyone besides me sticks his head down that bilge, Blow it off!”

The girls were confused and frightened, not having heard the chilling menace in that voice on the radio. And I had no time to explain. I was on the floor, trying to get the combination right on my gun cabinet.

With my other hand, I slammed the hatch leading down to the bilge shut and pulled a throw rug over it. With my foot I kicked over my kitchen table to provide shelter from the storm I knew for a certainty was coming.

The lock gave way to my frenzied efforts. I yanked two of my guns from their place and loaded them quickly, switching on the Aimpoint on my Ruger as I slammed a twenty shot clip into it. A thirty shot went into the Uzi. I peeked over the window ledge. The first boat was almost on me. The passenger standing in front of the control console held an automatic weapon at ready. The driver of the boat made a streaking pass to starboard. Both men were both black. The gunman opened up with no hesitation. Bullets smacked into my beautiful boat, drilling holes in the fiberglass and chipping pieces of furniture and kitchen cabinets into fragments of wood and splinters. Two of my side windows shattered, showering me with shards of glass. The cabinets and the overturned table provided enough of a barrier to stop the slugs.

My turn now. They had not seen anyone on board. They were expecting vacationers, tourists or a retired couple. They couldn't know I lived aboard and maintained a small arsenal within that cabinet. It gave me a small advantage.

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I lurched to the port window and took careful aim with the mini-fourteen. Ignoring the pain from cuts on my feet and knees, I looked through the Aimpoint with both eyes open. The little red dot seems to magically appear on your target but, unlike a laser sight, does not alert the intended target. My finger squeezed the trigger rapidly, sending a half dozen 227-caliber slugs on their deadly mission. The boat was turning, bouncing over its own wake, causing me to miss slightly. Instead of blowing his head off, the tumbling slugs shattered his sternum close enough to his heart stop all future aggression.

A second burst struck the driver of the boat exactly where I aimed. His head exploded like a ripe watermelon. He fell on the wheel and the 21-foot boat turned too sharply, throwing both wounded, dying men from the cockpit. The boat danced like a hooked barracuda, thrashing and bouncing over its own turbulence in impossibly tight turns, motor running at full speed.

It was a new aluminum Bass Tracker boat, rare for the salty waters of the Keys. It flashed silver in the light of the afternoon sun, catching my eye and holding it while some part of my subconscious screamed some unintelligible warning, stopping its gyrations only after running over one of its former passengers. Clothing and flesh and bone wound around the prop, causing the motor to stall. It came to a halt twenty feet from the “Sea Deuced”.

Clark poked his head up from the bilge. “Are you OK, Trevor?”

“Yes. For the moment. I thought I told you not to open that unless I called?”

“You wouldn't call. I had to move to Florida to talk to you because you never called. I know how to shoot a gun. You know how to drive a boat. It's hard to do both. Don't you think it would be a good idea to get out of here?” He crawled out of the bilge, talking to cover the fear in his eyes. It was a healthy kind of fear, inspired by intelligent analysis of the situation. It was good advice, to boot.

Still, I procrastinated.

“I don't know. If one of those shots hit a gas line and the bilge is filling with gas, we might have a problem. It might be best to stay where we are and make a stand. We're close enough to that island to swim to it if something happens to the boat.” Thinking of

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that, I crawled over to the stove and turned off the open flame under my lobster. Boiling water was spilling from two bullet holes. Dinner would have to wait!

“But these guys are heavily armed!”

I nodded agreement. “They’ve got a couple of Uzis and some hand guns.”

“Granted. You do not consider such to be heavy arms?”

“In certain situations.” I peeked out the window as I heard other motors approaching.

“You just won't run from a fight, will you?” In his usual, concise way, his comment hit the mark precisely. The adrenalin was coursing through my brain now. The heat of battle was upon me and I wanted nothing more than to kill those who had dared to attack me.

The radio crackled to life. “Mother, this is retriever two. Retriever One is down. Instructions?” This voice was foreign also but with a different, more guttural accent. There was no pretense in this one and I suddenly recognized the accent. Middle Eastern.

“Retrieve the cargo!” Came the order from that most sinister voice.

“The cargo is next to the houseboat!”

“Then remove the houseboat!”

The other two boats were still a good distance away, apparently having retrieved their cargo and now intending to devote more attention to us. One was about a mile away and coming our way. The third was half a mile further and just pulling the last container out of the water.

I went to my cabinet and took out a leather case. Unzipping it revealed my Remington bolt action thirty-ought six with a seven-power scope.

A look of understanding crossed Clark's face. “I see! Do you have that dialed in?”

“At three hundred yards! There is still a chance of missing. I'll have to take into account windage and the rocking and movements of both boats. If I miss, wait until they are within two hundred yards then open up with the mini fourteen. If they get through both of us, we've still got my Uzi.” I patted the compact little gun next to me. It's not fully auto but I've got a quick trigger finger.

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Using my binoculars, the bundles in the bow of the boat were as clear as the Uzi in the hand of the mate and the determined look on his face. Both of these men were black also.

When the boat was within three hundred yards I opened fire. The water was perfectly flat. They were coming directly at us. There was no wind to speak of. Luck was not operative in this situation. What happened next was directly attributable to long hours of practice.

I blew the driver away with my first shot, the bullet passing through the bass boat's tiny windscreen and knocking him clear over the stern and outboard motor. The mate whose life had been spared because he had been sitting in front of the pilot, had no idea his compadre was no longer driving the boat.

My second shot ruptured the aluminum hull just at the water line.

The gunman popped off a few shots, which went wild as the boat bounced over a set of waves created by the demise of the first boat. He turned nervously to say something to the pilot. He stared in disbelief; only now aware he was alone in the boat! Torn between shooting me and taking control of the boat, he made the wrong decision. He looked back at me and fired a few more rounds. I took my time and slowly squeezed the trigger. The round took him in the gut and he sat down heavily on the floor of the boat, a surprised look on his face. His hands dropped the weapon and made a futile effort to try and stop the bleeding with his hands.

“Good shooting, Trevor. Now how are you going to stop that boat from crashing into us?” Clark asked in a strained voice.

The boat was still headed for us, unmanned, a gasoline-filled bomb if it hit us.

“Uh, I hadn't thought of that!” I admitted. I put the rifle to my shoulder and took two shots as quickly as I could work the bolt action. Too slow and no effect! The slugs went through the soft aluminum without slowing the boat. I dropped the rifle and picked up the Uzi. Clark joined me with the mini-fourteen. We pumped round after round at the onrushing boat. They drilled more holes in the aluminum and plucked at the clothes of gunman. He felt nothing. At the last minute one of the slugs must have struck the engine cowling, blowing it off and moving the motor enough to cause the boat to veer sharply to

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the left, zooming like a wayward torpedo inches across our bow. It struck the beach of the small island behind us, becoming airborne and finally coming to rest in the stubby mangroves twenty feet inland.

We both breathed a sigh of relief. The radio had caught a broadcast on another channel, two guys talking about the lousy fishing off Fowey Rocks. I silently cursed them until it switched in time to catch the tail end of the last boat's broadcast. The indicator said it was channel sixty-nine.

“ . . . must have an arsenal. We're the only one left, sir. “

“Get the name and get out, now, you fool!”

“We got it, mon. It's called Sea Deuced!”

Sitting on the floor, our knees bleeding from the broken glass, we both took deep breaths and held them for a few seconds.

“What now, Trevor?” Clark asked.

“Get the girls out of the bilge. Start them on cleaning up this mess. Finish cooking the lobsters. I'll get the raft blown up and we'll row over to the island and see how much money our interference has cost someone. Then we'll know just how mad they are going to be.”

“How can one man attract so much trouble?”

“It's a knack.”

Chapter Two

We got the raft blown up. Julie and Carol were pretty shook up but kept their fear under control. I suggested they clean up the shattered glass. It gave them enough to do to keep them busy and to prevent panic.

A superficial check on the Sea Deuced indicated no major damage. Holes in the fiberglass, damaged furniture and a couple of holes in the upper half of my lobster pot. . . a little water on the floor but still usable. One half-cooked lobster had a bullet hole in his tail. I turned the stove back on.

After all, a man still has to eat!

The engines were OK and a fiberglass patch and 5200, cement that sets under water, repaired the holes beneath the waterline.

I was expecting someone, the Coast Guard, the Marine Patrol or locals, but as yet, there was no one around. Sound carries well over the water. It seemed crazy to think no one had heard the shots. Unless everyone had been paid off. We were in a desolate part of the waterways but not that desolate!

Now that I had a moment to think, I decided I should get some back-up here as quickly as possible. Fortunately, cellular service now extends to this part of the Keys. I dialed the number. A female voice answered and transferred me to the proper extension. The familiar, brusque voice that answered this time was even more impatient and crusty than ever.

“Miata here. Go ahead!” He barked.

“Tony, this is Trevor.”

“Hell, I know that. Who could hear that voice once and not know who it belonged to? Why have you been avoiding me?”

“I think I've stepped into something here you might need to know about.” I said carefully.

“Got yourself into some shit again, huh. Never call on me socially. Only when you need something, huh? What's goin' on?”

“Well, I just killed four people for a start.”

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It took him a second to absorb it. In the silence that followed, the implications of what I had done and how it might be interpreted washed over me. Suddenly I wanted him here very badly. The thought of trying to explain four deaths, even in self-defense, to a bunch of small town cops or the Coast Guard was a sobering prospect.

“Four?”

“Four.” I confirmed.

“What did they do to you, bump into your boat?”

“Almost. They filled it full of holes. I think Clark and I might have stumbled onto a dope shipment.”

“Stumbled? You sure it wasn't one of your scams gone sour?”

“Come on, Tony. We just happened to be in the wrong place. Get someone to check the radar for a low flying plane circling Card Sound.”

His interest piqued, he listened intently as I told him what had happened.

“OK. Stay where you are. Don't touch anything. I'm on my way down. If any law enforcement gets there tell them you are working for me and you were on a stake out. Your cover was blown and they attacked you. Is Clark all right?”

“Yeah, everyone is fine but it's going to be hard to talk him into going out on the boat with me anymore!”

I broke the connection. “What did he say?” Clark asked.

“He said to stay here and not to touch anything, he is on his way.”

“Sounds like good advice. Why do I have this feeling you are not going to take it? You have that look in your eyes again.”

“I don't want the bodies to drift away. I want to know who they were and what they were picking up. Don't you?”

“I suppose it will keep our minds off of the fact we just killed four people.”

“Not we. Me. Let's limit the liabilities.”

We caught up with the drifting boat, one body still entangled in the prop. I left it there. The others had sunk out of sight. Some of the bundles were still in the boat. A couple were floating, having fallen out of the boat. Bullet holes in the black plastic insured this was one shipment that wouldn't disappear from a police evidence locker

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later. We pulled the boat over by sheer muscle power, as my raft had no motor. Clark generously offered to hold the rope I attached to the bow of the little Tracker Marine bass boat with its brand new one hundred and fifty horsepower Yamaha. He let me do the rowing.

We tied it off to the Sea Deuced. The little boat had a raised deck covered with carpet. A half-dozen hatches were built into the bow of the boat, perfect for stashing fishing equipment or small bundles you wouldn't want to call attention to. Clark used the knife blade on my all-purpose Leatherman and inserted it into a bullet hole in the black plastic-wrapped package resting in the bow of the boat.

Inside were twenty-five smaller bundles. Clark looked at me and I nodded. He slipped the blade of the knife into one. We were not surprised when a fine white powder flowed out. Clark caught a little bit on the knife blade and tasted it. He smiled and took a little more up his nose.

“Excellent quality. Made with the proper chemicals instead of the kerosene and other garbage the Medellin cartel has been using. Must be the Cali cartel or some new players on the scene. Care for a toot before the cops get here and take it away?”

“I'll pass.” I believe everyone has a right to do whatever they want to or with their body and recreational use of anything in moderation does little harm, but I still feel uncomfortable around it. I don't smoke or drink much either. But I've seen too many people get strung out on cocaine to be unaware of the dangers surrounding casual use.

We transferred the bundle into the raft and I rowed us to the island.

The boat had hit the beach and gone airborne. It had landed upside down in the lower branches of a mangrove tree. It was a Bass Tracker also. The past tense was applicable. The aluminum was torn to shreds by bullets and branches. Its former passenger was entangled in an adjacent tree. We found it's cargo a little further inland, two more bundles the same as the other boat. We didn't bother opening the other two. Seventy-five kilos total of high-grade cocaine. Some one was going to be very angry with me.

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Clark was thinking along the same lines. “Maybe we should hide this. The people who brought this in are going to want it back. They probably have your address and life history by now.”

Let them look for me, I thought, with an arrogance that was totally unfounded in reality. My address is a PO Box on my driver's license. Trevor Cameron, boat bum and biker, has a few credit cards but no visible means of support. He likes to ride, fish, dive and play on his computer. Looking at him, people would guess he is a drug dealer or a strong-arm collection agent for a loan shark.

He is my creation.

Born Trevor Cameron Hamilton, I dropped the Hamilton and adopted the name of my true father, Shannon Cameron, retired adventurer and master mariner, shortly before I found him in Key West. I went there at the behest of my mother before she died. We met for the first time in a Key West hospital where we were recuperating after a homicidal maniac shot both of us.

Trevor Hamilton, on the other hand, is a self made millionaire, a real estate tycoon and reluctant entrepreneur. It was a role I was never totally comfortable with. I didn't like suits, office politics or plastic people. I didn't like being president or presiding over a roomful of gum chewing secretaries. So I left it all in the hands of Chuck Johnston, an ex-banker who knew no other type of life. Never knowing the rush of the wind in your hair, the thrill of meeting a shark face to face or the rush of adrenalin generated by personal combat, he never yearned for it.

I did.

We had a mutual understanding, Chuck and I. He only contacted me in case of emergency and I rarely came into the Houston office in my jeans or leathers and embarrassed him.

If I found a property or opportunity, I would call Chuck, president of Hamilton Management, to acquire it. Mr. Hamilton was kicked upstairs and became Chairman of the Bored. I suppose everyone who worked for us thought of Mr. Hamilton as being eighty years old and senile. Once a year I hid my tail under the collar of the suit I keep in storage to wear to the stockholders meeting. Since I own eighty percent of the stock, these

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meetings were short and rather poorly attended. I rather enjoyed the shocked look of the occasional stranger who turned up. Even in a suit, my six foot four and two hundred and ten pounds is startling. My face is tanned from my bike and scarred from my hobby, karate. I look more like an L.A. Raider doing a commercial for Brooks Brother than a corporate raider.

Enough aggrandizing. The point was, it is hard to find someone who doesn't really exist.

It might give me a head start. They might be looking for me but they had already made too many mistakes. One was letting me see them. The second was shooting at me. The third was missing me.

I am more comfortable in the role of the hunter than the hunted. We would see who found who first!

My arrogance, in retrospect, was inexcusable. I couldn't have known, Clark would tell me later, who and what I was up against. It would not make me feel any better.

While Clark rounded up the packages, I walked over to the body. I have a stronger stomach than Clark and I needed every ounce of control. The wound made by a thirty ought six is not pretty. Gingerly, I searched his bloody pockets for a clue to his identity.

I could find nothing except a phone number written on a cocktail napkin. I put it in my pocket. The boat had registration numbers on the hull. I took those down and copied the motor serial number as well. This had been a professional operation. Well manned by personnel with military training. No identification or personal effects to lead an investigation back to the sponsors.

“We've got seventy five kilos, Trev. These are worth three quarters of a million dollars wholesale. What do you want to do?”

“Bury the undamaged bundles!” I said. “The salt water and humidity will render the rest useless.” I caught Clark's smile. “This is insurance, Clark. I'm not about to go into the drug business. Don't get any ideas about turning this to Edger!”

Clark nodded and took off into the bush to gather the packages. He has a phenomenal memory. I would never have to repeat instructions or stories twice. It is a talent. I think it is less memorizing and more the ability to listen, something possessed by

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few. I followed him with a piece of aluminum I wrested from the wrecked boat to use as a shovel.

Clark's has a devious mind. He has a solid grasp on politics and intrigue. If he hadn't been so much of an anarchist, he would have made a fine politician. His contacts in the underground are encyclopedic. In his mind, he was planning who he would call when he got to the first phone booth, being careful to have a pocket of quarters. He looked at the cocaine as merchandise or a bargaining chip. He had accepted Miata as a factor and was adding the assets and debits in his mind.

On the other hand, I dig holes well. He casually felt me out as I began digging in the sandy soil of the island.

Sitting on a quarter million dollars worth of cocaine, he watched me dig. "This is more like it. This law and order kick you've been on gets me down sometimes."

"I didn't say we weren't going to turn it over to Miata. I just don't know when!"

"There are safe people that will take this off your hands at a fair price."

"There are no safe people! Five years down the line they get busted and remember me to save their ass. No thanks."

"So what are you going to do with it?"

"I don't know right now. I don't plan on selling it but we might need it for ransom."

"Ransom?"

"Let's say they catch me when I'm not expecting it. If they don't kill me right away it might mean they want their goods back. I don't want to depend on Miata to give me the cocaine back. This just might buy me some time if I don't find them first."

"You know what this is worth, Trevor?"

"Yeah! What good is money if you end up doing time? I make enough money. So do you. We don't need to take any more risks than we have to."

"Sometimes you lose me, Trevor. You don't think you can go to prison for shooting someone?"

"Killing someone in self defense is not murder!" I protested.

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“You refuse to sell drugs but you are willing to risk your life by hiding them from some guys that obviously have the manpower, equipment and desire to kill you just for spite!”

I pulled his expensive chair from underneath him and dropped it in the hole. He barely had time to get up. I pushed the others in with it and began to shovel the dirt in over it. The muscles in my arm and back rippling with my efforts, I snarled through my teeth, “I don't sell drugs! I'm willing to risk my life. . . not my freedom. As long as people leave me alone, I won't bother them. I don't like people who threaten other people. I don't like being shot at or ripped off. I won't start a war but, by God, I'll finish one!”

Clark didn't reply immediately, letting me cool down. He knows I would never hurt a friend but sometimes the wool slips from my civil facade. Sometimes the ghosts of my ancestors possess me; the warriors, the soldiers, the hunters. The men who fought for their families and their countries against all odds. It's a primal instinct we all used to have, but has been bred or brainwashed out of most Americans today. I had trained myself as the ancient warriors had. Hand to hand. A hundred fighting techniques from as many instructors. All types of weapons. In the crusades, I would have been a respected and feared swordsman. In the wild west, I could have outshot an Apache with his own bow and arrows. My ability with firearms was sufficiently attested to by the bodies nearby.

For fun, I pay for karate lessons at different dojos. In the last few years, some of the shocked and humbled instructors have offered to pay me.

To put it another way, I don't like bullies! I am not someone you would want to slap your girlfriend in front of.

I shook off the feelings. “Sorry, Clark. Coming down off adrenaline can be a real bummer.” I stood up and stuck my hand out to him. He took it with no hesitation.

“It's OK, Trevor. I can appreciate what you must go through to psych yourself into the state of mind necessary for survival. I've seen you do it and I find it remarkable. You seem to suck in all this energy from the air around you and you release it in these tightly controlled bursts of violence. It's quite frightening to watch. Even though my intellect tells me you would never hurt me and that you are doing it, in part, to protect me, there is that part of me that feels like the family dog you were just teasing suddenly turned into a

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prehistoric wolf about seven feet tall. You can't quite be sure that he will remember who you are! You have also neglected to shave in the last few days. It makes you even more ferocious looking.”

We gazed at each other, secure in our friendship. After carefully arranging palm fronds over the smoothed sand and committing the landmarks to memory, we turned and walked back to our raft and the carnage on the beach. “I appreciate your understanding, Clark.”

“Don't mention it.”

We cleared the woods just in time to see a Coast Guard cutter coming up from the south. A smaller boat painted with the gray of the Marine Patrol was visible in the north. A Coast Guard helicopter suddenly rose up from behind the big island and hovered over us. We waved at them from the beach.

The Coast Guard came as close to the tiny island as possible and summoned us to the ship. We rowed out in the raft. Upon boarding, the pointed guns reminded me I still had the Uzi stuck inside my wet suit. I gave it up to a seaman's outstretched hand and turned to face the Captain, a clean-cut seaman about my age named Lieutenant Maxwell.

He was not happy. Four dead men in the boonies with a boatload of cocaine is a brouhaha of major proportions involving entangled agencies, bureaucratic rank-pulling and impossible logistics. Government agencies also hate grandstanding individuals with guns.

“Do you expect me to believe, Mr. Cameron, that these men just happened to drop all this cocaine nearly on top of you? And that you took them all out when they were armed with automatic weapons?”

“Send your men over to my boat, Lieutenant. There are two girls there that saw the drop being made. They heard the gunshots and felt the slugs hit the boat. You might even be able to see some of the holes piercing my cabin, my hull and my new ten thousand dollar paint job. The ladies heard me return fire. My weapons are legal but effective. I defended my home and guests. They couldn't know they were out gunned when they attacked.”

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Clark piped up. “Trevor was a better shot, I might add. You will find all the evidence, bodies, boats, guns and cocaine there and there,” he pointed. “You might also get out a description of the third boat. It got away with most of the shipment!”

He glared at Clark. I interceded, “Lieutenant, Clark’s roommate is Tony Miata with the DEA. He is on his way down right now. You may use my phone to call his office to confirm. We did not come down here for anything other than pleasure but we always watch for anything suspicious. An unmarked plane dropping bundles wrapped in trash bags qualifies. I might add I tried to call you first. While your radioman was asking stupid questions they jammed my signal and started shooting.”

I’ve always had a hard time with people who assume you are lying. It brings out the worst in me. I leaned over him just a little. “Sorry about staying alive. If we were all dead you would be able to use your deductive reasoning instead of being forced to rely on an accurate recount of events from qualified, professional eyewitnesses skilled in accurate verbal testimony for federal courts! Because we fought back and aren’t shaking in our boots, you assume we must be guilty of something?”

I put my face close to his. The whole crew watched. “There is another boat just like the one floating behind mine that is smuggling a few hundred kilos of pure cocaine into this country of ours. We risked our lives to stop them! The least you can do is quit acting like some fucking reject from McHale’s Navy and get out an all points on that boat!” I turned my back on him and walked to where my raft was tied.

“Unless I’m under arrest, Maxwell, you may finish questioning me aboard my boat. We are not going anywhere. There are numerous things for you to do before a very demanding, unpleasant, rank pulling, DEA agent comes here wanting to see all the evidence you should have lined up, like these bodies the fish are starting to nibble on.” I pointed at the swirling water around one of the bodies and realized the school of barracuda I had met was working with extreme efficiency on one of the bodies. “He will expect you to have recovered the guns and stow the drugs. I have holes to patch and nerves to sooth. Come on, Clark. Let’s go home!”

Followed by a couple of seaman, we rowed back to the Sea-Deuced. Maxwell watched us go, silently fuming. As we got on the boat, Clark voiced the other thing that

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had been floating around in my subconscious, buried there in the weeks of recuperation from the wounds my father and I had sustained from the last cocaine dealer who crossed my path. A drug dealer employed by the Mossad/C.I.A. “What if this was a CIA or a Mossad operation, Trevor?”

I shook my head. It was still hard for me to believe our government could condone importing drugs, much less be involved in an operation like this. Yet not once, since Carmine was killed in a hail of bullets in Key West, had there been any airing of his connection to the Mossad in the media. My mind had a tendency to shy away from the questions created by the information I had. Only the law enforcement agencies were aware of the Mossad connection and they weren't talking to the press. I pulled on the oars with a vengeance. “If this was a government operation, Clark, not only are we in deep shit, but this country also.”

Chapter Three

“That was really good, Trevor,” came rare praise from Clark as I rowed back. A hastily dispatched pair of seamen followed in their dingy. “Professional eyewitnesses?”

“I testified in front of the Grand Jury regarding Carmine and DiAngelo.” I said in my defense.

“To cover stealing everything they had!”

“They started it.”

By the time we got back to the boat, the girls had cleaned up the place considerably. The lobster, now nicely cooked and a beautiful shade of red, lay tantalizingly piled on a bullet chipped platter in the middle of a table riddled with bullet holes. Some had evidently gone all the way through, Clark pointed out. Silently we both added it to the invisible points board we shared under the Lucky-Son-of-a-Bitch column.

By the time we sat down in front of the salivating seamen and started eating, we heard another boat. A forty-foot, dark blue Midnight Express powered by souped 440s slowed, came down off a plane a courteous distance from us. It pulled up and docked next to mine. The seamen went out to help with the ropes, obviously recognizing it. Tony

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Miata, cigarette dangling from his mouth, dirty t-shirt and jeans leaped on board, flashing his badge at the Coast Guard with a practiced flourish. Two of his operatives I called Chip and Dale accompanied him. They had never introduced themselves to me formally, preferring to talk with each other in strangely high-pitched voices. He came inside, sat down at the table, reached over and grabbed a whole lobster. Chip and Dale went with the crewmen over to the cutter.

“Thanks, Cameron. This is just perfect. A nice ride down on company gas, a lobster dinner, two beautiful broads and a quarter million in cocaine. You shouldn't have.”

“You can say that again.” I said as I cracked the tail open, determined to finish my dinner. “Pass the butter, please.”

“How did you manage to piss Maxwell off so quick?”

“He was wasting time. Letting these guys get away instead of putting it on the air. Interrogating me instead of taking our statements.”

“Yeah, the Coast Guard just doesn't know how to handle mass murderers.”

“Goddamn it, Tony. . .”

“Relax, Cameron. I'm just pulling your chain. I know you would shoot anybody without an airtight alibi.”

I ground my teeth.

He grinned at me. “Besides, if you were hunting them, you wouldn't have taken so many people with you.”

“I was just about to take them all home, when you got here.”

“Tsk, tsk. Don't try and take the law in your own hands. That's my job. You are just a civilian. That's the way you want it right?” He wiped a greasy hand on my tablecloth.

“Give Tony a napkin, will you, Clark? Tony, I just cost them a bundle. I expect them to come looking for me! Who ever they are?” I added with a questioning eye cast in his direction.

“Why would they do that? Do you have something that belongs to them?” His slovenly demeanor slipped slightly. A cop's eyes peered at me through bushy brows

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reminding me of who he was and what he represented. While we were friends, there was a line between us I refused to cross. I wasn't a cop. He could not let himself forget it and would make no exceptions for me if I stepped too far on the other side of that narrow line.

“You do, now, if the Coast Guard hasn't lost it. They won't know that I don't unless there is a leak on your end or you pass this on to the press.”

Such talk was making my girlfriends nervous. I stood up and looked wistfully at my half eaten lobster. “Come on, Tony, let's go for a walk on the deck.”

“Thanks girls. The lobster was great,” he said as he followed me out the door and up to the flybridge.

I continued. “They might do it anyway. They lost the coke and four men. I've hurt someone's reputation.”

He relaxed. “You want to be my bait?”

“That's not exactly what I had in mind. I want to find them and collect for the damages to my boat.”

“As an agent for the government I can tell you such a procedure is not allowed. If I can prove it in court, you might have a chance to sue whoever is charged with this deal or his estate if he is found guilty.”

“I could die of old age, too. By the time you get through with anyone you catch, they don't have a pot to piss in. Come on, Tony. I know you work with informants. I know you let them have little perks, drugs, money. I don't want to be on the payroll. I've got my own income. I just want these guys to pay through the nose for what they tried to do. What if it hadn't been me? What if it had been some old couple from Wisconsin? What then? You damn sure wouldn't be having lobster dinner! You'd be notifying relatives!”

“Calm down, Cameron. I know you are good at this kind of thing. I know you like to hunt down assholes like this. I've tried my best to get you to come on board. As much as you like this kind of work, you could be the one of the best!”

“I can't always play by the rules, Tony. Nor will I follow some prick's pointless orders. You can't advance without putting up with bullshit from your superiors. You have to do things a certain way, even if you lose the bad guys. I won't operate like that.”

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“You are one stubborn son-of-a-bitch!”

“What's it going to be, Tony? Are we going to work together on this or not?”

He turned away and watched the divers from various agencies drag in a body. The light was going fast. The Coast Guard ship had anchored and was settling in for a long night. “I'll work with you as far as I can. I like working with you, Cameron. You've got a lot going for you. You are street wise and tough. You are also a lot smarter than you look, which is awfully grubby right now. You need a shave! If you take these guys for anything, be smooth about it. I let you slide on switching those cases last year. If the Cuban navy hadn't blown DiAngelo to bits, that little stunt would have cost you a few years. Nice of him to get himself killed, wasn't it? Almost made me a believer in Clark's theory you are the luckiest man alive.”

Was the twinkle in his eye admiration or anticipation? Was he a friend or a spy, slowly working his way into my confidence, waiting for me to make a mistake? Why is it so hard for me to trust anyone?

Because I'm not really lucky. I'm smart, cynical and suspicious. Smart enough to harness fire without getting burned. Cynical enough to see all the possibilities in any situation and suspicious enough not to trust anyone or anything too far.

“That's the past, this is now. Let's get on with this. Get these guys to finish up with us so I can put these pretty girls to bed. We are spending the night here. Tomorrow I'll run everyone back up. I'll call you when I get back to the dock to see what you get off the physical evidence.”

“Lighten up Cameron. I know how to run an investigation. Where do you see that it says I'm supposed to take orders from you?”

“Sorry, Miata. What are your instructions?”

“Take these girls to bed, then take 'em home. Call me when you get back to the dock and I'll tell you about the physical evidence,” he grinned.

“Sounds good to me. See that the Coast Guard leaves me my weapons. An armed force has tried to kill me once. I would hate for my own government to help them.”

“I'll talk to them. Watch your back, Cameron. Don't be a stranger.” He turned to go.

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“Oh, yeah, Tony. Speaking of the government. . .” I left it hanging.

He didn't look back at me. “I thought about that too. I don't know and don't know if we'll ever know. It will always be a rogue agent that will take the blame and we'll never get past him to know who knew. Just be careful, Cameron.”

I watched him walk over to his boat and began barking orders. Amid all my worrying and weighing, I could not put him in a comfortable niche in my mind. He was working for the government. A branch of that government was suspected in supplying drugs. I had stopped a shipment of drugs. Would the government come after me? And if they did, whose side would Tony take? Too complicated. *Too much monkey business for me to be involved in.*

Everyone eventually cleared off my boat. They grudgingly returned my guns. Clark and I patched a few holes and covered the shattered windows with sheets and blankets. The night was cool enough to turn the air conditioning and generator off. Our makeshift windows served to keep out the voracious mosquitoes.

Clark was still a little up from his sample but I was feeling incredibly tired. The girls were starting to relax a little with some help from an unbroken bottle of fine California wine they had salvaged from my pantry. They wanted to party but the reaction from the day's events finally claimed its dues. I excused myself, deliberately going forward to use the head and falling into one of the V bunks. Comfortable for one. Impossible for two. I could hear the girls giggling, seemingly fully recovered from their harrowing experience. I listened for all of two minutes before falling asleep.

I dreamed of screaming black men in military uniforms shooting at me. They were dropping from the skies on huge, fluffy chutes. Swinging burnished machetes at me, they sliced into my flesh. I shot them until the bodies were piled like cordwood around me, close enough that their blood and mine ran together and became a river, which threatened to sweep me away.

I woke up shaking and drenched with sweat. I remembered the strange dreams I had while I was with Donna. It had been months since I had thought of them, but I thought of her almost every day.

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It had been a strange sequence, like a serial dream, about an older me, a Colonel in some future rebellion in America. It was like he was trying to warn me about a deadly future, as if I could do something about it, to somehow prevent it from happening.

It was a dark, threatening future in which America, and its government, was the enemy. That older Cameron obviously wanted to warn me, but what could one man, any man, do about the future?

I could hear moaning coming from my bedroom. I found I couldn't care less.

I had only fallen in love once. Donna died in an explosion meant to have killed me. Since then, I merely went through the motions. I had stayed with a girl, June, who had been wounded with me, until she had healed, then sent her home. I had dated others, but had no long-term interest in them, felt no jealousy when they found someone else.

Lonely women were plentiful here in South Florida. I took what came my way, loved them well and sent them away. I did not search for them or encourage them. Some were hurt, some became friends. It made no difference to me. I wondered if I would ever feel the emotion called love again. Long after all sounds had ceased, I searched for sleep, trying to forget alabaster eyes glowing with her love for me.

The next morning, I was up early. I threw the empty wine bottle away and washed the glasses. Sometime in the night, the Coast Guard, Miata and every trace of yesterday's events had disappeared. A few broken tree limbs on the island were the only reminders. The shallow sea had swallowed the blood of four men and the debris of battle. Peace once more reigned upon the waters as it had for millenniums. Once we surrendered to its embrace, our precious flesh was merely sustenance for its creatures; the wreckage of our fragile ships became their homes. The brief conflicts of man created an insignificant turbulence on the surface only, which subsided quickly and were forgotten immediately by the imperturbable oceans.

I rubbed my jaw and felt the stubble turning into a beard. The wind had picked up a bit, turning the placid bay into a chop. I was not ready to risk shaving at this time. I dressed in a pair of black, thigh length spandex shorts, a t-shirt and a pair of Nike water socks. The perfect clothing for a nautical existence; Comfortable, quick drying and non-restrictive. The water socks make great boat shoes and you can swim in them as well. I

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made a pot of coffee the old fashioned way to avoid starting the generator. While it was perking, I went out and double-checked the engine compartment to make sure nothing vital had been hit, like an oil pan or gasoline tank.

Satisfied, I returned to the cabin, poured a cup of coffee and fired up the diesels. I set my coffee on the upper deck and flipped the switch on the anchor winch. It pulled the boat forward until the rope was almost vertical. The anchor pulled loose from the sandy, shallow bottom and quickly slid into the bowsprit.

I climbed up to the controls and set a leisurely speed on a heading of twenty degrees north by northeast to take us to the narrow channel and through the shallow spoil area called Cutter's Bank where Card Sound becomes Biscayne Bay. As I plotted my course I found my island had a name. Pumpkin Key! I wondered if I should make a treasure map? Here lies the booty of Captain Trevor Cameron, scourge of drug runners and illegal aliens! X marks the spot! Avast me hearties. Cameron the marauder coming through!

Sometime later, the movement of the boat woke up my weary passengers. They somewhat sheepishly peaked outside to see if it was me at the helm. The girls actually wore clothes. Clark came up first.

“Good morning.” I said, still somber from my restless, blood-soaked dreams.

He assumed the wrong reason for my subdued greeting.

“Listen, Trevor, I know you and Julie had something going. . .”

“Clark, if I had wanted Julie or Carol, I wouldn't have gone forward to sleep. I had a lot on my mind. I enjoy combat and danger too much. I feel more alive in action than now. It bothers me because I also feel that everyone has a right to live his or her life in peace. I don't condone killing. Yet I've now done more of it than any one in peacetime has a right to. This insight into my own psyche disturbs me much more than who is sleeping with who.”

“Then you are not angry?”

“Julie is a sweetheart and I've enjoyed making love to her and probably will again. The same goes for Carol. They aren't in love with me nor I, them. We like each other and that's certainly not going to change because she likes you also!”

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“Of course, I know you are that way. Intellectually. Emotionally, I still have these middle class morals that inevitably interfere where sex is concerned. I think I am supposed to marry Carol and Julie because they both slept in my bed! I would love to know how you managed to shed all your inhibitions and programming.”

“I received little programming as a child and had no restrictions on what I could read. I planned the person I wanted to be.”

“Interesting. Amoral as opposed to immoral?”

“No. Immoral would be more correct. I think I am very moral but would be judged immoral because my system does not conform to accepted patterns. A hundred years ago it would have been accepted. A hundred years hence it may be again. Amoral is a lack of moral responsibilities. You must be moral to exist in a society. Society and I have reached a kind of understanding.”

“That means you are planning on tracking down the man that ordered that the attack on us and are not thinking about or interested in sex, right?” he surmised.

“Right.” I confirmed.

“It's OK, girls. You can come up on deck. Trevor is only plotting not brooding! Bring him up a fresh cup of coffee, please!”

They followed his instructions and soon were sunning themselves behind us. Everything was right in their world. Everything was back to normal. When we got back to the dock they would go on with their routines, a bit of adventure to tell about.

For me, the vacation was over.

I picked up the speed. The girls clung to the handrails I had installed next to the tanning cushions. My houseboat's hull was built when the boat companies were not counting pennies. It was laid up thick, with a high bow to take waves and wakes. I had added twin, six cylinder Cummings diesels. It could cruise easily at twenty-five knots and handle five-foot seas if necessary. The light chop had no effect on it's handling. I had adapted to a life on the sea with amazing ease.

I found the markers and made it through the banks. I rounded red marker number eight and corrected my course to seven degrees North. A half hour at twenty knots brought us to the channel through Featherbed Banks at the north end of Elliot Key. The

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markers for the channel leading to Turkey Point Nuclear Power Plant passed by to the west. The skyline of Miami became visible. Another course correction to ten degrees would bring us under the MacArthur Causeway that connects Key Biscayne to the mainland in under an hour.

I set the autopilot and tried to relax.

I switched to manual after we got into the heavy traffic around the Port of Miami. Brightly colored pennants were flying above Bayside, the huge shopping center and marina recently completed on Biscayne Bay on the mainland and across from Dodge Island. Shoppers and diners looked out at us and waved. I didn't stop.

We arrived at Clark's townhouse on Arch Creek in North Miami at about two o'clock in the afternoon. I shooed the girls out with hugs, kisses and apologies for being in the right spot at the wrong time. I decided against going to my dock by boat. It wouldn't hurt to do a recon first. When docking, your attention has to be on the docking procedure. There is none left over for survival.

The boat secure, Clark offered to run me over to Winston Towers Marina to retrieve my motorcycle or my truck. It is a quiet marina compared to Bahia Mar or Islamorada. There are no services, few parties, little parking and two entrances, both locked, requiring keys to get in or out. You have no way of knowing there is a marina nestled behind the giant, sprawling buildings of the massive development. You can see the shopping center on the water across the bay containing restaurants, theaters, nightclubs and the health club where I work out. It is a short row across on my raft and a good beginning to my workout.

I was not expecting trouble this quickly. There were a couple of ways someone could find out the marina where I kept my boat. The electric company, the phone company or tax records. It should take a little time. They would not find it behind Clark's.

The marina is watched over by John and Sherry Guest. They live on the fifty-six foot Carlcraft, Bon Bon, at the east entrance of the dock. John repowered my boat and put it into bristol condition. He and Sherry are perfectionists. I wondered what they would say when they saw the shambles it was in now!

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We cruised the streets leading to the gate. There were no strange individuals lurking about. I thanked Clark and waved him away as I unlocked the gate. I kept my bike safely locked to the wall of the parking lot that runs the length of the dock and forms the base of the massive Winston Towers Six Hundred building.

I was lulled into a false sense of security. Being home, I relaxed my guard. Besides, it's impossible to carry a gun discreetly when wearing spandex shorts. I underestimated the resources and the determination of my newly made enemies.

Sherry was on the front deck of her boat, the Bon Bon, talking with two people I couldn't see. The tide was low and the overhang of the upper deck hid their features but her firm, swimsuit covered tush and muscular legs were visible and unmistakable. I rounded the bend in the sidewalk in time to hear her say, "I'm sure he will be glad to call you if there is a problem. Trevor always pays his bills on time."

She turned, saw me and brightened, "Here he is now! Trevor, these men need to talk with you about the insurance on Sea Deuced. Did you have an accident down in the Keys?"

I still could not see their faces, but I was close enough to see black hands reaching inside expensive suit jackets. With a roar I leaped toward Sherry. Instinctively, she moved to the side. My hands caught the part of the deck that formed the porch roof and I swung over her railing, extending both feet as forcefully as I could given the angles I had to work with.

I caught both men in the chest hard enough to take their breath away and deflect their aim. One gun fired, the slug penetrating the porch roof. Sherry screamed. I landed on my feet and got a hand around the man's gun hand on my right. With a jerk and a twist I broke his trigger finger and removed the gun from his useless hand in one movement. I grabbed the tie of the man on my left and brought his face down to my rising knee. His nose broke and smeared his bright scarlet blood all over my bare legs. While he was bent over, I hit him on the back of the head with his injured partner's gun. He dropped his and went to his knees. I kicked it over board and threw the gun with it. Now we were on more even terms!

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

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Damn you, Cameron, I cursed myself, that macho attitude is going to kill you yet!
One on one, mano to mano. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

Once again I underestimated my enemy!

The bay off which the marina sits is about the size of two football fields. Where the Bon Bon is docked, it narrows into a canal that runs another two hundred yards behind another Winston Towers building. Across the canal is a wooded area where North Bay Road continues until it runs into 163rd Street.

It was from this wooded area that I heard the distinctive *phht* of a silenced weapon. It whistled by my ear and struck the concrete of the parking garage!

I whirled and grabbed Sherry and whisked her into her boat, locked the door behind us, shoved her roughly through the living room and down the stairs into her galley as more shots plunked into her boat, shattering glass and fiberglass. “Do you have a gun here?” I asked.

“No. I never needed one before you moved in.”

At least she wasn't dissolving into a hysterical puddle on the floor!

We crouched behind the safety of her refrigerator. “Where is John?”

“Out of town for the day.”

“How about a flare gun, spear gun, anything!”

“A flare gun is up there, in the kit beneath the wheel.”

I poked my head up the stairs. I could see the deck through the front window. It looked deserted. I crawled forward and opened the neon orange flare kit. I took the flare gun out and loaded it. I crawled to the shattered window and peered out.

My assailants were swimming for the other shore. Another black man moved out of the cover of the woods to help them, smoking, silenced gun in hand.

I stood up. He saw his gun and me swung my way with the practiced moves of a professional. I was a fraction of a second quicker. I pulled the trigger and watched the flare scream across the narrow channel and hit him dead in the center of his tie.

The suit must not have been made of flame retardant material. It caught fire with astonishing quickness. He screamed and pumped another round off in my general direction. His accuracy was seriously affected, as were his eyebrows, hair and most of the

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beard on his face, not to mention his suit. While he was screaming, I could see a flash of silver where his pearly whites should be! He quickly dove into the water and put the flames out. He rose. I got a good look at him. A big man with a mouth full of teeth liberally filled with silver. Reluctantly retreating, he put his last three shots into a pattern less than six inches across and six inches below the window I had looked out a fraction of a second before. Had I ducked instead of diving sideways across the couch, the bullets would have come to rest in my forehead rather than John's control panel. I could imagine my eyes taking the place of the broken gauges.

When I peeked out of the window, no one was there.

“Jesus Christ, Trevor,” came Sherry's voice from the kitchen. “We could have loaned you the money for the insurance!”

Chapter Four

Sherry entered the living room, hands on her hips; wearing the demanding look I had seen her use often with John. She was frightened, angry and wanted an explanation. I shuddered to think of what could have happened.

I tried to calm her down with humor. “Well,” I told her, taking her hand in mine and looking deeply into her eyes, inches above her, her body touching mine gently in three places at once, “I’m sorry to cut this visit so short. I wish I could have spent more time. It’s really been exciting, meeting you like this.”

She wasn’t amused. She tore away from me. She couldn’t hold still. She walked around, surveyed the damage in the living room, turned and dashed back down the stairs, calling over her shoulder. “What’s going on Trevor?”

“Just a little more work for you and John. Maybe you guys can work a deal with our insurance companies. We have matching holes in both our houseboats.”

“What did you do to these guys?” She muttered, coming out of the kitchen with a broom held in a threatening manner.

I took a deep breath. “Blew up two of their boats, killed four of their men, stole a million dollars worth of cocaine, broke one finger, cracked one’s skull and barbecued one’s ribs. I didn’t think it would piss them off that bad, though. I’m sorry I got you involved.”

“You are impossible. I don’t know whether to believe a word you say. We are going to have to renegotiate your lease if this keeps up” Nervously, she started sweeping up broken glass.

“May I borrow your phone?” She nodded. I took the portable off the wall and went out on the porch for privacy and to get out of her reach. I dialed Miata.

“Me again.” I said.

“Who and how many did you kill this time?” he asked wearily.

“None. I missed. They shot up John and Sherry’s boat and got away.”

Tony had met both John and Sherry. “Anybody hurt?”

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“None on our side. Three of them. One has a busted skull, one a broken finger and one is slightly singed from a flare gun and has silver teeth.”

“You must be slipping in your old age. Why didn't you shoot them?”

“I forgot my gun.” I didn't tell him I had thrown two away! “I didn't think I would need it this soon. These guys got some information network, to find me this fast.”

“You keep this up, no one is going to let you come over to visit anymore. I might be able to explain why these guys are so violent in their reaction to you.”

“I'm listening.”

“The cocaine wasn't their only cargo.”

“I don't understand.”

“It seems our smugglers are branching out. Looking for new business. Were all of the boxes the same size?”

I had assumed they were. I thought about it. I closed my eyes and ran the scene across my memory. I zoomed to the door of airplane. Stacked in it were two stacks of containers. One stack contained longer boxes!

“No. The one you got was the smallest. They had another size in the plane but by then I was ducking a lot and I didn't see who picked them up or if they came down.”

“The cocaine was the payment. The real cargo was inside. C4.”

“Sea Four?”

“Plastique. Explosives. It was neatly packed in with the cocaine. We believe the longer boxes may have contained weapons; Missiles, rocket launchers and automatic weapons.”

“Terrorists?”

“Better believe it. Well organized. Using established smugglers in the Bahamas to bring in their weaponry. Possibly paying with high grade cocaine!”

“I'm pretty impressed, Tony. How did you get all of this information, bring one of them back to life?”

“Dead men do tell tales, Cameron. Two you killed were definitely runners from the Bahamas. We got a positive ID on them from the Bahamian Defense Force. Two we can't get any ID on at all but we think they are black Palestinians or Iraqis. There was

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something in one of their pockets written in Arabic. We had a forensic specialist confirm that he could be from the Middle East.”

“So what have we concluded?”

“They planned to use that plastique for an operation. In context with the size of the shipment, for such a small amount to make a difference seems odd. Or maybe there is something you know, something you saw that could hurt them or expose their mission here. Maybe you killed someone's brother. If you would just leave them alive for just a few minutes, we could ask some questions!”

Yeah, They think I have a lot of plastique. Three times what you think I found! “Nothing comes to mind other than the boats and the cargo. Why don't you release the news to the papers that you have the stuff, not me?”

“I thought you didn't like to see your name in the paper, Cameron?”

“I'm tired of getting shot at. You have my permission.”

“I'd rather put a couple of men to protect you.”

“Watch me, you mean. So they can catch whoever shoots me! No thanks. Having Chip and Dale follow me around is not high on my list of things I'd like to see. Besides, I'm taking the bike, there isn't enough room on it for them and I don't think they can keep up.”

“They hate your nickname for them, you know,” referring to his operatives.

“Tell them to get a voice change. What about the boats?”

“The boats were purchased from a dealer on West Twenty Seventh Avenue, right off 305, by a Bahamian corporation owned by untraceable Lebanese business men. There is a record of some of these gentlemen coming into the U.S. within the last month but not leaving. Tensions are a little high in the Middle East right now, to say the least, so Customs is looking over all the entries from Muslim countries carefully.”

“Have you sent anyone over to the boat dealer?”

“Haven't been able to spare anyone. You free? Are you wearing that Spandex shit with your balls hanging out? If you are, change your pants first. No respectable agent of mine would dress like that!”

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“Tony, have you looked into a mirror lately? You've got more ashes on your shirt than Mt. Saint Helens. One other thing, see if the FBI or the Bahamas have anything on a big black man, six three or four, heavier than me, maybe two forty, with silver teeth. No idea if he's American or foreign.”

“I'll see what I can dig up. Check in with me tomorrow.”

I found the button and disconnected. It does no good to hang up the phone. These days that's what you do after you disconnect. Nothing is easy.

Tony's mention of the tension in the Middle East reminded me of what I had been missing on the TV news. President Bush was gathering a coalition of countries to counter Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Our troops were massing in Saudi Arabia. It looked like war was inevitable. I wasn't watching the developments with the rapture of most Americans.

I went inside and put the phone back in its holder. Sherry was still sweeping frantically, as if she were trying to sweep her fears away with the broken glass. I gently took the broom out of her hand. She collapsed in my arms, crying and shaking. “I'm sorry. I've always hated weepy women,” she said with a sniffle.

“You just came through a dangerous situation. We survived. This is just a reaction. The important thing is your breakdown happened now, not then. You held up very well. I'm sorry to put you in the middle. It won't happen again.”

“Are you are leaving?” she asked.

“Until the danger is past.” She had stopped crying but she wasn't pulling away either.

She looked up into my eyes. Since I had first met her six months ago, her blonde hair had grown a few inches, now falling below her neck, softening her angular, sun-bronzed face. Her body, a curious combination of soft roundness and work hardened muscle pressed up against mine. I couldn't help it, I couldn't stop it, it just happened.

I kissed her, really kissed her for the first time. She was married. I liked both her and John. I had not pressed the attraction I knew existed between us. I have no designs on other men's women. There are enough to go around. But the close brush with death sent a deluge of desire that submerged our careful pattern of quips and lightheartedness by which we maintained our proper relationship.

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Suddenly ashamed, we both broke away, breathless.

Her eyes slowly opened and she took a couple of deep breaths to regain her composure. “Thanks, Trevor. That was much better than a slap in the face.” She smiled but it flickered.

“I think maybe I need a cold shower.” I went into her pantry and pulled out a Ziploc baggie and sealed it. I took off the fanny pack I use to carry my keys and wallet in lieu of pockets and laid it on her table. I turned, walked out the door to the edge of the boat and dove over the rail. In ten strokes I was across the canal. I crawled out and examined the ground where I had last seen my silver toothed antagonist. Something told me this was my enemy. The others were flunkies following orders.

I found some shell casings. There was too much trash to locate any more evidence that definitely belonged to them. There was some blood and pieces of charred fabric. I collected what I thought might have value to Miata's lab boys. I put them in the bag and swam back to the swim platform of the Bon Bon.

Sherry met me at the stern with a towel.

“You really went overboard for me, huh?”

“You know it, lady.” I grinned, proud of my self-control.

“What should I tell John, when he gets home?”

“Tell him I'm glad he wasn't here and that I'm sorry for any damage that was done.” I couldn't tell if she caught my double entendre.

“You better take the truck. You'll catch a death of a cold riding that damn bike, wet as you are in the middle of winter.”

“Sherry, this is Florida, it's eighty degrees. I'll be dry in five minutes. Thanks for the concern.”

“You need someone to worry about you, Trevor.”

“Thanks again, Sherry. Good luck with John.”

“It's too late for luck with him,” she said in a different, small voice. She took her towel back into the boat and closed the door behind her. She and John had a strange relationship but only now did I realize how unhappy she was with it.

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I retrieved my pack and keys and walked down the dock to unlock my bike. When I rode by she was inside, sweeping a gain, with silent tears running down her face. I kept going.

By the time I got back to Clark's I was dry and pretty sure I had caught a cold. I locked the bike up in the carport and went inside.

Clark wasn't sympathetic. "You think your are indestructible. You could have brought the truck."

I filled him in on the latest news. He listened intently as I summarized the events and information I had obtained.

"This is an unusual turn of events. Drug dealers I know. They are motivated by profit. The closest I've been to terrorists is you. They are motivated by politics. They are more dangerous than drug dealers as they have no hesitation about killing innocent bystanders. I do not think of blacks when I think of terrorists. Why is that? Drug dealers, random violence, petty theft but not terrorists."

"Because," I interjected, "They have never been organized, outside the U.S."

"You think that may be changing?"

"If what we have seen in the last two days is the tip of the iceberg, I would say yes."

He thought about it. "There have been several attempts here to do just that. The Black Panthers in the sixties. Farrakhan, or something like that, the preacher friend of Jesse Jackson who advocates violence. More recently, the Yahwehs in Miami. Their leader was indicted and arrested for fourteen murders. He managed to amass quite a fortune in real estate. Miami even declared a day in his honor."

"What if someone is organizing and training black terrorists? Arabs are suspect these days but blacks can move about the country freely. There are many blacks in Egypt and Libya. A well financed organization using drugs as a front, stock piling weapons, could mount a terrorist campaign like none we've ever experienced in this country."

"Maybe we are jumping to conclusions. It could be that we have just stumbled on a black smuggling ring. There have always been black gangs."

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“Could be,” I agreed, “but I would be willing to bet that these have had formal military training.”

I thought of how the Palestinians adored Saddam Hussein and were willing to die for him in a Holy War. How they hated the Jews and Israel. How many Arabs were black? How many blacks thought of Americans and Jews as enemies? How easily a cadre of highly trained black terrorists could disappear into the ghettos, showing their faces only when they were ready to move. How willing young blacks would join a group that offered them a cause they could believe in, money and weapons. How many were already Muslims? I also remembered the little card Clark gave me last year that I still carried in my wallet. It read “Terrorist Hunting License”. Now it seemed prophetic.

What if this theoretical group were enlisting members from other countries as well, siphoning off manpower from Jamaica, Haiti, and the Bahamas? Seducing black governments with carefully crafted promises of aid from a coalition of oil rich nations with a common hatred.

Maybe we have it coming. The white man has subjugated and ruled non-whites for a thousand years. We made the blacks our slaves, colonized the Arabs for their oil, and used the Chinese to build our railroads. In America, it took a hundred years after setting the slaves free for them to gain the right to drink from our fountains, to go to our schools. We stole our country from the Indians, raping it, killing the buffalo along with the Indians and their way of life.

America was supposed to be different. Here the races united. All men equal, regardless of race, creed or color. Americans one and all. Here it is working, isn't it? If so, why do we avoid the ghettos? Why are there more blacks in prison than whites? Why aren't more of the young men from the ghettos lawyers, politicians, and doctors? Why do they riot?

I have no answers. I would like to think I'm not prejudiced yet the majority of my employees are white. Most of my friends are white. The truth is race is still important to us. We look down on other races. Ours is right, their's are wrong.

During the latest upheaval in the Middle East, back-to-back interviews were held with two Palestinians. One in Israel, one in Los Angeles. The one in Israel railed against

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the Jewish state and its inhabitants, vilifying them, swearing that one day the Arabs would unite and drive them into the sea, calling for Iraq to fire its chemical warheads at them. The Arab in L.A. was outraged that he had been threatened and subjected to this same type of hate. He was insulted by checks run on members of the Arab community by the FBI. Why should they be singled out just because they were members of a race that wanted to see America annihilated!

There seems to be no answers. Separate nations still war. Arab fights Arab. Religion is the major cause of war. When the races mingle, there is constant friction. Technology shrinks our planet; the impoverished and the ignorant have the most children, thereby increasing the poverty and over-populating our already crowded planet. Laws can't be passed to prevent it without cries of prejudice. Intelligence levels drop in our schools as intelligent people avoid having too many children. The ratios are askew. The democratic process sounded good when there were thirteen colonies. Now we are lucky if our elected officials can read. We are becoming a nation of illiterates led by pleasant looking people promoted by television. We never ask them to show us their report cards. We never question their IQ. We rarely check to see if they are qualified to run a business or even a household.

I said none of this. The subject has been discussed to death. Clark was on a different track entirely. "I was using it as a stool. I'm lucky I didn't blow us up. What if we had hit the C4 with a bullet? How much was C4 and how much was cocaine?" He was still adding up potential profits.

"Tony didn't say. He said he couldn't understand why they would go after me for such a small amount of explosives."

"I would question why they would jeopardize their safety for any amount. If your concept were right, they would have enough money to absorb a loss. Maybe they are just a small time outfit recruiting from different countries and financing themselves with drugs and robberies. The C4 might have been in just the one package for a bank job or burglary. Just because they have had military training does not mean they are working for a foreign government. It would explain why they are looking for you. You have a lot of their money," he pointed out.

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“If they want to recover something, they have a strange way of going about it. They were trying to kill me! They weren't asking a lot of questions.”

“Then they think you are a threat to them. Or they want vengeance. They think you know something that makes it imperative for them to kill you.”

“I don't know anymore than you know. I didn't see any of the survivors. They should know the cops have all the evidence. They couldn't be afraid I would come after them. It just doesn't make sense.”

“Maybe they figured out the cops don't have all the evidence. The smugglers know it because they haven't swooped down them. That means they know you have it.”

“The packages we buried.”

“The ones we didn't open. Maybe there was more than cocaine or C4 in one. Maybe there was a communiqué, something that could lead the police to them or incriminate important people.”

“They wouldn't risk that on a airdrop,” I disagreed. “Maybe they just plan to eliminate all the witnesses that could testify about the drop!”

We looked at each other. A chill ran down my back. There had been four witnesses who had seen the plane. Without us, there was no one to testify, should they be brought to trial. Could they be that thorough, that ruthless?

Clark echoed my thoughts. “That would mean they would come after all four of us.”

“How could they know who was on board?” I wondered out loud.

“The Coast Guard report. We all gave them our addresses.” Clark answered.

“You gave them this address?”

He looked distressed. “Well, yes. You told them I lived with Tony, and you have been impressing upon me how there is no need for being devious and furtive when you are legit!”

I ran for the phone, dialing Julie and Carol's number with hands that shook. There was no answer. It was only six o'clock, too early for them to be out. I slammed the phone down, cursing my stupidity and ran for my boat.

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“Make sure the door is locked, Clark, I'll be right back.” I hollered over my shoulder. I pulled a pair of jeans on over my shorts, checked the nine-millimeter pistol's clip and slid it into my waistband. A jacket to cover it and I was ready, hoping I was wrong, fear that I wasn't formed a solid burning knot in my stomach. I grabbed my cellular as I left, locking the glass door out of habit, knowing it would stop no one who wanted to enter, missing my secure trailer for the first time in months.

I dashed back into Clark's condo, feeling extremely vulnerable. The whole Secret Service can't protect our presidents from a determined idiot with a gun. There are too many places to hide, too many ways to kill. They had almost got me earlier because I never thought about checking across the canal. Even now, there could be someone looking at me through the cross hairs of a sniper's rifle in the upstairs window of the home across the canal, the inhabitants slaughtered for the strategic location of their home.

Farfetched, but possible. The shot didn't come and I made it back inside without incident. The startling realization he was a target had created strain lines in Clark's normally jovial features.

“This is the point where I usually blame you for getting me into this. But even with my vast store of rationalizations, I can't figure out how to blame you for getting me into this!”

Chapter Five

I scribbled a note to Tony. "Danger! Hit men after Clark too." I stuck it where he would be sure to see it and we dashed out the door, looking carefully up and down the street and peering uselessly into the wooded area across the street. We took the rental car Clark uses. He has no interest in things mechanical, preferring to return the vehicle when the oil gets low or the wheels get dirty.

He automatically tossed me the keys. Julie and Carol lived in an apartment north of 163rd Street. We got caught in the commuter crush that was Biscayne Boulevard. I cursed and pounded the steering wheel in frustration.

"I doubt that will make them move much faster. We are probably over reacting. They might have gone out for a bite to eat." I didn't answer. "So why are you blaming yourself for this situation?"

"I should have thought about this sooner! How could I be so blind? It's so egotistical to think they would single me out and leave everyone else alone. There I set, congratulating myself on my prowess, my ability to deal with danger, and I left two innocent girls alone and unprotected!"

"You couldn't know! You still don't know! My God, Trevor, how can you feel responsible for everyone you know? Who appointed you guardian of the universe?"

"If they had not been with me, they would not be in danger."

"If they had not been with you, they might have been killed crossing the street by a bus. If it hadn't been for you they would have died down in the Keys! You can't control all the possibilities or all anticipate all of the dangers."

"If I had kept quiet, hadn't tried to call the Coast Guard. . ." I moaned as the traffic moved forward a car length.

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“Then we would have no notice, no hint of their intentions. They could have caught us all up there on the upper deck, four easy targets instead of an armed defense.”

His arguments were sound and made me feel no better. With a sudden motion, I pulled over on the grass and accelerated past the line of cars, bouncing wildly over the rough terrain, honking at angry motorists and dodging the cars that were in the correct lanes. We careened through the parking lot of a Mexican Restaurant and cut through the crowded service station on the corner of Biscayne and 163rd Street, scattering paying customers before crashing through a hedge, jumping a curb and forcing my way into and across four lanes of traffic.

From somewhere behind me I heard a siren. I sped up, weaving in and out of cars, skimming bumpers and leaving a horde of angry frightened motorists in my wake. Clark held on, his fingers digging into the dash, knuckles as white as his face. I ran the light beside Facade, one of Miami's hot nightspots, turning into the entrance to Eastern Shores. Two blocks and a right. One more block and I came sliding to a stop in front of the girl's apartment building.

I was out the door; gun in hand, before it came to a halt. Running up the stairs I was vaguely aware of the police car sliding to a halt behind me. The police had drawn their guns. Clark was using all of his powers of persuasion to keep them from shooting me. I heard part of it as I ran down the balcony to reach their door.

“Don't shoot him, follow him. We have reason to believe there are two lives in danger up there. He is not a threat to you and he is licensed to carry that gun. Quickly, get up there and back him up.”

It is a credit to Clark's power of persuasion that the police did as they were told. I was outside their door, trying to decide if I should knock or kick the door down. I would look awfully silly if they were just in the shower. I could be dead if I knocked and my pursuers were still inside.

I opted for silly.

The two cops had just reached the top of the stairs when I braced myself and kicked the door off its hinges.

I went in with my gun at ready, cops behind me.

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It was too late!

Julie lay on the floor where she had fallen after innocently opening her door to the knock of a stranger. A dark stranger with a silenced twenty-two and teeth that gleamed silver as he shot her once in the forehead. Death had been mercifully quick. There was little blood on the carpet. The sight of her lying there convinced the cops this was no game. They fanned out around me, searching the apartment for the killer.

They found Carol in the shower, water still running. There was blood on the wall of the shower stall but she looked just as she had when I last saw her a few short hours ago. Until they pulled her from the tub and found the rear of her skull shattered, parts of her brain in the tub beneath her body. The single shot had entered her open mouth as she screamed at the stranger in her bathroom.

They had come here directly from the marina, wasting no time or motion. We might have passed them on our way here!

I walked into the living room and stared at Julie. What a price to pay for liking me! Clark walked in slowly. When he saw Julie, he turned even whiter and rushed to the railing outside, showering the cars parked below with the remnants of his lunch.

Strangely, I felt nothing now. Minutes before I had been going through hell. Now, knowing they were dead, that there was nothing that I could do to help them, my thoughts returned to the monsters responsible. They would pay with more than their money!

The scene secured the cops became cops once more. For just a moment we had been a team. Now we were back on opposite sides of the fence. I was not a cop therefore I must be a suspect.

“How did you know they were in trouble?” The older cop asked.

“We witnessed a shipment of drugs being dropped down in the Keys. Those responsible tried to kill me. It took me a little too long to realize they might want to kill the other witnesses too. When I did I rushed over. You followed me.”

“You could have come here earlier, then led us back by driving like a maniac,” the younger cop speculated.

I looked at him. He became uncomfortable.

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The older one interrupted the silence. “Where did this alleged attempt on your life take place and why didn't you report it?”

“It took place across the bay at my marina. You are welcome to talk with the dock mistress there. Her name is Sherry Guest and I was on her boat. You can count the holes and check out my story. There were three black men, all well dressed in suits. One has a broken nose, one a broken finger and the third caught on fire and is now clean-shaven, bald and has a mouth full of silver teeth! And I did report it. . . to Tony Miata, DEA.”

Tony!

They came to me first. Failing to kill me, they had come here and succeeded. Now they were looking for Clark! They knew where he lived but did not know what he looked like! They would be waiting for him to come home!

“Get on the radio. Get some squad cars over to 135th Street now! There is an officer in trouble. His name is Tony Miata and he could be walking into a trap! The men who killed these women are probably there now! Have them seal the street! Look for three well dressed but injured black men. Do it, man!”

They did as I told them. The bodies surrounding us provided them with enough reasons to take me at my word.

Things were moving too fast. They were well equipped, well informed and one step ahead of me. Innocent people were dying as a consequence of my meddling.

Clark could see I was upset.

“Trevor, you notified the Coast Guard, and the DEA. You have done exactly what a law-abiding citizen is supposed to do. No one could expect you to do more!”

“I expect more. If I hadn't thrown their guns overboard in my stupid desire to best them hand-to-hand, I could have killed all three of them!”

“To hesitate before killing is natural. They could have been police for all you know! Forget it! You are fond of saying superiorly how too many people live in the past. Follow your own advice.”

He was right. Being down on myself would not help anyone. There were still people alive who were in danger, including myself, Clark and now, Tony. There is danger to innocent people we didn't know, so long as these ruthless people ran unrestricted.

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“Hey,” called the cop from the squad car downstairs. “There is a report of shots being exchanged on 135th Street! An officer has been shot!”

“Can we get over there?” I yelled down the stairs to the younger cop. He looked up at the older one standing next to me, who nodded. “Call me on the cellular before you leave here, Clark.” To the older cop, “Keep an eye on him, he is a target also.” Then I leaped over the rail and landed lightly beside the young one. He stared at me, hesitant to get in the car with an armed, agitated giant who could leap from second story balconies without breaking both legs. “Do you want me to drive?” I asked.

It shook him out of his daze. “No! I can drive,” he said, miffed.

“Then what are you waiting for?” I said, climbing in the front passenger side.

The decision made, he once again became professional. Sirens blaring, we raced out on 163rd Street and back down Biscayne. “See what you can find out on the radio!” I suggested.

His badge said his name was Griffen. I judged him to be in his mid-twenties. “Are you in the habit of giving orders to policemen?” he asked angrily.

“No. I try to help policemen by making logical suggestions when they are too stressed out to think logically themselves.” I said calmly.

He shut up and reached for the radio. Traffic up ahead was backed up all the way to 151st Street, snarled by police roadblocks at 135th. No one was moving. It would take hours to clear the way.

“This is unit 2538. I am trying to reach the scene of the shooting. Are there more details?”

“One officer is dead. Two others wounded. A gun battle is now in progress. Perpetrators are believed to be hiding in the woods across from the apartments.”

“Turn here,” I demanded!

“What?” He looked at me nervously. I reached over and turned the wheel to the left, reached my foot over on top of his and mashed it to the floor. Tires screeching, sirens howling, Officer Griffen screaming and northbound traffic honking and sliding crazily to avoid colliding with the speeding police car, created a confusing cacophony that threatened to overwhelm his good judgment. He reached for his gun with one hand.

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Once we were safely across Biscayne Boulevard, I released my hold on his wheel and removed my foot from his.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing? Are you insane? You almost got us killed back there!” He finished pulling his gun from its holster, pointing it shakily at me.

“I’m helping you to be a hero, Officer Griffen. Or I might get us both killed. If you will just keep your foot in it down this road, take the gun off me for a moment to pay attention to your driving, I’ll explain.”

He holstered it with a sigh. “No need. This road leads past Florida State University and on to the wooded area where they are hiding. I knew that. You could have just reminded me without giving me a heart attack!”

“Sorry. You could have missed your turn.”

“Who the hell are you? Who are you with?”

“My name is Trevor Cameron. I’m with no one.”

“You’re not DEA or FBI?”

“Nope.”

“You got a license for that gun?”

“Yep! Wanna see?”

Just as Griffen turned on to the dirt road leading past the university towards the water, a white Pontiac rental car came careening from a side road, sliding wildly on the dirt before straightening out and accelerating towards us. Two black men were visible in the front seat. The one on the passenger’s side, upon seeing the police car, extended an automatic weapon out the passenger window and opened fire.

We ducked as the barrage shattered the windshield, the rear window, punctured the radiator and hit a tire. One bullet came to close to Griffen, nicking his ear, which released an inordinate amount of blood. He was scared. He felt nothing but a slight pain on the side of his head, saw the blood and decided he had been shot in the head. I looked him over quickly, saw it was a flesh wound and noticed he and I had both automatically fastened our seat belts. I quickly devised an impromptu plan of attack.

“You’re OK. It’s not serious. You’ve got to stop them. I’ll cover you. While they are ducking, ram ‘em!”

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“Ram them?”

“Your car's shot anyway. Pray they didn't fasten their seat belts!”

There was no time to think. They were putting another clip in their gun, heading for us at fifty miles an hour. We had slowed to thirty as the radiator hissed and the tire flopped on the rim. I popped up and fired five shots at them. The driver ducked, slowing a little and weaving. The passenger didn't duck in time, a bullet hitting his shoulder, forcing him to drop the fresh clip.

Officer Griffen was a game trooper. At the last minute, he cut the wheel to the left, we braced ourselves as best we could and smashed into the little rental.

Our Ford won!

The Fairlane was heavier and built solidly. The little white rental had crumpled like an aluminum can, throwing both men through the windshield after various pieces of twisted metal, whipping about like a cane field in a hurricane, broke most of the bones in their bodies.

I was a little dazed by the impact but beyond bruises from the restraint system, could find nothing much wrong with me. Officer Griffen, however, was beginning to panic. His driver's side airbag had worked like a champ, gently shielding him from further flying glass and debris. He had bravely taken the brunt of the impact and the airbag had worked admirably but for one small point; it refused to deflate, trapping him helplessly in his seat belt and wrecked car.

I could smell gas and decided we should both be away from these cars. I picked up a shard of glass and punctured it. I pulled him out through my door. We both exited the crushed vehicle post haste.

There was nothing to be done for the two men. Between bullets and simple physics, they were dead before the dust settled, shot through the windshield like a bullet, bouncing off parts of their car, our car and the hard packed dirt and rocks of the roadway. We saw no sign of a third.

His radio was in the same shape as his patrol car, twisted and broken. His handheld would need an overhaul also. My cellular survived.

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We fared about the same as our equipment. Griffin hadn't lost a lot of blood but it covered his uniform, obliterating his patches, covering his badge, absorbed all that he lost. He was a bloody mess and getting weaker by the moment. I let him use my t-shirt to try and stem the flow of blood. The shattering safety glass and small pieces of metal had left liberal lacerations on my face and arms. My knees took the most abuse, jamming into the dash on impact. It would be awhile before I could jump off any more balconies.

I had to get him out of here while he could still walk. Leaving the bodies where they lay, we limped down to the side road we had seen them come from. Another half block and we found where they had parked the car.

“We must be getting close . . .” I started to say, when the woods erupted with armed, screaming men. They burst upon us from all directions, guns waving, screaming things like, “Freeze,” “Get Down!” “Drop those guns!” and all manner of foul language.

The odds, attitudes and arms dictated the terms. We froze, got down on our knees and moved very slowly to remove our guns. Hands shoved us roughly on our stomachs as others patted down our clothing with practiced professionalism. The cold spot that had begun to form there relaxed a tiny bit. I risked a look around. Turning my head slightly allowed me to spy a dirty set of sneakers walking our way. They were very close quickly and, given the angle forced on me by what I guessed was a gun barrel in the back of my neck, I could only see as high as the knees of a dirty pair of jeans. The barrel pressed harder and I had to screw my mouth over to the side of my face to breathe air instead of sand. The hopes that these men were the police slowly melted and turned into the ice water flowing through my veins.

Then the ashes fell on the ground in front of my nose.

“I can't believe that you are the one who tried to kill me, Cameron!” Miata said, the hard tones back in his voice.

“I didn't try to kill you, you silly son-of-a-bitch,” I snarled, spitting out the dirt that was gathering in my mouth. “I tried to save you. Now tell this imbecile to let me up!”

The barrel was removed from my neck. I stood up, brushing myself off and glaring at the glaring circle of men. None of who had lowered their guns an inch. “Can't you idiots see that at least one of us is in uniform? And needs a doctor?”

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“Talk fast, Cameron. What are you doing here?”

“Well, I was worried about you. I left you a note!”

“I didn't get it. I haven't been in the house. I was too busy ducking bullets. If it hadn't been for the two officers that warned me taking the brunt of the attack, I would be dead!”

My bloody, beaten driver spoke up for the first time. “Cameron made us call. He said you were in danger. We had a squad car dispatched to warn you.”

Miata looked at him and looked back at me, conflicting emotions running across his face. “How did you know?”

“I came back to your place. We thought about it for a while, like why were they trying to kill me. Then we thought, what if they want to kill us all? Clark and I ran over to Julie and Carol's apartment. We were too late to save them. Griffen here picked me up on the way over, went in with me, then drove me to try and save your ass. We ran into them trying to escape. We lived, they died. End of story. Read it in his report. I'm tired and dirty and this hasn't been a real good day. I have to go through your place to get to my place and that may be difficult and awkward if you persist in believing I tried to kill you.”

He must have them well trained. I didn't see a signal but they all dropped their sights at once and opened a path to us through the woods and across the street to his apartment. Griffen reported the location of the wreck to some fellow officers. Again, the complexity of law enforcement amazed me. There were Metro, City, Park Police, SWAT teams, plainclothesmen, DEA sharpshooters and a North Miami city cop.

We walked through the ranks and reached an ambulance where the wounded were being attended. We got in line. Griffen turned to me and stuck out a hand. “I'm sorry about mistrusting you, Cameron.”

“Don't worry about it Griffen, I've known Miata for six months and he still doesn't trust me!” I said giving Miata a dirty look.

“It's real hard to do. There is just something about you. You were doing what you thought was right, trying to save your friend and I respect that. But you were doing MY job, doing the things that I was supposed to be doing, and doing them better than I was! You had this impatience with me, the kind a parent had with a kid that is just not as bright

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as they think he ought to be. When I didn't get it right the first time, you took it away from me. You scared me, humiliated me, and made me feel like a dumb ass kid again! I hit that damn car because I was afraid of what would happen to me if I didn't. Crashing city property into an escaping felon is NOT proper police procedure.”

“It worked,” sounded weak but it was all I could think of to say. He was right. I had bullied him, pushed him past safe limits. He could have been killed in the crash. I hadn't cared because I was there, too, taking a calculated risk. Or was I? Or did I really believe that I was invulnerable? That as long as I was with someone nothing could hurt them?

“Yeah, it worked. Now that I've seen you in action, I don't know if I want to be a cop anymore. If I take the chances you take, I could be dead in a week. If I don't I'll always be comparing my performance to yours and coming up short. What's strange is I don't think you are doing it on purpose. I mean, you aren't trying to be mean or pushy or domineering or over-competent but you are! You can have a real devastating effect on a man's ego. On the other hand, meeting you was one of those events that you never forget. Like hurricanes, shipwrecks and wars.”

Miata interrupted in his usual, diplomatic manner. “Come on, Cameron. You ain't hurt bad enough to be here. Come on across the street and let's talk while you take a shower!”

I stood up and walked across the street. I didn't look back. I don't think he watched me either.

Chapter Six

After the door had closed, Miata, DEA, turned into Tony, Clark's roommate, my friend. I thought I was the only one with a dual identity! I yelled at him, "So what was that all about? Do I look black to you? Would I shoot at you from across the street? Hell, if I wanted to kill you, I'd do it now, with my bare hands and carry you to the boat and use you for chum and shark bait. I'd use your teeth for sinkers and catch dolphin with your eyeballs."

He didn't blink an eye. He went into the kitchen, prowled in the fridge for a few seconds and returned with two beers, tossing one of them to me. Showing no fear at all at the bloody, battered almost seven-foot wolf, raging in his living room.

"I know that, Cameron," he said in a conversational tone. "Now! But as I walked up to this house, that squad car out there came screeching up and when they jumped out, all hell broke loose. People we couldn't see were peppering us with a hail of bullets. We fought back, reinforcements came in, and the shots kept coming! It was like being in the war zone! By the time we decided they were gone or out of ammo, my SWAT team had arrived and we went in. You two were the only ones there. What were my guys supposed to think? Were they supposed to say, 'Oh, it's YOU, Bob!' and drop their rifles? I must admit, I enjoyed seeing you down there in the dirt, kind of humble-like, entirely more than my Christian upbringing would have thought appropriate. I was still high on adrenalin. You've used that one before, I believe."

I took a sip of the beer. It washed some of the dirt out of my mouth and my mood improved accordingly. I took another and said, "Apology accepted."

"In your dreams! I ain't apologizing for nothing! This isn't my heat coming down on us, it's yours. You want to be this independent cowboy, riding the range with your trusty steed, six-gun at your side, rounding up the doggies and shooting up the bad guys. You won't follow orders, play by the rules, or wear a badge! The time for vigilantes is past, Trevor. If the public got wind of how much blood is spilled around you they'll force

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us to make you the first man in history locked up to protect not only yourself but your neighbors and the criminals as well. At this rate, we won't have to worry about it. These guys are heavy weights. They are going for the gold and they are going to keep coming. If you were a cop, they wouldn't be thinking like that!"

"That's bullshit, Miata. It didn't make any difference to them that the two they killed were wearing uniforms. They didn't know I was in that cop car when they opened fire! They just don't care! To them, Clark is as much a threat as I am. I'm not putting on a badge and I'm not going to pack up and run from this bunch of hoodlums!"

"This is much more than hoodlums, Trevor. This is a band of terrorists. We train Special Forces and Seals for years to deal with these guys. We always go after them as a team. You are a talented amateur. Drop this one. Take Clark on another cruise. Stay out of trouble! Stay out of sight!"

"Thanks for the beer. Thanks for the advice. I guess this means you don't want to share information and you don't want to work with me! I won't run and I won't be a target. You don't want to help, I'll make sure I call the press instead of you with information I come up with."

"Damn it Cameron, I just don't want you playing this alone."

"Then come with me. I can't sit in a goddamn office all day long and be effective!"

"I got people I got to direct. I can't do that in the field all day!"

We stood there staring at each other, tempers bristling, when I started laughing.

"What the fuck are you laughing at?"

"Us. We sound like old married people arguing about switching sides of the bed!"

The analogy got a giggle out of him. The giggle turned into a laugh and we both ended up on the floor with laughter. Nothing was really that funny but exhaustion had caught up with both of us. The laughter was only a release from the tensions of the day; the arguing a way to avoid admitting both of us had been scared and still were!

"OK, Cameron, you win again. I keep forgetting who you really are. If I had your kind of money, I wouldn't be punching a time clock or answering to anyone either. But I damn sure wouldn't be taking the risks that you do either!" Tony and Clark are the only

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people in Miami who know the secrets of my identities. He looked at me, a little crooked smile forming on nicotine stained lips, all the anger gone from his face, and said, “You are one strange bird, Trevor. Why would a man who could have anything, risk his life getting involved in shit like this? If they knew you were a certain Texas real estate tycoon named Hamilton, my superiors would fall all over themselves to provide you with all the police protection you would ever need!”

“Who you see is who I am, Tony. I'm more Cameron than Hamilton. I get more of a charge having a beer with a biker or fighting someone I've never met before in match in a little dojo in Davie than taking a bunch of plastic looking, poorly dressed, real estate agents out to lunch. Thanks for understanding! Now I'm going to bed.” I stood up and stretched gingerly. My aches were beginning to say, take two aspirin and don't call me until morning.

“Cameron!” I stopped. “It's me that owes you the thanks! Maybe we can get the department to issue you an honorary badge, one you can turn off and on whenever some cops need saving!”

I smiled and turned toward the patio door. “How about lending me a couple? With two good men under them so I can close both eyes tonight. They can turn the stereo or TV on as loud as they want. One other thing . . .” and the words I never thought I would hear myself say spilled out over my lips, “Make sure that they are white!”

I looked out of the door carefully before exiting. All looked the same. There was no one peeking out of the windows of the exclusive, waterfront home across the canal in Keystone Point Estates, no one holding hand grenades over the balconies of the adjacent high-rises and no suspicious boats cruising the canal.

I walked to my boat quickly anyway.

Two alert, uniformed police came in behind me. They stationed themselves outside, on deck. I took them some “Off” to stave off the attacks of the mosquitoes and no-see-ums and told them to help themselves to the coffee and food. I went back into my bedroom, first changing out the sheets to which the sweet muskiness of Julie and Carol still clung, then stepping into a fiercely hot shower to try and wash away the taste of fear, the tears of loss and the memories of things that might have been.

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Shampooing the dirt from my dust encrusted hair I stared at my bearded, bleeding face in the mirror in the shower and almost didn't recognize myself. I reached for my razor, using the lather to cover my face as well; I began shaving four days growth from my face. On impulse, I stopped and looked at myself again in the mirror.

Down in Key West, I had used a fake moustache as a disguise. I had liked it on me. Now that I had it started, why not keep part of the fuzz on my face? I left most of the growth, trimming a little on the sides to form a respectable but short Van Dyke style of beard.

Later, as I lay in my king-size bed alone, my thoughts turned back to Tony Miata.

We were much alike, I think, Tony and I. We saw things much the same. Tony did his job well, was conscientious and devoted. He was smart enough to see the flaws in the system and work around them as best he could by bending without breaking too many of the rules.

He was right, I would make a good cop, but it would cut me off from too large a section of people I knew and liked. Being a cop, I couldn't just turn my back on casual drug use, couldn't talk to old friends because I knew of their involvement in certain affairs, which, if leaked, could result in years in prison. If I were ever to accept the job it would change my easy passage through some segments of our society, pit me against the businessmen who drove while drinking, the small time dealers who were just filling the demands of friends and neighbors in order to feed their families. It would require daily meetings, paperwork and eight hours a days spent on the job. It would mean following orders! There I drew the line.

Sleep came on quickly this night, the blackness unbroken, thank you, Morpheus, by dreams.

The next morning, the guards were still with me. I awoke, did some push ups, sit ups as best I could in the confines of the living area of my boat. I still felt nervous about being outside in daylight. I fixed coffee, turned on the computer and devoted myself to being Mr. Hamilton for the hour or two it takes.

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I had planned my life carefully. It was structured and designed to insure I would never have to punch a time clock, allow me to travel where I pleased and stay as long as I wanted.

I, putting my life together without the benefit of a real father, had decided early what I wanted my life to be like. I wanted my retirement at thirty to be one long, glorious, holiday trip around the world, a traveler staying as long as I wanted rather than a tourist hurrying through.

It had not quite worked out that way. I had made enough money in my twenties to last me a lifetime, if I was careful with it, didn't get strung out on drugs, hookers or horses, the banks didn't fail and no one stole much of it. But I couldn't quit working, meddling, trying new businesses, buying more property. I still kept in touch with my business by computer, fax and phone lines almost daily. I probably couldn't retire if I had to but I had found a compromise that suited me.

As I waited for the computer to boot up my list of programs I thought about my father. We had met for the first time six months ago during Fantasy Fest in Key West where he lives aboard his houseboat, the Sea Ducer, docked along Houseboat Row. I was named after Trevor Shannon Cameron; Hamilton being added by my stepfather and that surname dropped, legally, by me after my mother had died.

My biological father had been a seaman. When he was in port he supplemented his income by doing "favors" for friends. He referred to them as salvage jobs. He would recover lost items, stolen money or boats for people who already had more money than they needed. If he recovered it, he would keep half. He said it wasn't much different from taking a ship out to sea for a month at a time, braving the elements, dealing with murderous cutthroats in ports in the Caribbean and South America. He got in the same amount of scuffles, life-threatening situations and made about the same amount of money after he got through paying for his expenses. Both occupations were still work in which he used his head and his hands. In between jobs he would unplug the phone for a week or a month and take his houseboat out in the backcountry with a beautiful woman and a case of booze until the money ran out. He was smart, navigating the Atlantic in the dead of

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winter is not for the faint of heart or mind, and he had found the lifestyle that suited him. Retirement in bits and pieces.

I wished he were here so I could take advantage of his knowledge of the islands and the world. He had traveled all over the world. My travels across the U.S. seemed limited compared to his.

Using my cellular, I checked my voice-mail and spoke with Bonnie, my secretary in Houston. I made a mental note of the figures she rattled out. Later, when and if I could return to my dock, I would download them from her computer to mine and into a permanent file through my modem.

There was nothing pressing for Hamilton so I put him on a shelf and became Cameron again.

I found the piece of paper I had taken from the dead man's pocket. I dialed it and got a busy signal.

A sudden movement on the front porch of my boat startled me. It was the officer reacting to someone. I put the piece of paper into my pocket and looked around nervously for my gun. A moment later, he relaxed and Clark knocked on the door.

"I wanted to see if you had eaten. No? Care for an International Omelet? What is that on your face?"

"It is going to be a moustache and goatee when it grows up. Give it time, maybe it'll grow on you. And I would love an omelet, thanks."

"It won't grow on me and it shouldn't grow on you. You are scary enough when you are clean-shaven. That hair on your face will cause Christians to throw rocks at you. It makes you look like the devil!" We got to the car. He looked defiant. "I'm driving."

"OK by me. I'm too sore to drive. You're lucky you didn't ride back with me."

"I heard. I also heard that you forced that poor cop to hit them head on!"

"It's a matter of opinion. Forced is a bit strong." He kept looking at me out of the corner of his eye as if seeing me for the first time. "You are really going to grow that?"

"Until I get tired of it!" I said, sharply enough to end the discussion.

Later, over breakfast, we exchanged information. I told him that the number I had found was definitely active. He told me Miata was checking out the wrecked rental car.

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Homicide teams had uncovered little physical evidence outside of the slugs. House to house inquiries were going on today in a quest for witnesses. Deciding it would be best to stay together today, we decided to start with the boat dealer after breakfast.

Sports Paradise was a well-stocked sporting goods store with a back lot filled with Bass Tracker boats. Smilin' Alvin Brewster was the sales manager. He was dapper in his Hawaiian print shirt and khaki shorts, thinning hair hidden beneath his Miami Dolphins baseball cap. He quit smiling when I showed him my Miata inspired ID proclaiming me to be Trevor Smith, Special Agent attached to the DEA.

I have become a computer whiz on my handy dandy Ventura Publishing program. It creates official looking letterheads, documents, business cards and, with the help of a laminator, beautiful identification cards.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Smith? I believe we answered the questions relating to the sale of those boats! I assume you are speaking of the two boats whose hull numbers we were asked to check a day or two ago?”

“Please relax, Mr. Brewer. I am not here to hassle you. We would like a little more detailed information about the man or men who bought them and their method of payment. This is my associate, Mr. Hancock. You are in no trouble, unless, of course, this turned out to be a cash sale and you kept no records on this transaction.”

He turned a little pale, sweat starting to form over his lip. He licked it off and stuttered, “No, no, we would most certainly have some kind of record of such a sale.”

I pushed him a little further, “The serial numbers, according to Tracker, indicate you received the shipment these boats came from. Did you handle this sale, Mr. Brewer? Can you describe the men who bought them?”

“I would need to check my records. I sell a lot of boats, Mr. Smith! You can't expect me to remember all of my customers.” He was relieved we weren't after him, but he was still hedging.

“How many times have you sold three boats at a time to a Bahamian company in the last thirty days?”

His eyes widened and then became furtive. “Three boats. You are interested in more than just the two?”

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“I am interested in knowing all you know about the customer in question! If you continue to behave in an evasive manner, Mr. Brewer, we can go downtown and do some intense checking on your background until you decide to cooperate!

“No, No! That will not be necessary! I'll tell you anything you want to know. It's just that Mr. Abraham has been such a good customer; I would hate to cause him any trouble. It isn't his fault if someone used his boats to try and run some drugs!” The push was all that was necessary to fold his resistance. His token objection registered, he would bend over backwards to give up whoever we were looking for.

Clark and I followed Alvin inside, up a set of stairs and into a bustling set of offices. His was one of the deluxe offices with three walls, one with a window. Awards for salesmanship, bass tournaments and a huge stuffed bass covered the other two. He stole a couple of chairs from the neighboring desk and motioned for us to sit down.

“Who is Mr. Abraham?” I began.

“Jacob Abraham. He is the head of the Caribbean Tourist Attractions, Inc., located on Bimini. They are developing new tourist attractions in the islands. Our boats are the perfect style for the flats. Stable enough to dive off of, with low transoms for easy access and storage for dive gear for four. For bonefishing, they are . . .”

I held up a hand. “Spare me the sale pitch please. I am not in the market and I have seen your lovely boats in action. Am I to understand your Mr. Abraham is exporting these boats?”

“Yes, of course. They are using them in Bimini, Nassau and Jamaica as I just explained. They also sell them, I'm told. They are a very aggressive company!”

“I can vouch for that,” I muttered under my breath.

Clark spoke up, “Do you ship the boats over to the islands for him?”

“No. They pick them up here. I assume they have their own ships or make other arrangements.” He took off his cap and laid it on the desk. A thin film of perspiration had formed on the top of his head. He took a Kleenex from the box on the desk and wiped it. Other members of the office staff had quit working and dropped all pretense of not listening.

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“How many have they purchased and what period of time have you been doing business with them?” I asked.

“He called me from Bimini a month ago. We settled on a figure, his representative brought cash and picked up the boats. In thirty days they've picked up nine boats, so far.”

“So far?” Clark and I chimed in together.

“That's right. They agreed to take a dozen. We are preparing the last three now!”

As I glanced around the room, I noticed one of the girls in the office edging closer as she began to file papers in a nearby file cabinet. She was black. I began to think that this whole affair was seriously affecting my judgment and fueling an unfair paranoia towards blacks! All of the other workers were white and curious also.

“They would pick them up here, when?” Clark asked.

“They will be serviced, the motors attached and rigged by Tuesday.”

“What does the Jacob Abraham look like?” I asked.

“I don't know. I have never met the man. All of our business has been done by phone.”

I leaned forward and wrote down Tony's name and number. “I am going to give you this number to call before they come and pick these boats up, Mr. Brewer. This is the number of DEA headquarters. Be sure you talk with Tony Miata. Give him at least a one-hour notice. If they show up early, stall them! Are you clear on that, Mr. Brewer?”

He nodded his head. the droplets of sweat reforming. He licked his lips nervously. “There is just one thing, Mr. Smith?

“Yes?”

“The man that picks them up. He never talks much. Usually has a couple of guys with him. I don't know his name but he scares me. I don't know what it is. Perhaps I am just over reacting but he is quite large, bigger than you. Maybe it's his teeth. You can see them when he talks. . . they are silver. I just wouldn't want to be put in a situation where I had to cross him; you know what I'm saying? I'm a salesman, not a hero!”

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Chapter Seven

We collected copies of the sales receipts containing the address of Caribbean Tourist Attractions in Bimini, probed a little more and reassured Smilin' Alvin we would see he had sufficient protection.

Back in the car, I asked Clark, "What do you make of it?"

"Doesn't have the feel of a terrorist type of operation but then I am not qualified to comment on such organizations. As a front for a smuggling operation, it is ideal. Yes, we bought the boats. Yes, we rented the boats. No, they were not supposed to cross the Gulf Stream with them. Fortunately, they are insured. If you have no further questions I believe we will hang up now. Please direct further inquiries through our embassy!"

"You think they took them over there then came back to catch a drop?"

He looked at me as though I were a daft stepchild.

"No, Trevor. I doubt they would be shipped over until they were through with them here. That should be easy for Tony to check."

"Why would they need so many?"

"It is possible they actually are using some over there now."

"Maybe we should go see." I tendered.

"I am not sure I could handle that many miles across an ocean in that boat with you. I'm sure I would feel like one of those little ducks in the shooting gallery."

"You could fly."

"That is preferable to boating. A dangerous sport! But I am not up to hunting this madman down on his own turf!"

"They do not know what you look like." I pointed out.

"They know what my name is. Bimini is a small island. The customs official could be this guy's cousin."

He had a point. I shut up to think about it. I remembered the number I had tried earlier. I pulled my cellular out of my pocket, flipped it open and dialed it. Clark was muttering under his breath as he tried to get onto Highway 836.

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It rang twice and a cultured voice answered, “Meredith S. Weather, Photography. May I help you?”

“Mr. Weather, please.”

“There is no Mr. Weather. This is Meredith Weather. May I help you?” Her patience was an indicator that this was a common mistake.

“Sorry! What type of photography do you do, Ms Weather?”

“What type do you want? I'm not real particular what I point my camera at.”

“I have several different types of businesses, Ms Weather. Would it be possible to drop by and see some of your work?”

“If you would like, I can come to you,” she said.

“No, I'm on the road at this moment. You may be able to hear my friend cursing the traffic.”

“I'm down in South Beach.” She seemed hesitant.

“We're close.” I prodded.

“Very well, I have a few minutes if you can come now.”

“We are on our way. What is your address?”

“I have a studio and apartment in the Windsor Hotel. 606 Ocean Drive, room 401, over looking the park and the beach.”

“My friend and I will be there shortly.”

“Your name is . . .?”

“Trevor . . .Hamilton.”

“See you when you get here Mr. Hamilton.”

I turned the phone off and stuck it back into my pocket. Clark looked at me with a smile. “Today we are Hamilton, huh?”

“We don't know if she is tied to these guys or how. It's possible she would recognize the name of Trevor Cameron,” I explained. “Stay on 836 until it becomes Interstate 395.”

“If she is tied to them, she will recognize you no matter what name you use. You are a memorable person. How memorable are you? With your new look, people you have never met will remember you!”

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His feeble attempt at wit amused him. He chuckled to himself as we crossed over the Intracoastal. We admired the huge cruise liners lined up along the other side of Government Cut, the wide, deep channel that carries all of the shipping from the Atlantic into the Port of Miami. Minutes later we were cruising along the completely renovated South Beach area of Miami.

Once, in the early thirties, these small hotels were the hub of Miami Beach. It was here that Miami Beach became a household word synonymous with fun and sun. Millions of tourists flocked to the beautiful beach and lovely hotels. Thousands stayed. Miami grew further into the Everglades and north until the City stretched from Homestead to north of Palm Beach.

Larger hotels were built further North of the Beach like the Fontainebleau. Sheraton, Hyatt and Holiday Inn moved in. The tourists of the sixties flocked to them by the millions also. The tiny, Art Deco style hotels withered, paint peeling, plumbing leaking, they attracted only the down and out, old and impoverished. Police patrols were increased. The seedy section of town now attracted only the attention of moviemakers who needed scenic slums for the rash of dealer movies like Scarface.

Then the eighties came in with a movement to restore the district. Coalitions were formed. Investors encouraged to buy the hotels cheap, refurbish them, and install bistros, sidewalk cafes, nightclubs and boutiques in and around the old hotels. Tons of fresh paint flowed over the buildings; pinks, turquoise, yellows and pastel hues covered the dinginess, restoring the facade of grandeur to the withered face of the oceanfront. Vagrants, the elderly and the poor were resettled like the Indians of old, to less desirable locations further inland. The rich, the beautiful and the decadent once more descended upon the area. By the nineties, it was THE place to go for nightlife. Private parties abounded in the lobbies of restored hotels, with guests overflowing into the streets. A Saturday night was bumper-to-bumper traffic, wall-to-wall people, with overlapping music emanating from the packed clubs and cafes.

It was noon Friday and the cafes were crowded. The Windsor had one filled with artist and model types, long hair for the men, and long legs for the women. We took the elevator up to the third floor and knocked on the door of 301.

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It opened onto a small, brightly lit apartment/studio. The occupant was a woman so incredibly beautiful I was stunned, forgetting for a moment, my reason for being here.

Someday soon, the segments of mankind will blend together, racial distinctions becoming a matter for genealogy researchers, inter-racial marriages erasing all boundaries and borders, welding forever humanity into a single race. She was living proof, a goddess from a time two thousand years in the future.

Her skin was that natural walnut shade of brown that all white women strive to obtain from the sun, risking the threat of skin cancer to reach that peak of tanned loveliness she had been blessed with at birth. You could not judge race by the color of her skin. She could have been Filipino, or of Negroid blood, though her fine boned features and narrow nose were Caucasian. It was stretched over the body by Scandinavian Cher wishes she had! Not overly muscular, but solid, strong with wonderfully firm breasts beneath her skintight white dress. She could not have worked in a factory or office; her beauty would have seriously disrupted productivity!

Her eyes were that rare shade of violet, glowing with intelligence that endeared young Elizabeth Taylor to the hearts and minds of America. They were enhanced by a slight oriental tilt at the corners giving her smiling, violet eyes! I guessed her to be twenty-four or five. A beauty such as hers could truly be called ageless!

“Mr. Hamilton?” She queried. Clark poked me in the back. I fought back, struggling, swimming out of those violet depths, bursting to the surface, trying desperately to remember who I was and why I was there!

I gasped a breath of air as I remembered to breath. “Ms Weather. I . . . I am Trevor.” Me Trevor, you gorgeous.

She stepped back to allow us to enter. Clark pushed me through the door, painfully ripping the roots loose that had bound me to the tile outside her door.

I stared and Clark filled in the gaps. “I’m Ralph Hancock, Mr. Hamilton’s associate, Ms Weather. We are hoping that he will recover fully, one day, from this affliction.”

A hint of a smile played on her lips. She had found a lip-gloss that exactly matched her eyes. Matching eyes and lips smiled together. Awesome!

A Trevor Cameron Novel

“What is his affliction, Mr. Hancock?”

“He swallows his tongue when in the presence of a beautiful woman. Sometimes it takes hours for him to recover the power of speech.”

She looked at me again. Her eyes went from my head to my toes. I could feel the blood rising up my neck and flowing into my face. I hoped my tan was enough to hide the fact that I was actually blushing. “I would think he would have a great deal of experience with such women. He is not that unattractive, despite the growth on his face. There are many beautiful women that would be attracted to tall, muscular men.”

The blush deepened as they discussed me as though I were a pin up on a calendar.

“When he is not going through these seizures, he is relatively urbane, witty and can be quite charming.”

“Can I offer you some coffee, or tea? Some smelling salts perhaps.”

This had gone on long enough. I took a deep breath. “No thank you. I'm sorry, Ms Weather. In truth, I was not expecting a photographer to look like you.”

She looked at Clark, still smiling. “He does speak well once he gets rolling,” then to me, “What are photographers supposed to look like Mr. Hamilton?”

“They are not supposed to make their models feel they are old hags, in comparison.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hamilton. Now that the pleasantries are out of the way and you have regained the power of speech, what can I do for you?”

That threatened to trigger a whole new set of thoughts that could carry me away again. I launched into a monologue while trying to discover a line that would allow me to follow her around for the next ten years.

“I am looking for a photographer that can assist me in several current and future projects. I work with several companies that deal in everything from real estate to clothing. I am based out of Texas but we are expanding here to South Florida. Would it be possible to see some of your work?”

“Of course. Everything you see on the walls here are my work. I will be glad to dig out my portfolio while you are looking. How did you get my number, Mr. Hamilton? From the yellow pages?”

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There was something in her question that alerted me. She was offering me an easy answer. “No. Someone who had either seen your work or had used you before, I am not quite sure. I was talking with a number of people over cocktails and mentioned I could use a photographer. They did not tell me you were a woman, much less a beautiful woman.”

If it was a test, I passed. She smiled and went to a corner of the room. I admired her apartment and the integration of her home and career. It was a small, but comfortable two bedroom, with a breathtaking panorama, viewed through the small frames of beautiful French windows, of the Atlantic Ocean with its constant parade of ships, large and small. Standing on the small balcony, one could view an endless stream of humanity strolling down the street and beaches.

Inside, she had converted one bedroom into a dark room. The living area contained framed, blown up photographs so varied in content they would not be attributed immediately to one artist.

There was an eleven by fourteen of a rose, floating serenely somehow upon a crystal clear pool of boiling, bubbling water, every bubble in focus, and every droplet reflecting and containing a microscopic version of the sky.

There was a cityscape in which her hotel appeared in a line of hotels. Using time-lapse photography and a camera firmly planted on a tripod inches above sea level, she had captured the unchanging beauty of the quaint, pastel buildings totally unaffected by the blurred, random, rapid movements of people and autos.

She had several large blowups, each capturing a piece of Florida's natural tropical landscape. Emerald islands seen from the air, floating in the clear blue waters of Florida Bay. A huge banyan tree dominated one, the cameraman, or woman, in this case, must have been in a helicopter. You looked at the tree from another treetop with miles of other trees just like it stretched out to the horizon. A large part of her work seemed to be aerial.

My eye skimmed over five or ten portraits and glamour photos framed for effect and came to rest on a very tasteful nude, semi-hidden in a corner of the room. It could have been dubbed boudoir photography but it was set out of doors in a very private looking tropical garden. The leaves and flowers of exotic plants coveted by northerners as

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houseplants, caressed bronze skin, posed seductively but with muscles tensed and violet eyes glowing with defiance and challenge. It was a savage, warrior woman challenging all who saw her. Only the strong and the confident need apply. Only the bravest warriors would dare approach her. She would rend and maul the weak and never would they find the softness beneath the steel!

“Does that one frighten you, Mr. Hamilton?” The silken tones invaded my consciousness.

I turned to look into those violet eyes, the primitive now sheathed in civilization, the feral ferocity now the insinuating purr of the domestic feline. “I find the contrasts interesting,” I said in a neutral, detached tone.

“Contrasts?” she asked, looking around me at her photo, puzzled, trying to understand my meaning, off balance momentarily.

“Between you in clothes and out of them.”

She regained control, looking at me with more of a wariness now, not quite as sure of her power over me as she had been minutes ago. She lifted a large, black leather portfolio onto her dining table, unzipped it and stood aside.

She was a talented woman, an accomplished photographer who possessed the ability to take the everyday and ordinary and show you a side of it you had never seen, to take the plain and make it beautiful, to take the simple and show you the complexity underneath.

It is not often you meet really talented people. Most of us have accepted and are resigned to our mediocrity. We put the talented in the rarefied air of that exclusive neighborhood the Greeks referred to as Olympus, New Yorkers, Fifth Avenue, the rest of the U.S.A., Hollywood. She belonged on Mount Olympus, maybe she spent her summers there, but now she was here and I could not quite figure out where she fit into this or how to ask her within the context of my cover story.

“So, what do you think? Am I who you are looking for?” She crossed her arms and waited.

“I am convinced of your talent.”

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Clark nodded his agreement, hungrily flipping through her vast treasure trove of photography. “These are simply wonderful. Why haven't I heard of you? Haven't you shown these in a gallery in New York or Los Angeles?”

She tossed her head, long, brown flowing tresses swinging with her short, bitter bark of laughter.

“I am just a poor Jamaican girl playing at photography, Mr. Hancock. I am not a professional photographer. I take photos for pleasure during the day. I do some for friends. I work nights as a cocktail waitress. I answer the phone that way as a lark, in hopes that I might be able to pick up a little business off of wrong numbers. That's why I asked rather slyly about the yellow pages. Do you know how much it costs for a yellow page ad? Two inches in Miami alone can be over a thousand a month! I couldn't afford the first month!”

There was sadness and a wistfulness that showed briefly beneath her proud exterior. “Are you doing any commercial work right now?”

She turned, stored her frustrations neatly again, and turned back towards me, in complete control once more. “I help out my friend Steve. He has a helicopter service over on Watson Island. I fly with him a lot and he lets me take my photos on trips when he has no passengers. He gets requests for aerial photographs every now and then. I'll go with him, take the photos and develop them for him.”

“Have you done any of that lately?”

“Last week. He got this job of mapping the coastline down around Biscayne Bay and Card Sound.”

“Whom did he do that for?”

I was too eager, asked the question with too much interest. She suddenly became suspicious.

“All of a sudden, you sound like a cops! Who are you really? What is this all about?”

Clark and I looked at each other. She was becoming frightened. I suddenly, desperately wanted to trust her.

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“Please don't be frightened. My name is Trevor. Trevor Cameron. This is my friend Clark. We are not police and we are no threat to you. Some men tried to kill us on Thursday down in Card Sound. One of them had your number in his pocket.”

She thought about it and asked the question I would have.

“How did you get it out of his pocket?”

“I shot him and took it out of his pocket before the authorities arrived on the scene.”

I said it matter-of-factly; she took it the same way.

“Why did they try to kill you?”

“We witnessed a large shipment of cocaine and weapons being dropped near my houseboat. They waited as long as they could, when we showed no signs of leaving, they were ordered to kill us. They failed.”

“I should have known by the way you looked at my picture of me, you weren't what you said you were. You weren't threatened at all. Violence or the threat of violence attracts you, doesn't it?”

“I don't run from it,” I admitted.

“I'm not putting you down, Mr. Cameron. You have taken it on yourself to find out who is responsible. You had to lie until you could be sure I had nothing to do with the attempt on your life. Had I been a part to it, I would be quiet frightened of you right now. I just kind of got my hopes up that you were Mr. Hamilton, my corporate raider, come to raise me from poverty to the realm of fame and riches, a prince clutching a faded photograph he found discarded on a street corner, searching the city for the girl with the negative. . .”

Clark was watching me carefully.

“Ms Weather . . .”

“Oh, hell. Call me Stormy. All of my other poor friends call me Stormy.”

“Is that what the S. really stands for?” Clark asked.

“My dad had a sense of humor. So do I. So what do you really do, Trevor whatever-your-name-is? Are you a smuggler and these guys are crossing your turf? A hit man who got shot at and now you are going after them or are you just a average Joe who

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has been watching too much TV and thinks he might be able to get something out of this?"

"These men are very serious. I have survived three encounters with them. Two of my friends were not so lucky. I am doing whatever I can to help the authorities find out that they are, that's all. Now that you have put me in my place, maybe you would like to tell me how your phone number ended up in that man's pocket?"

There was no hesitation. "I haven't the slightest idea. I told you already, the only job I've done for the last month was that photography of the east coast of the mainland down Biscayne Bay. I gave the prints to him a week ago. He paid me! I haven't heard from him since!"

"Would you mind calling him, Stormy?" Clark asked. She did not seem to be angry with him. "Ask him if they picked up the prints and get a description or a name from him, please."

"All right!" She walked over to the phone and dialed a number. "May I speak to Steve? What? Is he sick? OK, Thank you."

She hung up and looked past us. "They say he hasn't been in for a week. He hasn't called in. He hasn't picked up his check. He doesn't answer his phone."

I looked to Clark. "Input please."

He thought about it for a few seconds. "Scenario One. Our group hires Steve to photograph the scene of the drop. They get the photos and take him out to eliminate any possible identification."

"Why would one of them have the number of the photographer in his pocket? She hasn't seen the people."

"She has seen the photos. She was with Steve. She developed the prints. . ."

"She has the negatives!" We shouted in unison.

"The drop has already been made!" Clark pointed out. "They may have got her number, decided she was no threat to them and went ahead with the drop anyway."

"We could assume that. But there is the possibility that we are attributing too much importance to what we witnessed and not listening to what the evidence is telling us."

"What do you mean, Trevor?" Clark asked.

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“Maybe Tony was right from the beginning. The coke wasn't the cargo. The weapons were. What if the photos had nothing to do with the drop?”

“What else would they want photos of that area for? There is nothing down there! One bridge that no one uses, a bunch of mangroves. . .”

“A nuclear power plant!” Stormy and I finished for him.

“Maybe we should talk about this over lunch and not disturb Ms Weather. . . Stormy. . . any further.”

We looked at her. She stood up. “Lunch sounds fine to me. This is the most interesting conversation I've heard since my girlfriends told me about sex. It has something to do with me and a friend that might or might not be dead and you are not going to leave me behind at this point. If you can't afford to take me to lunch, I'll take you. Let me get my sun glasses.”

Clark caught her arm. “Would you mind getting those negatives? I think it might be a good idea to keep them within arm's length until we decide on some plan of action. It may be that our bogey men are out looking for them at this very moment.”

“Sure, I've even got an extra set of prints. I'll bring them along.”

We watched her walk away and disappear into her dark room. Clark and I looked at each other.

“What do you think?” Clark asked me.

“Incredible is the word that keeps coming to mind. I think she is incredibly talented, incredibly beautiful and in incredible danger. I think we will find her flyer friend incredibly dead.”

Chapter Eight

We walked downstairs and down a block to one of her favorite sidewalk cafes. The food was over priced and simple fare. Soup and sandwiches. She was well known on the street and many a man said hello to her, hopes high at first then fading as they became aware of Clark and I.

We ordered sandwiches and Perrier from a waiter who would have preferred to flirt with me.

She turned to me. “You are a strange man, Mr. Cameron. You tell me you are a wealthy entrepreneur and then you tell me you are a killer of men. Most men would not admit something like that, preferring, I think, to have me believe they are the former rather than the latter.”

“I acted in self defense, on the side of the law. There is nothing dishonorable in what I did. I felt it was important that you know the severity of the situation. I have lost two friends to these men. I think you have lost one also. Although we have just met, I would prefer the same fate not befall one as beautiful and talented as you.”

She sipped her Perrier and looked to Clark for confirmation.

“All our lives are in danger, Stormy. If these people are who or what we suspect, there are many more lives in danger than just ours. Trevor has a tendency to see things in a limited context.”

“I beg your pardon?” I said.

Clark ignored my interruption. “He is highly protective of his friends, stray cats and even strangers, should he take a liking to them. What we are talking about now has much more serious implications than whether we live or die.”

“Speak for yourself, Clark,” I grumbled. “Staying alive has always been a top priority to me.”

“Hush, Trevor. The lives of millions of people, including yours, is at stake here. If, by some chance, terrorists succeeded in blowing up Turkey Point, the resulting fallout and or explosion could make Chernobyl look like a minor disaster! We are talking about the destruction of Miami. Radioactivity could spread as far as Palm Beach and Key West! We don't know if that is their only target. There is also Port Everglades.”

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“What about Port Everglades?” I asked.

“There are millions of gallons of fuel stored there. It is a fact that such facilities are under attack. It has been less than a week since crude pipe bombs were found near a similar storage facility up north. The only reason millions of gallons of methanol did not go up in flames is because the timers on the bombs malfunctioned. Imagine if they had the sophisticated explosives and equipment we know our personal antagonists have.”

We were silent for a moment, digesting the implications.

Stormy shuddered, her sandwich forgotten. “You are serious, aren't you?”

Clark nodded. “I am quite serious, my dear. That they intend to try something of this magnitude is the only thing that could justify violence of such an intensity,” he pointed out, gently reminding her of the madman in the Middle East named Saddam Hussein.

“I know that,” she answered, “but that is happening half a world away. That's something you watch on TV.”

“Was. It has now come to us.”

“What do you think you can do? Why are you getting involved? These places have security. It's the job of the Army to fight wars, to protect us.”

“The army,” I pointed out, “is made up of men and women just like us. Protecting our country and ourselves is everybody's job. Especially when we are at war!”

She looked at me strangely. Clark nodded. “The answer to your question is yes, he is always that way. He would have joined the armed forces already but he sees more action here than in Saudi Arabia.”

“Why doesn't he join the police?”

“He doesn't take orders very well.”

I had enough of them talking about me like I wasn't there. I finished my sandwich. “If you are through discussing me, can we get busy? I think we should check on Stormy's friend.” I turned to her. “Is there somewhere you can go for a few days? A friend, out of town, maybe?”

“While you save the world? I don't know what your situation is Mr. Cameron, but I have to work. I have an apartment to pay for, a car payment to make and a job to keep. I

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can't just pick up and run on the speculation of two people I just met who sound like refugees from a James Bond flick! Why are you here and not the police? If there has been all of the murders and killings you say, why haven't I read about it in the papers?"

"There are many things you don't read in the papers. Terrorists in America are one of them," I snapped.

Fire flashed in those violet eyes and she snapped back. "I'll go with you to check on Steve. I don't believe for a minute he is dead or that I am in any danger. I don't believe you have killed a man and can sit in this cafe and discuss it as though it were an everyday occurrence. I will continue to humor you for the ten minutes it takes to go over to his apartment. Then I am going to go home and get ready to go to work and you can both take this song and dance on down the road and try to impress another girl with this macho bullshit!"

"She doesn't believe us, Clark," I said, my anger gone as swiftly as it had come, replaced by a sense of futility.

"I sincerely hope that your friend is alive and well, Stormy," Clark said gently, with a sincerity that she could not doubt. "I don't blame you for doubting us. The story is quite absurd on the surface. Let's go together to check on him and put that issue to rest. As far as the rest of it, I can tell you this; neither Trevor nor I have lied to you. Should it become necessary to convince you, I can give you a name and number of a high ranking government agent that will confirm everything we have told you."

Doubt shown in her eyes. He had gotten through to her. She was not so sure we were lying anymore but still she did not want to believe us. Belief meant an upheaval in her life, a change in her routines. It meant admitting that her life was in danger, that her safe, secure haven in this country was a fallacy. Violence was something you read about in the morning papers, watched on TV, something that happened to other people, not to you.

"OK, let's go. I have a key to Steve's apartment. It's not far from here." She almost blushed.

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I paid the tab and we walked to our car. She gave Clark directions. The ride over was uncomfortably quiet for all of us. She had nothing to say. I was convinced that her friend was dead. I did not expect him to be in his apartment but he was.

Steve's apartment was on the second floor at the end of the building, situated in such a way it got no foot traffic from the other apartments, otherwise someone else would have reported the sickeningly sweet smell emanating from underneath the doorway sooner.

Though I had never smelled it before, I knew instantly what it was. I turned to Clark and Stormy, pulling my cellular from my pocket and handing it to Clark, "You better call the police, Clark. Stormy, if you would, please let me have the key and go downstairs."

"What is it? Why should I go downstairs? What is that smell?"

"I'm quite sure that smell is what is left of Steve. It means he has been inside that apartment for several days, dead."

She blanched but was resolute. "It is my key and my friend. I've got to know!"

It is useless to argue with a woman once she sets her jaw like that. I stepped aside.

From outside, the smell was faint and could have come from a bin of rotten, forgotten fruit or an ice chest in which baitfish had been left for a week. Once she unlocked the door and it swung open, the gagging, putrid odor of decaying flesh rushed over us. Combined with the sight of the swollen body lying just inside the door beneath the swarm of newly born flies with maggots crawling from empty eye sockets and a hole square in the middle of it's forehead, it was more than even I could handle.

I have seen men die and seen more death in the last few days than most people witness in a lifetime but I was not ready for this. Stormy vomited instantly, spraying bile and undigested sandwich over the body and the blood soaked floor. Clark and I controlled our reactions a couple of seconds longer, allowing us to reach the railing and empty the contents of our stomachs into the bushes below. Stormy fell in beside us, eyes fluttering as she fought fainting, spitting over the railing as she dug in her purse for a tissue or a rag.

I pried my white knuckled fingers from the rail and returned to close the door. I motioned for Clark and Stormy to follow me down the stairs. I put an arm around her

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shoulders to steady her. Clark was not to steady either. Once down in the car, we placed an anonymous call to police and left the scene. There was nothing to be done for Steve, nothing would be found in his apartment to lead to his killer. He had been dead a week, one of the first victims of the deadly group that had infiltrated our country.

Clark was white as a sheet and shaking but still able to function. I helped Stormy into the back seat and Clark drove back in the direction of her hotel. She was limp as a dishrag. I said nothing until we reached the hotel.

“I’m sorry about your friend, Stormy. Do you see now that you have reason to be concerned about your own safety?”

She nodded her head loosely. I wasn't sure she was really listening.

Clark parked in front of her hotel. I got out and opened her door, helping her out. “I’ll walk you up. Can you throw a few things into a bag quickly? We’ll take you somewhere where you will be safe and get these prints and negatives in the hands of the law.”

“I’ll wait here for you,” Clark said, his face still drained of color.

She didn't protest. The fire in her spirit was reduced to smoking ashes by the brutal reality she had witnessed.

We took the elevator up to her apartment. She handed me the keys.

I opened her door for her and allowed her to enter ahead of me.

I have a sixth sense that has warned me many times about danger. It did not work this time!

The first inkling I had that something was wrong was the contact of a gun barrel with the back of my head.

Fireworks went off and my eyes rolled back up into my head. My knees would no longer support me nor would any of my muscles respond to my commands. The pain in the back of my head grew and overrode all else. I felt no pain at all from my head hitting her floor.

I don't know if I lost consciousness. I could hear voices but couldn't understand what they were saying. I could feel hands touching me roughly but did not know what they were doing. It was like being trapped inside a body that couldn't move, speak, hear or

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see. How long this condition lasted I wasn't sure, time being another concept I was temporarily unclear on, but when the room came back into focus, I was bound hand and foot, laying up against the wall beneath the French windows I had admired earlier. I could see Stormy standing beside a huge black man with silver teeth. He had one hand around her shoulder protectively and he was murmuring calming phrases I couldn't quite catch in her ear. He flipped a wallet open and showed her something inside it. I guess I had no exclusive on fake IDs.

There were two other well-dressed black men in suits with him, both holding guns on me. One called his attention to the fact that my eyes were now open in heavily accented English.

My nemesis took his arm from around her and turned his attention to me.

“Well, Mr. Cameron or whoever you really are, I'm glad to see you are still alive. I want to see you stand trial.”

Maybe I wasn't really conscious. “Trial?” I repeated in a pain-fogged voice.

“That's right. For the murder of four Bahamian Defense Force soldiers. Also, if I understand Ms Weather's story correctly, the murder of her boyfriend!”

He reached an arm out in a protective gesture and she voluntarily moved into his embrace. She didn't look at me.

“You're crazy, you murdering son-of-a-bitch.” I muttered, testing the ropes tying my wrists together behind my back.

“You have had a very close call, Ms Weather. This man is extremely dangerous. He killed four of my men who were trying to prevent him from taking delivery of a shipment of cocaine we tracked from the Bahamas. Obviously, from what you have told me, he paid your boyfriend to take photos of the drop area and then killed him also. You were the last possible link to his smuggling plan. He couldn't know that your boyfriend had not confided in you as to the identity of his employers so you were next.”

“Stormy, don't believe him! You must try to get away!” I pleaded. The ropes were too strong. They had disarmed me, my nine millimeter tucked away out of my reach in his belt.

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“Very good acting, Mr. Cameron. It is unfortunate that we must leave the dispensing of justice to the Americans. If you were in my country, we would see that you received swift and terrible punishment for your crimes.”

He turned to Stormy. “He was right about one thing, Ms Weather. It is dangerous for you to stay here. He has friends that are as dangerous as he. Please pack a bag and we will see that you are taken to a safe place until the Americans have rounded up his confederates.”

She nodded, overwhelmed by the events, the shock of seeing Steve's body and now this subterfuge. She did not know whom to believe. She was docile and meekly followed his instructions. She went into her bedroom. I could hear the sounds of drawers being opened.

He came closer to me. I could see the burns on his face. He had shaved his head and lantern jaw to remove the traces of singed hair and beard. This close I could see his Arab heritage beneath the almost black skin coloring. His tribe had interbred hundreds of years before with the black tribes of Northern Africa. It must have been a warrior tribe where the weak and cowardly were weeded out quickly. His eyes were an ice blue beneath heavy brows and glowed with the ferociousness of a Zulu warrior of the early eighteen hundreds.

He lifted my two hundred and twenty pounds into a standing position with one muscle corded arm. Bringing his face inches from mine, he spoke softly, without emotion, in low tones that carried to my ears only.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am known in the West by the name of Jacob Abraham. You may call me by my real name, Abu Ibrahim, as you will not live long enough for it to matter. You have been a real problem, Mr. Cameron. You are a very talented amateur. I am amazed at your abilities. You have cost me dearly in time, men and money. You will now tell me where you have hidden my cocaine and my explosives. I know you did not turn over all of it to the authorities. I have informants in high places. Tell me where it is and I may let you live.”

“Bullshit!”

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“What spirit in the face of death! I can admire that. Were you not American, I would strive to recruit you for my team!”

“What team is that? You are not Bahamian, nor Jamaican.”

“You have a good ear for accents, Mr. Cameron. Just let it be said that I am a religious man on a mission from Allah to destroy you and your kind. As you have no doubt figured out by now. Now where are my goods?”

“Fuck you!”

“Tsk, tsk. I had imagined you to be more educated and at least coherent but I had correctly guessed your reaction. Oh, well. It is a minor inconvenience. We are not your average, under financed terrorist group. A million here and there will not affect us, or our mission at all. We are Al-Qaeda. You will hear much about us in the future. And for every man who falls at your hands, ten will spring from the sand to replace him. This is no ordinary war, Mr. Cameron. This is a holy war. The war to end all wars. You may think it is over because someone calls a cease-fire. It is not. You may think it is over when you break all the bridges in one country. Another will take arms against you. We may fight from camels but we will fight. We will strike at you from every conceivable way until your frightened countrymen huddle in fear in their houses as we did in Baghdad. You will soon learn what it means to fight an Arab, Mr. Cameron! You will learn as your Israeli masters have learned.”

His voice never raised an octave. He could not be heard from across the room, much less from the bedroom. She would not know what he was until it was too late. Across his forehead sweat had formed and dripped into his eyes with no eyelashes to stop them. He blinked and the religious fervor faded from his eyes. We both heard her latch her suitcase.

“Well, not you, personally. But you know that. Besides, there is still your friend waiting down stairs. I'm sure with a little persuasion he will be glad to tell us everything we need to know. I doubt he is has the ability or the courage to defy me as you do.”

I followed his gaze out the window. Directly below us, on the street, Clark got out of the driver's side of his rental and glance nervously at his watch and the entrance to the hotel.

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I was shook, no doubt about it. I knew my death was certain. I knew Clark had little chance of escaping without warning. Stormy was no longer a factor. She had been subjected to too many tales today and she had no basis on which to judge reality. She was no more than a female prisoner of war in the hands of sadistic fanatic who hated Americans.

“What about the girl? What do you need her for? She knows nothing that could hurt you!” I heard myself say. It was as near as I have ever come to begging.

“Ah, the girl! She is beautiful, is she not?” He glanced at her picture on the wall, the silver in his teeth flashing in the light of the window. “We have no women of that nature in my country. I think it will be nice to have her demonstrate her abilities for me, in a place where agents of your government will not interrupt us. I know you have given my description to your friends at DEA who have, by this time, relayed that to the FBI. Fortunately, my work here is completed. People you know nothing about will be able to carry out our missions here in complete safety while I lie around on sandy beaches with Ms Weather and supervise from afar. I will indoctrinate her into the true religion. I only wish I could take you with us also. I would enjoy torturing you almost as much as making love to her!”

He turned to his two men. In a whisper he said, “Kill him as soon as we are down stairs. Then bring his friend to the marina.”

Stormy came out from the bedroom with a suitcase. She had been crying. She took one last look at me. It was undecipherable. Then he opened the door to whisk her out of the room.

The men in the room were professionals. Their eyes or guns never left me. Even if I had been able to get my hands loose, I would never have made it all the way across the room. I knew that two seconds after the door finished closing, I would be as dead as her boyfriend. These were not the kind of men that you could trick or talk them out of doing their job.

I had seconds to do something. With a roar that stopped Silver Teeth as he was closing the door behind him, I flung my body through the French windows with as much force as I could muster.

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The thin wood and glass broke easily and I was free! But I was dreading what awaited me three floors below!

Chapter Nine

I am not suicidal but given the choice of immediate death or death ten seconds later, I, an eternal optimist, will always opt for the latter. There have been stories recorded of men jumping out of airplanes, whose parachutes did not open, bouncing a couple of times and living through it.

Stormy's hotel is located on a narrow, old-fashioned street with narrow sidewalks. I knew the car was below me. If I got enough distance out of my leap, I hoped to land on it, rather than the sidewalk.

I tried to think of it as a high dive. I watched the car rush up at me at a frightening speed. Just prior to impact I whirled and landed feet first on the roof of the rental car with my knees slightly bent, legs tensed to help absorb the shock.

The roof of the little rental car caved in like tin foil but didn't break. My legs absorbed a lot of the energy but not enough. Leg muscles folded under the strain, butt and back took the rest of the impact. The windshield, rear and side windows exploded outwards, showering Clark and startled pedestrians with thousands of tiny bits of safety glass. I took another nasty rap on the head and my knees slammed into my chest, breaking several ribs. Somehow, I retained consciousness.

Clark was there to pull me from the roof. I tried to suck air into my collapsed lungs, succeeding at the expense of my ribs. Suppressing the pain with a groan, I screamed, "Get us out of here. Fuck the ropes! Get me in the car. Got to get away." It came out a whimper. I prayed he could make out my whispered instructions.

The top was bent so badly from the impact he could not open the door. He helped me to a standing position and I threw my upper body through the shattered window, yelling, and "Drive, Drive!"

A Trevor Cameron Novel

He ran around to the driver's side, started the engine with shaking hands and dropped it into gear, stomping the accelerator and tearing the bumper from the car ahead of him as he pulled out of his parking place. I barely had time to squirm around and get my feet in.

Fortunately, this was no Saturday Night and there were only a few scattered cars filled with gawking tourists. Wind whistling through the missing windshield, frightened drivers honking horns, Clark was able to put enough distance between the hotel and us by weaving in and out of the oncoming traffic that when the sound of gunshots reached us the bullets didn't.

“Jesus, Trevor. Are you all right? Where's Stormy? What happened?”

“They've got her. I think you better take me to a hospital this time.” And the blackness engulfed me.

I came around slowly, in a drugged fog, in a place I recognized as a hospital room. There was no one present here in the room. I guessed they had found my insurance card, (which I finally had transferred over to Cameron) because I was alone in the room. The lights were low and the blinds were drawn. No light came through them so I guessed it to be dark. There were no clocks and my Rolex was missing. Raising my arm to look for it was too much of an effort. Thinking was tough and the invisible elephant on my chest refused to get up.

Years later, I woke up and looked at Clark, who was leaning over me with a worried expression on his face.

“Couldn't you use the elevator like everyone else?” he asked.

“Had to warn you. Elevator too slow. Hard to use steps when your legs are tied together.” Then I was gone again.

I came out of it quicker this time, they said. A doctor had joined Clark. They were both smiling. I took it as a good sign. I found I actually cared about my condition during this bout of awareness.

“Eh, what's up, Doc?” I said as one eye opened.

“He's always wanted to say that,” Clark filled in for the doctor.

A Trevor Cameron Novel

“I’m glad to meet you in person, Mr. Cameron. I must say I was worried about you for a while but you have a superb physique and amazing recuperative powers and, Thank God, a great insurance policy which we can’t collect nearly as much on if you die on us. We don’t get that many paying patients here at Jackson Memorial.”

“This is Doctor Dennis Bernstein. An honest, Jewish doctor. That seemed to be the most logical choice, given the situation.”

“I hear you’ve been having a little trouble with Arabs also!” He began poking me with his finger, “Does this hurt? How about this, or this, or . . . ?”

“It all hurts, Doc. Everything on these bones are bruised. Now what about the bones? Tell me about the bones!”

“You are very lucky.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“You have three broken ribs, some small, relatively unimportant bones are fractured in your feet, a hip bone and tail bone are chipped and you have a concussion. Then there are the bruised kidneys, spleen and muscles. There are multiple lacerations. In laymen’s term, you look like you’ve been through a meat grinder, with scars on top of scars, some fresher than others. All thing considered, for someone who thought they could fly, you are in pretty good shape!”

“How long have I been out?”

“Three days. Under police guard, day and night. You must have friends on the force I assume, and a fan club has formed here! The nurses here have been told of some of your feats. They think you have been fighting the war all by yourself on this side of the ocean and they are all a-twitter. They can’t wait to see you with your eyes open now that they’ve all seen you with your clothes off.”

“Three days! What’s happened, Clark? They had Stormy! Did you call the cops? Miata? They said something about a marina, I just remembered! Jesus Christ! Three days! They were going to take her out of the country, Clark! She thought they were the good guys. She thought they were protecting her from me! She believed them. Oh, Christ!” Anguish welled up in my throat.

A Trevor Cameron Novel

“Her apartment has been sealed off. She hasn't come back. There is no sign of them. They searched the marinas, Trevor. You told me! You kept saying it over and over, ‘took her to marina’. So I told Tony. They found where they had been docked in a large Magnum at International Yacht Harbor, right across the canal from the Coast Guard Station, right under their noses. Five minutes after you left the hotel in such a grand manner, they were in their boat with Stormy, and on their way to Bimini. Even though there is pressure being put on to the Bahamian Government, not much cooperation is being given by the locals. In other words, we haven't found him, her, or his operation.”

“Did you tell Tony about the power plant, what we think they're going to do?” The words weren't coming out like I wanted. Drugs or concussion? “What are you giving me for pain?”

“Demerol,” said Bernstein.

“No more.”

“You won't like it. Give it another day.”

“I've got to get out of here!”

“The guards can work both ways, Cameron,” came a voice from the door. I recognized Tony's voice. “You look like hell,” he said as he came around to the side of the bed. “But your goatee is looking better!”

“What about the plant?” I asked again.

“We've got no proof, other than your brilliant speculations. Turkey Point is not operational at this time. There is a lot of construction going on there now and I've been assured that there are safeguards and security is already on maximum alert. The same is true of other potential targets, Like Homestead Air Force base, Port Everglades and the Port of Miami. We, if I may speak for myself and the other official agencies and armed forces of our government, are prepared for potential terrorist attacks. We are aware we are at war. You are a civilian. It is the joint consensus that you should act like one.”

I said nothing. He correctly assessed it as stubbornness, not assent.

“People are dying around you, Cameron. You are involving non-combatants in situations they have no business being in. You are endangering yourself and everyone around you. Therefore I am placing you under protective custody.”

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“You're kidding!”

“Do I sound like I'm kidding, Cameron? You are making people very nervous with all this talk about nuclear power plants and terrorists.”

“What people? Your people? The `suits'? They don't want people to know, do they, Tony?”

He wouldn't look me in the eye. We had talked often enough for me to know the “suits” are the bureaucrats and government appointed officials you see taking the credit for the busts and seizures that operatives like Tony make. They are the ones that tell you we are winning the war on drugs while they make the policy and decisions that perpetuate it. “It is the official viewpoint that there is no danger from terrorists within the continental U.S at this time,” he said carefully.

“In Israel, such things are a daily occurrence. We have learned to live with it. Maybe you will too.” Dr. Bernstein offered.

Tony turned to glare at him. “Don't you have rounds, Doc?”

“Is that an order from an authorized government agent?”

“Let's call it a request from an short tempered asshole with a gun!”

“With friends like him, I would hate to meet your enemies,” he said to me with a good-natured wink. His attitude changed, his voice hardening as he turned back to Miata. “You have ten more minutes, Mr. Government Agent. Then you may get your ass out of here. That is an order by the attending physician. He is under my care and out of your jurisdiction for the moment. Keep your police force outside this room until I release him. Do we understand each other? Good day, Trevor, Clark.” He walked out of the room without saying good-bye to Tony.

Tony glared at him as he left the room. I glared at Tony. “You can't be serious, Tony! You say there is no danger from terrorists and then you tell me you are going to put me under protective custody to protect me from something that officially does not exist! Get a life! I'm not going to stand for that and you know it! I'll be on the phone to the press so fast you won't believe it, yelling my head off.”

“Look, Cameron. I've got a lot of pressure coming down on me on account of you. The suits think I'm off my rocker even talking to you. They have begun to think I'm a

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security risk because I'm living with Clark and talking to you. I passed you off as a valuable source of information but informants don't leave a trail of corpses, bullet-ridden boats and wrecked police cars behind them. Now we have a dead pilot, a kidnapped girl and eyewitnesses that put you and Clark at both of their apartments.”

“Didn't Clark explain to you what happened?”

“He gave me a rundown on this Ms Weather, who you suggest may have been kidnapped. I heard the story of how she led you to the pilot's apartment. But we have no proof she is not with these men of her own free will. We don't know she didn't have something to do with his murder! What Clark couldn't seem to explain to my satisfaction is how you got her name in the first place. It would seem to suggest you may have known her in the past, like say, before you took this impromptu trip down to the Keys where you just happened to stumble on this drop.

“What are you trying to say, Tony?” Clark asked. I didn't have to ask. The chill that was going up my spine was telling me what he was trying to say.

Tony looked at Clark. “Do you know what his IQ is, Clark? I do. I've checked his records as far back as the first grade. Straight A student. As an adult, at one time or another, he has been investigated by almost every agency there is because of his association with people who have less than sparkling records. Yet, he's always come up clean. We know what you used to do; we don't know what he's done. That's what is scary. We are very wary of someone who has cultivated and honed his talent for violence and has an IQ higher than some of our best scientists. Someone who looks and dresses like a biker when he could be living in a mansion and riding around in limos. Someone who leaves a string of bodies behind them. In self defense, of course.”

“Is this your thoughts I'm hearing, Tony?” I asked quietly.

He looked at me with eyes that belied his tough words. “No. Not all of them, anyway. I like you Cameron. But it is a little scary when you have people that are more experienced than you and have not had the pleasure of being subjected to your brand of personal magnetism, point out certain facts that might make one feel that they are being led around by the nose. It is scary to think of yourself as an intelligent person and find out there are intellects out there that make yours look like a first grader. Combine that with a

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willingness to kill and you have a very dangerous combination. You should have joined the army, Trevor. You should have joined the CIA. At least you wouldn't have made the big boys quite as nervous. They would have felt like you were controllable. They would have had the chain of command to insulate them from you. As it is, you are a loose cannon. I'm sorry, but I will have to consider you a material witness at the least or a suspect at the worst.”

“A suspect in what?”

“Smuggling. Murder. They are considering the possibility you are behind all of this. The terrorist thing being a smoke screen. Play it like this. You make a buy. Cocaine and C4 for some reason. Being the careful planner you are, you get Steve to fly down and take pictures of the drop area. Then you find out he had help. You torture him to get the number of his photographer. You can't be sure he hasn't mentioned to her who he was working for. You kill him. You get Clark and the girls to go down with you on a lobster hunt as a cover. When the delivery is made, you kill off the runners so you don't have to pay them. Your men take off with the drugs, leaving enough to show me and the Coast Guard. The C4 makes me think it's the work of terrorists.”

“What about the attack on Trevor at John and Sherry's. The murder of Julie and Carol?” Clark asked.

“Staged attack. No one hurt. Sherry a willing witness. On his way back to his houseboat conveniently parked behind our place, he stops and pays a visit on Julie and Carol. Then he comes back to you and, bingo, the two of you figure out the danger. He drives like a manic to save them. Picks up a police escort. They arrive on the scene with you. More witnesses in his defense. Meanwhile two of his men are waiting to take me out. They miss. So he eliminates them also. He's a hero. Now he has to take out the photographer. How am I doing Cameron?”

Too good. It even sounded plausible to me! “It sure makes it sound like I'm some kind of homicidal maniac all right, Tony. How did I manage to hit myself on the back of my head, tie myself up and jump out a four story window?”

“Maybe you were the victim of a double cross by your men.”

“I think it would be awfully hard to prove.”

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“In court, maybe. It would be hard to make a jury believe you are that smart with the way you look. But it is scary enough to the Justice Department that they want real close tabs on you for now.”

“Are you charging me with anything, Tony?”

“No. But I'm revoking your concealed weapons permit. As a suspect, I must ask you not to leave the county without permission.”

“What about me?” Clark asked.

Tony sighed. “You are another one of those people with real scary IQs but you don't have the bent for mayhem that he does. If I were you, Clark, I'd review the possibilities that I've just outlined and ask yourself if there is the chance he has been using you to cover for himself. See you later, Cameron. If you want to confess and save us all a lot of time and trouble, just call.”

“Don't hold your breath, asshole.”

“Sticks and stones, Cameron, sticks and stones.”

He walked out of the room. I could see the uniformed guard outside the door before it closed. I looked at Clark.

He met my gaze.

“Well?” I said finally.

“I can't tell you what a shock it is to learn that your best friend is a homicidal maniac.”

“Clark!”

“OK, OK, don't get upset. He does paint a grim picture though, doesn't he?”

“I think he gives me a little more credit that I deserve.”

“No. The scary part is that you and I know he is right about you. You are exceptionally cunning, ruthless and not hesitant about killing in self-defense or revenge. The part he is wrong about and he couldn't know is you are incapable of killing defenseless, innocent people. You are also lazy. You would not take the time to put together an operation such as this for profits when you can hire others to work for you in legitimate channels. To be fair to Tony and his bosses, they are born too late to recognize

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the white knight syndrome in people like you. How many Lancelots have there been, throughout history?"

"Speaking of damsels in distress . . ."

"I thought that would be your next question. I would guess she is with your new nemesis in the Bahamas at this time. He can't take the chance of being caught here in the U.S. at this time."

"What about the power plant?"

"Obviously, they don't want your help. You have warned them. I would say that we have done all we can in that area. The government is much better equipped to deal with a terrorist attack than we are. They have increased security since the war began just to deal with a terrorist threat."

"Do you realize," I said as the thought struck me, "that we have legitimized them?"

"I'm not following?"

"We gave them the right to attack our power plants, our refineries when we declared war on Iraq. We are not dealing with just terrorists. I believe the man who ordered me killed was an officer in a foreign army. His men. . . soldiers. He was the leader of the equivalent of a Seal Team, operating behind enemy lines. Their mission is the same as our soldiers over there, disrupt power, destroy communication and supply lines. This is not terrorist action against civilians. It is war! We killed more civilians in Panama than we did soldiers! Maybe for the first time, America is being invaded!"

"What a frightening thought."

"Tony knows that I didn't arrange this. They are setting me up as a scapegoat in case this gets out of control. If word gets out about what is really happening here, someone in the press has got to realize the distinction." In retrospect, my naiveté regarding what I then believed was a free press, was amazing if I really had that high an I.Q.

"So what are you going to do?"

I sat up in bed. The pain was intense but not unbearable. I had lost most of my agility for the moment but not movement. "Tell the doc to give me a supply of light

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weight pain pills, like Tylenol Threes. I will be checking out of here early in the morning. Your car keys and a change of clothes would be appreciated. Take a taxi back to your place and don't let Tony answer the phone tomorrow. I need some theatrical make up to cover a few of these cuts. While you are doing that, I think I'll sleep for awhile."

"What is the makeup for? I've never known you to be so vain before."

"I need to have my picture taken first thing tomorrow. Oh yeah, I'll need a one way ticket to South America, too."

"South America? Where in South America? I thought they went to the Bahamas? You are going after the girl, aren't you?"

"Just make sure the flight leaves tomorrow between one and three. I don't care where in South America it goes to. See that the ticket is refundable. I will need my birth certificate and name change documents and some cash out of my safe." Clark knew the combination.

"I see. I think. He's right you know, you do have a criminal mind."

"One other question, Clark. What floor are we on?"

"The second."

"Thank God. I'm developing a fear of heights." I closed my eyes and was asleep instantly.

I dreamed again. Not the serial dream of a future existence. This one was very current. This time I could see my enemy inches away from me, staring at me with a faint trace of a smile lurking about his lips. Behind him, far in the distance, came a horde of men, brandishing weapons and the American flag. I felt momentarily elated as I watched them come closer and closer. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Stormy, impassively watching as the group of men closed in on the two of us. I stood and watched him, eye to eye, trying not to look elated, thereby warning him of his impending capture.

Then they were on him, right behind him, arms reaching out to grab him. That was when I felt hands grabbing me. Someone had snuck up on me while I smirked at his imminent capture! I fought wildly, breaking arms and fingers as I struggled to get loose. Free for an instant, I lunged at him, screaming, determined to land one blow for freedom! My fist smashed his face with all the force I could muster and he exploded into a

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thousand shining shards of silvered glass! A mirror, I realized as I went down beneath an army wearing red, white and blue flags upon their uniforms. I was fighting my own reflection! It was me our soldiers were trying to capture!

Chapter Ten

It turned out to be two days before everything came together. I slept most of the time, marshalling my strength, letting my body recover from the ordeals it had been through and letting Miata believe he had cowed me into compliance if not submission.

I chafed at the lost time, visions of Stormy, beautiful Stormy, alone and frightened, in the hands of a mad Arab terrorist bent on the destruction of America. For the first time in months, the memories of pale skin and alabaster eyes had been upstaged by dreams of dark skin and eyes the color of amethyst. She had become an obsession, something I wanted so badly I was willing to risk my life and freedom by disobeying Miata, leaving the country, not just the county, in the attempt to rescue her.

Why had she affected me so deeply? We had only just met. She was still a stranger to me. She had done nothing to encourage me, nothing that even hinted that there could be anything more than a casual acquaintance between us. Had I read more into our brief moments together than there had really been? I suppose all men fantasize about loving women as beautiful as she. Had we more time together, she might have told me there was no chance but she had been taken from me before I could know and now I could not get her out of my mind.

In my idle hours, my only activities besides eating were mental, analyzing my options, conceiving plans of actions, discarding or refining them and examining the multitude of feelings generated by the skirmishes with the enemy.

Months ago, I had tracked down, confronted and succeeded in eliminating two drug dealers who had killed my lover and tried to kill me. I had been driven by rage and the desire for revenge. I did not feel the same towards my silver-toothed adversary.

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I was not driven by hate. His people and mine were at war. Let me correct that; we had declared war on Iraq. There were Arabs on our side that fought against Arabs loyal to Saddam Hussein. Jordanians and Palestinians looked to Saddam as a champion. The Saudis and Kuwaitis saw him as a monster. The truth was hidden beneath layers of diplomacy, lies, half-truths and censorship and distorted by cultures so diverse that hope of settlement and peaceful coexistence seemed to be out of the question. Iraq and Iran had battled for eight years, carrying on a tradition of tribal warfare that spanned recorded history. We had backed Saddam against Iran in retaliation for the seizing of our Embassy in Tehran. The Israelis had displaced the Palestinians after World War II, now the Iraqis did the same to the Kuwaitis. This time the U.S. stepped in, for oil or freedom, depending on your point of view.

Whatever the motivation, we had had half a million soldiers half a world away fighting a war. The American people and I were determined to support them and prevent the kind of treatment accorded our Vietnam Vets. Many other Arab states felt the same way about the Iraqi soldiers. The battle lines were drawn and the missiles and bullets flew. We were committed to kill one another.

When I opened fire on the men retrieving the weapons, I had forfeited my status as a civilian in their eyes. So now I was an active participant in the battle that raged between us. Like many of our men who had dug into the sand of Saudi Arabia, I found I could not hate the men I faced. Saddam Hussein, yes, for forcing this war upon us. However rumors were rampant that Bush had tricked Hussein into invade Kuwait and that Kuwait had cross drilled into Iran's oil fields and was justified in invading.

Maybe even our leaders were to blame for not having the foresight to develop alternative forms of energy, thus making the oil less valuable and strategic. But not the men with different skin wearing different uniforms. I, like my brothers across the sea, would fight and kill because it was our duty and because it was a matter of kill or be killed. We would fight and do it well but we had not yet reached the point of hating. The sight of burned babies and bombed out homes on the TV were as tragic coming out of Iraq as out of Israel.

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I was determined to keep the war away from here, if it was within my power, but I could not bring myself to hate the man I fought against.

Clark had managed to assemble the items I had asked for. He had one other bit of news; the last three boats ordered had not been picked up. They were paid for and abandoned at the dealership. Evidently, Silver Teeth had told the truth when he said money was not a factor. My meddling may have only meant they had gotten their boats elsewhere. For me, it was a lead that hadn't panned out.

Nor had there been any type of activity on the news that could have been attributed to terrorists. The murders of Julie, Carol and Steve were lost in the carnage of assaults, drug related shootings, murders for hire and robberies reported by the Miami Herald daily. Stormy's kidnapping and my fourth story flight had not even made the papers. The pipe bombs found in Norfolk near the tanks of methanol had been linked to three businessmen and a scheme to collect the insurance on other tanks of sulphur treated water they had been unable to sell and had run up a sixty thousand dollar bill on storage.

As far as the press and America was concerned there was no threat of terrorism!

This was my personal war. No uniforms, no parades, no publicity, no glory. I could walk away from it without shame. I had been ordered to walk away from it.

I couldn't.

At four o'clock in the morning, five days after my admittance to the hospital, I was ready.

The guard had grown lax. He was really there to protect me. I was not under arrest. He chatted with the nurses, went out often for coffee. Sure, someone had tried to kill me but that was old news, this was light duty and no one took it seriously. There were no bars upon the window and I had not been out of bed as far as he knew. I had made sure he had not seen me exercising, testing bruised muscles.

I quietly dressed, replaced my Rolex on my wrist, put Clark's keys in my pocket, put pillows under the covers and slid silently out the window. The short drop caused enough pain to take my breath away. I recovered quickly and found the rental waiting at the prearranged parking lot of Jackson Memorial. A trip to the restroom of an all night

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service station off I-95 allowed me to shave and use the make up to cover the almost healed cuts and scratches on my face and hands.

Up until now, I had traveled widely across the U.S. but had no reason to go overseas. I needed a passport and I needed it quickly. The ticket to South America would accomplish two things; first, it would get me my passport in one day. Thus the make up. I would have enough trouble, I suspected, with the fact that I had changed my name without having to try and explain why I looked like a poor duelist. Two, it would throw anyone trying to track my movements off for a few days.

I stopped at a Denny's for breakfast, killing time until the passport office opened. I was the first in line. I filled out the paperwork and presented the girl behind the counter with the back up documentation to prove I was born in the U.S.A. Strains of Bruce Springsteen echoed crazily in my mind. I showed her my ticket, expressing the need for immediate attention in order to make my plane that afternoon.

She looked through the documents and looked at my face too closely, or so it seemed. I have always had the feeling that all bureaucracies perceived me as a threat, like Communists look at dissidents and dictators view the vote. As if, somehow, they possessed the power to see inside my head and knew the distain I felt for them and their dedication to delays and paperwork.

Well, perhaps it's just the way I dress! There is no reason I know of to wear a suit unless your job depends on it. Mine doesn't.

She told me to come back at noon to pick up my passport. That would give me time to get back to my boat and get it away from Clark's house and Tony's surveillance.

I called Clark. He said Tony had left for work. I made it there in twenty minutes.

I drove down the street a couple of times checking for any type of security. There was none. I went up to the door and Clark let me in.

“Why does Tony have a guard on me and not on you?” I asked as I entered.

“He feels, as I do, that your escape and the events of the last few days attracted too much attention. Neither did they expect to have to fight the police force. Killing me should no longer be their priority, if, indeed any of them are left here in Miami. That is, according to Tony, if it wasn't you all along.”

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“They still had a guard on my door.” I pointed out.

“I believe that was more to watch you than for anyone else.”

“Does Tony really believe that bullshit story he came up with?”

“Tony is under a lot of pressure from the “Suits” as you call them. He grouses about it all the time. They are not the ones out there taking the chances. They send men out to risk their lives making a one ounce buy while letting the big fish go citing international pressures and internal security. It is hard for him. He wants to work with us. He likes working with us. Snitches or informers are usually losers, liars or cheats. They are unreliable and impossible to trust. They are usual strung out themselves and turning in their friends for the chance to do just one more line.”

I nodded, anxious for the information but in a hurry to get out of what now felt like the lion's den. “Talk to me on the boat.” I said, leading the way out the patio door. “It is difficult to get a simple answer out of you. Does that mean yes, he believes I killed Steve or no he doesn't?”

We walked out the dock to my poor, bullet-riddled boat.

“No, he doesn't think you killed Steve but he does think you know more about the cocaine drop than you do. That is, in part, because his instincts are correct. He just hasn't figured out exactly what you haven't told him. Imagine, Miata, an experienced field agent, meeting someone like you who doesn't do drugs, doesn't sell drugs, is rather well known as a stand up guy in circles that police and agents don't circulate in and possesses the intelligence, drive and morals of a career cop. You can gain information it might take years to get through regular channels. He wants to find a way to use you effectively but he is frustrated because you only help when it is in your interests to do so.”

He watched me scurry around the boat, securing loose items, stretching plastic over the broken windows and checking my fluid levels in the engine compartment. “Go ahead, I'm really listening.”

“The point is he doesn't understand how you can be so ruthless with people like DiAngelo and Carmine and not feel that way about the other drug dealers in the country.”

“I've told him a dozen times, I am not interested in being a cop. Carmine and DiAngelo killed Donna! That's why I went after them,” I said irritably.

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“Your own interests! He accepted that then. Now you've killed six more men he considers drug dealers, turned in more cocaine than most of his men have ever confiscated. In other words you are more effective and competent than most of his officers. Now his superiors are questioning his ability to control you. In their minds you are just an informer. They can't understand why he lets you get away with working when you want. It is a totally unnatural relationship in their eyes and it makes him suspect. They are pressing him to get something on you to gain your cooperation. It is putting him between a rock and a hard place.”

“I feel we've worked out a decent relationship. He did me a favor, I did him one. We are even.”

“He feels the same. Try conveying that to a suit who has never been on the street. To them, you are either a cop, an informer, in jail or you are a victim. Like he said, there are no room for vigilantes or gunslingers anymore.”

I came out of the engine compartment convinced the Sea Deuced was seaworthy.

“Convey my apologies for failing to help ingratiate him with the assholes he works for. Tell him to try brown-nosing more. We are not dealing with just drug dealers here. Tell him to try and get that through his bosses' heads.”

I stuck my hand out to him. “I'm off to see the wizard, Clark. I've no family, so if I don't come back, I've left instructions with Houston that you are the new chairman of the board.”

“Trev, I thought I was going with you? I was just joshing about not going on the boat with you!” He looked stunned.

“I need a liaison here. Keep an eye out for yourself. You are not out of danger yet. Keep a sidearm on you. Tell Miata to get them to double the security on Turkey Point. I'll get back to you when I can. Keep in touch with Chuck. You know what I would do in most situations. I trust your judgment.”

“Be careful, my friend. I would not want to be rich over your dead body.”

He tossed me the stern line after the diesels roared to life. I caught it, pushed the bow away from the dock and climbed up to the flybridge.

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I tapped the starboard engine into gear, waited two seconds then dropped the port engine into reverse. She swung around like she was on gimbals. When the bow pointed toward the Intracoastal, I put port in forward and I was off on my first great ocean adventure!

First, I had to gas up and pick up my passport. I headed downtown, using the markers to stay in the deep water of the Intracoastal, that great American waterway that provides safe inland passage almost the entire length of the East Coast of the United States, reaching all the way down to the Keys and up around the tip of Florida all the way up the west coast to St. Petersburg and Tampa.

I reached downtown, docking at the Marriott for gas and lunch. From there I took a taxi to the Passport Office.

I was not so lucky this time. I had to wait in line for thirty minutes. When I got to the window, the girl remembered me. It wasn't a good sign.

"I've come to pick up my passport. The name is Cameron."

"Oh yes, Mr. Cameron. Would you please come with me?" She motioned me to the employee's gate, a swinging door that led from the public area to behind the counter.

I felt a twinge of nervousness. In the two times I had been in this office, no one else had been invited behind this partition.

My paranoia increased when she led me through another doorway and into a hallway lined with doorways. Several were open. Behind the doors were small, windowless cubicles. I was ushered into one. There were two chairs and a small table inside. It looked uncomfortably like the interrogation rooms you see in all of the cop movies. My alarm grew when she turned to leave me and I saw there was no doorknob on the door! In its place were a combination lock and a handle.

I caught myself before I leaped at her and the slowly closing door. This is America. They don't pull tricks like this on you in America, do they? Then why do the doors have combo locks on them? Another bad sign as far as I am concerned.

I stood my ground. Anything else would be too suspicious. I breathed a little, silent sigh of relief when she left the door cracked by inches. I was not locked in. It made a big difference.

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I was sure that my absence from my hospital bed had been noticed and duly reported to Miata by this time. Since I was not under arrest, I doubted he had an APB out on me. I trusted the wheels of bureaucracy to turn slowly enough to allow me to collect my passport and disappear but I couldn't understand the special treatment I was getting.

I didn't have to wait long. The door opened and two young men in suits and ties came in. They both flashed badges and ID that identified them as George Smith and Fredrick Hummel. Both were employed by the State Department.

Fred said, "Mr. Cameron. It seems you are in a bit of a hurry to leave the country. Why are you going to Bogotá?"

Clark had not been able to get a flight to Rio. One usually has ulterior motives for going to Columbia. Especially scruffy looking people with stubbly beards and long hair tied back into a ponytail.

"I have never been to Bogotá. I want to see what it looks like."

George took his turn. "You bought a one way ticket?"

"I have credit cards, George. I can buy a one way back anytime I get ready to leave." It seemed to rile him I remembered the name on his ID and chose to use his first name. "Besides, I may want to go someplace else later."

"Most people aren't traveling at this time."

"Why? Have they talked with you guys? I can see how that might have a negative effect."

"We are talking about your passport here, Mr. Cameron. I would advise you to cooperate," Fred piped up.

"I am cooperating, Fred. I am just wondering if you put everybody through this little grilling to give them what is their right to have. I was born here. Why am I being subjected to your questions? Did I miss something in your application?"

"You changed your name last year from Hamilton. May I ask why?"

"Normally, I would say no but I have no desire to antagonize you further. Hamilton was the name of my stepfather whom I was never close to. When I found out my real father was still alive I dropped the Hamilton and adopted my middle name as my

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surname in his honor. Should I have added another middle name? Is that the problem? Are you supposed to have a middle name to get a passport?"

They looked at each other. I was not reacting to their satisfaction but my voice was still polite.

"What is your occupation, Mr. Cameron?"

"I am chairman of the board of Hamilton Properties and the major stockholder. I worked my ass off for ten years now I'm going to play for ten. I can afford it. Now gentlemen, you know by now that I have no record. You also know that I have been investigated by the FBI and checked out by the DEA on more than one occasion. I am insolent and insulated by modest wealth therefore I don't fit most of your profiles. I am not a drug dealer or a criminal and pay more taxes than both of you make. It makes no difference to me whether you like me, my looks or the way I dress. Give me my passport now or give me a reason why so I may phone my attorney!"

Without another word, Fred pulled out a passport and handed it to me. I open it, checked the information contained there, and looked in disbelief at the picture. "I'm sorry, gentlemen. I just started growing this mess on my face. Hopefully it will grow out and look better than this. Now I can understand your reluctance to let me out of the country. You didn't want to promote the image of the Ugly American."

The humor broke the ice that had formed in the room. Smiles gradually erased the frown lines on their youthful faces and hands were extended.

"Sorry about this, Mr. Cameron. Between your looks, size and name change, we thought we should talk to you. Your appearance just didn't jive with that of the chairman of any board."

"No problem, fellas. Sorry if I got testy."

Once out in the hall, I noticed a distinct feeling of relief.

I caught a cab downtown and got back to the Marriott. I stopped at Tugboat Annie's and grabbed a burger for lunch, then made my way down the main dock to the ships store and gas dock at the end. I paid for my diesel with cash, stocked up with essentials like toilet paper and food, and was as ready as I would ever be.

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While I was putting the groceries up, I turned the radio on Channel One to check the seas. They were running three to five with a Northerly wind driving the Gulf Stream even higher. Not a fun crossing. The wind was supposed to die down tomorrow. By this time, it was past two o'clock so I decided not to make the crossing today. Tomorrow would be better for the boat and me. I was not that enthused over the thought of taking a severe pounding on top of my broken ribs and bruises.

I rented a dock space from the girl at the desk, put the Sea Deuced into it, secured the lines, plugged the power and phone cords in and settled in for the rest of the afternoon and night.

I shut down the flybridge and went downstairs. Sitting down in the main cabin for the first time since she had been shot up, I viewed the damage. On impulse, I looked through the yellow pages and began calling marine service companies until I found one who was motivated by money willing to come out late on what I found out was a Friday. I had lost complete track of what day it was. I gave them the size of the broken windows and made arrangements for them to be cleared by security to patch the fiberglass as well.

That accomplished, I thought of what I might run into once I crossed over into the Bahamas. From the talk along the docks, I knew what to expect when entering the Bahamas. There were no searches. They were not worried about anyone smuggling drugs from here to there. Rarely did a Customs Officer ever board a boat. The Captain reported to the office where fees were paid. Once I checked in at Bimini, the rest of the islands were open to me indefinitely. My weapons were no problem as long as I reported them. Would they be enough to take on a group of well-organized militia? I suppose they would have to do. I found myself wishing I had a bazooka and several Stinger missiles to take along.

Then the thought occurred to me complete with light bulbs flashing in my brain. I had something that could be just as valuable. It could be considered almost poetic justice.

Inspired, I made sure my guns were secured and locked inside their cabinet, left a note for the repairmen and strolled up the dock to the hotel.

The Marriott is located just off Biscayne Boulevard behind the Omni Mall, one of the largest indoor malls and hotels in the country. Three stories of shopping center

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beneath the Omni Hotel, connected by a walkway to the Marriott and the Venetian Condominiums next door. Someone living in the condos could live their life here and never have to go outside the interconnected complexes.

I crossed the walkway and consulted a directory to find the Radio Shack. There I bought rolls of speaker wire, cheap two way radios, and other novelty devices such as the Radio Shack version of the Clapper, a cute device that allows you to turn the lights or TV on and off without getting up from your chair. They advertise it on TV right between the “I’ve fallen and can’t get up” commercials and the adjustable beds on reruns of the Golden Girls.

The hobby shop provided the balance of my shopping list. I felt a little like a kid who had just got a hundred dollars to blow from his grandmother. I placed the model rocket kit with the electronic launcher on top of my pile and the clerk looked at me as if I were that kid.

“For your children’s birthday?”

“No. For mine.” I grinned.

He shut up and totaled my purchases. Clark was right. The beard made me look ferocious even when I smiled.

Chapter Eleven

By the time I got back to the boat with my booty, the repairs were underway. The owner of the company introduced himself as John Ginsberg. A thin (all good boat mechanics seem to be thin. Someone my size can't get into the tight confines of most engine compartments.), balding man in his early thirties with a southern drawl that seemed incongruous with his name.

“You got a lot more damage here than you tole me on the phone, Cameron. It's gonna take me longer than I thought.”

“Do what you can, John. I'm leaving in the morning.” I carried my goodies back into the bedroom, which had come through virtually unscathed.

John followed me into the bedroom. Evidently my looks or size didn't intimidate him at all. “You gonna be hanging around on the boat while we work?”

“I hadn't thought about it. Why?”

“Well, owners kind of have a tendency to get in the way. They ask stupid questions and are generally a pain in the ass.”

“It's too bad you have to see them to get paid, isn't it?” I said with a trace of a smile tickling the corners of my mouth as I tried to keep from laughing at his brashness.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “That's one of the big drawbacks about this business. I love boats but the people that own them are usually jerks.”

This time the laugh escaped. “Tell you what, John. Replace the glass, patch up as many of the holes as you can tonight, charge me overtime and I'll go up to Tug Boat Annie's and hang out so I'm not looking over your shoulder.”

“Thanks. I'll lock up and bring the bill up to you later. I think they've got a band up there tonight, maybe you'll get lucky and score.”

I had been to very few bars since I had been in Florida. My nights were usually spent at the gym, writing or examining the memos and books relating to my business affairs. Days I spent out on the boat fishing or riding my bike around the beaches. Dates were found on the beaches or the gym. I am not a social person. I do not go in for the bar and the single scene. I can dance but rarely do. I drink little and watching others get drunk ranks right up there with watching goldfish feed. People began to act foolish, then get

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uptight when you don't laugh at the same things they do. I like to fight but prefer to do it with sober professionals. In that context it is a learning experience, positive in nature, beneficial in the exercise and spirit of competition.

Still, it can be fun watching the games people play in the pursuit of pleasure.

Tugboat Annie's attracted an interesting cross section of people. Bored businessmen stuck at the Marriott over the weekend searched diligently for a companion to pass the time with. Wealthy Cubans mingled, dressed in purples and pastels, gold gleaming. Couples from Canada drifted in from dinner, talking softly to each other in French. Single women sat together at tables accepting or declining offers to dance, then compared notes about their respective partners.

I sipped club sodas with a twist of lime at the bar, ignoring the bartender's questioning gaze. He was wondering if I was a cop or a reformed alcoholic.

The band played a mixture of Jimmy Buffet, island songs and rock and roll. By ten o'clock, the evening was in full swing. People flowed around me, hustling each other for drinks or dances. A couple of girls drifted over, checking me out a little closer. I smiled with just enough coldness as I pointedly failed to buy them a drink. They talked to each other for a while, about coke, AIDS and Corvettes. They decided I was a poor biker who had somehow slipped in and left me alone. John came in around ten o'clock with my bill.

“What, no luck?”

“I guess not. Just not my lucky night.”

“You didn't wear enough gold. You should have sniffled more. That always attracts women in Miami.”

“Do you want a drink?”

“No thanks. I would rather go home and smoke a joint.”

“I don't blame you. This really does not appeal to me that much either.” I took the bill, glanced it over quickly in the poor light, went straight to the bottom line, decided it was reasonable enough for the rush service and late hour. I reached into my pocket, counted out a few hundred-dollar bills and put it into John's hand. For some reason it made him nervous.

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“You leaving now?” he asked.

“Yeah, I'm going to the boat.”

“I'll walk with you.”

“Something wrong?”

“This ain't the place to be flashing a role like that. Did you see those guys over there checking us out?” He nodded at a group of four Latinos murmuring among themselves. “They think I'm delivering you drugs. If they follow us out we have a problem. I've already sent my guys home.”

“Lets find out,” I suggested. I got up from the bar, paid my tab and we started for the door. Out of the corner of my eye I saw sudden movement. They were headed out another entrance. I counted four.

John saw them too. “Shit. I wish you had paid me with a check. I wish I had let you walk me to the car before you paid me. Did I mark that bill paid?”

“I'm afraid you did.”

“Shit. I even let my guys take my tools with them. I got no weapons. That's what I get for coming down to this part of town this late. Maybe we'll be lucky and they'll just take the money.”

“We can walk to my boat. I have a gun on board. Then I'll walk you to your vehicle.” Mentally I groaned. Just what I need right now. Shoot a punk or two, deal with the cops, and go downtown. Then Miata would have his lever.

“My truck is closer. It's just over there, next to the hotel. If we can get to it, I can take you to the entrance to the hotel and you can get a security guard to take you back to the boat.”

We started for his truck but they quickly surrounded us. There were only a few scattered tourists around, none in earshot. They had a spokesman, a Latino about twenty-two, sporting a gold chain and a healthy dose of machismo.

“Hey, man. You got any drugs?”

“No,” I said curtly.

“You want drugs?”

“No.”

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“You got plenty of money, man, you and your buddy. Looks like a drug deal to me. Tell you what, muchacho, you give me the money, we won't bust you.”

“You got a badge, muchacho,” I asked quietly.

“I don't need a badge, puta, I got this!” He whipped out a pearl-handled switchblade and snapped it open. “Don't be a stupid mother fucker. Give me the money and you can live.”

I shook my head sadly. “I'm really sorry about this. Please give your mother my regrets.” John was already reaching for the money I had given him. He stopped and stared at me along with the cowboy and his buddies.

“What you mean talking about my mother, dick head?”

“I feel bad about her. You look too old to be on her insurance policy and I bet you don't have any either.”

“You going to be the one that needs insurance, you don't up that money now, mother fuck...ooof!”

A snap kick to his crotch cut his epitaph short and suspended his sex life indefinitely. I stepped to my right one long step while the others were gawking at him, and chopped the one on my right in the throat with the edge of my right hand, putting just enough of a swing into it to disable without killing. I allowed the momentum to turn me towards the one standing behind me, bringing my left foot in a high arc, ankle turned slightly to allow the sole of my shoe to absorb the impact with his jawbone. He went down hard, knocked clean off his feet to land on his shoulder on the concrete. That left me facing the last of the group. The safety of numbers suddenly taken away, the slightly built youngster turned and fled.

I turned my attention back to their spokesman who had begun to breathe once more. Lifting the switchblade from unresisting fingers, I let him watch as I placed my thumb against the flat of the blade and applied pressure until the cheap metal snapped and the blade flew off into the bushes. I probably should have stopped there, but the blood lust and frustrations had built up more than I expected. I backhanded him across the face with enough force to lift him from his crouched position and carry him into the bushes behind his blade. John could easily hear the breaking of his jaw.

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It took all of thirty seconds.

I ignored the pain in my ribs and continued in the direction of John's truck, leaving the three moaning men where they lay.

John looked at them then at me. "You must have had a lot of hostilities bottled up for awhile. Might be sometime 'fore they try that again."

"Thanks again, John, for helping me get the old boat ship shape. Sorry about the incident. I'll pay by check next time."

"No problem. You can pay me in cash anytime, Cameron. As long as you walk me to my car."

By the time I turned around, there was no sign of them or the struggle. Back at the boat, there was no sign of violence there, outside of the holes in my table and lobster pot. John had done a good job on the windows and fiberglass. I set up some alarms on the doors and windows I had picked up at Radio Shack and settled in for the night, nine millimeter under my pillow.

I awoke before daybreak, still sore but it was getting better. I had coffee and set sail, but not for Bimini. Not yet. I had one more stop to make!

I retraced the route my merry crew and I had made in what seemed like years in the past but in reality less than two weeks before; happier days, when war had still been a world away. Beneath the causeway named for the founder of the now defunct Eastern Airlines, Eddie Rickenbacker, I sailed, down the length of Biscayne Bay.

Morning's light found me within sight of the twin stacks of Turkey Point. Soon the markers leading to Bayfront Park came into sight, with a steady stream of early risers who had launched their boats there and were headed out for fishing beyond Fowey Rocks Light. Rounding a point of land and the twin reactor stacks came into view, nestled among the latticework of incomprehensible construction platforms and electrical transformers. Viewed through binoculars, it was simultaneously intriguing and foreboding, a complex structure encasing twentieth century technology, yet strangely fragile looking. I wondered what the effects of a rocket or a hand grenade would be.

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Shortly after noon, I dropped anchor near Pumpkin Key once more. There were quite a few boats in the area but none on or near the tiny island. Armed with a small spade, I loaded my raft with some of my new toys and made for the beach.

Twenty minutes later I sat on the beach, carefully separating cocaine from C4. I was glad Clark was not with me this time. The sight of me carelessly dumping a million dollars worth of cocaine into the sea would have galled him forever. So many lives and fortunes had been risked to get this white gold into the country, he would have said. So many lives thrown away using it, I would have countered. Better that I did this alone. Even Miata would not have agreed with me but we both knew how much “evidence” had been replaced with sugar or lost outright from evidence locker rooms in police stations and government agencies across the country.

Still, the fifty kilos I destroyed were but a drop in the bucket compared to the daily production flowing out of Bolivia. It was hard to say which presented the greater threat to the security of our country, the terrorists or the corruption and addiction created by the insidious white powder.

Personally, I believe legalization, taxation and education makes more sense than the morass of moral indignation, two-faced officials and inept, unequal law enforcement that make up our current policy. To illustrate, if you are interested, read *Deep Cover*, by Michael Levine, (no relation to my attorney friend in Miami) a former DEA supervisor and undercover agent. A true story which illustrates the dangers to our agents created by their our people.

The C4 was wrapped in one pound packages, packed inside the kilos of cocaine. I extracted almost thirty pounds of the doughy looking, malleable substance.

I had no experience with this substance, and no knowledge of its properties other than what I had read in books or seen in the movies. I thought it was fairly stable and knew it required some type of detonator device but the amount, explosive power and the method of ignition had to be discovered on a hit and miss basis.

Opening one packet, I removed a marble size piece and gently pressed it against the trunk of a small mangrove tree. Taking the launch controls that came with my model

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rocket, I unrolled the thirty feet of cord from around it and pushed the two alligator clips at the other end into the soft substance.

I found myself sweating profusely. I had seen the bloody, mangled hands of kids and men who had held onto Fourth of July firecrackers a fraction of a second too long. Back in Texas, as a teenager, I had once engaged in the popular Texas pastime of blowing up mailboxes along rural routes with M 80s. I suspected that this material was a might more dangerous!.

I had previously installed the four AA batteries in the launcher. Making sure the balance of the explosives were far enough away, I pushed the button.

I had placed the charge facing me instead of on the other side. Mistake on my part! The explosion blew my cap off my head. A fist size chunk of wood disintegrated. The tree shivered and fell, narrowly missing me as I dove out of the way.

It was better than cherry bombs! But the explosion could have been heard for miles! It was time to leave.

I rowed back to Sea Deuced; pleased to see no one had noticed the fireworks. Once the plastics were stowed carefully inside a box in a corner of my gun cabinet, it was time to get under way.

I had a big gun now.

Angelfish Creek was only a short distance north. It provided a well-marked channel around the northernmost tip of Largo Key. Once I had safely navigated that and the nearby coral reefs, it was deep water and safe sailing.

I punched the coordinates for the south end of Bimini into the loran. It took a few seconds to calculate the course, showing me that Bimini was 49 miles across the Gulf Stream at a heading of eighty-five degrees. The seas were not bad, this Saturday, running two to four feet. Unlike a weekday, the fishermen were out in force, probably fishing for kingfish, this early in the year. I had heard that there were some sailfish running also. I set the autopilot for ninety degrees to allow for the Gulf Stream, that wide band of warm water, twenty to forty miles wide at different times, that flows like an ocean river from the equator, north along the coast of Florida at a brisk three to five knots per hour. It is the main reason only the occasional tourist tries to row a boat from Miami to Bimini.

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I played with the throttles until I found a speed that fit the seas. My fine craft handled the seas beautifully. It would have been a little tense aboard a regular houseboat, most having low riding bows that could be easily swamped by a large wave, but mine had a high bow and cut through the waves easily.

The day was warm, the skies were blue. The rocking of the boat soothing and restful to me. I have never experienced the horrors of seasickness, never had to take the Dramamine or wear the Scopalamine patches behind my ear. To me, the sea was a joy I found much too late in my life. I had grown up landlocked in Texas and not came to Florida until I was thirty. When I got here, I adapted quickly to life on the water, trying to make up for lost time, using the words of Ernest Hemingway and John D. MacDonald as a guide.

I had walked the streets where Hemingway lived in Key West; stayed in Slip F18 at Bahia Mar, berth of the fictional Busted Flush. Now I was soon to set foot on that tiny island that had inspired Hemingway to write the Old Man and the Sea. I sailed the same waters, felt the same kinship to the sea he must have felt.

The nostalgia did not last long. Hemingway came here hunting marlin and giant tuna. The marlin had been plentiful then. Now they were scarce. The islands were filled with fishermen now where once only the hardy and brave dared to roam. I came here hunting men.

Over-fished it might have been, but fifteen miles from shore, all traces of Miami's skyline disappeared. The numerous small fishing boats had vanished over the horizon. An occasional, large sport fisher could still be seen and a large luxury yacht paced me four miles to the north, headed in a more northerly direction, probably coming from the Middle Keys and bound for Freeport. I could see one large container ship paralleling the coast about twenty miles from shore, headed north, taking advantage of the Gulf Stream in what is loosely termed the second shipping channel. Other than that I had the ocean to myself.

Once out of sight of land, the vastness of the ocean settled in on you. Man's place in the scheme of things became apparent. Our importance diminished accordingly in the vastness of the ocean. We were mice aboard our fragile, leaf like ships, where a sudden

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storm could whip the now calm ocean into a deadly, boat-breaking maelstrom, with waves twenty feet high. With all our advanced technology, we were still at the mercy of Mother Nature.

Occasionally, my loran would beep; it's cross-track alarm alerting me I was veering off course. A minute correction put me back on the proper heading. A glance at my charts confirmed I was going in the right direction, still, this being my first crossing; there was a tiny tickle of fear. What if I missed? Bimini is such a tiny island in such a large ocean. What if the charts were wrong? What if the loran was defective? This is the Bermuda Triangle after all, where planes and ships piloted by those more experienced than I have been lost!

Wasted worry!

More fishing boats came into view, first on my radar screen then into my range of vision, the radio channels sprang to life with inter-boat communications. Soon the outline of the island came into view right where my instruments said it would be. The distance to go shrank to four miles, then three and two as the island grew. Now buildings and trees were visible to the unaided eye. I scanned the shoreline but saw only beaches. Using the binoculars, I found the markers on the southern end of the beach.

Bahama's ports and channels are not as clearly marked as Florida's. Bimini consists of two islands. The northern most island contains the town and all the marinas. Bimini's harbor is protected by a ship killing coral reef that runs out from the main island due south and protects the beach of the sparsely inhabited southern island. To enter Bimini's harbor, John Guest had told me, it was necessary to line up two markers on the beach of the southern island, located near the island's tallest tree. Once the two markers were lined up like the sights on a rifle barrel, you were in the channel cut through the reef.

Twenty feet from the sparkling white beach, you turned north and followed the beach into the harbor that divides the two islands. Only then did the numerous marinas become visible.

Yachts and sailing vessels from around the world were docked at the well-maintained marinas. Names overheard on the docks stateside came back to me; Blue Water, The Big Game Club. I got on the radio and hailed the Big Game Club. The dock

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master answered, we switched to channel sixty-eight and he guided me into a slip where I was met by a dockhand that helped me tie up. It was a little tricky, the current here being stronger than most of the marinas I had docked at in the protected, inland waterways of the United States and the fact that I had no crew on board but between us we managed to get her tied up.

I had decided against a covert type of approach. In the first place, I had to check in with customs. Secondly, on an island this small, the Sea Deuced and I would stand out anyway. Third, if my prey was here, his spies would alert him of my presence. It would save me the trouble of hunting him down.

So I registered under my own name, paid for the dockage with a credit card and followed the dock master's directions across the narrow street that was the island's equivalent of a major thoroughfare, and up a set of stairs to a second story office.

A single officer manned the office. I filled out the routine paperwork truthfully and presented my new passport. When the customs officer got to the part of the form that asked if I had brought any weapons and ammunition into the Bahamas and raised an eyebrow. His voice contained the lilt of common to the natives of the islands.

"What is the purpose of your visit, Mr. Cameron?"

"Pleasure."

"Why do you have so many weapons of such destructive capacity and so much ammunition, Mr. Cameron, on a pleasure trip? Are you planning on visiting us or invading us?"

"I collect guns. I have owned these for years. I live aboard my boat. Therefore I merely keep them in my home. I have no place else to keep them. I also have scuba gear and fishing poles. There was no place provided to list those," I pointed out

"You will not need your guns here in Bimini, Mr. Cameron. See that they stay upon your boat."

"Of course," I agreed.

"We have a very peaceful island here. This is not your wild west. We welcome tourists but you wear an air of violence and purpose about you that disturbs me." He

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cocked an eye at me and suddenly became more than just another minor, featureless, black official of a minor, under-developed country.

I looked beneath the uniform and saw an intelligent, concerned public servant who took his job seriously. His nametag told me his name was Brainiard.

“Officer Brainiard,” I said, taking a giant leap of faith, relying on intuition, “I do have a purpose and I could use a friend within your government. I am looking for a woman who was kidnapped from Miami by a group of foreign nationals whose last address was a company operating out of Bimini.”

“Are you a member of the your law enforcement community?”

“I am not. I am merely a private citizen.”

“Is this not a matter for your state department to handle?”

“The wheels of government turn too slowly when a life is at stake.”

“So you have come to rescue her.” It was not a question. “What qualifies you to accomplish this?”

“I am the only one who had seen this man who is still alive.”

“These are bad men, you would have me to believe. Very dangerous, no doubt.”

“They are, sir.”

“Yet you are alive. That leads me to believe you must be a dangerous man also. Perhaps this is something that our police should handle. Perhaps I should not allow another dangerous man access to my island.”

“To deny me is to reduce her chances of remaining alive.”

“She is a white woman? These men are white also?”

“The men are black but not of these islands. The woman is from Jamaica. Her skin is light and she is beautiful by any race's standards.”

“You are in love with her?”

“We did not have the time to fall in love. We had just met before she was taken away by these men.”

“When was this?”

“Five or six days ago.”

“It took you this long to decide to come after her?”

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“I was in the hospital and unconscious for several of these days. I lost track of time.”

“These men, they are many and well organized?”

“Yes.”

“And well financed? It would be easy for them to buy loyalty and cooperation, no?”

“It would. They are black men in a black man's country.”

“Does that bother you, Mr. Cameron?”

“Only the fact they mean to harm me and my friends and possible my country. I have reason to believe they come from a country which is at war with mine.”

“I see. Now that war has intruded into my country which is at war with no one.”

“I do not seek to harm your country but I have reason to believe they are using drug runners from your country to smuggle arms into mine.”

“If these men are as professional as you paint them, you are taking quite a chance telling me this, are you not?”

“The thought occurred to me also.”

“Why then?”

“It is easier for me to trust than to live in fear of betrayal.”

“But I am black, also.”

“The leader these men follow is not. They are using their black skin to deceive and circumvent detection. They are using their skin color to gain sympathy from your people when they have done nothing to deserve it. Your people and mine have always been close. When I refer to my people, I mean Americans. Americans come in all colors. This is not a matter of race. That is why I need to trust you. If not you, someone else.”

“You speak well and convincingly, Mr. Cameron.”

The door opened and another officer entered the office. Brainiard pursed his lips and gazed at the ceiling for a few long seconds. I found myself holding my breath.

“I appreciate your honesty, Mr. Cameron. I will do some checking on your behalf.” In a lower voice that did not carry to his counterpart, he said, “If you would write down the names of the company and the men you seek, I will ask around. Perhaps I will

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see you at the Compleat Angler later tonight when I am off duty. Around eight. Be careful who you speak with until that time.”

“The Compleat Angler?”

In a louder voice, “A must for all tourists, Mr. Cameron. It was one of Hemingway's favorite places and the island's main source of alcohol and beautiful women. I'm sure you will enjoy it.”

He handed me back my passport, his expression purposely bland.

“Welcome to the Bahamas, Mr. Cameron. May your stay be productive.”