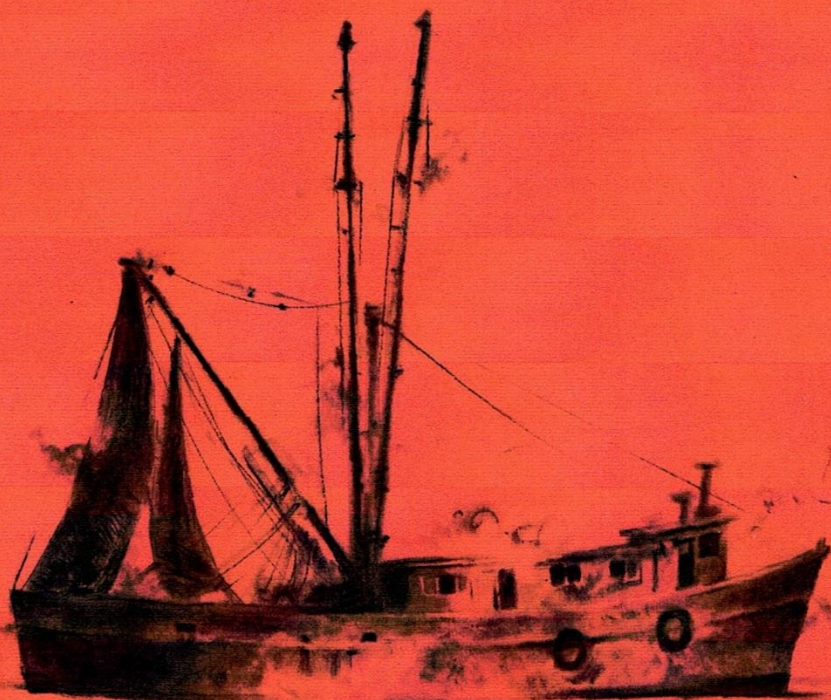


J.B. RIVARD

a novel



# DANGEROUS PARALLEL

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*J.B. RIVARD*

**Dangerous Parallel**  
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## CHAPTER 1

The dock was deserted. Everything was quiet, except for the soft clanking of sailboat shrouds in the marina across the harbor.

It was moonless and half past eleven when I climbed over the stern of *Reel Time*. I clambered up on the flying bridge and fumbled at the controls until I found the generator switch. With the generator rumbling, I hit the lights. The quartz lamps above the flying bridge blasted two white holes in the night. Squinting against the blinding dazzle of all that white fiberglass, I swung myself down onto the rear deck.

I stood there as the thirty-five footer sloshed a bit against her lines. The tide was out. Shark, I reminded myself—I've got to rig for shark. I pawed through the tackle drawers searching for the heaviest wire leaders. My jaw stretched around a giant yawn—the two hours I'd slept since hitting the bed early just weren't enough.

Time for a Pepsi. Earlier, I'd chucked the small cooler of drinks onboard. I dug around in it, popped a can top and guzzled the fizzy. My body seemed almost alive.

I laid leaders out on the deck. Damned Arnie. He's going to shut Zack and me down if he doesn't get his money. Arnie Maddick is *Reel Time*'s absent owner. He pays no attention to maintaining the craft unless it is to wheedle someone into fixing a broken part on it without getting paid. He and Zack are

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on speaking terms, barely. And, speaking of the captain who knows no equal, where the hell is Zack?

*Reel Time* is a Bertram Sport Fishing yacht. One of those you charter for a chance at hooking a big billfish, or if you crave danger, shark. I started working it for Zack Montrose three years ago, after his divorce. Zack's tall and rangy, salt and pepper hair, big ego. He and I hit it off right from the start, even though he's a couple years older than me. Of course it didn't hurt that we shared a generous dislike for Arnie.

The Pepsi tasted good. I swatted a big mosquito on my arm and climbed back onto the dock. After loading the fish boxes, I hauled four bags of ice and our frozen baitfish to the boat. I began tying leaders to the line on each of the fish rods. Exciting stuff, this life as a deck hand.

Headlights swung through the parking lot darkness. Then footsteps hit the wood of the dock. It was Zack.

"Goddamned mosquitos are dive-bombing tonight," he said. "Did you tell the charter we leave at midnight?" He climbed up to the flying bridge.

"I told him to be here at quarter to twelve."

"It's past that. Hope he's not a no-show." Zack flipped instrument switches and the green glow of video screens lit up his face. "He can kiss his deposit goodbye if he doesn't show." He started first one, then the second motor. Exhaust from the two diesels gurgled into the water at the stern. The fumes made my eyes burn.

Headlights flashed again from the parking lot. Two figures loomed out of the blackness. I offered an arm as they crossed from the dock into the boat, but neither accepted.

“I am Vincent Pragg and this is my wife, Christine,” the man said. I guessed he forgot he’d given his name yesterday when arranging the charter.

Shielding his squint from the bright lights, Vincent cupped a hand over his sweaty forehead. His dark eyes darted from me to Zack and back. In his other hand he clutched a blue canvas bag. Although it was a warm night, he wore an untucked long-sleeved shirt that didn’t conceal a belly I judged to be two six-packs past the fill mark.

I said “Hi” to his wife, a big-boned non-knockout blonde. She nodded silently, her lips curving into a slight smile. She wore baggy slacks rolled up at the ankles and a tan pullover top. She stood at the stern with one hand on the coaming as Vincent approached the cabin. Zack leaned down from the bridge and shook Vincent’s hand. “Welcome aboard *Reel Time*, folks,” he said. “I’m Zack, your skipper. The wind has laid, so it looks like smooth water for our trip. Any questions?”

Both charterers shook their heads. I threw all the lines. Vincent and Christine arranged themselves on the deck seats. Zack put *Reel Time* in gear. We pulled from the dock and headed slowly through the harbor. I asked the two charterers if they’d fished for shark before.

“No,” Vincent said.

Pointing at the blue canvas bag at Vincent’s feet, I asked if he wanted me to put his sandwiches or whatever on ice in our cooler.

“No,” he said, smiling slightly. “I’m sure they’ll be all right. They’re imperishable.” There was an accent in his pronunciation that I’d noticed yesterday, but I couldn’t identify the language.

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“When we get underway, spray usually gets everything wet back here. If you like, I’ll stow the bag in the cabin.” I bent to grab the bag, but he quickly placed his hand on it. “No, no,” he said without a smile. “It’ll be alright.”

We rounded the jetty at the harbor entrance. Zack gave the motors more throttle. A mound of foam rose from behind the stern, looking dazzling white against a black ocean. We headed for Hawk Channel. As the boat danced a bit and spray flew up, Christine frowned. She and Vincent exchanged nervous glances. The noise from the engine exhausts and the boat’s wake made conversation on the open deck difficult. I entered the cabin and motioned for Vincent to follow. He stepped inside, clutching the blue bag.

“Yes?” he said, grasping the grab rail with his other hand.

I slid the cabin door closed. “Since you’re new to shark fishing, I’ll give you some hints. “We’ll be going out about fifteen miles, and—”

“Yes, yes. I already know,” he said, swaying back and forth as the boat bounced. “This was all explained previously to me by Mr. Maddick when I paid. We are prepared.”

“You paid Maddick?” That didn’t sound right. “What did you pay for?”

“The balance. For the charter.”

Oh-oh, I thought. Zack will not be pleased with a customer paying Arnie instead of him. I squashed my empty Pepsi can, plopped onto the settee and tried to think how I’d break the news. Zack owed Arnie a bunch of money—his cut from charters and some other deals. But Zack always seemed to be able to nickel and dime his way out of paying Arnie each time. Now it looked like Arnie had found a way to bank some of Zack’s back nickels.

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Usually, charterers want to know how we plan to fish, what weight line we'll use, who will handle the baiting and gaffing (me), and so on. But these two didn't want to talk about the fishing.

Weather radio was blaring from the bridge. I leaned back and shut my eyes. I wondered about Vincent's concern over the blue bag. Also, is there such a word as "imperishable"? Together with the rumble and roar of the motors and the churn of the sea, the sounds blended into a potpourri of noise that quickly lulled me to sleep.

I awoke with a start. I was alone in the cabin and we were slowing. I slid the cabin door partly open and slipped onto the deck. Vincent and Christine were talking near the stern.

"What's up?" I shouted to Zack.

"Trying to sort out these blips," he said, speaking loudly but not averting his eyes from the radar screen. I immediately knew he was trying to locate a trawler—he wanted one dragging nets that we could fish behind. As I turned to inform the Praggs, a glint of steel made me stop.

Vincent was standing with a pistol in his right hand. It was pointed at my midsection.

"Follow my instructions and no harm will come to you." His voice was now loud. He seemed to enjoy his sudden command of everything. With his free hand he pulled a slip of paper from his trousers pocket. He handed it to me. Scrawled in pencil was the command TURN OFF RADIOS followed by GO TO and two sets of digits. "Give this to him." He gestured toward Zack with the pistol. "Bring to me the mikes from all your radios."

I clambered up to the flybridge, trying to get my sleepy brain to acknowledge that we were being hijacked. Zack was

staring at the radar screen. Without speaking, I handed the note to him.

“What the hell is this?” he said.

I grasped his upper arm and swung him a quarter turn around. He saw Vincent and the gun—now trained on the two of us. He frowned at me, then stared at the slip of paper. “Damn,” he said. He glanced again at Vincent, who shook the pistol with increasing intensity. “Okay, okay,” he shouted at Vincent. “No problem.” He looked at the paper again, reached up and turned off the radios. “Look,” he shouted at Vincent, “No radios. Radios all off.” He held the paper up and said, “We will take you wherever you want to go.”

Good, I thought. We don’t want to fight this. But as Zack reached for the throttle levers, I sensed the thought racing through the skipper’s mind: Give the engines full throttle. The boat will leap forward and dump Vincent right over the transom into the water behind the stern.

With his hand on the two throttle levers, Zack pushed them forward, but slowly. The engines barked. The boat moved to top-water, then smoothly forward.

“I suppose,” he said to me out of the side of his mouth in a voice he knew Vincent couldn’t hear, “this sonofabitch is hijacking us for some damned drug deal.” He turned the boat south, entered the numbers from the paper into the keypad of the electronics box, and activated the autopilot. Then he pressed “START” and took his hands off the wheel.

We were on our way to a featureless patch of ocean along latitude twenty-four separating the United States from the Republic of Cuba—the watery equivalent of no-man’s-land.

## CHAPTER 2

The noise from the engine and wake was loud. Vincent wouldn't overhear, so without turning my body, I said, "Where's your gun?" Zack kept a loaded revolver on the boat, hidden from the prying eyes of the Coast Guard.

"Port engine hatch. Behind the generator."

"I'll tell him you're worried we're low on oil. I'll lift the hatch, grab the gun and fill that beer belly full of lead."

Zack reached for the range switch on the radar. "You never were strong on humor, Billy." He switched the range switch to five miles. "He's holding a gun aimed at you. Before you had a chance to raise the gun, you'd be shot dead."

"Nice thought, though, about Vincent's belly. So how come, back there, you didn't jam on full throttle and toss the bum over the stern?"

Before Zach could answer, there was movement below. Vincent approached, his voice harsh and loud. "Up there, what's doing?"

Zack turned and yelled. "It's okay. Got to check the fuel." As he turned back to the dash, he glared at me, said in a low voice, "Who's running this boat, Billy? You or me?"

Oh-oh. I'd stomped on a nerve. "Okay, skipper..."

"Did you forget? About the lady? Maybe she's not in on this."

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I figured she was in on it, and she'd rightly have gone over the stern with Vincent. Quietly, I said, "What's the chance we can raise somebody by cell phone?"

"Not good, reception's weak here. With Vincent eyeballing us..."

"Yeah, but—"

"You!" Vincent hollered, waving at me with his gun, "Shut up. Keep to business!"

"Yeah, okay," I said, nodding.

Zack said, "What'd I tell you?"

I noticed the glitter in Vincent's dark eyes—reflections from the quartz lights above. To Zack I said, "The lights are right in his eyes. You could switch them off and—"

"Hell's bells!" Zack put the tip of his index finger below a blip near the top of the radar screen—a move meant to fend off Vincent's suspicions. "Don't go half-cocked, Billy. Act normal. I'll figure a way out." He punched the volume button on the weather radio. "We don't want him to start shooting. He might accidentally kill me. Then where would *you* be?"

"Mourning, of course."

His cheek lifted slightly in a weak smile.

A loud gunshot intruded. We whirled around.

Vincent's gun was raised high in the air. Smoke wafted from the barrel. "You!" he yelled, pointing at me with his gun-free hand. "Get the mikes. All mikes for radio! Down here. Bring cell phones, also!"

"Sure, okay," I yelled.

Zack yanked mike cords from the radios. While talking with minimal lip movement Zack said, "Listen. He can't sell any dope he gets from a boat out here. He has to get it to shore.

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He needs us to get him to his customers.” He handed the mikes and his cell to me. “We’re okay until we get to shore.”

That was Zack’s futile attempt to calm me. I climbed down, handed the mikes and our cells to a sour-faced Vincent. He quickly tossed them all overboard.

For the remainder of the long ride to the rendezvous, Vincent and Christine sat to starboard, opposite me across the rear deck. Vincent’s pistol hand rested on his thigh, the barrel pointed more or less at me. His focus roved in a nervous pattern: from me to Zack, forward, then back again to me. He paid no attention to his wife. Sea spray beaded up on his forehead, and he sometimes wiped it, but his grim scowl never changed. I noted his fat lower lip quivered from time to time. Christine didn’t turn to me or Zack, and I never caught her talking with Vincent. Her gaze was fixed forward, on where the boat was heading.

After a short time, I stood up and reached for one of the fishing rods.

“Sit down. You not hear me, I shoot you.”

I sat down, spread my hands out. “I was going to stow the rods inside, out of the spray.” I pointed. “These big reels are worth a lot of money...”

“No.” he said. The bags under his eyes wobbled as he shook his head. “Sit,” he commanded.

Zack reduced throttles to idle, and the boat slowed and settled. I figured we were nearing the rendezvous. I searched the darkness ahead for a vessel, but saw nothing.

Zack turned and spoke loudly to Vincent. “We’re at your numbers. There’s a vessel ahead on the radar. What do you want to do?”

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Vincent stood up with the side of the gun raised to his forehead to shield his eyes from the quartz lights. He squinted up at Zack. “Go close. I can’t see.”

Zack increased throttles. Exhausts gurgled in the wake. Vincent cocked his head to afford a better view forward. I saw an opportunity to jump him, but he still had his finger on the gun’s trigger.

We moved forward with minimal wake.

The green glow of a running light appeared off our starboard bow. Vincent saw it. “Pull to them,” he shouted.

The dim outline of a trawler loomed out of the night.

Zack turned toward it. Its slow-running diesel throbbed across the narrowing gap. Bilge water poured from a rust-rimmed hole in its hull and splashed to the sea below. Lack of a wake proved the trawler was not moving.

We closed and Zack put the motors in reverse. Our exhausts bubbled louder. We slowed severely within a yard or so of the trawler. No one was visible onboard. Nets hung in disarray from the trawler’s frames and outriggers. I expected lights to show, but none were visible. I searched for movement in the pilot house, but saw nothing.

Zack maneuvered our starboard side toward the trawler. A deck hand with a red bandana tied over top of his head appeared from behind a winch on the aft deck.

Vincent stood about a yard ahead of the stern, feet spread to counter the rocking of the boat. “You!” he said, waving the gun at me, “Get rope to him.”

I grabbed a dock line, stepped to the deck on the side of the cabin and tossed it. The red bandana man caught it. I cinched it to a cleat. He hauled it hand over hand, inching our starboard side closer.

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I turned toward Vincent. He threw his gun into the blue bag, and dropped it. He placed his thumbs to the sides of his chin and shouted something in Spanish. Christine joined him at the starboard side of our boat.

Zack disengaged the motors. *Reel Time* thumped against the trawler's starboard side.

Christine's right arm and shoulder made a powerful arc, her wrist disappearing into Vincent's belly. He exhaled like a blowing dolphin, and spun toward her. He doubled up and collapsed in a heap, both arms embracing his middle.

I dropped the rope and jumped to *Reel Time's* deck. As I steadied my feet, I saw a bearded crew-member in a gray jumpsuit appear at the trawler's rail. He pointed an AK-47 at me. I froze and raised my arms in surrender.

Christine climbed with surprising agility on *Reel Time's* hull rim and grasped the trawler's gunnel. The man in the red bandana leaned, grabbed her and helped her crawl over onto the trawler's deck. The guy with the gun continued pointing it at me.

By now lights were on in the trawler's cabin. The shouting in Spanish sounded urgent. The dock line I'd tossed went limp in the water. The bearded guy with the gun lifted its barrel and turned away from us.

Zack quickly sized up the scene. As the guy with the AK-47 headed for the trawler's cabin and the guy in the red bandana retreated, Zack flipped the quartz lights off, threw the motors in gear, and bent down to make himself less of a target. We moved forward, skimming alongside the trawler's aft hull. As we passed its stern, I saw Christine, silhouetted against the transom. She seemed to be staring at us calmly as we receded into the night.

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Once clear of the trawler, Zack jammed the throttles and *Reel Time* lurched to top water. The abrupt movement pitched me back onto my haunches.

“Get his gun!” Zack shouted.

I scrambled to gain my feet and launched toward Vincent at the stern. Then I remembered he didn’t have the gun. It’s in the blue bag, dummy!

I dove cross deck, searching and feeling for the bag. *Reel Time* churned at maximum speed, spray flying. Lack of light made it difficult to see anything. Luckily I hit the bag, reached inside and grasped the cold steel. With one knee still on the deck I pointed the gun toward Vincent. At the same time I realized the gun’s safety might prevent it from firing.

We were a good distance from the trawler now. “Gimme light,” I shouted. “Turn on the lights.”

Zack flipped the switch. The quartz lights came on. With my eyes adjusted, I saw that Vincent’s lump at the stern wasn’t moving.

I searched the gun. “I think he’s out,” I shouted, “but where the hell’s the safety?”

Zack pulled back the throttles and the boat settled to a slow cruise. He turned, glanced at Vincent, and slid down the ladder. He snatched the pistol from me and flipped the safety off.

“Here,” he said, handing the gun to me. He turned around. “Keep me covered.”

Hands ready to grapple, he approached Vincent. He nudged Vincent’s shoulder with his knee. No reaction.

He leaned down to look closely. “He’s not breathing. I don’t—”

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I came up behind. “That Christine has some kind of punch.”

With one hand Zack waved me back. “Wait a minute...” As he spoke, a thin line of bright red blood ran out along the deck from under Vincent’s form.

Zack gave me a worried glance, and I shrugged. He unfolded one of Vincent’s arms. When he lifted the second arm, a black plastic handle in the middle of a bloody patch in the center of Vincent’s shirt was visible. Zack said, “That looks like a—”

“Knife,” I said.

Zack placed the tip of his index finger below Vincent’s ear. Vincent didn’t react.

I said, “Is he alive?”

“I don’t feel anything. Could he be dead?”

Zack turned to me and glanced at the gun. “So what are you doing, holding the gun on him?”

I lowered the barrel. “Here,” I said, “you take it.”

Zack took the pistol, and turned the safety on. He went to the starboard side to check the boat’s progress. “Dead, dead, dead,” he said as he tossed the gun inside the cabin.

Reflexively, I started coiling the dock line. I dropped it and plopped onto a deck chair. My brain ached.

Zack climbed onto the flying bridge. “Shit!” he said, “no mikes! No phones! We can’t call the Coast Guard or...” His voice trailed off.

The stream of blood lengthened. I stood, climbed onto the flying bridge and fit my bottom onto the bench seat. “We got a body.”

“Thanks for the news.”

“Nobody’s going to believe this.”

“I’m not sure *I* believe it.”

Zack rested his hands on the wheel. We sat silent for several minutes. Then a smile formed on Zack’s lips. He slapped his knee with one hand and began laughing.

I gave him a serious look. “What’s so damned funny?”

“You. You, standing there, holding a gun on a dead guy.”

I considered the picture and smiled. “Who says I’m not a ‘take-charge’ guy?”

Zack entered numbers into the electronics box, and punched “Start” on the autopilot. “We’ve got a ways to go to get home. We’d better figure out how we’re going to play this.”

I got off the seat and started down the ladder. Zack said, “Where you going?”

“Just thought of something.” I thumped to the deck and grabbed Vincent’s blue bag. I clawed through the clothing inside feeling for what I’d bumped against when I grabbed the pistol. Inside a folded jacket were two packages wrapped in brown paper with big rubber bands around them. I tore open the end of one package.

I clambered one-handed onto the bridge. “Look at this.”

“What is it?” Zack turned the autopilot off and slowed the boat. I handed him the package.

He held the package, thumbed the ends of the bills through the opening I’d torn. “Hundreds—these are hundred-dollar bills! We’re rich!”

“Rich and in trouble.” Inside were at least a dozen packs of hundreds. I began counting the number of bills in a single pack.

“There must be a hundred thousand here,” Zack said.

It took me a while to complete the count of the pack. “This package must contain about a hundred-twenty thousand dollars.”

“*This* package?”

“There’s another one—below.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“Vincent’s blue bag. There’s a second package like this one in there.”

“Hell, that’s like a quarter-million dollars!”

“But Zack, we’ve also got Vincent.”

Zack grinned. “We get rich. And all you do is worry.”

“When we get back to the dock with Vincent’s body, we’ll have some worry. Like how to convince cops of the whole story—this hijacking, the rendezvous, the killing...”

“Piece of cake,” Zack said. “Even with your record.”

He referred to my detention record. As a teen, I’d served nine months for grand theft auto. “Don’t forget—I got time off for good behavior.”

Zack laughed. “That’s the part no one will ever believe.” A grin plumped his cheeks. “We dump his body over the side...we’re home free, and rich.”

“Yeah? How do we explain what happened to our charter?”

“Okay. We clean up the blood.”

“But what about the charter?”

“We took them nightclubbing in Key West and they got too drunk to return with us.”

“Come on, Zack. If Vincent’s body washes ashore with a knife hole in it, cops are going to think we didn’t show them a good time.”

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Zack frowned, and returned the power to autopilot. “We can’t go back with a dead body.” A serious look came to his eyes. “No, no, no. We got to come up with a story. Something everybody will believe.”

“Including Sheriff Flannigan?”

Zack squinted into the blackness. “Hey! I got it! Listen to this!

## CHAPTER 3

Zack outlined his story. “A go-fast catches us fifteen miles out. This Cigarette boat cuts us off and forces us to stop. A burly guy boards us, says he’s rescuing Christine.”

“Rescuing Christine?”

“From Vincent. See, it’s a love triangle. He grabs her, says, ‘Come on with me, you’re my love, you don’t belong with that S.O.B.’ But Vincent says, ‘Oh no you don’t,’ and pulls a gun. But before Vincent can aim, the burly guy—”

“Wait. Slow down. Where’s the Cigarette boat while this is happening?”

“Alongside our boat. A friend of his is driving. Let me finish!”

“Okay.”

“The burly guy rushes Vincent and stabs him. The burly guy and Christine hop onto the Cigarette and zoom off—for who knows where?”

“That’s it? That’s the story the Coast Guard and Flannigan are going to believe?”

“What do you think?”

“I think it’s about as hard to believe as the hijacking. First place, we just stop and welcome the burly guy on board *Reel Time*? Second, Christine isn’t exactly a knockout. She’s curvy as a brick, and her face cries for a lift. Does the burly guy have a vision problem?”

Zack thought. “Yeah, Christine’s not exactly a dish.”

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“And what if Sheriff Flannigan questions us separately? If we both say what really happened, the stories should be the same.”

“Yeah. I see what you mean. We’re kinda stuck.” Zack’s head shook in lazy arcs. “Stuck with the craziest story since George Bayler hooked a boat on his backcast.”

“You think Christine was Vincent’s wife?”

“Nah.” He reset the radar’s range. “The whole nasty wipe-out was a setup.”

“The trawler. Headed for Cuba?”

“A stinking, rusty tub—without hull numbers. Had to be from the far side of the twenty-fourth parallel.”

Zack was referring to the line of constant latitude that separates Cuba from the U.S. “Why would Christine—or whoever she is—want to go to Cuba?”

“Beats me. But they welcomed her aboard. Maybe she’s...” Zack chuckled. “Maybe she’s one of the Comrade’s hot mamas.”

“I bet Vincent was paid to set up the hijacking. Once she got to the rendezvous, he was just excess baggage.”

Zack pursed his lips and checked our compass heading. I figured I better tell him. “He paid Arnie yesterday.”

“What?”

“Vincent. He paid Arnie the balance of the charter.”

“Arnie got my money?”

“Yeah. Vincent said he paid Arnie.”

Zack groaned. A few long seconds later he smiled. “God bless Vincent.”

“Huh?”

“Maybe we lost the charter money, but he left a hell of a tip.”

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“Yeah...but...”

“What d’you mean, *but*?”

“That’s a lot of cash. All in hundreds.”

“Sure. Maybe the quarter-million was Vincent’s pay. For the hijacking.”

“Way too much. You and I both know guys who’d hijack the Key West Ferry for half that.”

Zack was silent.

“I’m betting it’s hot money.”

Zack shrugged. “So what?”

“If it wasn’t Vincent’s money...”

Zack’s face got all pinched. “So what?”

“Once news breaks that he’s dead, somebody will be on the lookout for all that dough.”

Zack pointed into the distance, where the outer buoy at Seguro Key became visible. “What do we care?”

“That person might be a big-time druggie or the Mafia. Or the Comrade’s enforcer...”

“So?”

“You go spending a wad of hundreds, it might be like advertising you’ve got the bundle.”

“Ah.” Zack shoved the idea aside with the palm of his hand.

We cruised on. At the head of the jetty, Zack shut down the autopilot and slowed. As he turned to parallel the jetty, he said, “All right. We split the money, park it in a bank for a couple weeks.”

“You think the Mafia or the enforcer would give up looking after two weeks?”

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“Well, maybe. That person—whoever it is—doesn’t know what happened on our boat. Maybe Christine was supposed to take it with her.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think she knew. Once she stuck that shiv in him, all she wanted to do was board that trawler. She looked easy as we pulled away.”

“Okay, smart ass.” Zack faced me. “What do you think we should do?”

“Leave the money in the bag. Don’t touch it.”

“And turn a quarter-million in to the cops? No way, Billy. Nothing doing.”

“Okay. But we better leave some of the money in the blue bag. It’ll make the TV news that Vincent left a wad of money behind—it might keep suspicion off us.”

“Great. I vote to leave ten bucks.”

I chuckled. “Sure you would. And the cops are going to bother reporting Vincent’s pocket change?”

“Okay. How about a few thousand?”

“Fifty thousand. That leaves a hundred-thousand for you, a hundred-thousand for me.”

Zack gave me a look like what was wrong with me, what was I thinking. We approached the harbor. I got busy deploying fenders and arranging dock lines.

It was still dark, not yet five a.m., when Zack backed the boat in and I tied up. The docks were deserted. Zack climbed down from the fly bridge. “Okay, I guess.” His face had a strained look, like he felt a slight pain. “Fifty it is.” He headed for the boatmen’s shack while I collected the money and Vincent’s keys and rushed to the parking lot.

After stowing the money in my truck, I put on work gloves. There was but one strange car in the parking lot, an

older blue Toyota sedan. It had to be the car Vincent and Christine arrived in. Did Vincent plan to drive it when he returned? Maybe. Maybe we were supposed to be dead by then. Yikes!

One of the keys from Vincent's bag fit the Toyota's door. In the light from the interior lamp, I checked all around, including the glove box. I found a car registration, a couple napkins with orange food residue, a warranty for tires, nothing that explained anything. Underneath the driver's seat was one of those small flyers printed cheaply on newsprint. I rolled it up and stuffed it in my hip pocket.

I popped the trunk. Spare tire, a jack, pair of cheap pliers. I closed and locked everything, then returned to the boat and returned the keys to the blue bag.

When I got to the boatmen's shack, Zack was on the phone. "...I know it sounds weird, but that's what happened. Yeah, he's dead—he's been dead two, maybe three hours. We—" He looked blankly at me while listening to the other end. "Yeah, I know. But we had no way—bastard threw our cell phones and mikes overboard." He listened for a short time, staring down, tapping with his boat shoe on the floor timbers. "Okay. We'll be here waiting." He hung the handset up. He turned to me, nodded his head toward the phone. "Deputy Devlin. He said he's gonna roust Flannigan."

"The Sheriff."

"Yeah. Got the feeling he didn't want to get him out of bed. I called the Coast Guard. And Arnie. We'll shortly have enough people here for eight-handed poker."

"They drove a Toyota two-door. Florida plates. About five years old, with a bunch of dents."

"A cheap car they could leave behind."

“I searched it.” I yanked the rolled-up paper out of my hip pocket. In the light I saw it was yellow newsprint with a masthead “Boats & Ships,” dated four days ago. “This is all I found—the car was clean.”

Zack glanced at it. “Boat news. That doesn’t tell us anything.”

“Car doesn’t match the quarter-million cash. Like the money wasn’t his.” I flipped pages to the classified section. An ad circled with blue ink attracted me. Under “Boats for Sale” it ran:

73 x 19 STEEL SHRIMP TRAWLER,  
892 Detroit Eng., 40,000 lbs capacity.  
Long range fuel & water. Call for price.

It ended with a telephone number.

Zack read over my shoulder. “Maybe Vincent decided to give up being a hijacker, buy a shrimper and join the ranks of noble, hard-working fishermen.”

Red and blue flashing lights in the parking lot interrupted. Sheriff Flannigan and Deputy Devlin climbed from the Deputy’s van and strode toward the dock. We joined them on the dock where *Reel Time* was moored.

“You Captain Montrose?” Flannigan said.

“Yeah. This here is Billy Farris, my deck hand.”

“Your boat?”

“It’s Arnie Maddick’s. I run the charters.”

“Your license?”

Zack pulled his wallet from his shorts, handed a plastic to the Sheriff.

Flannigan glanced at the Coast Guard ticket, handed it back. “Let’s see the body.”

Zack stepped into the boat, lifted the corner of the tarp we'd thrown over Vincent. There was a lot more blood under it than before.

Flannigan glanced at it and turned to Devlin. "Get an ambulance out here."

Deputy Devlin stepped away from us keying his radio.

Flannigan turned to Zack. "You said the man carried a blue bag?"

Zack nodded, went into the cabin and returned with the bag. Flannigan pulled on a pair of latex gloves he had in his pocket. Zack handed him the bag. He opened it.

Deputy Devlin approached, stowing his radio to its holder. "Ambulance on its way."

Flannigan nodded, removed items from the bag, one by one. Deputy Devlin wrote the contents in his notebook:

3 keys on ring  
5 mm hand gun, Ser. 1864758  
felt-tip pen  
1 man's shirt, white with blue  
stripes, size 36  
1 man's light gray jacket, size 40  
Approx. 500 hundred-dollar bills,  
amt. to be verified

Flannigan handed the bag to Deputy Devlin. To us he said, "You two follow me."

On the way to the Sheriff's van, Flannigan wiped sleep from his eyes and suppressed a yawn. He opened the passenger's door and snatched the mike from its holder.

"We're here at the Seguro Key dock with the crew of *Reel Time*, a sport fish." An affirmative reply crackled in a woman's

voice. Flannigan replaced the mike and turned to Zack. "I'll need to get statements from both you and Mr. Farris. Devlin?"

Deputy Devlin climbed into the driver's seat, stowed the blue bag next to him, and started the motor. Flannigan opened the sliding door. Zack and I climbed in.

Arnie's white Ford wheeled into the lot and screeched to a halt. Arnie hopped out of the driver's side without turning out the headlights. After jogging to the van breathless, he stopped at the open rear window and addressed Zack. "What the hell is this all about?"

"Like I told you on the phone," Zack said, "we got hijacked. One of the hijackers got killed."

"If you'll excuse me, sir..." Flannigan said.

"Oh," Zack said, "this here is Arnie Maddick. He owns *Reel Time*—the boat."

"Where's the dead guy?" Arnie said.

"In the boat," Zack said.

"Holy shit..." Arnie turned and strode toward the dock. Flannigan nodded to Deputy Devlin, who followed and caught up with Arnie. "Sir, you'll need to stay here." He held his hand up ahead of Arnie. "The boat is a crime scene."

Arnie stopped. "My ass." With his arms cocked, and fists on his hips, he stood as if he was ten feet tall. "That's my boat."

Devlin said, "This is an official investigation. You'll have access later, but right now..."

Flannigan, after alighting from the van, approached the two. He motioned for Zack to join. Zack got out and I followed. "Mister Maddick, I'm Sheriff Flannigan, Monroe County. We're asking you to stay right here for now. Your Captain will explain." He turned to Zack.

## Dangerous Parallel

Zack said, “The hijacker got killed, Arnie. He’s...the body’s on the boat, like I said.”

“You didn’t say the...on the boat.” Arnie turned, and ambled toward the dock. Deputy Devlin crowded him. “Now, Mr. Maddick, I’m going to have to intervene. You can’t...”

The Sheriff, Zack and I followed behind.

When Arnie reached the boat, he halted, glanced down at the lumpy pile of tarp next to the transom, and sighted the pool of blood. Deputy Devlin moved in front of Arnie to block him from stepping into the boat.

Arnie said, “Damn. Of all the...” Pink bluster drained from his face. He looked puzzled.

Zack eyed Arnie and turned to Flannigan. “Oh-oh. I think he’s gonna—”

Arnie turned toward the finger pier, stepped onto it, turned toward the water, arched over, and vomited violently. Deputy Devlin stepped to the finger pier and grasped Arnie’s shoulders from the rear. “Better sit, Sir. Don’t want you falling in.”

The smell was awful. I stepped forward, lifted the lid of our dock box, and grabbed a roll of paper towels. I handed them to Deputy Devlin. He tore off a bunch, wadded it and gave the wad to Arnie. Arnie was now bent low, almost kneeling. He coughed, and wiped his mouth and face.

“All right now,” Flannigan said, “let’s get some order here. County investigators will be here shortly. Deputy, get the keys to the boat from Mr. Maddick—or Captain Montrose. Then explain to everyone that the boat is off-limits. It’s impounded until the investigation is complete. The investigators will take care of the rest.”

A siren sounded up the road.

## Dangerous Parallel

Deputy Devlin looped his arm under Arnie's arm, helped him to stand. "You okay now?"

Arnie stood, a little wobbly. "Yeah, yeah," he said, glaring at Zack.

Zack ignored Arnie's look and handed the boat keys to Flannigan. Devlin helped Arnie sit down on our dock box. Flannigan led Zack and I toward the parking lot.

An ambulance turned into the parking lot, red and blue lights flashing, its siren silenced. Following behind was a white van and a police cruiser. The three vehicles parked in a row and men got out and began talking in the glare of the vehicles' headlights.

"I'll handle this," said Flannigan to Deputy Devlin, who'd now caught up with us. "You take the boat crew and get their statements." He handed Devlin the boat keys and headed to the group of men gathered near the three vehicles.

"Let's try this, one more time," said Deputy Devlin, opening the door of the Sheriff's van. As we climbed in, I saw Arnie Maddick, facing the glare of headlights, shuffling toward his car. He cradled the wad of paper towels in his hands in front of his chest. I nudged Zack, but he didn't follow my gaze.

## CHAPTER 4

Although it was only 6:40 a.m., Julia Cotter pulled her Honda into my dirt driveway at a fast clip, her dark hair fluttering out the lowered driver's window. She alighted, pounded on my door and announced, "All right, Billy. Up, up, up. It's your bookmobile girl. Get your best-seller, adult, young adult, and children's, compact discs, DVDs, magazines, or books-on-CD."

Unshaven, I'd just poured my first cup of coffee. I was dressed in my shorts and ratty robe. I swung the door open. She stood there tall, with a wide lipsticked grin, in cut-off shorts, flip-flops and a way-too-big long-sleeve shirt that hid all major attractions.

"Don't you look lovely," she said. "Too bad I left my camera in the car."

"To what do I owe the honor of a visit by the bookmobile at this hour?" I retreated to my chair and gestured toward the coffeepot. She nodded and sank into the other chair. I got a cup from the cupboard, filled it and set it before her at the table. I sat down and she explained.

"The Marathon library's closed for painting, so I have the day off. It got me thinking about the bookmobile that used to serve the Keys. But I couldn't wait to hear about—"

"The hijacking."

"Well—yes. The whole thing. It made this morning's TV news. Are you okay? I mean..."

“After all the questions by every agency of government, my brain is fried. Other than that, I’m more or less okay.”

“But you witnessed a murder. That’s more devastating than a simple scare.” Oscar Cotter’s daughter Julia retains the unaffected manner of her father. Hidden under that diffidence, though, is a crackerjack mind and unlimited curiosity. Contrary to Oscar’s dedication to his client’s finances as a C.P.A., Julia chose to serve the public’s literary and intellectual needs as a librarian. It doesn’t hurt that her mother Gladys’s warm congeniality seems to have softened the edges that might otherwise intimidate people like me. “The news said an ‘altercation took place’. What really happened?”

“I’ve got to shave, and...”

“Go ahead. But I’ve got a thousand questions.”

As the shaver buzzed my chin, I knew I’d have to edit my story. Julia was too honest to deal with what Zack and I were now calling “the bundle.” I’d stuffed the twenty packs of hundred-dollar bills into a trash bag and thrown it into the cab of the truck before the fuzz arrived. Now the bundle was behind my golf bag in the bedroom closet. I could only hope Julia wouldn’t be as concerned about the money as she was about the blizzard of action, the two hijackers, the trawler, but most obviously, the stabbing. Why didn’t I realize Vincent had been stabbed until after we’d escaped from the trawler? Why did Christine stab Vincent? And why didn’t that seaman with the AK-47 shoot at us?

My answers weren’t very good because, although I’d been over those details what seemed like a dozen times with the County, the State and the Feds, I didn’t fully comprehend the actions. That three-or- four-minute blur of surprise, panic and

fear that ended with our escape into the darkness left me feeling it was not real—it hadn't really happened.

When I shut the razor off, Julia had finished her coffee and now had a rough idea of the hijack story. She stood up, glancing at her watch. "I've got to go," she said. "Got to clean up, do my hair and get ready for the burial."

"Who died?"

"You didn't know? Ma Hutchins, the lady who ran the bait stand on Long Point Key."

I knew of Ma. She was up in years, lived on our Key in an ancient midget trailer. She might have been a shrewd operator, but I always thought she was slightly daffy, probably because she'd stuck the outside of her trailer with what seemed like dozens of children's plastic dolls.

Julia went to the door, paused. "She passed in her sleep, last week. I thought you knew."

"They burying her here? In 'Palm Haven'?"

"Yup. You going?"

"Not this morning. I promised I'd meet Zack. With the boat impounded, we need to figure out how to jigger the charters, see what we can save. And how to weather Arnie's bile."

"Good luck with that last one," she said, waving and hurrying to the Honda.

###

Zack's trailer is on a lot he could afford. It's a spit, surrounded on three sides by mangroves. It floods whenever there's serious rain. He says they're red mangroves, I say black. Not that it matters—Julia says there are more than eighty species of mangroves.

## Dangerous Parallel

“How come you never greeted me like a long-lost brother before?” I said, stepping over his pair of boondocking boots inside the door. I placed the black plastic bag on his settee.

“Huh.” Zack opened the bag and grinned. “It was that obvious, eh?”

“Your eyeballs are nothing but bulging bankrolls.”

“You gotta admit, those portraits of Benjamin Franklin are beautiful.” He dug into the plastic bag and began stacking the packets of money on the coffee table. “...Eighteen, nineteen, twenty. There are twenty—what a gorgeous pile!”

I grabbed a pack and began counting how many hundreds. It was easy. Each pack contained a hundred bills.

Zack wrote down my totals on a pad of paper. “Wow,” he said after I’d finished, “It’s a nice round two-hundred thousand bucks! A hundred-thousand for you and a hundred-thousand for me!”

“All in used bills.”

“Used spends as easy as new.”

“It’s all too neat and tidy, a hundred bills in each pack, twenty five packs in Vincent’s blue bag. I bet it wasn’t Vincent’s.”

Zack paused with a pack in his hand. He looked at me. “What’s your point?”

“Whoever it belongs to will be looking for it.”

“Who cares?”

“If we spend hundred-dollar bills around the village, it could be like advertising. That we’ve come into large bread.”

Zack tilted his head. “No problem. We’ll spend it in Key West, Miami, or...”

I shook my head. “I thought it over this morning. Taking this money was a dumb idea.”

“There you go again. Did anybody, even the Feds, act suspicious yesterday—I mean about the money?”

“They’ve got plenty of time.”

“Okay, forget about it for now. We’ve got to contact the next couple of charterers, tell them *Reel Time* is temporarily out of service. Jeez, I sure hope the fuzz hasn’t draped ‘crime scene’ tape all over the boat.”

###

Later, near sunset, I propped my feet onto the wicker footstool and punched Zack’s number into my phone.

He answered, “These new cell phones cost a bundle, but don’t talk a bit better. What’s on your alleged brain?”

“Speaking of bundle, I’ve thought it over and come up with a terrific idea. Bring your bundle—and stop by Ace and pick up a six-pack.”

“You buying?”

“You owe me for the charter.”

“How’m I supposed to pay you when I haven’t received a cent?”

“Don’t forget the beer.”

“What brand?”

“Don’t be cute, Zack.”

The headlights of Zack’s truck flashed through the window over the kitchen sink. I watched as he trudged to my open door with a bag in one hand, a six-pack of Coors in the other, and another six-pack of Coors under his arm. I grabbed the six-packs from him. “Nice,” I said.

“Since you claimed you had ‘a terrific idea,’ I figured I might need extra fortification.”

We sat at the kitchen table. I popped the tops of two beers, and stowed the rest in the refrigerator. “My idea is simple. If

the Sheriff or Fed fuzz get bees in their bonnets and decide we're suspicious, we can't have any of this money around."

"Really?"

"Well, suppose they come with search warrants."

"You're paranoid. But they might."

"How do we explain all that bacon?"

"I see what you mean."

"I figure the best thing is to bury it."

"I'm not keen on trying to dig up your weedy yard."

"Me neither." I stood and thumbed toward Cove Road.

"Let's grab the bags, tie them up and take a walk."

"And leave all this beer? Not a chance, Junior." Zack took the rest of the six-pack from the fridge. We tied off both plastic bags.

After checking to see that Cove Road was empty as usual, I took my short-handled shovel from the shed, and we crossed the yard, trudging to the road.

"Damn. It's black as fifty fathoms out here," Zack said. "I hope you know where you're heading."

We clomped north on the uneven gravel in the moonless night. Lights showed from Chet's windows—my nearest neighbor—a hundred yards on the other side of the one-lane road.

"This'll be easy," I said.

"Speak for yourself. I can hardly see what I'm stumbling over."

"By the time we get there, your eyes will be dark-adapted."

"Why the hell didn't you bring a flashlight?"

“You mean so people would be attracted to a bright light and wonder what the hell two people are doing down this lonely road?”

Zack groaned. “All right, but if I trip and break an ankle, you’re gonna be out of work.”

“I’m out of work already.”

“I talked to Arnie about that. He said the Sheriff told him the impound would be over in about three or four days.”

“Then we can notify the next charter.”

“Maybe tomorrow.” Zack drained his beer and crushed the can.

After we’d gone about a quarter mile, I turned off the gravel onto one of two dirt paths made by automotive wheels carved into a grassy field clear of mangroves.

“Wait a minute,” Zack said. “This is...damn, this here is the cemetery.”

“Sure. Welcome to Palm Haven. All we gotta do now is—”

Barely audible, Zack said, “I don’t like this.”

“What’re you whispering for? The dead don’t hear.”

“I don’t care much for cemeteries.” He didn’t move. “Why are you going in here?”

“I’ll show you when I find it. Follow me.”

“Just a minute.” Zack flipped a can of beer from its holder, popped it and took a gulp.

“Let’s go, but be careful. Some of these little old headstones are overgrown with weeds.” I stepped carefully along the path, looking for a mound. When it appeared, I stopped.

“You know Ma Hutchins’ Bait Stand on Long Point?”

## Dangerous Parallel

“What’re you talking about?” He took another swallow of beer.

“You probably don’t know—she died.”

“Well bless the old bat’s soul. She was a fixture down there.”

“Here,” I said, pointing at the gentle mound of dirt, “she is now.”

“Oh. This is kind of freaky.”

“She won’t mind.”

“I don’t know. I don’t like messing with the dead.”

“The dirt’s fresh. It’ll be easy to bury the bags.” I set my bag down, took Zack’s and set it beside mine. Zack handed the half-six-pack to me. I gave him the shovel, broke out a beer, popped it and took a swallow. “Ah, just the stuff for a little grave-digging.”

“If you say so.” He probed the dirt with the tip of the shovel.

“No. Down here.”

“What’s wrong with this?”

“That’s the head end. You want the foot end.”

“You’re weird. You into some kind of occult deal?”

“No. But I don’t want to risk having our stash dug up when they install Ma Hutchins’ headstone.”

“Oh, yeah.” Zack took a swig of beer, and relocated to the foot end.

We dug a hole about three feet deep, deposited the two bags and refilled the hole. I paced the distance, about eight shoe lengths north of the line of tombstones.

Zack grabbed the last of the beers from me, “Let’s get back and try some serious drinking.”

## Dangerous Parallel

“Okay.” I took a swallow from my beer. “I think we should salute Ma. She may not realize it, but she’s standing on a small fortune.”

###

The next morning, my head was a little fuzzy. I phoned Zack. It rang and followed with his recorded message. I didn’t leave a message.

I made coffee and got dressed. I burned some whole-wheat, downed it with coffee and drove to the docks. First thing I saw was yellow tape hanging from *Reel Time*. Oh, oh, I thought, Zack and Arnie will be sore about that. On the way back, I stopped at the boatmen’s shack. Inside was Arnie, paging through the newspaper.

“You seen Zack?”

“Nope,” he said, “not this morning. Did you see that gold-damned tape all over my boat?”

“Yeah. Chickenshit. They didn’t need to do that.”

He pulled the cigar from his mouth. “Have they been hassling you?”

I shook my head no. “I mean we did the rounds with them the other day, but—”

“Sheriff Flannigan or deputies hasn’t talked to you yesterday...or today?”

Something’s up with Arnie. “No. Why?”

“Never mind. I was just curious.” He jammed the cigar back between his lips, picked up the newspaper and resumed reading.

As my motor kicked over in the lot I wondered what was going on between Arnie and the Sheriff. I left and drove to Zack’s trailer.

## Dangerous Parallel

His truck was parked in the usual spot. As I walked up to the trailer, I said in a loud tone, "Bet your head hurts." I followed by beating on the door with the flat of my hand. It made loud booms. "Rise and shine," I ordered.

No sound came from inside.

Zack never walks anywhere, so it was peculiar for him to be gone with his truck at home. I jumped up to peer in the side window. The venetian blind was open, but nothing inside seemed amiss. I went back and tried the door. It was locked.

I trudged back to my pickup, thinking. I backed up, turned around, and drove back toward home.

My cell rang. I pulled off the road, stopped and punched the phone.

It was Zack. "They got me here in Key West."

"Who? Somebody's got you?"

"The Sheriff. They said I could call you."

"Good. Tell me what happened."

## CHAPTER 5

“They roused me out of bed before sunup this morning,” Zack said over the phone. “They came and took me here. Sheriff headquarters.”

“You’re under arrest?”

“They say they’re just holding me. For questioning. Can they do that?”

“Up to seventy-two hours. After that they have to charge you.”

“Damn.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“They came with two deputies and a search warrant. Turned my trailer upside down but didn’t take anything. Said I’d have to come with them for questioning.”

“What about?”

“Mostly about me and Arnie. Charters. Money. How we go round and round.”

“What’d you say?”

“That I asked Arnie to pay me our share of the charter. Because Vincent paid him.”

“This was yesterday?”

“Yeah. But Arnie, he’s hot under the collar, he had to argue. You know Arnie.”

“About how much you owe him?”

## Dangerous Parallel

“Yeah. So all red-faced, he says he’s not gonna pay me a cent...well, turns out I had to admit I owed him more than what was owed to us.”

I didn’t reply.

Zack went on. “So I gave him a couple hundred. So maybe he’d calm down.”

“You gave him two-hundred bucks?”

“On account. I shouldn’t have, I know.”

“Okay. You want me to get ‘Smiley’ for you?”

“Smiley?”

“Yeah, you know that sourpuss lawyer hangs out at the Inn, making goo-goo eyes at the desk girl?”

“Oh. Well, tell Smiley to stand by, just in case. But they haven’t broke out the rubber hoses yet. And the doughnuts here are right tasty. I’ll take my chances.”

###

The Sheriff had a murder case on his hands. He might have found out from Arnie that Zack had the money to pay the two-hundred. That money most likely came right out of Zack’s ‘bundle’ of hundred-dollar bills. And the Sheriff was possibly suspicious that there might be more than the fifty-thousand in hundreds that the Sheriff’s office had taken custody of. That would account for the search warrant. But I couldn’t say anything over the phone to Zack about any of this—the fuzz would be listening or recording.

I took the yellow flyer out of the desk and read again the pen-circled ad for the shrimp boat. The area code for the phone number was Pensacola. I punched it into my phone.

When a man’s voice answered, I said I was calling about the ad in *Boats & Ships*.

“Sorry, you’re too late,” he said. “It’s sold.”

“Oh. It seemed like just the boat I need. Seventy-three footer, steel, with a Detroit Diesel...”

“Yeah, the *Veronica B.* is a sweet one. Just been repainted. But it sold about a week ago.”

The seller sounded friendly, so I tried to engage him. “You sold the *Monica B.* to a local shrimper, I suppose...”

“It’s *Veronica* with a ‘V.’”

“Oh, *Veronica B.* A lot of construction noise there, eh?”

“You know it. They’re tearing up my street again.”

“So you sold the *Veronica B.* to a local shrimper?”

“No. The fellow wasn’t local. Pragg was his name.”

“Pragg, that’s odd, I know a guy by that name, Vincent Pragg.”

“Well, that’s him, then.”

“Hard to believe it was the same Vincent Pragg. Kind of fat, dark hair?”

“No. Must be a different Vincent Pragg. The guy I sold to was bald. Not fat, looked trim to me.”

“Where’s the boat now?”

“Can’t say. A captain and crew showed after the sale, checked everything out. The boat sailed day before yesterday.”

“Well, that’s interesting. Thanks for filling me in. What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t. It’s Briden. Captain Tom Briden.”

As I ended the call with a pleasant “Thanks, again,” it was easy to see that something very strange was going on. With Zack being held by the Sheriff, one dead Vincent Pragg on *Reel Time* and a different Vincent Pragg buying a shrimper named *Veronica B.*, it was time for me to go to Pensacola.

###

At Key West International, I caught the commute to Miami. After a couple hours layover, I jetted to Pensacola, where I rented a Chevy.

The shrimpers, a jagged jumble of outriggers, lay along the wharf. I drove the road that fronted the wharf, scouting for construction. Sure enough, barriers and cones set off a section where a backhoe was scooping chunks of asphalt into a pile. Yellow-clad workers watched while a couple of them dug next to a big pipe in the exposed sand.

I parked the car nearby and walked back to the construction area, where I found a man on the dock hunched over a net. I stopped and smiled. "Hi. I'm looking for Captain Tom Briden."

The man didn't take his eyes from his work. He pointed across the road.

"That shanty there," I said, "That's where he is?"

The man didn't look up, just nodded and grunted something I took to be "yes."

The shanty was made of rust, with sheet metal here and there holding it together. The door was cracked, so I entered. After the outdoor glare the interior seemed dark, but there was a shadowy man behind a workbench. Hairy arms jutted from his rolled-up sleeves.

"Pardon me," I said to hairy arms. "I'm looking for Captain Tom Briden."

"You found him." He smiled.

"I heard you had a shrimper for sale."

"Could've sold that boat three times over."

"It's sold then?"

"Right. Hated to let it go. But my son, he's a worthless sonofabitch. Wouldn't work with me. I mean he's always

taking off to somewhere as soon as he's a couple bucks ahead." Briden shook his head. "You can't make it shrimping with your boat tied at the dock."

"Yeah, I know. I'm in charter fishing. You say it was a honey of a boat?"

"It was a good shrimper. Super outriggers and good doors. A range of two-thousand miles. Just had the Detroit diesel rebuilt. But the *Veronica B.* is gone, sold more than a week ago."

"You sold it to one of the Captains here?"

"No. Sold it to a guy called Pragg. Clean-cut, nice guy, didn't try to knock down my price. Said the company he represented chose their boats carefully, paid the going price."

"What company was that?"

Heavy thuds issued from the road construction. Briden cupped a hand behind his ear. "Huh?"

"What company was that?"

"Uh, let's see. It's...right here." He dug under a pile of papers on the bench and pulled out a torn half-sheet. He squinted at it. "Estrella Foods, Inc."

"That sounds familiar. Is there an address?"

"It was on the check, I think. According to Pragg, their headquarters are in Miami."

"Uh-huh."

"But they took the boat—the *Veronica B.*—to Texas."

"Huh. Where in Texas?"

"Someplace—hmm. I don't recall—I just don't remember." Captain Briden gazed out at the construction, shook his head. "Terrible," he said.

"Well, thanks for the chat. I'll be off now."

“Good luck with your search. The *Veronica B.* was all repainted. Red with white trim. You won’t find a trawl that nice.”

I left and returned to the Chevy. Before opening the door, I scanned the street that dead-ended at the wharf road. There was a small tavern with a sign, NETTER HANK’S.

I hiked to the narrow, rundown storefront. Inside, the high and dented wooden bar stood at right angles to the street. There were no tables. Two men sat on stools at the rear of the bar.

The bartender was a round-faced guy with one eye that didn’t follow when he looked at you.

“You Hank?” I asked.

“Naw.” He stopped his rag in mid-wipe. “He ain’t here.”

“I’ll have a Coors.”

Lazy eye shook his head. “Sorry. We have Bud, Miller, Pabst...”

“Never mind.” I nodded toward the pair at the rear. “I’ll have what they’re drinking.” He brought me a Miller.

The pair at the back talked rowdy. I concluded they’d had several. I’d toss out a couple of random but common names, see if I could connect. “I’m looking for John, or maybe it’s Jim,” I said, aiming my voice in their direction. “Signed on to crew on the *Veronica B.*?”

The guy facing me shook his head. But the nearest of the two turned to me. “You talking ‘bout Peterson?”

I picked up my beer and moved a few stools closer. “Yeah, Peterson—signed on to the *Veronica B.*? I couldn’t remember his last name.”

He nodded. “John Peterson. That’s him. What ya wanna know? They’re gone, y’know.”

## Dangerous Parallel

“They left?” I said. “Well, we were good buddies, but he disappeared at the last minute, and...”

The guy gave a laugh, showing several missing teeth. “Bullshit, buddy, he owed you money, right?”

“Well, maybe a few bucks...”

“I seed that right away. They were in a big hurry getting that boat out’n here,” he said. “Who’re you?”

“Billy. Sometimes they call me Bad Billy.”

Missing teeth laughed again. The friend also laughed. “Badbilly,” he mimicked. “You ain’t that big. You must be a mean fucker.”

“I’ve been around. Done some time.”

Missing teeth turned on his stool until he faced me. He leaned toward me. In a low voice intended to exclude lazy eye, he said, “You know what John Peders—I mean John Peterson—told me?”

“What?”

“He said they were gonna pay him a lot of money to crew that boat because they were going to run money.” Then, more loudly, “Not shrimp, money.”

I drained my beer and ordered a round for three. “You mean drug money?”

“I mean where they take the money and clean it. Dirty money.” He frowned. “Don’t you get it?”

“Oh, yeah, I get it. Did he say where they were taking the money?”

“No. No. You don’t get it. They weren’t taking it from here. They were gonna be doing that when they got to, to wherever it was they was going.”

“Over in Texas?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Ole Point, Texas.”

Lazy eye chunked the three Millers onto the cracked formica on top of the bar. I paid him and tossed a couple of singles as a tip.

“Thanks for the brew, Badbilly,” missing teeth said.

“Yeah, thanks,” the friend said.

“No problem, You sure it was Old Point?”

“Shit, I don’t know,” missing teeth said, laughing, “something like that.” He paused, then took a big swallow of beer. “You know what he tole me?”

“No, what?”

“He said they don’t even count that shit.”

“The money, you mean?”

“Yeah. They got so much they can’t take time to count it. He said they weigh it.” The nature of this revelation stopped him in mid-swig. Very slowly, he said, “You know it’s true.”

“By the pound,” I said.

He nodded. “They bundle it up in bales. That’s what he tole me. They weigh hundreds of pounds. Thousands, maybe.”

“That’s a lot of money,” I said.

“You know it’s true,” he said, gulping down more beer.

We talked about fishing, and the Buccaneers’ football prospects. Global warming didn’t come up. I finished my beer.

“So long Badbilly,” missing teeth said as I stood to leave.

“Yeah,” the friend said.

The bartender looked at me with the good eye and waved as I pushed through the door.

It was nearly five in the p.m. I drove the Chevy back to the airport and checked it into the agency. Then I found a monitor and checked the schedules to Miami. There was about a two-hour wait. The deli place was empty. I ate one of those nine-

## Dangerous Parallel

buck sandwiches and washed it down with a ten-buck Coors.  
At least they had my brand.

## CHAPTER 6

I arrived home at ten-thirty. A piece of torn envelope stuffed in the crack fell down as I swung the door open. On it Julia had written, “Can’t find you. Call me.”

Inside I punched her number. “Hope I didn’t get you out of bed.”

“Where have you been?” She sounded peeved.

“I’ll explain. Get decent. I’m on my way over.”

Julia wore one of those long tee-shirts that doubles as pajamas and a robe. She let me in. We sat in the kitchen. “Zack called me,” she said. “Where have you been?”

“Running down a lead. Trying to free Zack.”

“What do you mean ‘free Zack?’”

“Maybe he didn’t tell you. He’s being held by the Sheriff.”

“He said he was at the Sheriff’s, but...”

“The Sheriff served a search warrant on Zack’s trailer and took him to Key West for questioning. They can hold him for seventy-two hours. After that they’ll have to charge him.”

“Wow. I didn’t expect that. Is it serious?”

“It could be.”

“He didn’t sound concerned on the phone. Just asked why you weren’t answering your phone.”

“That’s Zack for you. Told me ‘they haven’t broke out the rubber hoses.’ And they have tasty doughnuts.”

Julia smiled. “That’s Zack all right.”

“I turned my phone off so I wouldn’t get interrupted. With the fuzz closing in on Zack, I figured I had to find out why Vincent Pragg circled an ad in *Boats & Ships*.”

“*Boats & Ships*? The library subscribes to that throwaway. But—”

“Circling an ad must mean something.”

“Possibly. But how did you know Vincent circled the ad?”

“Because it was in his car. Under the seat.”

“What?” Julia held up both hands. “What were you doing in Vincent’s car?”

“Well, after we docked *Reel Time*, I took Vincent’s keys and searched it.”

She frowned. “That sounds...you think that was okay?”

“It seemed like a good idea. We were trying to figure out what the hijacking was all about.”

“But, but...did you tell the Sheriff—or the Feds?”

“No. I didn’t find anything, really, other than the *Boats & Ships*. It didn’t seem important. I just stuffed it in my pocket. Didn’t see the marked ad until later.” I told her I’d contacted the ad’s seller and met with him in Pensacola.

“Billy! You were supposed to stay in town.”

“But they may charge Zack with something. They might even accuse him of killing Vincent.”

Disbelief filled Julia’s eyes. “No. That’s silly. Zack wouldn’t kill anyone.”

“It didn’t happen. But Flannigan has Vincent’s murder on his hands. And no access to the killer—Christine is long gone. So I went to Pensacola to see if I could nail down something. Something that would tell us what this is all about.”

“What did you find out?”

## Dangerous Parallel

“Not much. Unless we can figure out how or why a different Vincent Pragg bought a shrimp boat from Captain Briden about a week ago.”

Julia frowned, shook her head. “I’m not even going to ask you to explain that. But if Zack is in danger of being charged, aren’t you in trouble too?”

“Maybe. What else did Zack say on the phone?”

“Not much. He said he wanted to talk to you about some Fed—I guess he meant FBI or something.” She began teasing the hem of her shirt with a finger and thumb. “Billy, I don’t like any of this.”

“Relax. It’ll work out somehow. Right now, we need to get some sleep.”

She looked at the clock. She glanced at the hand at her hem, and moved it to her lap. “Yeah,” she said, “maybe you’re right.”

I got up, went to the door, opened it and stepped out. Behind me were hurried steps. Julia swung around me and threw her arms around my neck. “Don’t lock me out. I need to know what’s going on. You’re very important to me.”

I felt a little guilt for not telling Julia about the money. But I couldn’t put her at risk by making her a party to larceny. “I’ll go to the Sheriff Headquarters tomorrow. Talk to Zack.” I smiled, then lied, “I’ll keep you in the loop.”

###

I slept deeply till seven, and woke hungry. I scrambled four eggs and topped them with industrial-strength salsa. With two slices of toast and lots of hot coffee I was ready for the world.

Before nine, I was on Stock Island. I drove past Sunset Marina, parked and found a desk in the Ad building. I told the

receptionist with the tight coiffure who I was and who I wanted to see.

“Mr. Montrose is in Detention, is he?” She pulled the pencil out of her hair, rested it next to the keyboard and consulted her computer monitor.

“My information is incomplete,” I said. “He’s likely in the Royal Suite, if there is one.”

“Heh,” she said, smothering a smile. “I’ll be right back.” She disappeared behind a door. Two minutes later, a tall rangy black guy in a gray suit came out with her.

“You’re Billy Farris?” he said to me.

“Uh-huh.”

“Could I see your I.D.?”

I gave him my driver’s license. He studied it and smiled. “I’m Mark.” He extended his hand. “Mark Eppington, FBI. I wonder if you’d mind taking a couple minutes to talk to me.”

“I’ve come down here to see Zack Montrose.”

“Sure thing,” he said, grasping my hand and shaking it. “I’m sure all that will be arranged. But what do you say we just step over to the conference room and chat while you’re waiting?”

“Okay. I guess.” I gave the woman with the tight hair a questioning look. She smiled and nodded to me. “I’ll be taking care of your request, Sir.”

Eppington picked up a tan valise. We entered a windowless room, brightly lit, with a table and several chairs. A blackboard and a calendar hung on one wall with a picture of a clipper ship on the adjacent wall.

“I should explain a bit,” Eppington said as we took chairs across from each other. He pulled on his small chin beard. “I’m

new to this investigation, but I understand you were on the boat with Mr. Montrose when it was hijacked. Is that right?"

"Uh-huh." I noticed his tie was loosened.

"Hijacking a U.S. boat on the high seas most probably constitutes a federal crime. So we're anxious to learn all we can of the details. You follow?"

I nodded.

Eppington shed his suit jacket. The shirt cuffs of his dress shirt were unbuttoned. He dug into his valise, pulled out a sheaf of papers and a small electronic device. "Mr. Montrose has been very helpful. He's provided me with a concise description of the sequence of events. Would you mind doing the same?"

"I've already signed several written statements that tell everything I know."

"You bet. I've got copies right here. As well as your arrest and incarceration records. But it would be very helpful to me if you'd repeat your experience during the hijacking while I record it. I know it's an imposition, but I need that recording."

Eppington was going out of his way to be deferential while also being sly. He knew I was familiar with the law, that legally I didn't owe him an interview. But I was desperate to see Zack and find out what was happening.

"I guess so...okay," I said. "Soon I'll have this story so pat you can set it to music."

###

After we'd finished, Eppington led me down the hall to the front desk. The receptionist with the tight hair sat behind her desk. Standing in front was Zack and a uniformed officer. The receptionist saw us, rose quickly and clicked her high heels across the floor to meet us. "Great news, Sir," she said to me.

“Mr. Montrose has been released. Officer Borland is hoping you’ll transport him back to Seguro Key. Otherwise...”

“That’s fine,” I said, and we continued to the desk with her.

Zack recognized me as we approached. “You visiting old hangouts, Billy? Or are you volunteering to take my place?”

“Neither,” I said, smirking. “Did you eat up all the free doughnuts?”

He waved papers he gripped in one hand. “I hope you brought plenty of cash. I got my walking papers and you’re buying.”

Eppington looked at Zack and smiled. “Thank you on behalf of the Bureau, Zack. I hope your stay here hasn’t been too taxing.” He withdrew business cards from his shirt pocket and handed one to each of us. “I’d like to stay in touch with you and Billy.”

“Strap on your water wings,” Zack said. “We may be several miles offshore.”

I frowned at Zack. “Do you know something I don’t?”

“Always, Junior, always. *Reel Time* is no longer on impound.”

Officer Borland nodded to Zack. “I’ll be leaving you now, Mr. Montrose. Goodbye and good luck. Just be sure to stick around where the Sheriff can contact you when you’re not on the water.”

Zack nodded and the officer strode off.

“Come on Zack,” I said. “Let’s blow this place.” We went out and down the sidewalk. As soon as we stepped onto the parking lot, I stopped.

Zack said, “What’s the matter?”

“I’m sure they pumped you. But you didn’t—”

“You don’t think I was about to tell them anything...?”

“You didn’t let on about the money?”

He smiled and started forward. “Nothing, Billy. Not a damned word.”

We hopped into my truck and drove silently to the Overseas Highway. I stopped at the first bar we came to.

“Wow,” Zack said after a long swallow of beer, “seems like a hundred years since I had a cold one.”

“Flannigan’s hospitality didn’t include libations?”

“Not a bad place if your thing is sweaty armpits, homeless drunks, and three-day-old coffee.”

“It wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t paid your way.”

Zack froze with his beer in mid-hoist. “What’re you talking about?”

“The two hundred you paid Arnie.”

“So?”

The waitress came by to see if we were okay. After she went away, I lowered my voice and said, “I found out Arnie blabbed to Flannigan. Flannigan knows Vincent paid Arnie, not you, for the charter. Flannigan took charge of Vincent’s fifty thousand. That’s five-hundred Ben Franklins.”

Zack whispered, “So what?”

“You gave Arnie two Ben Franklins. Two Ben Franklins from your bundle.”

“Well, I owed him, so...”

“Yeah. But Flannigan put two and two together and got four. He figured those two bills came from Vincent’s bag. That you left the fifty-thousand in Vincent’s bag to throw them off. That there was a bundle of cash in your trailer. That’s what gave him probable cause for the search warrant.”

Zack set his beer onto the table. “Damn.”

## Dangerous Parallel

I continued, softly. “Fortunately, the cash wasn’t at your place. I think Flannigan figured he could sweat something out of you if he held you for questioning. That’s why you ended up being held here in Key West.”

“Damn. Sounds like that’s what happened. What’ll we do now?”

“We can’t touch the money. We have to leave it where it is. But we’d better find out what’s with Estrella Foods, Inc. of Miami before Flannigan decides to search my place.”

“Estrella Foods? Miami? What the hell are you talking about?”

## CHAPTER 7

The rain came in sheets as Zach drove by Sunset Point. Key Largo would be next.

“The way it’s coming down, this may not be a very smart idea,” Zack said.

“You never know. These squalls can be gone in twenty minutes.”

We were headed for central Miami. I’d filled Zack in on my trip to Pensacola. He wanted to investigate Estrella Foods too, but he worried. “What we gonna do when we get there?”

“I don’t know. But if the operation is as phony as I think, we should be able to figure out something.”

It was close to eleven p.m. and Miami’s streets were still wet, but the rain had stopped. After locating the Estrella building, we drove around. Close to the local switch yard we found a cantina that was open. There were three people at the bar in the tiny place, but all four of the tables were empty. Zack sighted the bosomy barkeep and said, “Let’s take a table.”

“How far is it?” I said.

“You mean to Estrella?”

“What else?”

The bartender approached and asked what we’d like. We asked for Coors, but she said they didn’t carry that. Zack smiled and said, “Just bring us a couple of Budweisers.” She returned to the bar.

“Okay. How far?” I said.

“Wow,” he said, “how about those twins!”

“Okay, Zack. Now, how far?”

“Mmm. Maybe four or five blocks. Why?”

“We’ll leave the truck and walk.”

“What if it starts pouring down again?”

“We’ll get wet.”

It was after midnight when we left the cantina—and the ‘twins.’ We traipsed about a quarter mile through a commercial area before reaching the location.

A double set of railroad tracks crossed the concrete street at a sharp angle. Past the railroad warning sign and signal lights was the flat-roofed building. The painted ESTRELLA FOODS INC. on its stucco front wall was slightly visible in the dark. No lights shown inside. No people were around at this time of night and the street was empty of vehicle traffic.

Across the street was a sand and gravel yard with a conveyer belt that angled up to a steel tower with floodlights on top. Zack and I studied our target standing in the shadow of the yard’s graffiti-covered wall. A car horn sounded in the distance.

Zack turned to me. “This neighborhood lacks a lot.”

“Affluence,” I said.

A paved parking area for three cars fronted the tan building. Some stucco was missing above a single roll-up truck door. Two windows with bars and awnings, and a narrow entrance door with the street number above it completed the front of the building.

The side of the building visible to us was blank, decorated with red and black graffiti. We crossed the road and the tracks and rounded the corner to the rear of the building.

The rear wall contained a plain steel door that lacked a knob or a handle. Opposite was a weedy stretch with a few trees, power poles and a cell tower. Half a block away were some shabby outbuildings and a sheet metal shed with a smokestack.

Zack pointed to a metal trash bin that loomed in the darkness. "Not much to do back here unless you like the sound of piss on metal."

"You would think of that." I glanced up and noticed a single, narrow window, about a yard wide, high on the wall. "How about boosting me up so I can look inside?"

Zack interlaced the fingers of his hands and locked them tightly together. He stooped, and I stepped into his cupped hands. He lifted me, grunting.

"Jeez, Billy, you gotta lay off the cheese and beer."

I peered, trying to see through the window, but it was too dirty. The metal frame was rusty and hinged at the top. The latch at the bottom appeared to be unfastened. I pulled and lifted. The rusty hinges squeaked.

"Higher," I instructed Zack.

"Ugh."

"Okay," I said. Barely gripping the inside wall, I wriggled a leg up and through, and was able to place a foot on an interior ledge. When I lowered the other leg, I found myself standing, not on a ledge, but on a workbench. I eased myself off onto the concrete floor.

It was very dark inside. The main interior room seemed to be fitted as a warehouse with a high ceiling and rows of shelving. The shelving held boxes, sacks and other containers.

An unoccupied truck bay next to the shelving led to the front roll-up door.

At the front on the opposite side was an enclosure with a lowered ceiling. Entry to it was through a closed personnel door. Around the door and through several cracks in the walls, slivers of light from the front filtered into the warehouse section.

I groped my way to the plain steel door in the rear wall, lifted its bar, and let Zack inside. In the light that shown through two small windows in the roll-up door, we read the labels on the boxes and containers on the shelves. "Canned tuna fish, whole wheat flour, iodized salt," I read aloud.

Zack said, "What we have here is basic grub."

"How do we know?" I said. I searched, and found a box that had been slit with a box cutter. I peered inside.

Zack came closer. "What's inside?"

"Bottles of salad dressing. Forty-eight bottles of Spicy-Italian."

"Not exactly suspicious. Unless you're a Creamy Ranch person."

We made our way toward the front. A fork lift was parked at the rear of the loading space. Oil spots on the floor marked the space where a truck probably parked.

"Where's their truck?" Zack said.

"I wonder. Maybe it's out for repair."

Near the door to the enclosure were several big boxes. I tried the door and entered the enclosure. Low-level light illuminated the interior through the two windows at the front. It came from the tower lights at the sand & gravel yard across the tracks.

Inside were two desks with computers, one with a copier-fax machine. In the corner was a freestanding copier. A small safe, several chairs, a water cooler and two file cabinets, both

locked, completed the office. The door to the street was at the front of the enclosure.

I shrugged. "I don't get it."

Zack said. "If only you had your Spiderman code ring..."

As Zack spoke, headlights flashed on the street outside.

We retreated to the warehouse section, closing the enclosure door behind us. I moved quickly to the small window in the big roll-up door. "It's coming here. To the parking lot!" I continued looking long enough to identify a large truck with 'Estrella Foods, Inc.' on its side pulling into the lot.

Zack and I hid behind the large boxes outside the enclosure. Light flared across the interior from the truck's headlights, then dimmed. Loud engine noise came closer and abruptly quit. Headlights went dark. A vehicle door slammed.

Rattles, probably from unlocking the front door, sounded. The door squeaked open and someone entered. The door closed. Fluorescent lights in the enclosure's ceiling flickered on, spraying tiny splinters of light from cracks and spaces around the enclosure's door onto the concrete floor of the warehouse. Intermittent shuffling noises suggested the occupant was moving about or working a keyboard.

Zack peered over the top of his box. He stretched his neck and cocked his head trying to see through one of the cracks. He shook his head, signaling he couldn't see anything.

Clicking noises issued. Then a man's voice: "I am here. Yes." Pause. "Yes, yes, I understand. Alright, goodbye."

I silently imitated talking on a phone. Zack nodded agreement.

We waited, scarcely breathing. Occasionally a new noise would emerge from the enclosure as the person moved or

changed position. We did not know what to expect. Tens of minutes passed, slowly.

Engine sounds alerted us. Light flared across the interior from headlights again, then dimmed. Softer engine noise came closer and abruptly quit. Headlights went dark. A thud sounded, an auto door being closed.

A brief knock on the door followed. The person inside shuffled, then the front door opened.

The man's voice said, "I'm glad you came."

"I am a busy man, Enrique." The second man's voice was higher, and tense. "I hope this is not serious."

"Please sit down, Khan."

Scraping sounds issued as the men moved chairs.

"It's the vendors," Enrique said.

"The vendors," Khan said, without emotion.

Click, click went a cigarette lighter, followed by a whoosh as cigarette smoke was exhaled. More shuffling sounds of feet being repositioned followed.

"They want nine-hundred thousand more," Enrique said.

"Nine-hundred thousand?"

"Yes. Nine-hundred-thousand, U.S., more."

"Snake bellies!" Khan exclaimed. "They have already been paid!"

"I understand. But—"

"They were paid the agreed amount!" The sole of a shoe whacked on the concrete.

"I know," Enrique said.

"The Council will not tolerate. This deal was three million U.S. dollars, no more."

Zack turned to me in the dim light and gave me what I took to be a wide-eyed look. By now I could smell cigarette

smoke filtering out of the enclosure. Rhythmic tapping of fingernails on a desk followed.

Enrique said, "The vendors, they think the Council will pay more."

"It is blackmail, but I have seen that before. I warned everyone about these snake bellies." A hand slapped the top of a desk. "They have become too cocky. They do not think it is blackmail, but it is exactly blackmail."

"There seems to be little choice," Enrique said. "The vendors, they have what the customer wants."

"I know. I know." Khan said in a tired voice.

The conversation ceased. There were shuffling sounds, like a person pacing the floor.

Finally, Khan said, "They think the Council has vast resources. Everyone thinks the Council has unlimited resources." A chair moved slightly.

"I know," Enrique replied. "The vendors—"

"The vendors will come to understand," Khan said, "the fate of blackmailers is to live a long life without hands."

"I shall be happy to inform them," Enrique said.

"Nine-hundred-thousand," Khan said, slapping the desk again. "Yes, they are very sure of themselves."

After a long pause, Enrique said, "They want it the same way."

"Transferred to the Cayman Island account?"

"Yes. They say they will make delivery—to the ranch—only when the transfer is electronically verified."

"These snake-bellies do not lack for cleverness."

"Well?"

“The problem is schedule,” Khan said. “We cannot meet our schedule if the vendors fail to complete the transaction on time.”

After a long pause, a chair scraped concrete. Khan sighed. “We will be forced to authorize the added payment. The Council will have to agree.”

“I understand,” Enrique said.

“Perhaps the customer will contribute.”

“That would help.”

“Tell the vendors to watch their account. I will let you know when the transaction is accomplished.”

“Yes,” Enrique said.

“Tell the snake-bellies the Council will not endure more blackmail. Further blackmail will be accompanied by excruciating pain.” A chair scraped on concrete.

“I’ll tell them,” Enrique said. “Now I must also tell you the money deliveries here are not working out.”

“The Estrella payments?”

“Yes. Sometimes it comes on Monday, sometimes Thursday, even Saturday,” Enrique said. “This is unsatisfactory, I have banking—you know—we are running a business.”

“I transfer it to you as I receive it.”

“And I need five-thousand more,” Enrique said. “This is necessary to keep the operation going. I have employees, payroll to meet.”

“You are like a mosquito, Enrique. A bite here, an itch there. It is annoying.”

“I am not like the vendors, Khan. You can depend on that.”

## Dangerous Parallel

“All right, all right,” Khan said, exasperated. “I’ll see to it.”

“And the delivery...,” Enrique said.

“And the delivery. yes.” Chair scrapes again followed by footsteps. “The Council will be very unhappy.”

“You will get back to me, Khan?”

“I will get back to you.”

The front door opened and closed. A car motor started, headlights came on. Shuffling sounds issued from the enclosure. The fluorescent lights went dark. The front door opened and closed again, followed by sounds of a deadbolt sliding home.

## CHAPTER 8

I moved cautiously from behind the boxes. Zack did the same. We listened as Enrique started the truck's motor. Its headlights came on bright, then faded as it moved away.

I sprinted to the roll-up door and looked out the window. The red glow of the truck's taillights disappeared down the street.

"Wow!" I said.

We reentered the office enclosure. Zack said, "What now?"

"Just a minute." A small slip of paper on one of the desks captured my attention. "This wasn't here before." I grasped it, held it so light from a window hit it. "There's a telephone number on it." I stuck it in my pocket.

Zack was at the front door. "How're we getting out of here? That guy used a key. If we leave by this door, it'll be unlocked."

"Hmm. The steel door at the rear—but that can only be latched with that bar inside."

We went from the enclosure to the truck bay, and the big roll-up door. Two electric push buttons next to the door controlled it. When down, it latched with spring-loaded latches.

I pushed the "Up" button. The motor whined and the door moved up. With the door up about six feet, Zack stepped outside.

I pushed the “Down” button, and dashed after him. The door powered down and latched.

There was no foot or vehicle traffic. We strode back to where we’d parked the truck. Filling our lungs with great breaths of cool night air, we were excited—and confused—by what we’d witnessed.

“Okay, Genius” Zack said, as he started the truck and we pulled from the parking space. “Explain all that.”

“It’d be easier explaining ice hockey to a Zulu.”

Our headlights picked out the reflective paint on the green sign. Arrows pointed to SOUTH DADE EXPRESSWAY 1/2 MILE.

Zack was silent. Finally he said, “Let’s give it up.”

“What?”

“This whole business. Chasing clues, kidding ourselves. We don’t—”

“Wait a minute. You want us to forget what happened on *Reel Time*? That we’re witnesses to a hijacking and a murder?”

“No. I’m talking about chasing around playing detective. Let the fuzz do that.”

“Sure. And what if they decide they don’t believe us?”

Zack didn’t reply. We entered the Expressway and he increased speed.

I said, “We have money that doesn’t belong to us. There probably is somebody out there who desperately wants to know where that two-hundred thousand went.”

Zack briefly glared at me. “Listen. That’s chicken feed to these guys—they’re talking millions. And that guy Khan, he’s scary. Who are all these others—the ‘Council,’ the ‘vendors’? We don’t have any idea what’s going on.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Ask yourself,” he said, “are we any closer to knowing why Vincent was killed? What he was doing with all that money? Who Christine was or is?” Zack gestured with hands off the steering wheel, palms up.

“We know somebody posing as Vincent bought a shrimp boat for Estrella Foods...”

“Okay, but—”

“...and now we know Estrella Foods is as phony as a weight-loss diet.”

“With that info and ten bucks, you can buy a six-pack.”

On the northbound lanes of the highway, an eighteen-wheeler with an orange and white trailer flashed by.

“It’s all part of a pattern, Zack. We just can’t see the pattern yet, that’s all.”

Zack glanced from the road to me. “While you’re looking for a pattern, we’re getting deeper and deeper.”

“The key seems to be the so-called Council.”

“Got to be the mob—Mafia, maybe.”

“Khan didn’t have the right accent.”

“Since when are you an expert on Sicilian accents?”

“I mean, he sounded Indian.”

Zack made whooping sounds, moving the palm of his hand in and out in front of his mouth.

“No,” I said, “not that kind of Indian. *India* Indian.”

Zack laughed at his joke, and slapped the steering wheel with the palms of both hands.

“Almost four-million bucks,” I said, “for delivery to a ranch...”

“Maybe a race horse?”

“Or maybe just plain horse, meaning heroin,” I said.

We fell quiet. Lights from a convenience store/gas station slipped behind us and disappeared. Another hour and we'd reach home, both of us dog tired.

The lights of Key Largo lit our path. Black and white movie images of Humphrey Bogart and Edward G. Robinson flickered through my mind. The plot of the movie eluded me, something about a hurricane—Bogey—was he a boat guy?

I reached in my pocket and pulled out the slip of paper I'd taken from the desk. "I'm going to call this tomorrow, and see who answers—maybe we'll learn something."

"Good luck with that, Junior," Zack said. "If Khan answers, tell him you know two break-in artists who—for the right price—can be bought."

###

The funeral mass was over. I watched in front of St. Anne's as the casket was loaded into the gray hearse, and the family, a man, a woman, and two boys, was escorted to a waiting limousine directly behind. A couple of funeral parlor types in dark suits scurried, and soon the small motorcade drove off.

At graveside the two boys, flanked by the man and woman, faced the side of the casket as the attendants arranged it on the lift. A few other mourners stood at the rear and on the sides, further behind. Shaded by a green awning, the priest at the head of the casket read aloud. I was parked too far away to hear.

In my rear-view mirror I located a fancy white Cadillac. I had watched it drive into the cemetery and park. Inside were three men, two in front, and one in back. They never left the car.

The announcement had caught me unprepared, and I had barely made it to the church at the end of the service. I pulled

the Miami Herald from behind the seat and reread the obituary. Survivors were two sons, and an older brother. No mention of a wife, but the brother is married. The woman at the grave must, I concluded, be the brother's wife.

The priest waved a silver wand at the casket, and read some more from his book.

The three men in the Cadillac hadn't moved, but a blue Ford Bronco with a man driving came late to our part of the cemetery. He slowed and parked at the rear of the line of parked cars.

The priest stepped back one step, and the attendants began cranking the casket into the ground. The mourners stood as stiff as the nearby tombstones.

The man in the Bronco didn't leave his car. The three in the Cadillac didn't move either.

The mourners drifted away from the burial site and returned to their cars. Only the family remained. I got out of my pickup and approached the man next to the grave.

"Pardon me, Mr. Pragg...my sympathies to you and the family." Eddie Pragg didn't look at all like Vincent, but was heavysset with white hair. He looked at me. "Sorry. I know you?"

"I knew Vincent. I'd like to talk to you."

"Is owing you money." He sounded as though he expected it.

"No. There's an insurance matter I'd like to discuss with you."

"Eh? Please..."

"I'd like to meet with you later today—we can discuss it."

Eddie's wife approached, took his arm in hers and glared at me.

## Dangerous Parallel

Eddie said, "Already I talked lots to police. Are you cop?"

"No. But believe me, it's important. It won't take fifteen minutes,"

The two boys went to the limo. Eddie's wife tugged at his arm. "We'd better go."

"No," he said to her. He looked at me and plucked a business card from his pocket. "Is card. I there this afternoon."

"My sympathies," I said, nodding.

Eddie and his wife turned and went to the limo. I went to my pickup. As I climbed in, the fancy Cadillac pulled out and drove away. The Bronco had not moved. I started my pickup and turned onto the cemetery road and drove out. When I turned left outside the cemetery and headed south, I glimpsed the Ford Bronco in my mirrors.

It figured. Even in death, Vincent commanded interest.

When I caught the ramp to the Airport Expressway, the Bronco followed, though maintaining a distance between us.

I drove the speed limit and turned onto the North-South Expressway leading to downtown. The Bronco followed. I guessed the three men in the Cadillac had set the Bronco on my tail.

When I reached downtown, I headed for the nearest parking garage. At the entrance I purchased a ticket, and drove round and round on the concrete ramps, rising from lower levels to upper levels. At the level marked "5th Level," many parking slots were empty. I pulled in, parked, and got out.

The Bronco drove past, the driver staring straight ahead.

As I crossed to the elevator, I saw the Bronco pulling to a stop in a parking slot.

When the elevator door opened, I entered and punched "2nd Level." The door closed and the elevator took me down.

I exited that elevator and sprinted across and down the ramp to a different elevator. Inside that elevator, I punched the “5th Level” button.

When I arrived at the 5th level and the door opened, no one was in sight. I exited the elevator, sighted my pickup and the parked Bronco. I ran to my pickup, backed out of the slot and drove down the ramp marked “EXIT.”

At the outlet, I slipped my ticket in the slot and the barrier lifted. I burned rubber turning right onto the street. As I allowed the steering wheel to straighten, I saw the Bronco driver. He was standing on the sidewalk. He stared at me without expression as I waved and passed by.

After driving a few minutes, I pulled into a drive-in that advertised “Fire Burrito with Chiles and Jalapeno.” It sounded spicy enough to etch its way to my ankles. After finishing the burrito, I reviewed Eddie’s card. In nice printing it read, “Accuracy Sheet Metal, Eddie Pragg, Pres.”

It was two-thirty when I parked in front of an older concrete-block building that had been stuccoed over. Inside was a tiny office with a bleached-blond secretary. When I asked for Eddie Pragg, she vanished through a door into a shop area.

Shortly, the secretary and Eddie Pragg emerged from the same door. He wore working clothes rather than the suit he’d worn at the cemetery. “For what did you want to see me about?”

I glanced at the secretary, rubbed my chin. “Uh, maybe you could show me your shop operation.”

Eddie got the idea that I didn’t want to talk with the secretary present. “Yes. Follow me.”

We entered the shop where several workers were hammering, cutting and riveting metal ducting. To Eddie I said, "I'm Lou Morgan, with the Hawley Agency. Maritime Insurance. I'm trying to find out more about Vincent's death and the boat hijacking. Can you help me?"

"All my life I've work hard. I was first here. I saved, bought a small shop. We worked hard and I'm able for to pay for Vince's—his family's way—out of Cuba." He paused then looked up at the fluorescent lights. "Is lazy, he expects everything right now." He waved a hand. "He went wrong way."

"I understand. You're raising his boys?"

"Me and my wife been raising them since Vince's wife goes away."

"I have a question about Vincent's activities."

Eddie motioned for me to follow him as he went to a slightly quieter area.

I said, "Did you ever see Vincent around a medium height man, slim, with a completely bald head?"

"Carlos? Sure, I'm used to see him. Why?"

"I'm trying to find this man, Carlos. Is that his first name?"

Eddie shrugged. "First name, last name. Who knows? They just call him Carlos. He's some kind of big man in little Cuba." Eddie grabbed a dirty rag from the nearest workbench.

"He's powerful?"

"Understand, I don't know." He wiped oily soil from his hands. "The people is saying he's got money. And connections. I believe Vince works some time for him."

"Could he have been behind Vincent's killing?"

"Couldn't say. I hope not."

“Well, that’s helpful. Thanks a lot.” Eddie nodded and led me back to the office. I said, “And again, my sympathies.”

“You have—card? A business card?”

I shook my head. “The Agency doesn’t want their investigators bothered by calls. Sorry, no business card. But thanks for the information.”

I drove a short distance, found a parking lot and pulled in. In my pocket was the slip of paper I’d taken from Estrella Foods. I called the number on the slip of paper. It rang twice and a female voice answered. “Southeastern Independent Bank, Loan Department,” she said. “How may I help you?”

“Where are you located?”

“On the corner of Broward Boulevard and Timothy in Ft. Lauderdale. You can’t miss us.”

I guessed Khan was a surname. “Is there a Mr. Khan at this number?”

“Yes, but he’s not available right now. May I have him contact you?”

“No, but thanks anyway.” I hung up.

Could the Khan at Estrella Foods be the same Khan working in the loan office of a Ft. Lauderdale bank? It didn’t make sense. I drove the thirty miles to Fort Lauderdale.

Southeastern Independent Bank was the ground floor of a five-story, squared-off concrete mushroom. The stem had three-story-high pilasters with palm trees planted too close so they all leaned outward, like bent old men. Fancy windows suggested the upper floors paid the rent.

I parked in the lot and entered. The lobby was open—an ATM blinked at me in the corner—but the interior doors to the bank itself were locked. Banking hours posted on a door showed I’d arrived after banking hours.

## Dangerous Parallel

If Khan was indeed employed by this bank, I'd have to find out later.

## CHAPTER 9

It was Friday, and we had run an eight-hour day charter almost due east from Seguro Key. The two men and a boy of fourteen got sunburned, seasick, and fish. We'd been so busy I'd only briefly filled Zack in on Vincent's funeral, the tail and my visit with Eddie Pragg.

When we returned to the dock, I hung the bigger fish, some kings and mahi. The charter took pictures of themselves and the fish, with *Reel Time* as backdrop.

While I was hosing salt spray from the boat and the fish blood from the deck, Arnie Maddick drove into the lot. He was soon in deep conversation with Zack. I knew what that was about: money. After a time they trudged to the boatmen's shack and went inside. I was not finished wringing out all our towels when Zack left the shack, went to the parking lot and drove away.

After I'd finished all my chores, I drove to the Reef. Zack was inside.

Zack lowered his beer. "Did they tip?"

"Yeah, but not enough."

Looking at the ceiling, he nodded. "Good thing you're rich."

I just looked at him. The barmaid brought me a frosted mug of beer.

Zack leaned forward and quietly said, “Who’s this guy Carlos?”

I lowered my voice. “I can’t prove it, but I think he’s the guy who bought the shrimper in Pensacola. The descriptions match. And it might have been Carlos’s boys that called in the tail at Vincent’s funeral. Eddie Pragg says Carlos is a big fish in Miami’s little Cuba.”

“If so, you got the wrong species. How about a big gator?”

I threw Zack a flyer. “Could Carlos have been Christine—in disguise?”

“That’d make him Vincent’s killer.” He rubbed his chin, like maybe rubbing would make the answer easier. “Why would he do that?”

I shrugged. “Don’t they always say thieves fall out?”

Zack shook his head. “Naw. If they were on the outs, they’d never show up together for a fishing charter. And if Carlos is such a big gun in Miami, why would he arrange to sail to Cuba on a rusty bucket like that trawler?”

I shrugged. The barmaid renewed the pretzels.

Zack gave the barmaid his ‘come hither’ smile. “Thank you. I’ll check back later for the free steak and fries.”

I sighed.

We emerged into the sunlight outside, squinting. Zack said, “Maybe Carlos’s boys had you followed because they thought you were a cop.”

“Possible. But in real life I’m just an underpaid deck hand.”

We trudged to my pickup. I got in and slammed the door. Zack leaned his hands against it. “Speaking of moolah, why don’t we do some ‘midnight mining’ tonight?”

“Not a good idea, Zack. We’d be conspicuous spending hundred-dollar bills in the Keys.”

Zack dropped his hands from the door. “The heat’s off. The fuzz knows we didn’t kill Vincent. They have no idea how much money was in that blue bag.”

“Yeah, probably. But *somebody* knows. That wasn’t Vincent’s casino winnings or income tax refund.”

“Okay,” Zack said. “But that same somebody might just figure the Sheriff lifted it.”

“Maybe. But if you go around buying diamond earrings and gold-plated Kewpie dolls for your girlfriends, that somebody could reckon you’re the poacher.”

Zack turned, then glanced back. With a dismissive wave he strode to his truck.

I started the pickup’s motor and left the parking lot. On the road, my thoughts turned to Julia. I punched the Monroe County Public Library number into my phone.

“Hi,” I said when she answered. “How about joining me for supper tonight?”

“You mean bottled beer and pretzels?”

“Naw. Real food. We could go to that Italian place in Marathon.”

“You’re buying.”

“Yup.”

“I wasn’t asking.” She paused to make sure I understood. “What time?”

“Around dark. It’ll be more romantic.”

“Oh-oh. I smell something fishy. Have you been fishing?”

“Well, I’m on the road home and uh . . . I need a favor.”

“Your wish is my command,” she said. “Unfortunately.”

“Do you have a reference book that gives particulars about banks, like addresses, size, officials...?”

“A Florida bank?”

“Southeastern Independent Bank, Fort Lauderdale.”

“I’ll see what I can find. How soon do you need it?”

“I’ll call you back in thirty minutes. Will that work?”

“Like I said, your wish . . .”

“Okay. Thanks. Bye.”

Later, when I picked her up, she had her hair in a new coiffure. She wore a brightly-colored sunsuit. As we drove south, she said, “Is there something at Southeastern Independent Bank I should know about?”

“Based on what you gave me, I’d say you know more than I do.”

“Except why you asked me to find out about it in the first place.”

“There’s a connection between that bank and Vincent’s murder.”

“What’s the connection?”

“It’s like a chain of circumstances that tie them to him.”

“Thanks. That clears it all up.” She fiddled with the pickup’s air-conditioning setting.

“I like your hair.”

She stared straight ahead. “Excellent change of subject.”

The air conditioner came on, going *shhhhh*. I said, “I went to Vincent’s funeral and burial. I talked to his brother. He and his wife are raising Vincent’s two sons.”

“Oh. Now I know why you were interested in Southeastern Independent Bank.”

Julia is not easy. I decided on nonchalance. “Not really.”

She looked at me blankly. “So what’s really going on?”

## Dangerous Parallel

“Trying to find out what’s going on—why Vincent was killed and—”

“Zack’s not a suspect. And they haven’t come after you. Isn’t it the police’s job to figure out why Vincent was murdered?”

“Sure. I’m running down some loose ends they’re not looking at.”

The seams in the pavement made rhythmic thumps. The green highway sign said SEVEN MILE BR. 9 MILES. Julia said, “I do not understand you.”

“Is it essential in a relationship that the woman always understands the man?”

“Not always.”

“Could this be one of the times when it’s not essential?”

“Okay. But I see this as dangerous—poking around in a murder case.”

Off to the side, some tourists tossed bread into the air. A big flock of seagulls flapped furiously catching the food. I said, “Possibly. Maybe not. Who knows?”

We drove into Marathon and parked at the restaurant. I said, “You understand this is something I have to do.”

“Yes. But because I don’t know what’s going on, I worry. Do you trust me?”

“Of course I do. I’d trust you with my life.”

“Then how come you won’t tell me what you’re doing?”

“You have to believe I’m trying to do the right thing. When everything is clear, I think you’ll understand.”

“I think I get it.” She smiled at me and stepped to the pavement. “You Spencer Tracy, me Kathryn Hepburn. You Bogey, me Bacall. And so on. Is that what we’re doing?”

“That depends on whether you can tolerate me in streaky black and white.”

“I’ll tolerate you for however long the fettuccine with clam sauce holds out. But not a minute longer.”

###

Zack and I left the elevator and followed our guide to the office marked Special Agent Mark Eppington. In the anteroom was a metal desk with a slightly less metallic secretary busy behind it. Hanging above her was the only hint of wall decor in the sober surroundings—a framed photograph of the J. Edgar Hoover building in Washington.

Upon our entry the secretary—adorned with several pounds of ear bangles, neck bangles and wrist bangles—swung around on her swivel chair and spoke loudly: “Mark!”

My heart went out to Eppington.

He greeted us with a giant smile and ushered us into a conference room where a man and a woman were seated at an oval table. Unoccupied chairs filled the periphery. Folded and leaning against the wall were more chairs.

The man at the table stood up. “I’m Doug Howlandger, D-E-A.” His smile was veiled by a mustache the color of straw. Dark-skinned enough to have just hopped off a tanning bed, he seemed uncomfortable in coat and tie. His hair, short, changed from straw color on top to dusty red at the ears. I guessed the red was lost to sun exposure.

Eppington introduced us and said, “Doug’s an old hand in the Caribbean. A significant player in the Bureau’s arrest of the Cuban spy ring back a few years. The ring targeted the region’s major military installations as well as the local Cuban émigré community. He’s handling the drug aspects of the investigation.”

We sat down. Did Eppington's mention of drugs mean he knew something we didn't? I glanced at Zack to see if it registered with him, but he was busy smiling at the woman sitting across the table. Eppington introduced her as Marlene Barnes. "Marlene is our sketch artist, formally known as our 'Visual Information Specialist.'"

Marlene rose to shake hands, revealing a tiny body in a stylish pantsuit. "I'm so happy to meet you both," she said. Her happy smile faded to a studious expression. "Mark has told me about your experiences during the hijacking. It must have been terribly distressing."

Eppington studied his notebook, then grinned at Zack and me. "We really appreciate you fellows taking the time—"

"Yeah, coming way up here to this zig-zag zoo," Doug said, "dreamed up by some famous architect from Chicago."

Eppington reacted. "Doug's not a fan of our complex. But it's an environmentally-friendly facility, helps save on the Bureau's light bill."

Zack waved his hand at all the glass. "So how much is there?"

"They measure it in acres," Doug said, grinning. "You may not have known that Security checks you for stones on the way in."

"Anyway," Eppington said, "we appreciate you coming."

"Yeah," Doug said. Then, suddenly serious, "it's important to get your cooperation, to find out who killed this guy Pragg."

"Okay," Zack said, "but I have a question. The Monroe County Sheriff said they'd taken fingerprints from the knife that killed Vincent. If those prints are clear, how come you need us to help identify the killer?"

Eppington smiled. "You're right. The prints were okay. Unfortunately, they didn't correspond to anyone in the FBI file."

"It's a limited database," Doug said. "But with a good picture . . ."

"Exactly," Eppington said. "With our system, we can take witness's information and put together a pretty good picture of the suspect." He nodded toward Marlene. "Marlene brings her expertise and training as an artist to the computer-aided operation. In a minute I'll take you down there and show you how it works." He turned to Howlandger. "Doug, Captain Montrose here is the man who gave us the GPS coordinates of the Cuban vessel that met them near the twenty-fourth parallel during the hijacking."

"That was great," Doug said, pulling at the hairs of his mustache. "We tracked the vessel, at least we're fairly sure it was the same one, right to Cabanas, Cuba." He slapped the table with his hand. "Yes, sir. Our tracking system is the best in the world."

"Cabanas. On Cuba's north coast," Zack said.

"Right. So there's an international angle—maybe involvement by a Caribbean drug outfit." He pulled at the mustache again.

Eppington said, "The suspect left the U.S. and has obvious stateside connections, so we can't assume she—or he—remains outside the U.S. The suspect can, and may, return."

This seemed to me to be Eppington's defense of the FBI's limited jurisdiction within the United States.

Eppington continued, "In any case, the sketch will help identify the suspect. We transmit it to all field offices making sure every agent is aware of the suspect's appearance."

Howlandger said, "That goes for us, too. DEA assets around the world can monitor the movements and activities of a suspect, regardless of location."

"Marlene, please take Mr. Montrose and Mr. Farris and show them how your system works," Eppington said, before turning to us. "Before you leave, she'll return you to me."

Marlene led us to the identification lab, a room filled with electronic bays and video terminals, where a couple of technicians were working.

"Wow," Zack said, "it's cold in here."

"Loads of air-conditioning to keep the circuits cool," Marlene said. "That's why I keep a sweater handy in my locker."

We stepped over grated troughs in the floor that held tangled electrical cables. Marlene sat down at one machine and typed into its keyboard. A color picture of a man's face scrolled up on the screen.

"This is Henry Montana, shotgunner," she explained. "I put this together from several witnesses' descriptions. He was picked up less than a week after the picture hit the field."

"What I do," she said, "is start from a dummy face." She struck a key and a round face with dots for eyes and lines for other features appeared. "As I ask non-leading questions and the witness talks about the suspect's face, I modify facial characteristics until it begins to look like the suspect." She demonstrated by typing on the keyboard, changing the face's eyes from blue to green. "Do you get the idea?"

"Yeah," I said. "We go back and forth with you until the face looks like Christine—or whoever it was that killed Vincent."

Marlene smiled at me and Zack. "That's the idea."

“What if the person was wearing a wig?” Zack said.

“We want to get as close as we can to the person as they appeared to you. Later, we can use various programs to remove or add hair, modify age, or peer beneath cosmetics to actually show what the person may look like under changed conditions. For example, here’s Henry Montana again.” She moved the pointer to Henry’s mustache and tapped keys on the keyboard. “Here’s what he looks like clean-shaven.”

“Impressive,” Zack said.

We worked with Marlene for over an hour. When Zack and I agreed the picture resembled Christine, Marlene took us to another office where Eppington studied a sheaf of papers.

“How did the sketching go?” he said.

Marlene handed him a paper printout.

“Terrific,” he said, smiling at the picture.

Marlene excused herself and left the office. Eppington waited until she closed the door. “Don’t be put off by Doug Howlandger. He sometimes acts like he’s the only player on the team. The Drug Enforcement Agency tends to be proprietary about its turf.”

Zack nodded. “We often get those types on charters. It’s part of our business.”

The three of us left the office and paused for a moment in the hall. “I’m going to have to get down to the Keys one of these days,” Eppington said. “See if you guys can find me a big fish.” His face lit up with a toothy grin. “How about a marlin?”

“There are no guarantees in the fishing business,” Zack said. “Some days you can’t keep ‘em from getting hooked. Other times, you can’t find one anywhere.”

“Sounds familiar,” Eppington said. “Seems like we have the same problem with suspects.” He laughed, and we shook

## Dangerous Parallel

hands. Within minutes we were whisked through security and on our way back to Seguro Key.

## CHAPTER 10

Zack sat on a folding stool next to the lure box. On top of the lure box were parts of one of our heavy trolling reels. Zack held the reel's gearcase in one hand and a wrench in the other. "Crap!" he said. "I can't fix it."

We had an important charter scheduled in two days and Zack couldn't fix the reel's drag. This is how I ended up driving to the fishing supply house in Coral Gables. They have a genius guy in a back room there by the name of Cecil. He can fix just about any reel made.

When I talked to Cecil, he said "Gimme till after lunch."

I had time to fill, so I drove to Fort Lauderdale.

The Narsom home on one of the many man-made islands was a two-story pink stucco with white trim. Many white, round-arched awnings adorned the mansion's round-arched windows and doors. The roof of the second story was a 'widow's walk,' with white balustrade and a tile-roofed dressing room for suntanners.

I drove to the end of the street's cul-de-sac, parked and walked back. Barely visible behind the pink stucco mansion was its boat house and a docked white motoryacht I judged was a 90-foot Hatteras.

Huge French doors with tiny prisms windows and several tons of polished brass adorned the main entrance. Less intimidating and off to one side was a narrow flagstone walk. It

was shaded by tall palms and well-planted shrubs and looked like it led to a side entrance.

Rounding a corner on the flags, I faced a single white door with a fancy brass buzzer. In answer to my ring, there were sounds of footsteps, then silence.

I was being examined via the surveillance camera. A moment later the door opened. A short Asian with little hair and an excess of teeth grinned at me. "Yes?" he said.

"Pardon me, I was hoping to speak with the owner regarding . . ."

"No go. No sale," the houseman said. Behind him was a large room, sparsely filled with expensive furniture. Beyond, floor-to-ceiling glass allowed a vista of the boat canal and the outdoor swimming pool.

I pointed. "Regarding the Hatteras. The motoryacht?"

At that moment, a gorgeous blonde woman with pale blue eyes emerged from somewhere. She approached behind the houseman without a smile. "What about the Hatteras?"

I projected my best take-no-prisoners smile. "I noticed your Hatt, there. I crew for owners, part-time, as needed. And well, I don't have a business card or anything, but . . ."

She stood behind the houseman in a peach-colored jump suit. Her jutting breasts projected over the small shoulders of the Asian. "You're soliciting," she said, frowning. "That's not allowed here."

"Sure, I understand." I kept the smile going. "But I can give references, whatever."

The houseman turned away and disappeared.

"You should leave," the woman said, not smiling.

“Okay. But so you know, I can handle docking and undocking, and—I escort seasick guests to the lee rail so they don’t—you know, get it all over themselves.”

Crinkles formed at the edges of those pale blue eyes, but she suppressed a smile. “Our Captain oversees hiring of crew. You should contact an employment service.”

“Sure. I bartend and even work a galley, though my cooking is not the greatest.”

She grinned. “At least you’re honest.” Her eyes examined me carefully. She looked slightly relieved. “If you like, I’ll take your name and number. Perhaps someone will contact you.”

“Great! It would be a privilege working for you, Mrs....?”

“I’m Candy Narsom.” She half-turned and raised her voice. “Yin. Bring paper and pen. Take this man’s name and number.”

The houseman appeared with a pad and ball point. As he handed it to me, Mrs. Narsom smiled, turned and disappeared somewhere. I wrote my name and phone number, and handed the pad and ball point to the houseman. He bowed and closed the door.

I left the home of Jules Narsom, president, Southeastern Independent Bank and returned to my pickup. I drove back to Coral Gables and collected the repaired trolling reel from Cecil.

###

Tripper, the town dog, is really the dock dog. He’s always sleeping on one of the charter boats till he gets roused out. My idea is, he likes the warmth the water lends to the decks.

“Okay, Tripper,” I said, “out you go.” He wags his tail in slo-mo, thinking I’m saying something nice, then climbs warily

onto the dock. As slow as he moves, I'm sure his arthritis is getting worse.

Two men are chartering today. Johnson Kingsley, an advertising bigwig from Miami, and Jess Tarlington, a C.P.A., have both caught marlin on *Reel Time* during the past two years.

Zack clump-clumped down the dock, threw his legs into the boat and climbed to the flybridge. "Better get extra ice, Billy. We'll be out a while today."

"Going to the cliff?"

"These guys always want to go for big blues." He turned on all of the electronics.

I headed for the ice machine. Getting to the cliff takes two hours, plus two hours back. It's a lot of driving. But the sharp drop-off borders a part of the gulf stream highway for blue marlin migrating from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean.

I picked three bags of ice. As I headed back, I spotted our anglers in the parking lot.

Zack had kicked the two diesels into action, so the familiar odor wafted out of the bubbles at the stern. I stowed the ice and went over the gear to make sure we had everything.

The two fishermen climbed in, I threw the lines, and Zack guided the boat away.

Soon we were skimming southward, heaping up a white froth that tumbled behind us, spread wide and returned to its smoothly-waved clarity. It was a sun-sparkly day, so I didn't mind sitting in the spray watching the blue-greenish-tinged water fly by.

The roar of the motors and the whoosh of the wake made for a pillow of sound that lulled you into contemplation.

Thinking back to the money, I wished we'd never discovered the contents of Vincent's bag. It now seemed like a poor choice, not to mention that Zack and I didn't share the same ideas about it.

Was I being paranoid? Now that Zack was likely off the hook for murder, maybe we could spend some of the money and no one would become suspicious. It was tempting to consider time away, travel, other places and people. But our situation was perilous and the mystery loomed.

I saw only two other boats on our trip out, and they were a long way off. Distant too were my efforts to find out what Khan and the Council meant, why all the money was in the blue bag, and on and on. It all seemed far away now, even unimportant. Why didn't I just leave it alone, as Julia recommended? Probably that would be less dangerous than poking into the murky activities we'd uncovered.

I knew I couldn't leave it alone. The uncertainty was like a magnet. It's like fishing, I told myself. The unseen and unknown out there, like the fish you imagine or anticipate.

I stood up and snatched a can of Pepsi out of the cooler. The cold carbonation felt good on my throat. Clouds in the west might build and bring rain after noon. But we were nearing the cliff and it remained sunny.

I rigged the four rods we would deploy. Each rod was numbered, from one on the starboard outrigger to four on the port. The lines on each were marked so we knew how much line to let out on each. This assured that we'd troll with our standard spread of lures at trolling speed. Each line ended in a lure of differing color, providing a varied choice for the fish.

Zack gave me the hand signal as he slowed the boat. I began letting out line. Jess and Johnson each took a rod. I told

them to let out line until they saw the little marker come off the reel.

When they were through and the rods were stowed in their holders, I hollered up at Zack. "They look okay?"

"Let another ten or so yards out on number four," he yelled. Zack almost never found the setup to his liking.

I checked the gaffs to see if all were sharp.

Johnson said to me, "Don't worry about the gaffs if we get a blue. Jess and I decided we'll release it."

Although they'd never released a significant catch before, catch and release is popular now. But I knew it was easier to say than to do. Released fish often don't survive the injuries they receive fighting the hook, and crewmen need skill to safely remove the lure. Nevertheless I said, "Sure, the more to catch later."

I thought about my visit to the Narsom mansion. "Say," I said to Johnson, "I was up in your neighborhood a couple days ago. I know you do a lot of business with banks. What do you know about Southeastern Independent Bank?"

"Sure," Johnson said, "they're one of my clients. What's your interest in Southeastern?"

"Curiosity. Heard a few comments. You like dealing with them?"

Johnson hesitated. "They pay on time. That's nice."

"You mean the top brass—or the staff?"

"I mostly deal with staff. The president is a guy named Narsom. Haven't dealt much with him, just cocktail parties—you know, social doings. He's got a nice place on the water."

"He's impressive as a CEO, I suppose."

Johnson hesitated again. "I guess. Like I said, I mostly deal with staff at Southeastern."

“Narsom hasn’t been in any trouble, has he? I mean like audits or regulator problems.”

Johnson seemed suddenly relieved. “Nothing official, although I wouldn’t know about SEC audits or bank regulators. It’s just—well, they’re rumors, really. He may have international connections that, you know, might not be the most worthy.”

“Foreign partners, you mean?”

Johnson grinned. “Like I said, it’s mostly rumors. You think we might hook a blue today?”

“We’ll see.” I brought my nine-foot-long plastic pipe to the stern. It was painted with black markers every six inches beyond the four-foot length. I told both anglers, “When we get a fish up to the boat, I’ll be the wire man. The guy who isn’t fighting the fish should follow me and use the measuring rod to get the fish’s length. Then I’ll try to get the lure out and let him go.” I fingered my cutting pliers in its sheath. “If I can’t get the lure out, I’ll cut him loose.”

We were on a westward troll, paralleling the cliff. On one side, the depth is about 850 feet. On the other it goes over 1500 feet.

Occasionally, tangled masses of sargassum weed, formed by wind into weed rafts, floated by. Green flashes glinted from underneath—reflections from hundreds of ‘chicken’ dorados hiding below. But there’s less safety than these fish sense because seabirds see them and attract other predators, including fishermen.

It wasn’t long before Zack sang out loudly, “Fins! Stand by!”

A few seconds passed and he shouted, “Fish on four!”

I clutched rod four, pulled it from its holder, and handed it to Johnson in the fighting chair. Moving swiftly, I grasped rod three, withdrew it and began retrieving line as fast as I was able to turn the crank.

Jess went to rod one, and grasped it with both hands.

Zack shouted, "Fish on two!"

"Damn," I said. If both fish were blue marlin, I knew we couldn't handle them. I stuck rod three into its holder and grasped rod two. I yelled at Jess, "Put that back." I yanked rod two from its holder and thrust it at him. "Take this, there's a fish on it."

Quickly, I took rod three from the holder and continued wildly reeling in its line. Next I would try the same with rod one.

Drags screamed as both anglers heaved back hard, setting hooks. Each line took on a crisp—and ominous—arrow-straight plunge into the water behind *Reel Time*.

## CHAPTER 11

I shouted to Zack, “What can you see?”

“Nothing.” As Zack spoke, a big blue marlin came out of the water, eighty feet behind us. The fish knifed vertically, cleared the water in a shower of spray, and with a giant splash fell back into the ocean.

I turned to Johnson. “Is that yours?”

“Think so.”

“Zack,” I yelled, “Can you see Jess’s fish? The fish on two?”

“Yeah, it’s a blue.”

“Shit,” I said, straining to see the two fish, although neither was visible.

I studied each angler. Jess stood braced against the transom, both hands gripping the rod above the reel, the rod butt in his belt socket. Johnson was straining a lot, but had the advantage of being belted into the chair. Both reels’ drags screeched as the two fish took more line.

Both fish broke through the surface at almost the same instant. They were wide of each other and more than 50 yards back. Spray obscured the view. I was not sure which fish was largest.

“Cut two, now!” Zack shouted.

I whipped out the cutter and nipped Jess’s line. “Sorry about that, Jess. We can’t handle two marlin that size.” He

straightened. His wrinkled brow glistened with sweat. He seemed almost relieved.

Johnson's fish took more line. I glanced at his reel and pointed at it. I shouted to Zack, "Half a spool!"

Zack threw the boat's gears into reverse and reduced throttles. He turned around to face the stern while aiming the boat toward Johnson's line. He steered by manipulating the twin throttle levers behind his back, one in each hand.

Seawater from wave-tops now broke over the stern and cascaded across the deck. The water and foam were slippery. "Jess!" I said. "Watch your footing."

My eyes reverted to Johnson's line. Its entry point into the water approached the stern. The tip of Johnson's rod curved downward. His cheeks turned red in his effort to keep the rod's tip above water. "Damn," he said between quick breaths, "Going south."

Zack reduced our backward advance. He leaned over the bridge's rail, attempting to see through the depths that held the fish.

He shook his head. He couldn't see the fish.

Zack understood that if the fish swam toward the boat, the line could tangle around one of the boat's screws. He put the gears in neutral and our rearward progress slowed.

Johnson continued to pump his rod. Each downstroke brought in but a few feet of line.

*Reel Time* became stationary, with Johnson's line entering the water about fifteen yards astern. The entry location moved toward us, sluggishly. I looked up, caught Zack's attention, and pointed toward the approaching line. Zack reacted and shifted gears into forward. The boat moved forward, away from where the line entered the water.

## Dangerous Parallel

With the boat at low throttle, Zack began a practiced tactic. He changed gears from forward to neutral, or reverse to neutral. By varying the time at neutral, he kept the distance from the line's entry to the stern about the same, as dictated by the fish's movements. At the same time, he gave each motor more or less power, steering us.

Johnson was now pumping the rod. With both hands gripping the rod, he hauled back until the tip of the rod was several feet above the water. Quickly he switched his right hand to the reel's handle. His left hand lowered the rod while the right cranked the reel.

I coached him, repeating, "Pull!" and "Reel!" in a slow cadence.

Johnson tried to establish a rhythm with his upstroke and downstroke, but the fish pulled so strongly, he became exhausted. He'd work strenuously, then be forced to stop and rest.

Jess cheered him on, "Come on Johnny, come on. You're getting him."

At intervals of a few minutes, I glanced at the spool of his reel—very little line was being taken in. After about fifteen minutes, the reel remained almost half empty.

Abruptly, the line sliced fast to the port side. Within a few seconds, a great blue-gray body shot out of the water twenty yards ahead of our boat, at an angle off the port bow.

Zack reacted, rotating the throttle levers. Diesel exhausts coughed a burst of black smoke and we turned sharply to starboard. As always, Zack knew he had to keep the fish in the half-circle centered on the stern of *Reel Time*.

At the same time, I spotted a sag in the line. "Reel, dammit! Reel!" I commanded. "Faster! Or he'll toss the hook!"

The line sagged less. “Now pump! Reel and pump.” The line tightened, the rod tip now bending downward.

“How big is it?” Johnson said, puffing.

“I’m guessing at least five-hundred,” I said.

“It’s gotta be a monster,” Jess said.

Zack continued to face the stern, his eyes focused intensely on the line to the marlin while his hands behind him worked the engine levers. When the blue closed, he nudged the boat forward. When the blue moved away he gently reversed direction, steering the boat with the throttles. Zack’s maneuvering allowed Johnson to maintain most of the line remaining on his reel, while also pumping on a tight line to the fish below.

The huge fish no longer seemed strong enough to take line against the drag. But I knew we would not control the fish if it stayed rested. The marlin was testing Johnson’s brute strength and we were working as a team, each helping to tire the fish. But it was essential to keep the fight going.

Johnson’s shirt and shorts now appeared glued with sweat to all his muscles. I studied him for signs of a sag in his endurance. When his eyelashes began to flutter, I said, “Stop pumping. Just hold the fish steady. Get your wind.” For the first time, Johnson stopped straining and gave me a weak smile.

“Jess, get him a drink from the cooler.”

Jess pulled out a can of 7-Up, popped the top and placed it in Johnson’s left hand. Johnson gulped a series of swallows and handed it back. “Better,” he said.

Finally Johnson, pumping and reeling, gained almost a quarter-spool of line.

## Dangerous Parallel

I picked up my armored fish gloves and pulled them on. I searched the area below the point where the line entered the water, trying to see the fish.

“Coming up!” Zack yelled. I strained to see what he saw, but couldn’t.

A moment later, I saw a flash of sliver at the same time the fish saw the underside of the boat’s hull. “Look out!” I yelled at Johnson.

Line streamed off the reel against the drag, with Johnson hanging onto the pole with all the strength he could muster.

“Monster fish,” Jess said.

“Not tired yet,” I said.

Equally quickly, the drag on Johnson’s reel went silent.

From his high angle on the flybridge, Zack could see the fish. “Coming ‘round to this side,” he said, pointing to starboard.

I only saw the line bellying toward starboard. At the side of the boat, I looked down and saw the big fish swimming lazily. It looked to be maybe thirty feet down. Abruptly, the fish stopped swimming—just hung there in midwater.

Johnson took the opportunity to catch his breath.

Zack turned the boat slowly away from the fish.

The fish faded from view. I turned to observe Johnson. He now pumped and reeled, grunting loudly. His reel spool appeared almost full.

Zack announced, “Coming up.”

I sighted the dark blue of the big fish’s back rising about ten feet from the stern. Its long dorsal fin broke through the surface and laid over slightly.

“Lower your rod,” I said to Johnson. “Now toward me.”

I grasped the line near the end of his rod. I ran my gloved hand down the line, pulling it gently toward me. The wire leader was now visible.

“He’s tired,” I said. I gripped the wire leader and pulled the fish, more or less sideways, toward the corner of the stern. I transferred the leader to my left hand, grasped the fish’s bill with my right and drew the fish alongside the side of the boat. It looked lifeless, just a floating hulk.

“Quick,” I ordered, “measure it.”

Jess laid the long pipe over the top of the marlin, trying to reach the fish’s tail.

“Forget it, the pipe’s too short,” I said.

I transferred the fish’s bill to my left hand and worked the lure loose from the jaw with my right. Jess leaned over me and carefully captured the lure I handed to him. He swung lure and line into the boat. Johnson huffed an exhausted breath, and fell back in his chair.

The fish’s big round eye, as big as my fist, didn’t move or change, yet it seemed to be watching us. I lowered the fish’s head back into the water, but nothing happened.

With my free hand I grasped the lower jaw. I moved it to open and close the mouth, hoping to force water through the fish’s gills.

There was a split-second of tension. The fish exploded into motion. It lunged forward with shattering speed. The tail flew by my head in what seemed like a microsecond. The upper half of the tail struck my left side. It felt like a dozen iron skillet hitting at once.

Not exactly knowing how I got there, I found myself sitting on the deck. Johnson and Jess were bent over me. My left arm and shoulder felt warm.

Slightly later, Zack bent over me. "What happened?"

I felt a little woozy.

"Damn, Billy," Zack said, "What the hell? You knew he was gonna . . . aw, hell." He threw a towel over my shoulder. It didn't hurt, but blood seeped through it.

Zack said, "Billy, listen. Where's the bottle of bleach?"

"Bottom shelf, under the cabin sink."

Zack left and returned with the bottle of bleach. Now my arm and shoulder hurt.

Zack said, "Is it busted?"

I wiggled the arm. "Naw. Just scraped," I said.

"You're not gonna like this, but we better," Zack said, gesturing. The two anglers lifted the towel from my wounds and peeled away the torn part of my tee shirt. Zack splashed the bleach on the wounds. I screamed in pain.

Zack had drenched another towel in the ice water from the cooler. He wrung it out over my shoulder and arm, rinsing off the bleach. It seemed like torment. I closed my eyes and shuddered.

Johnson said, "Jeez, Billy, I'm sorry. I . . ."

Zack pulled me to my feet by my good arm. "Why the hell did you hang on to him, Billy?"

"You had to be there," I said.

Jess said, "Man, that was a monster fish."

###

Julia was applying antiseptic cream to the cuts and abrasions on my shoulder and arm. I twitched. "Hold still," she said.

"I told you Zack threw bleach on me. If there are any germs left, they are in worse shape than I am."

"You are a mess. But worse, you're jumpy. If you will just hold still, I'll be able to finish."

“The least you could do is offer anesthesia—courtesy of Dr. Coors.”

“Just you wait.” She continued with the cream. When she finished she took a Coors from her refrigerator, opened it and set it on the end table next to me. I stood and inserted my left hand into what was left of my sleeve.

“Don’t! Don’t do that! That shirt is as slimy as that fish. Take it off—I’ll wash it out.”

I complied. She took the shirt and disappeared. When she reappeared without it, I said, “Ah, nurse Julia.” I sat gently on the edge of the couch, daring myself to lean back onto the towel she’d thrown over it.

Julia’s eyes narrowed. “Have your fun. But I’m taking care of you. Later, I’ll wrap those wounds with gauze.”

“So I’ll look like a mummy.”

She screwed the cap back on the antiseptic tube. “Yes, if that’s the way you see it.”

She thinks I don’t appreciate what she does. “I never got care like this before . . .”

Her eyes left the tube and searched me. “What do you mean?”

“You know. Before we met.”

“Yes. You miss those days?”

“Come on. Of course not. I was trying to tell you how much I appreciate your care.”

She glanced at her finger and began wiping it with a tissue. “Perhaps you should keep that in mind as you risk your butt.”

“This is from fishing.” I raised my bloody and cream-skimmed arm. “It’s what I do.”

She threw the tissue into the trash. “I’m not talking about fishing. I’m talking about the other.”

“You mean attending Vincent Pragg’s funeral and . . .”

She sat down on the end of the couch. “Yes. It all has to do with this . . . this investigation, or whatever you call it.”

“Running down loose ends.”

“Has it occurred to you that I might be able to help you with this?”

“You have. You got all that info I needed about the bank.”

“But don’t you see? I could be more helpful if I understood what you’re after.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you would. You know, you’re really something?”

She stood, approached, and kissed me lightly on the lips. “I love you.” Her eyes roved over my shoulder. “Oh Billy, you look terrible.”

I grinned. “It’s all this goop you put on me.”

She sat down again. “All because you were trying to save that fish.” She pointed at my wounds, “This is the thanks you get for that.”

I was thrown back to the moment when Vincent met his end. “Fish, like some humans, have no regard.”

“What will happen,” she said, her thoughts converging toward mine, “to those two boys—Vincent’s sons?”

“Eddie Pragg seems like a good man. The kids have been living with him and his wife for some time. They are better off for it. This loss—like all losses—will pass with time.”

“More likely, it’ll dim with time.” She folded one leg over the other. “But they’ll never leave it behind. They’ll carry the knowledge with them wherever they go.” She brought her hands together, fingers touching fingers. “How much longer will this quest keep us at odds?”

“I don’t think we’re at odds.”

## Dangerous Parallel

Julia glanced at the end table. “You haven’t touched that beer. Shall I warm it further? I could put it in the microwave . . .” She rose, gathered up everything except the gauze and tape, and disappeared.

Later on she fed me, bathed me, wrapped my arm and half my upper body in gauze and drove me home. I don’t remember much else.

## CHAPTER 12

I felt a little silly in the outfit: starched white shirt with epaulets, pleated breast pockets with flaps, matching shorts with creased and cuffed legs. It came straight from Gaff-Rigg, the nautical apparel store that Candy Narsom had specified. It showed a lot of my deep tan, which I liked, and my scabby scrapes from the marlin, which I didn't.

Captain Angelo had called, checking out my experience and references, followed by Mrs. Narsom, who explained that a uniform was essential for working aboard the Hatteras.

Yin met me at the door of the pink stucco home in Fort Lauderdale. When Candy appeared she was dressed in white slacks and top. Her hair and makeup were perfect, as I somehow expected.

"I hope this is all right," I said, spreading my hands. "It came all starched and pressed—ready to wear."

"You look gorgeous. What happened to your arm?"

"It's one of those stories," I said. She led me inside.

"You've heard of sea stories?"

She didn't reply but walked ahead past furniture that seemed all white, with gold and black accents. Dominating the walls were large abstract paintings, like something out of a New York penthouse.

After passing through a formal dining room and a pantry area, we exited into a covered patio with the gleaming white

motoryacht docked alongside. We stood in partial shade next to lush green plantings as she explained that I would be working under Captain Charles Angelo during the evening cruise. “I’m sorry you haven’t had a chance to meet him, but I got in such a rush for this celebration . . .”

I told her I’d had a pleasant meeting with Captain Angelo over the phone. “Oh,” she said, “of course—how stupid of me.” She laughed, her silky, white garments catching part of the slanting sunlight. “Guests will begin arriving about . . .” She glanced at a thin gold strip on her left wrist. “About an hour from now. Did I explain the celebration?”

“You mentioned something about the bank. I didn’t catch it.”

“Yes, it’s the one year anniversary today,” She smiled. “You’ve tended bar before, if I recall?”

“Several orgies ago,” I said.

Her face, blank at first, quickly turned merry. She pointed to a stack of cardboard boxes on the dock. “Here’s the liquor.” I said I’d load them on board, and she hurried away.

After loading the boxes on board the Hatteras, I toured it. It was a ninety-footer, with four staterooms below deck. A half-deck down from the bridge was the salon, tiled in subtle tan stone. Electronics at the entry controlled lighting, sound, disappearing TVs, window drapes and other functions.

The overhead was pale cream, with insets and lighting by indirect, distributed lamps. The contrasting walls were a rich walnut, with shaded sconce lights between windows equipped with powered drapes.

Furnishings included luxurious couches with excess pillows, snack tables and chairside lamps. At one end was the main marble-topped table. The bar I was to tend, also marble-topped, was adjacent, with several cushy stools.

Aft of the salon was a fully-equipped galley with the latest appliances.

“Hello there,” said a voice behind me. “You must be Billy.”

I turned to see a bearded, medium-height man in a uniform similar to mine. He wore a captain’s hat with gold-colored embroidery on its brim. Charles Angelo filled me in on his background. Like many hired boatmen, he’d retired from the U.S. Navy. His manner was easy and we got along well immediately. I told him about my injury and that it had occurred during my regular job as crew on a chartered sport fishing boat.

“That must have been a really big marlin,” he said. “You took considerable risk in working his jaw like that.”

“Like Captain Montrose says, I have talent, but am still learning.”

He laughed. “There are platters of hors d’oeuvres, cold cuts and other stuff Mrs. Narsom wants loaded, in the house kitchen. Can you—”

“Sure,” I said. I debarked. The house kitchen was a cavernous white room lit from large double windows topped by a third round-arched window under outside domed awnings. There were dozens of hanging copper pots and a butcher-block island the size of Vermont.

Candy was busy instructing a young Asian woman in an apron how to arrange bite-sized foods on a platter.

“Captain Angelo said you had some hors d’oeuvres to be loaded on board?”

“Oh, yes. Good,” she said. She went to a brushed stainless-steel refrigerator and opened the door. “This one, this one, this one, and that one.” I took two silver platters wrapped in plastic and deposited them in the yacht’s galley refrigerator. I repeated the trip several more times with assorted cold cuts, crackers and cheese, fancy vegetables, and other bits. As I came and went, I saw groups of guests arrive.

Later, when everything was loaded on board, I assumed my station behind the bar in the salon.

Soon I heard laughter outside and two men and a woman entered the salon. The men headed to the bar and ordered drinks for all three. The taller of the two men lingered at the bar.

“I’m Jules Narsom,” he said. Narsom was fifty-ish, at least six feet, well-tanned. His dark hair was streaked with gray. His erect and trim appearance, together with his rimless glasses, lent him the look of a successful executive.

“President of Southeastern Independent,” I said with a smile.

“You’re well-informed.” He turned to face the seated couple. “The gentleman who just sat down with his wife is Nathan Walsh. He’s the CEO.”

Walsh was older, slightly stooped, wore bifocals and had a thin mustache. His wife was gray haired, with pleasant wrinkles around her eyes. I took two scotch and waters and a Tom Collins to the table in front of their couch.

Others boarded. Everyone ordered drinks. Some of the newcomers introduced themselves, most using their first names. So far I'd not heard Khan's name.

With about twenty-five people boarded, the engines were started. I conferred with Captain Angelo regarding his undocking method, then began hauling in the mooring lines as the big boat cleared the dock.

We crawled down New River flanked by multi-million-dollar bungalows, then made a slow starboard turn into the Intracoastal. As we waited for the 17<sup>th</sup> street bridge to raise, Candy took my arm and introduced me to a group of three people gathered at the starboard rail. I shook hands with Bob and Brenda Forbes, and B. I. Khan.

Khan, lean and sharp-featured, fixed me with his fierce black eyes. "You get much sun." He paused, staring. "Your arm is injured."

"The result of working boats year round," I said, "They're an occupational hazard."

"Very bad for the skin," Candy said. "Office pallor is much more healthful."

"I should know," Brenda Forbes said, looking at Khan.

Candy said. "Brenda is Mr. Khan's executive assistant."

Khan nodded toward Forbes and the women. "Please excuse me." He gave me a half-smile. "I'm happy to have met you." He turned and headed for the salon.

Brenda looked at me. "B. I. is not very sociable."

I said, "What's the initial B stand for?"

"I can spell it," she said with a chuckle, "but I can't say it. "It's Pakistani, or so I'm told."

After a few more minutes of small talk, I excused myself and returned to the bar. Khan had joined Jules Narsom and the Walshes at an L-shaped couch near the bar.

I made drinks and traded comments with guests, eavesdropping when I could. After a time, the Walshes left the couch and Khan began questioning Narsom in soft but intense tones.

“Have we not gotten Cuban credits from IBI?” he said, clicking his lighter twice before it flamed. He took a strong draw on his cigarette and exhaled smoke upward.

Narsom, whose voice was less audible, said something like, “Don’t worry. As long as everything is settled by September . . .” His eyes strayed from Khan, as if he sought someone across the salon. When his attention returned to Khan, he said, “September. When Fischer and Hart begin the audit . . . we must complete the Texas project on time.”

“I’m concerned,” Khan said, taking another deep draw on his cigarette. “The cash flow to Estrella . . .” He blew exhaled smoke upward, momentarily obscuring his face.

“The bank is to maintain the required liquidity.” Narsom’s gaze again shifted from Khan. He appeared to concentrate on a group gathered near the forward section of the salon.

“Fine, fine,” Khan said, gesturing with the hand that held his cigarette between its first and second fingers near the big knuckle. “But cash demand is increasing. There is pressure on my department.”

Narsom returned his gaze to Khan. “You worry too much. It’s up to the Council to convey the plan and

manage it—to change the plan, if that’s required. The bank’s job is to do the banking.”

Khan’s left hand snatched the cigarette from his right and tapped the lighted end again and again on the lip of the nearby ashtray. “The Council. They see millions. But they ignore expenses. They do not listen when I bring these things to their attention.”

Narsom smiled and nodded at a woman who passed close to their couch, then sighed. “I’ll discuss it with Nathan and the others, but worry is useless. IBI must heal any wound. As long as Texas is okay, there should be no problem.”

Khan took a puff, blew it upward. “Everything is on time at the moment. But , , ,”

Narsom regarded Khan. He patted Khan’s shoulder. “Then relax, Khan. Relax and enjoy.”

###

We were cruising north in the Gulf Stream. The late afternoon sun splashed low through the salon. Candy entered from the galley, went to the electronics, and powered the drapes closed on the sunny side of the salon. She swished to the bar and smiled at me.

“Tell me now,” she said, “What happened to your arm.”

I chuckled. “A marlin’s tail.”

“A tale told by a marlin. How fascinating.”

“Not that kind. The tail fin of the fish.”

“Oh—the *tail* of the marlin. You were fishing?”

“Crewing a charter in the stream.”

“Was it a blue marlin?”

“Yes. About five-hundred pounds.”

“Oh, my. What happened?”

I told her. She seemed to understand everything except the final moments. She said, “So you were moving the fish’s jaw?”

A small dish with some wilted slices of lime caught my eye. “I hoped to pump water through its gills—I thought we were losing the fish.” I threw the lime slices into the trash container. “But it didn’t need much reviving.”

Candy laughed softly. She placed the palm of her hand under my injured arm. “It looks to me as if it is healing well. I’m sure it was painful.”

“The healing will look peculiar because all the new skin will be pink instead of tanned.”

“Uh-huh.” She withdrew her hand. “I think it’s time to set out the food. Will you help?”

We went aft to the galley and began carrying serving dishes into the salon, placing them on the marble-topped table that was covered with a linen tablecloth. “Please help yourselves,” Candy announced to the guests.

People gathered and began serving themselves, filling their plates with little sandwiches, fancy olives and garnishes, small meats with toothpicks, celery sticks with cream cheese, and other delicacies. The scene bubbled with animated talk.

I mixed drinks as needed. Candy sat with Jules and the Walshes as they enjoyed their snacks and conversation. A while later, Jules Narsom tapped a wine glass with a fork and asked for attention. The guests hushed.

“I just want to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for all the good work—the cooperation you’ve all given the bank during the past year. We’re the fastest growing bank in South Florida and I know you will all help maintain that pace in the coming year. Again, my thanks.”

The guests applauded, then resumed relishing the food and drink. Here and there, loud laughter was heard as jokes were told.

Darkness overtook the Hatteras, and I wondered about our position and direction. Shortly, Candy appeared at the bar. "Bet you can't make me a Trinidad," she said.

"Oh-oh." I shook my head. "Drinks named after islands. They're tough."

"It's a rum drink," she said, placing herself gracefully on a stool. Her movements reminded me of milk poured slowly, glistening white and smooth. She looked at the softly lighted overhead. "Lime, bitters and sugar . . . I think." She laughed.

I stepped from behind the bar and gestured toward the space. "It's all yours. Everything's there, mix away."

"No, no, no." She laughed. "I was just testing you. I don't really want a Trinidad."

"Rum doesn't mix well with tequila, anyway." I touched her glass. "Would you like another?"

"I shouldn't." She glanced over her shoulder. Jules was deep in conversation with a small group. "But . . ."

I filled her glass. She dreamily stirred the drink. "You're doing a very nice job. I've received several nice compliments. Perhaps . . ."

"I appreciate the chance," I nodded toward the crowd. "Lots of nice people. They all work at the bank?"

"Mostly. Except, you know, husbands and wives of employees."

I looked around. Khan was not present. "This man Khan, why did you introduce me to him?"

"Oh, I don't know." She tapped the swizzle stick against the glass. "Maybe because he's . . . part of the inner circle."

“Inner circle?”

“A mover and shaker. Although just a VP, Jules says he’s a very key person.”

I wiped a small spill from the bar. “A vice-president.”

“Oh yes. But there are a half-dozen of those, you know.”

She laughed.

“Sounds like the bank is doing very well.”

“I guess so. I don’t really keep up with it. I just try to enjoy the benefits.”

“Seems like you have quite a job. Putting all of the ingredients of this party together was not easy.”

“I manage,” she said and sipped her drink. “I manage.” She gazed at the crowd, and her face turned serious. “Do you live around here? Around Fort Lauderdale?”

I smiled. “I don’t think we’re near Fort Lauderdale at the moment.”

At first she frowned, then laughed. “Of course. How stupid of me. Where do you live?”

“I hang out in the Keys.”

“My. You drove all the way up here—I mean all the way to Fort . . .”

“It’s a great job. I’m not complaining.”

She placed her hand in the pocket of her slacks and withdrew a pack of paper money folded in half. She placed it in my hand and folded my fingers over it with her other hand. “I hope this is adequate,” she said, smiling. “You’ve been just terrific.”

“Thanks.” I noted the number 100 on the corner of the outer bill.

Jules Narsom and several other guests approached. “One more,” he said to me, then to Candy, “Lets go up to the

bridge,” I served them, they took their drinks and mounted the steps to the bridge.

I glanced at my watch. It was nearly ten o’clock. I went to a window and looked for lights in the distance. Reflections confused the view. No one was waiting near the bar so I stepped through the door to the rail. The overcast sky glowed dimly, lit by towns on the Florida coast. We moved slowly toward a cluster of bright lights off the starboard bow. I withdrew the folded money, unfolded it and by touch counted the bills.

Music sounded. I returned to its source in the salon, where two couples attempted to dance to a recording. The limited space and placement of furniture interfered, but the dancers persisted.

Some of the hors d’oeuvres remained. I helped myself to three stuffed olives and a small cake with pink frosting. I threw down a quick shot of Jack Daniels. I told myself I was going to have to improve my diet. I followed the whiskey with a Pepsi.

The Hatteras now headed toward the coast. From the side deck I discerned four tall stacks with blinking lights dead ahead. We entered the Lauderdale channel and turned toward the 17<sup>th</sup> street bridge. I returned to the salon, gathered and stacked the plates, drink glasses and assorted dishes in the sink, removed the tablecloth and wiped the big table clean.

After securing the boat’s mooring lines at the Narsom’s dock, I collected the trash, and returned all the platters and dishes to the kitchen. Most of the guests were now gone. Candy Narsom entered the kitchen. I asked if there was anything else she’d like me to do.

“No, no,” she said with a smile. “You’ve just been wonderful. I wish. . .”

## Dangerous Parallel

Jules followed her in, carrying his drink.

Candy eyed Jules, then said to me, “Thank you so much. We’ll be in touch if we need you again.”

I said goodbye to her and to Jules, and went to my pickup.

I had much to think about as I drove to the Keys. What would I tell Zack? What would he think of Khan and Narsom discussing Cuban credits, the IBI and the Texas project?

## CHAPTER 13

I said, “I didn’t think I’d live long enough to hear it.”

Zack didn’t say anything. He tipped his mug up and gulped some beer.

I continued. “You actually admit the fishing was good today.”

Zack put the mug down, screwed his face into a superior look. “You wouldn’t be sitting here in the Reef quaffing a frosty one at two in the afternoon if I hadn’t engineered it so well.”

“Oh. So now it’s *engineering*. You sure it’s not quantum theory?”

“How many times do I have to remind you that catching your limit is not luck. It’s skill—high level stuff.”

“How about astrophysics?”

“Listen. I watch those fishing programs on TV. Those fishermen are pros, right? Have you ever seen them *not* catching fish?”

“Okay, okay. Maybe it isn’t astrophysics. It’s half-astrophysics.”

Zack couldn’t avoid laughing. “You, Billy—you are the half-assed one.”

We laughed and ordered two cold ones, in new mugs. The barmaid with the biker tattoo brought the beers in mugs covered with lots of frost. With a half-snarl, she said, “At the

rate you two are drinking, I'm gonna run out of refrigerated mugs an hour before happy hour."

Zack couldn't resist. "Yeah, but don't forget what a terrific tipper this guy is," he said, pointing at me.

We had run a day charter, getting into furious fishing less than six miles out. I was happy for that because I hadn't returned from the Narsom cruise until well after midnight.

"So fill me in on your cruise yesterday," Zack said when we'd run out of jabs and laughs.

"I learned to like living like the upper crust lives. That mansion, that Hatteras, that gorgeous woman—"

"You better stop there, Junior. I don't want to have to report this to Julia."

"You won't believe: She, this absolute knockout, introduced me to B. I. Khan!"

Zack leaned forward with a quizzical look, lowered his voice. "No, really? The guy at Estrella?"

I nodded. He's a beady-eyed guy, maybe Pakistani. He and Jules Narsom referred to something called 'IBI' and the 'Texas project.'"

Zack took a big swallow of beer. "You heard all this—on board the Hatteras?"

"Yup."

"'Texas project,' that's got to be something to do with that shrimp boat—the 'Veronica B.'"

"...the same boat that Captain Briden said he sold to a man named Vincent Pragg." I drank beer, trying to recreate in my mind all the incidents I'd experienced in Pensacola. "Khan and Narsom talked about this project being worth millions. Khan complained of the cash flow. I

got the impression that Southeastern Independent Bank is bankrolling part of the deal. And, they have a deadline in September.”

Zack closed his eyes for a moment. “I wonder if it’s the same deal what’s-his-name, Enrique, talked about—the extra nine-hundred thousand for the ‘vendors.’”

“Yeah,” I said, “for a delivery—to a ranch.”

We both drank more beer, thinking. The Reef was empty except for us and two fishermen with boots, sitting at the bar. Finally I said, “We really ought to find out what’s going on there.” I made some rings of water on the table with my mug.

“Texas, you mean?”

“Yeah. We need to know what’s driving all this effort, money. . .and people.”

“What was the name of that—that town?”

“Old Point, I think.” I searched my memory. “I’m pretty sure that’s what that guy at the bar in Pensacola said.”

“Never heard of it.”

“That guy had had a few by the time I talked to him,” I said. “It might be something else that sounds like ‘Old Point.’ Let’s look it up.”

At Zack’s trailer, I sat at the dinette table. Zack opened the cabinet on the wall next to the tiny galley. Inside were two pairs of shoes, a shelf of disassembled fishing reels, piles of magazines, some luggage and rolls of navigation charts. In a few minutes sorting through these, he brought a large NOAA chart to the table, unrolled it, and held the curling edges down with both hands. “Hmm,” he said, staring at the chart, “‘Old Point’ doesn’t pop out at me.”

We both studied the chart.

Zack said, “The only place I can find on the Texas coast with a name like that is Oak Point.”

“Where?” I said.

“Hold the damn edge of the map, and I’ll show you.” I pressed the edge of the chart. Zack slid his finger to a small dot north and east of Corpus Christi. “Right here, see?”

“That’s got to be it. It’s close to what I heard the guy in the bar say.”

Zack let the chart roll itself up. He sat down at the dinette and looked at me. “Okay. Now what?”

“I’d better see what flights are available to Corpus Christi. What’s our charter schedule?”

Zack went to the front of the trailer and returned with his appointment book. “Next two days are clear, I know without looking.” He paged through the book. “I was figuring on pulling the water pump on the generator—it needs a kit. Then there’s Tish. . .”

“Tish? The checker over at . . .”

“Yeah. We have plans.”

“Uh-huh. Probably steak dinner, followed by dessert.”

Zack grinned, stopped paging and raised his eyes from the appointment book. “Looks like we’ve got three days clear, then the Wilsons and the Carltons.”

“What about Arnie? Are you up-to-date with him?”

Zack looked from the book to me and frowned.

I shrugged.

He sat, got out his phone and punched. He crossed a leg over the other and looked at the ceiling. “Yeah, it’s me. Have you booked anybody on Reel Time for the next . .

.yeah, yeah, I know. You'll get it, just relax . . .huh? Yeah, when . . . Okay." He punched the phone off. "Bastard."

"What'd he say?"

"Nickle-grubber. Before he even answers, he's ragging me about money."

"He has a booking?"

"Next week. Nothing till then."

"That gives us time. You get the pump fixed and uh, see Tish. I'll get my ten-gallon hat and fly to Texas. You can meet me there and see what the bad guys are up to."

Zack said, "I wanna be Wyatt Earp."

"Nah," I said. "Me Tonto. You Lone Ranger."

Zack grinned. "Hi-yo Silver, away!"

"That's pretty tame."

Zack took a serious look. "Listen, Tonto. We track down them famous bad guys all the time—for no pay! Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Butch Cassidy . . .what kinda job is that?!?"

I smiled. "Yo, masked man. But think of all the autographs!"

###

It was after three when I got home. I compared schedules and reserved flights to Corpus Christi. I phoned Zack and gave him the schedule for his flight. The couch was comfy—I must have fallen asleep. The phone rang.

It was Julia. "What have you got in the fridge?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, besides beer and peanut butter?"

"Why are you prying into my private life?"

"Hmm. I guess I deserved that."

"So?"

“I thought I’d pick up a few things on my way home from work. I wondered if I could do something about your rotten diet.”

“I really don’t need any wheat germ, goat milk or sesame seeds.”

“I was actually thinking of corn-on-the-cob, mashed potatoes, and my chicken. Baked to a golden brown?”

“No gravy?”

“All right. Gravy.”

“If I may ask,” I said, “when does all of this occur?”

“You know my hours. It’ll be a bit later.”

I glanced at my watch and calculated. I would never make my flight. “How about I save you from the dread of making gravy and meet you at the Italian Garden? I think they do chicken . . .”

“Billy Farris! You’re turning down my baked chicken and gravy? I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it. In an hour. I’ll explain when I get there.”

###

Outside the wavy-roofed terminal at Corpus Christi International, I picked up the Mazda I’d rented online. This time of night, there was very little traffic. I drove onto South Padre Island Drive, the elevated that slices across the city. Miles of car lots, Bar-B-Ques, gas stops, shopping malls and tire stores slid behind me. The overhead sodium lamps tinged almost everything a garish yellow tone.

I stopped at a motel with red brick porticos and a large gold-painted eagle on the roofline. I guess I’m an eagle freak. The place had two double beds in a room on the upper level. I plopped in and went asleep almost instantly.

Early the next day I drove north from the city, over bridges and causeways, past construction yards where welders high up on giant oil platforms were visible amid showers of sparks. Next to the Intracoastal Waterway, a flat, featureless strand gave way to a jumble of shacks, bungalows and trailers marking the edge of Oak Point.

Of the one-story storefronts lining the highway, only a few seemed to house going businesses. Dirty windows held FOR RENT signs. On one side I saw a tamale stand, a lawyer's office, and a small grocery. On the other side I passed The Wagon restaurant, two pawn shops and a variety store.

The town's two traffic signals seemed to change mostly to supply visual variety. A block beyond the second signal, I sighted the give-away vista of outriggers poking against the sky.

I took a right onto a pot-holed side road. It twisted past Tate's bar toward the harbor. The curve was raggedly lined to seaward with docked shrimp boats. Some were stern-moored alongside piers, a few moored three-deep, paralleling the wharf. Interspersed were empty piers and rusty, metal-sheathed or dilapidated wooden buildings.

On the opposite side of the road, behind sagging chain-link and drooping or open gates, were low-framed shops and outbuildings. Some displayed signs advertising net repair, shrimp for sale, or diesel service. Stake trucks and pickups were parked haphazardly in weedy yards. Here and there workers hammered on unyielding fixtures, loaded waiting trucks, or loitered in small groups.

I drove slowly, searching for names on boats, but many were hidden by the confusion of shacks, piers and other boats. I

decided finding the *Veronica B.*, if she was here, was going to take time.

## CHAPTER 14

The road turned to gravel where the shrimp docks petered out. I parked there and began walking back along the paved section.

I had prepared for this kind of search by wearing baggy jeans with a hole in one knee, worn boots, and an old chambray shirt with a brown paint stain on a sleeve. I topped it off with a ratty ball cap that advertised ‘Mainway Marine Supply.’

I kept to the harbor side, zig-zagging around fenced barriers, empty piers and weather-beaten shacks and sheds. Searching for the names of boats sometimes meant entering property I was not authorized to enter. I probed as respectfully as possible, but probe I did. Fortunately, I was not challenged.

Occasionally I encountered riggers, headers, or other men working on or around their boats. I’d smile and say Howdy. Most of them returned the greeting.

Somewhat beyond half-way along the docks, I found the *Veronica B*. The red hull with white trim was moored, stern in, at a decrepit dock, its lines tied to heavy timbers jutting six or eight feet above the tide line. Next to the dock was an abandoned shack. There was no activity at the location and no one appeared to be aboard. To avoid suspicion, I didn’t linger.

I continued my walk and returned to the Mazda. I drove through town to the north side. There were three motels, none appealing. I picked Sea Rest, a group of white-painted cottages. The office was a framed shed attached to the side of a metal

trailer perched on cement blocks. As I entered, a jingle sounded. It came from white Christmas bells strung on a satin ribbon hanging from the top of the door. The woman in a print dress who appeared from behind a drape had flunked Weight Watchers more than once. “High-dy,” she said.

“Howdy, yourself,” I said, imitating the Texas greeting. When I inquired of the price, she said, “Ah kin lit y’all have it fer nahnty-nahn.”

I said I’d take it. She gave me a key and I drove to No. 6. With adequate up-and-down and side-to-side motion, the key worked. The small room had a double bed, a metal night stand with lamp, two wooden chairs, a small TV, a toilet and shower, and two small windows. In the window opposite the bed was an air conditioner. I turned it on and it whirled. As it gained speed, the fan blades began hitting the plastic housing, making a clatter that could be heard in San Antonio.

I stood back about three feet, lifted my right leg and slammed the metal base with the sole of my shoe. The clatter ceased. Cool air invaded the room. Who says I can’t perform mechanical miracles?

I called Zack. “Greetings from my Texas palace by the sea,” I said.

“I expected to hear from you before. How come you’re screwing off?”

“I been busy.”

“Is it true there are more cows than babes in Texas?”

“Numbers don’t count. Quality, in steaks or blondes, is what matters.”

“What’s keeping you so busy? I know it ain’t the babes.”

“I located the boat.”

“Where?”

“In the city we discussed.”

“Damn you’re getting awful formal.”

“Not formal, careful. Is there anything new?”

“Devlin stopped by today while I was working on the pump. He had a copy of the wanted poster with the picture we made.”

“Our black guru sure didn’t slow-walk that, did he?” I said.

“So what ya gonna do now?”

“I’ll probably go fishing,” I said.

“You go all the way to Texas to go fishing? You need help, friend.”

“Give my best to Julia.”

“I’ll give her *my* best.”

“There’s no worry, then.”

“Let me know if you find work,” Zack said.

“Won’t be hard finding a better boss.” I said, and shut it off.

I drove back toward town, and parked outside Bob’s Bait & Tackle. I bought line, a few hooks, some bait, and a cheap rod and reel combo encased in plastic. I felt silly buying fishing equipment.

I stopped for two cold cans of Pepsi at the drive-in, and drove to the harbor. I parked again where the pavement turned to gravel and walked back to where the *Veronica B.* was docked. I baited up and began fishing from the dock.

Two cans of Pepsi and one eight-inch croaker later, a rusty Dodge pickup with two men inside drove up and parked with

the driver's side nearest me. The driver—a guy with smooth upper eyelids that looked slightly Asian, wore a black cowboy hat pulled low on his forehead. When he exited I saw he was a heavy six-footer in dirty jeans and a blue shirt with torn sleeves. He crossed the short gangplank to the Veronica B. and entered the deck house. He didn't seem to notice me.

The passenger got out of the Dodge. He was shirtless, a short muscular Latino with a backwards baseball cap that said CAMEL. He faced into the door he'd opened and urinated. When finished, he wandered onto the Veronica B. and began heaving lines on the stern deck. He soon spotted me and came to the bulwark across from where I was fishing. "How's a fish?"

"Fine. If you like little croakers." I said.

"I no eat anythin' outta this harbor," he said, shaking his head.

"Yeah?"

"I seen what gets pumped in there from these shrimpers." He grinned.

I wanted to engage him. "Not too bad if you wash it down with enough whiskey," I said.

CAMEL didn't reply, but continued shaking his head, gazing into the water.

I said, "Doesn't John Peterson work this boat?"

This got CAMEL's attention. "You know him?"

"Yeah. I'm a buddy—from Pensacola."

"They been off to Houston. S'pose come back here with a truck."

"Today?"

"Tonight," he said.

## Dangerous Parallel

“If you see him, tell him I’ll be at Tate’s bar tonight.”

He said, “I be talking to him, yeah. I tell him. Your name?”

“Just tell him it’s his old buddy from Pensacola. He’ll know who it is.”

“I tell him Pensacola, right?” He said. He pursed his lips and took aim over the side.

I said, “Yeah.”

CAMEL spat into the water, turned and went to the far side of the shrimp boat.

I reeled in. Minnows were stealing my bait. I baited up and tossed the line back into the water. After a time, I caught another small croaker. I tossed it back, packed up, and walked to the Mazda. After stowing the fishing gear in the trunk, I drove to town, parked, and went into the Hot Tamale.

A tall Mexican woman with flashing dark eyes and wavy shoulder-length hair took my order for a half-dozen tamales.

“You want hot,” she said, “or medium?”

“Hot, I guess.”

“You had these before?”

“No, first time.”

“You want medium,” she said, and disappeared into the rear. In a couple minutes she returned with the tamales wrapped in paper in a cardboard boat.

“Watch out,” she said, as I paid for the tamales. “They’re hot.”

“I thought you said—”

“They’re medium, but they’re hot,” she said, matter-of-factly. I shrugged, sat down at one of the four picnic tables at the front. The table had a paper covering, salt and pepper, a box of plastic forks, and a screw-top jar of pepper seeds.

“You can have a soda,” the woman said from the counter, pointing at two machines along one wall. I went to one of the machines, entered coins, and picked a Pepsi from the trough. I returned to the table, unwrapped a steaming tamale, peeled back the husk and bit into it. It was delicious. The half-dozen were gone in a flash.

After sunset, I drove to the harbor and found an inconspicuous location across the road from the moored *Veronica B*. I parked and turned off the lights. There were lots of Texas-sized mosquitos, only an occasional car, and no signs of activity around the boat. I slumped into my seat and waited.

A little before ten o'clock, a two-and-a-half-ton truck slowed as it passed. It stopped, turned, and backed toward the *Veronica B*.’s dock. I tried to read the print on its side, but couldn’t quite make it out. This had to be, I told myself, the truck from Houston that CAMEL had spoken of.

Coming behind the truck was the Dodge with the two men I’d seen earlier. The Dodge parked beside the truck, its headlights illuminating the area. CAMEL got out of the pickup and directed the big truck as it positioned itself with the rear toward the dock. The guy with the cowboy hat stayed inside the pickup. The truck’s lights went out. By straining, I could now read the legend on the side of the truck. It said Estrella Foods, Inc.

I studied the two men as they left the cab of the Estrella truck and passed through the pickup’s headlights. One of them wore a blue, short-sleeved shirt tucked into cowpoke-skinny jeans with a belt that had a big silver buckle. The second guy wore baggy camouflage trousers and a yellow tee-shirt without a message. Since this was the truck from Houston, one of these two men had to be John Peterson.

The headlights of the pickup went out. The four men gathered at the rear of the big truck, out of my view. Shortly, a deck light on *Veronica B.* came on.

I strained to see the action, although the draped nets hanging from the frames on the boat interfered. All four men seemed to be wrestling with what looked like a large box that had apparently been removed from the rear of the *Estrella* truck.

Soon the men shifted a second, similar box, onto the deck. During a pause, the guy in the cowboy hat went into the deck house. Interior lights came on. The boat's diesel motor started with loud sputtering. Smoke issued from its stack. After a few more minutes, cowboy hat joined the other men on deck where it looked like they heaved on a large hatch or something similar.

Confusing actions involving the rigging followed. A boom swung around toward the stern. The diesel motor's speed increased. One of the two boxes seemed to rise clear of the deck. It stopped, then moved sideways, with men apparently guiding it. It stopped again, then slowly disappeared from view. I guessed it had descended into a hatch. After more movements by the men, the second box went through similar motions and also disappeared.

I detected voices during these actions, but could not discern words.

Following the handling of the second box, the boat's diesel motor stopped. Two of the men debarked and paused near the two trucks. One of them laughed. They appeared to be the same men who'd arrived in the *Estrella* truck. They boarded it and its motor started. Headlights came on, and it pulled away. I ducked below the dash to avoid the beam of its headlights as it

swung past. The truck drove off in a direction opposite to that of its arrival.

More lights came on in the deck house. Through one of the portholes I could detect some movements by the two men inside. I couldn't determine what they were doing, although they didn't show any sign of powering up *Veronica B*. I waited for about twenty minutes during which the two men in the boat showed no signs of leaving. It was past eleven, so I started the Mazda's motor, eased from my parking place and drove the road a short distance before switching on my headlights.

I drove to Tate's bar. As I approached, I studied the bar's layout. The building was low and shed-roofed, with parking in front and on one side, on gravel. There was no outdoor lighting, just dim light from a streetlamp some distance to the north. There were a half-dozen vehicles present, although the Estrella Foods truck was not there. All the vehicles in the front were parked head-in to the building, with one vehicle parked on the side, also parked head-in.

I pulled into the lot and backed up on the far side of the car parked on the side of Tate's. Then I switched off the motor and lights. From where I was, I could see the front parking area, where there was room for several more parked cars.

I rolled down the driver's window. Sounds of country music drifted in.

I waited, fighting off drowsiness by counting the number of windows in the building, the number of letters in the neon beer signs, anything.

Headlights from a red pickup flared from the entrance to the lot. It parked. Two men got out, talking words too muffled by the distance to understand. One of them wore camouflaged

pants. They looked like the two men who'd come from Houston in the Estrella Foods truck. They entered the bar.

I waited a few minutes, got out of the Mazda and strolled to the front and entered.

The inside was divided into two rooms. One contained the bar, a rough wooden affair with bamboo decoration tacked to its front and a cash register. A woman tended behind it. To the left was a room with tables, a tiny dance floor, and a tiny bandstand to match—without a band. A jukebox against the far wall jangled at high volume playing a western lament.

I saw the two men seated at a table in the left room. I confirmed they were the two men from the Estrella truck.

I selected a table near them with an easy view of the entrance and sat down. The music was so loud the two men almost shouted over it to be heard. This made eavesdropping easy.

## CHAPTER 15

A big letter 'P' could be seen on the buckle of the guy seated farthest from me, so I guessed he was John Peterson. He and the younger man in the camouflage trousers were talking about some girls they'd encountered.

The waitress took their order and then mine, and soon returned. She served them longneck Budwiesers, and they ran a tab. They didn't pay any attention to me.

I paid for my Coors and laid a tip on the table. I drank some of my beer and looked around. Mostly men, except for two couples laughing loudly at the bar. Dingy interior, with several loose acoustic tiles overhead that looked like they might fall off. The fluorescent lamps providing lighting had covers partially covered with blue paint to provide 'atmosphere'.

For a time, the Estrella men didn't say anything about their mission. Then, Peterson said, "Goin' to be stuck here till next week."

"How come?" camouflage said.

"Garth says we don't go back to Houston till Friday week."

"I ain't gonna miss making that pickup for awhile."

Peterson paused the lift of his longneck. "Why you say that?"

“You know I don’t like that neighborhood. Scares shit outta me.”

“Aw Handy,” Peterson said, taking a swallow from the bottle. “It ain’t that bad. Just the drive-bys you got to miss.” He chuckled. “Reminds me of a Cong village at night. You never know what’s goin on till there’s holes in you. Much better in the daytime—you see ‘em coming.”

“Scares shit outta me.” Camouflage let the beer gurgle in his mouth. “How much longer we gonna be doing this kinda shit?”

“Till we get this here big deal. That’s what Garth says.” Peterson ogled the waitress and smiled at her. She ignored him.

“When’s this here pickup at that ranch?”

“Dunno. Garth says he don’t know, neither.”

“Shit,” Camouflage said, “I wish we’d get out of this one-horse town.” He tipped his longneck to his lips.

“You ain’t got that right. It’s a one-*whore*’s town,” Peterson said, laughing. Handy gave him a quick sober look, then he burst into laughter.

Peterson set his bottle on the table, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I gotta say, you ain’t gonna be no more happy when we sail off in that shrimper.”

“I’ll be outta this one-whore’s town and through making pickups. I’ll be happy enough to leave it all behind,” Camouflage said, shaking his head.

“Sailing cross the Gulf and back ain’t what I’d call a vacation,” Peterson said, turning his bottle round and round on top of the table.

“Bonus time!” Camouflage grinned. He slapped the table with his hand for emphasis. “You forget. After that it’s bonus time!”

The entrance door opened and CAMEL entered. I froze for a fast second. I tried to swallow, but the football in my throat interfered.

I stood up fast, walked directly toward CAMEL, blocking his view of the Estrella men. I stopped in front of him. “Howdy,” I said with a smile. “I sure wanted to thank you for getting the word to John. It’s just been great visiting with him.”

CAMEL gave me a questioning look. A fraction of a second later, he grinned. “Oh, yeah—I remember you . . .”

“Sorry,” I said, “I got to run. See you later.”

I rounded him and went out through the doorway he’d just left. Outside, I sprinted to the Mazda, started it and threw it into gear. I tore out of the parking lot, spitting gravel.

I glanced back and saw the entrance door of Tate’s was still closed. For all I knew, those three guys spent the rest of the night in Tate’s trying to figure out who the hell that handsome stranger from Pensacola was.

###

It was after two the next day before I made my way slowly down the jetway behind an aged lady with a cane.

Miami International was not crowded. With plenty of time before the commute left, I strolled down the long corridor, thinking. I passed a long row of windows and noted the leaden atmosphere. Soon it would rain, I predicted. As I rounded a corner by a Juice Bar, my attention was arrested by an approaching bronze face with a familiar smile full of white teeth.

“You’re a hard man to find,” Mark Eppington said. He wore a plaid suit. His knitted tie was loosened at the neck. His hands were in his trouser pockets, everything relaxed.

“You’re not doing too bad,” I said, dropping my carry-on bag to the floor.

“I tried to get hold of you in the Keys.” He offered a handshake; I accepted. “But no luck.”

“So naturally, you went directly to Miami International.”

He grinned, looked at the floor. “Not exactly.”

“What’s up?”

“We have some new information on the hijack case. I thought I’d share it with you.”

I picked up my carry-on and we moved to the side of the aisle. “Not to cramp your style, Mark.” I dropped the bag again. “But that sounds like something out of Grimms.”

He grinned again. “As in Hansel and Gretel?”

I nodded.

“Okay. We do have information. And we do have needs.” He smiled with a trace of sheepishness. “We sometimes have to rely on the good will of airline reservation clerks.”

“Uh-huh,” I said.

Eppington nodded. “Okay, you were probably not visiting relatives, or friends—in Corpus Christi, right?”

“Now wait a minute, Mark . . .”

“Let me tell you. When I was at Cornell, I played on the chess team. Opening thrusts may develop into aggression. Moves that are too aggressive often produce losses that leave both sides weak. This is why most games end in draws. You see where I’m going?”

“Right now, I can see where *I* should be going.” I picked up my carry-on and pointed. “My flight leaves in thirty minutes.”

Mark matched my pace as I headed for the gate. I said, “Regarding your point about the chess match, it doesn’t tell me

what happens when the chess board is knocked over and all the chessmen end up on the floor.”

“What I’m saying is, you and I are headed for a draw. If we keep this up, nobody wins.”

I stopped. Eppington stopped and turned toward me. I said, “Have I done something that offends the eye in the sky?”

He resumed walking. “I wouldn’t say that, Billy,” he said. “The agency sometimes steps with all the finesse of a Percheron, but we *are* dedicated to justice. You could be very helpful in that endeavor.” He paused and smiled at me. “Not that we don’t appreciate the help you’ve already given us.”

“Sure. But I’m not a partner to your business—I don’t work for the government.”

“That’s fair.” He went silent. “I was just wondering if, before you fly home, if we could just chat quietly for a few minutes . . .”

“Heck yes, Mark.” I glanced at my watch. “I always enjoy chatting with you.

We arrived and found a couple of chairs out of earshot of waiting passengers. Eppington leaned toward me. “We have a person—an informer—who thinks the person in the sketch, Vincent Pragg’s killer, is Carlos Silvan.”

“Christine is Carlos Silvan.”

“If this person is right, Silvan was disguised as a woman when he entered your . . . fishing boat.”

“Sport fish.”

“Sport fish—I never get that right.” Eppington shook his head. “How does that work, considering your observations during the incident?”

“Well, it took some muscle to stab Vincent that way.” I cast my mind back to the hijacking. “It might even explain why Christine never said anything.”

Eppington nodded. “If the suspect is Carlos Silvan, he’s a Cuban citizen who may have ties to drug activity in south Florida.”

“Isn’t drug activity, uh . . . what’s-his-name—Howlandger’s responsibility?”

“Doug Howlandger. Yes, he’s DEA. The Bureau’s interest is interstate crime and threats to the government. But there is a certain overlap. I hope you understand. And as you may know, interagency cooperation isn’t always as good as it should be.”

“Uh-huh. Turf wars and all that.” I parked my carry-on on an adjacent chair.

“We try to avoid that term.”

I smiled. “But maybe you have to file a freedom-of-information lawsuit to find out what’s happening.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Eppington spread his hands wide. “Carlos Silvan may be a bit player, or he may be a power player. It’s possible he works for the Cuban government or some other government. Our file is thin. When you boil it all down, we’re not even certain this is the person in the sketch that you and Zack helped create.”

I wondered why Eppington was telling me this. “So?”

“So we had a thought. We thought you might be able to personally identify whether or not he’s the guy who played Christine on board *Reel Time*.”

## CHAPTER 16

Mark Eppington just told me he was thinking I could personally identify Vincent Pragg's killer.

"Sure," I said. "You have a mug shot?"

"That's the problem. We don't have a decent photo. As I said, our file is thin."

"I don't get it," I said. "I thought you guys claimed the-eye-in-the-sky tracked him on that trawler to Cuba. How come you didn't get a photo?"

"It's complicated. We have some fuzzies. A couple of distant shots. None of what we have will suffice for accurate, certain identification. For that we would need well-lighted close-ups—like mug shots."

"So you haven't been able—"

"I can't get into detail, Billy. Cuba is difficult and Silvan is slippery. He's good at disguises. He seldom shows up where he's expected. And our borders are, let's say . . ." Eppington shook his head.

"Not airtight," I said. "I get that."

"Time is of the essence, and there's a meeting scheduled. If he shows up for the meeting, and if you were there . . ."

"What?"

"That's where you could be of significant help. Of course it's entirely voluntary."

“Sure, voluntary. But even if I was there and he’s the guy who killed Vincent, he’d recognize me in a second.”

“Of course. You’d have to be inconspicuous.”

I laughed. “Inconspicuous. You’re a marvel, Mark. How does inconspicuous work?”

“We’ll arrange that you’re not seen, or are disguised.” Eppington’s expression became more serious. “Of course, it’s an irregular procedure—and there is some danger. It’s a bit like being an FBI informant. We would have protections in place, of course, you know, other agents. But you would need to offer, so to speak.”

I didn’t like the sound of ‘offer.’ “What would happen if I identify this guy as Vincent’s killer?”

“That’s evidence we seek. But I must tell you, we plan to delay his arrest.”

“But that would mean he’s a murderer. Why delay?”

“Because if he is an agent of a foreign power and if foul play beyond Vincent’s murder is involved, we need to discover what that consists of.”

“So the Bureau is willing to let this guy, even if he’s a murderer, just wander around?”

Eppington drew back. “Look Billy. The FBI is charged with maintaining the country’s safety and security. Until we know this man is who we suspect, and whether he represents a threat, we have to regard him as someone who, by his actions, will reveal what he is involved in. If we arrest him too soon, we may never learn of a larger threat, if there is one. Do you see the dilemma?”

“I sort of understand. But what’s to prevent this guy, if he is who you think, from hunting Zack and me down and killing us?”

“First, he doesn’t know we can identify him as Vincent Pragg’s killer. Second, he seems to have years of illegal activity with no arrests, so he probably thinks he’s too clever to be caught. He likely doesn’t feel threatened. Third, we will be watching him. For these reasons, and others, we think it unlikely he’d attack you—or Zack.”

“Uh-huh.” What Mark said sounded good, but it also sounded like the promises made in TV commercials for vegetable processors.

Eppington studied me. “Although we need your help, I realize this is a tough call for you.”

My mind was already made up. “Maybe not as tough as you think. When do we begin?”

Eppington looked relieved. “We don’t have the exact day yet.” He stood up. “As soon as I know, I’ll get hold of you.”

“I bet you will.” I took my bag from the chair and stood. We shook hands. He clapped me on the shoulder. “Have a good flight. And thanks.”

I watched as his tall frame receded down the corridor in graceful strides. I returned to the boarding area and soon was aboard the airplane, trying to feel for the end of my lap belt.

“For your comfort and safety during our flight, ladies and gentlemen . . .” droned the flight attendant.

‘Comfort and safety,’ I thought. My future was shaping up slightly short on both accounts.

###

When I arrived at the airport, it was raining. I was soaked by the time I got to my pickup. As I pulled from my spot, smoky clouds skittered across the sky and sheets of rain raced for

pavement drains. My wipers barely kept a small area of the windshield clear.

By the time I got home, it had stopped, although water still gushed from roofs and downspouts. There was a wet note from Zack stuck in my door. I grabbed it, let myself in, threw off the wet clothes and donned my robe.

I punched Zack's number. When he answered, I said, "What's the panic?"

"I'll be there as quick as I can," he said, and the phone went off.

I was unpacking when Zack drove up and threw open the door.

"Don't bother knocking," I said as he faced me.

His face was pale. "The money. It's gone!"

"How do you know?"

"How the hell do you *think* I know?"

"You dug it up." I threw dirty socks and underwear onto the floor.

"Will you stop throwing your shit around and listen?"

I straightened and looked blankly at him.

His expression was pained. "How the hell else would I know it's gone?"

I said, "I thought we agreed . . ."

He now saw my calm. "You don't look . . . huh?" He turned and shut the door, swung back with one eyebrow raised. "Did you . . ."

I nodded. "Yeah. I was afraid you'd do what you just did. So I dug it up."

"Well, you horse's ass. You freaking horse's ass."

"The money's safe, Zack."

His hand slid over his mouth. He couldn't find words. He didn't want to further his embarrassment by adding stupid excuses to his action. I went to the refrigerator, pulled out two cans of beer and handed one to him. I sat on the couch and took a swallow, not looking at him. He tossed back half a can, then abruptly said, "Why the hell are you dressed like you just got out of bed?"

"It was pouring rain when I got to the airport. I got soaked."

"Texas didn't improve you any," he said, staring at my bare legs. "Knobby-kneed as ever."

"Texas has charms you'll only dream of."

"You mean you got laid?"

"I'm referring to the hot tamales."

"Me too," Zack said, and we both laughed.

I told him about locating the *Veronica B.*, watching the boxes from Houston being loaded from the Estrella Foods truck onto the shrimper, and the eavesdropping I'd done at Tate's Bar. "Remember what that guy in Pensacola said about the mission?"

Zack paused. "You mean shipping money?"

"Uh-huh. Those boxes could be full of money."

"Aw, come on. Boxes that big?" He spread his hands wide. "Loaded with money?"

"Could be. Dealers take in small bills, Zack. Small, like fives, tens, twenties. So the wholesaler ends up with stacks and stacks of small bills. Now how will the kingpins, the supplier of the drugs, get rid of mountains of bills, millions of dollars in small bills?"

"They weigh the money?"

“Possibly. In any case, they can’t take it to a bank on a forklift and ask the teller to deposit it to their money market market account. That might look suspicious.”

“Yeah, well, I never really gave it much thought. I know there’s a law about depositing over a certain amount . . .”

“I think a cash deposit of over ten-thousand dollars has to be reported by the bank. It’s a requirement that came about to discourage money laundering.”

Zack took another big gulp of beer. “That’s certainly a problem I wish I had, trying to deposit mountains of money. So you figure they’re loading all this money into a shrimp to take it—where?”

“The guy I think is Peterson said they’d be sailing ‘across the gulf.’ He didn’t say where.” I gathered up my laundry, went to the bedroom, and put on fresh clothes. When I rejoined Zack, I said, “Peterson and the camouflaged-pants guy also said something about a pickup at a ranch.” I grabbed a shirt, threw it on over my tee, and told Zack about being surprised by Eppington at Miami International. I detailed what he said about Carlos Silvan.

“An informer has identified him as the man in the sketch that you and I created at the Miramar FBI. He may be a mid-level drug dealer, an agent of some foreign country, even a terrorist—Eppington said the Bureau didn’t have much on him.”

“You think Carlos is involved with the money-shipping—in the *Veronica B.*?”

I took a drink of my beer. “Just a guess, but I’d say Carlos was the guy who arranged Estrella’s purchase of the shrimp boat. He’s mysterious. Pretty difficult to see what other parts he may play.”

“We know Estrella Foods is a front.” Zack gestured with his can of beer. “With Khan and what’s his name up to some kind of big deal.”

“Enrique.”

“Yeah. I have difficulty keeping track of all these guys.” He finished off his beer.

“You never know,” I said. “Maybe they’re going to take the money to Cuba. Maybe there’s a sweetheart deal there with some bank that will accept bales of drug money. Carlos is Cuban, so he might be the key to that.”

“The *Veronica B.* has enough range.” Zack crushed his can. “Didn’t the seller say it had a range of 2,000 miles?”

“Yeah, that’s what Captain Briden said.”

“And a shrimp boat doesn’t look unusual in the Gulf of Mexico. But . . .”

“But what?”

“It’s slow,” Zack said from the kitchen, where he’d deposited the can. “At ten knots there’s lots of time for U.S. surveillance to track it. And the Cuban coast patrol would have an easy time intercepting them off the Cuban coast.”

“Yeah. Maybe they’ll take it to Columbia, or Panama.”

“From Texas?” Zack returned. “No. They’d have to make the turn at the Yucatan Channel—that’s got to be better than eighteen-hundred miles. And it would be risky, trying to get past port authorities in Central America.”

“The answer is, they need a friendly port. They can’t clear that cargo through legitimate customs.”

Zack frowned. “It doesn’t figure. Unless . . .”

“What?”

“Unless they plan to rendezvous with a friend at sea. A cleared vessel, say from Cuba. They could transfer the boxes of money at sea.”

“Then they wouldn’t need a friendly port,” I said.

“If they transferred the cargo at night, somewhere along the twenty-fourth parallel, north of the Yucatan. They’d be hard to spot visually, like from a Coast Guard chopper.”

“Sounds possible,” I said. Yet I had to admit that our ideas were just guesses. We could be wildly wrong on every detail, including whether those boxes were filled with money, with contraband, or with legitimate cargo.

## CHAPTER 17

“What do you mean, you don’t know how to spit the seeds?”

Julia looked at me and laughed. “Girls are taught better than to spit.”

“Can’t eat watermelon without spitting the seeds.” I took a bite and spit, demonstrating my best form. The seed bounced off Julia’s porch into the flower bed.

“Hey,” she said, “don’t spit seeds into my flower bed. They might sprout.”

“If they grow enough, we can have free melon.” I took another bite and spit several seeds.

Julia laughed again. “You’re impossible.”

I grinned at her impish laugh. It had been a hectic weekend with back-to-back charters on *Reel Time*. I was glad for this Monday off. When I saw watermelons piled outside the grocery, I couldn’t resist. Besides, Zack’s truck was parked in the lot. Zack was at the end of the checkout, flashing his smile and being clever for the benefit of Tish.

Tish liked that. She giggled. When she giggled, her whole body participated. Zack liked that.

When I brought the melon to Julia’s, we put it in the kitchen sink and added ice from her fridge all around. It was tedious waiting till it got cold, but now there was only a small piece left.

“It’s nice we both have a day off,” Julia said, sitting on her deck with her feet on the steps.

“Uh-huh. I’m enjoying it—being with you.” We watched the glow of the afternoon, wanting time to halt so we could catch up with each other.

The sultry air brought sweat to our bodies, but we didn’t move. One instant I caught Julia’s brown eyes through tangles of hair and it seemed we shared some idyllic secret. But in the next instant it was gone in the breath of the on-shore breeze.

A rattle and crunch announced the arrival of a Sheriff’s van. It rounded the corner and shuddered to a stop behind my parked pickup.

“I thought I might catch you,” Devlin said as he left the van. “You weren’t home, so . . . anyway, you’re supposed to come with me.”

“Now?” I stood up and frowned.

“Yup.”

“What for?”

“Damned if I know. I’m supposed to get you to town by four.” He pushed his sleeve up and glanced at his watch. “We don’t have much time . . . let’s go.”

“Wait a minute. Is this an arrest?”

“Nope. But they said you’d come. It’s FBI business. Authorized by Mark Eppington.”

I started toward the door. “Okay. Got to wash the watermelon off my hands.”

Inside, Julia followed me to the sink. “The FBI. What’s this about?”

“I agreed to help Eppington out. It’s like a favor.” I rinsed my hands in the ice water. As she handed me a towel, her eyes searched mine. I wiped my hands and kissed her on the lips.

“It’s more than a favor.” She looked away. “Try to be careful, okay?”

I nodded and joined Devlin in the van.

When we reached the Overseas Highway, Devlin turned on the flashing lights and the siren. Despite the traffic, we made good time to Marathon. At the airport, Devlin took a side road to a fenced area at the far end of the field, near an unmarked metal building. A man opened a chain-link gate, and Devlin pulled to a stop near a yellow and white helicopter.

“There’s your ride,” Devlin said, thumbing toward the chopper. I went to the nearest side. A guy in helmet and flight gear came up, opened a door and motioned for me to enter. Once I was seated behind the pilot, the guy threw a life jacket over my head, pointed to its front buckles, and pulled a lap belt over my middle. He handed me a set of what looked like earphones and pointed at his own ear-protectors and nodded. He closed the door, and tested that it was securely latched.

The turbine whined loudly and the big blades began turning. The guy in the helmet circled, bent beneath the propeller wash, entered the other side of the cabin, and took a seat next to the pilot. The turbine wound up with a roar, we lifted off the ground to a height of a few feet. We turned around, rose a little more, tipped forward and skimmed loudly to the northeast.

The chopper bumped along like a truck with loose springs on a washboard road. Sliding off to my right was the string of Keys and reefs, lumps of shell, coral and drifted sand seemingly held together by the concrete

ribbon of the Overseas Highway. Soon we were over open water.

Land arrived again in the form of the green denseness of the Everglades.

As Miami International came into view, we slowed. We dropped to a few hundred feet and slowly glided to a landing near a long shed with a metal roof and its own windsock. Parked near the helipad was a white Dodge van. A man standing by the passenger's door motioned to me as I left the chopper.

"Agent Halliday," he said. "You're Farris?" We shook hands, he followed me into the van. He thumbed toward the driver in front. "This is Wiskewski—we call him Whiskey." Whiskey drove out and onto an exit road. Within minutes we were at the posted limit on the Expressway.

###

"Good to see you, Billy," Eppington said, after I'd cleared security and taken the elevator inside the glass-clad building.

I smiled. "That chopper sure beats driving the Overseas Highway."

"Have a seat and I'll brief you. We don't have much time, so excuse me if I run through this quickly." He glanced at his handwritten notes. "Just got word today from our informant. He says Carlos Silvan is supposed to attend a meeting tonight at Los Caballeros, a Cuban restaurant here in Miami. I called you right away, but failed to reach you."

"We haven't learned what the meeting is about, or exactly who's attending. It might be a drug deal meeting or it might be something else."

"What does Doug Howlandger say? Does he think it's a drug deal?"

“Doug’s out of town at the moment. He hasn’t checked in with me, so he may not know about the meeting.”

“So this is strictly an FBI operation?”

“No. We continue our cooperation. DEA is staffing some of the operation and we’re picking up the balance. Nevertheless.” Eppington said without a change in tone, “I’m running the show.”

I found this last comment comforting.

“After we get you disguised, I’ll hand you to Agent Lorenzo. He’s an expert when it comes to Latin issues, he’s smart, and knows the ropes. You’ll be completely safe in his hands. He’ll brief you on the details on your way to the restaurant. Questions?”

“I’ll think of a dozen an hour from now.”

Eppington led me to the elevator. Inside, he said, “I want you to know how much I appreciate what you’re doing. Without it, we might be tagging the wrong man—a very worrisome outcome.”

We exited the elevator and entered an unmarked door a few steps past a water cooler. Eppington held the door and in a loud voice said, “M. L., you there?”

A short thin man in a white lab coat came from behind a corner wall. “Oh, it’s you, Mark,” he said. “Martha said you’d be here soon.” He looked at me. “I see you’ve brought my subject.”

Eppington introduced M. L. White, and we shook hands. I thought about his use of the term ‘subject.’

“Male or female?” M. L. said.

Eppington laughed. “He’ll do fine as a Caucasian male.”

I turned to M. L. “Do I get a choice?”

M. L. said, “I keep hoping they’ll let me turn an aging Caucasian into an Indonesian belly dancer. But . . .”

Eppington shook his head, swung his focus upward.  
“Guy’s a true flake.”

To M. L. I said, “Can you turn me into Clark Gable?”

“Sorry,” M. L. said, “Your ears won’t make it. Got to stick out.” He cupped his hands behind his ears, and we laughed.

“Got to run,” Eppington said. “I’ll see you before you leave.” He stepped through the doorway and closed it.

M. L. shuffled around me like he was examining the tires on a used car. “Hmm,” he said. He led me to the next room, which looked like the interior of a salon, with mirrors on opposing walls.

I sat in one of the two barber chairs while he searched through materials in several cabinets lining the wall. “We’ll start with a dark wig and horn rims . . .” he said, trailing off while he thought of other treatments.

‘Men at work,’ I thought—what craziness there is in the nooks and crannies of law enforcement.

“We don’t go in for skin mods, much,” M. L. said. “That’s theatrical. We try to stick to simple strategies that are effective and comfortable.”

“Skin mods?”

“Cosmetics. Darkening creams, eye shadow, blush . . . you know.”

“Yeah. I generally steer clear of that, too.”

“Very important for the ladies, though.”

“Unless you’re trying to change them into men, right?”

“Hold still, there, Billy,” he said, placing a pair of dark-rimmed spectacles on my face. “I’m trying to get the right fit.” He set that aside and chose another pair.

After a short time, M. L. asked me to look in the mirror. I faced a dark haired, older man with heavy, dark spectacles and a short, thin mustache.

M. L. said, “I think even your mother might be confused, at least momentarily.”

“I still have green eyes,” I said.

“Sure. We could change that with contacts, but because you’re not a contact wearer, you’d be uncomfortable. We don’t want to jeopardize your vision—that is your major job today.” He motioned for me to follow him. “Okay. Now let’s go see how you’re going to dress.”

###

Agent Lorenzo was no taller than me, and overweight. His belly flowed over the top of his trousers. He wore a sports jacket and steel-rimmed glasses that rested low on his nose. He was, let’s say, not exactly your image of the federal officer—yet his jet black hair, dark eyes and skin were a bonus for this operation. He’d blend without question into the target neighborhood.

He drove a gray, two-year-old Chevy with a crease in the right front fender that had turned brown with rust. Invisible under the dash was a powerful radio set that sputtered occasionally with short agent-to-agent messages. Once, Lorenzo spoke briefly to the radio, although I couldn’t detect a microphone on him.

We were headed north on 32<sup>nd</sup> Avenue when he said, “How’d you get yourself into this mess?”

"I volunteered."

He nodded. "Didn't anybody ever tell you . . .?"

"Eppington's very persuasive," I said, smiling.

As Lorenzo laughed, his belly wobbled.

We stopped for a traffic signal. He said, "We have two plans. Plan A is what we're going to do. Plan B is what we're going to do when Plan A goes wrong. Savvy?"

"Savvy."

"Plan A is, we get a table near the door. We don't order food immediately, just a couple of beers. You drink beer?"

I chuckled. "Occasionally."

"Drink slow. Make it last. Eventually we'll order something to eat. Eat slow. Drink a lot of water, keep the waiter busy bringing water. Savvy?"

"Savvy."

The signal turned green. We moved across a bumpy intersection.

"If you see the mark—the suspect—and if he's the guy you know, you ask me to pass the sugar. Meanwhile, arrange your knife so it points to the guy you identify. You got that?"

I assured him I understood.

"Okay. I'll take it from there." He maneuvered the Chevy around a double-parked vegetable truck.

"Now Plan B. In case of gun shots or what have you—"

"Gun shots?"

"Just a figure of speech. It won't happen. But just in case. Savvy?"

"Okay . . ."

"In case of any violence, you hit the floor. Get as flat as you can as fast as you can. Pay close attention to me, I'll get you out of there. Now for any other defects in Plan A, just

## Dangerous Parallel

listen to me. Pay no attention to any other voices. I'll tell you what to do. You got that?"

"I think so."

We crossed the Miami river. Rusty freighters flying exotic Caribbean flags squatted next to dockside warehouses.

"Whatever you do, don't stare at the mark. Don't let him even guess you're looking at him. Savvy?"

"I think I can handle that."

"Good."

Lorenzo turned left onto a street made narrow by angle-parked cars on our side. When he found an empty slot, he parked the Chevy.

A block down and around the corner was Dos Caballeros.

## CHAPTER 18

Lorenzo led me into Dos Caballeros. Inside the entrance we pushed through swinging doors. The place was crowded, and loud with the clatter of plates banging against plates and voices talking and laughing. Waiters in white shirts with white towels around their waists scurried about. As soon as we pushed through, a man about sixty dressed in a dark suit and tie confronted us. He carried a sheaf of menus. “Buenas noches,” he said.

Lorenzo smiled and spoke with him in Spanish. The host led us to a table fairly close to the entrance, but left no menus. The table was set with a white cloth, napkins, and silver. Overhead, a fan chopped at the smoky air.

I glanced around, and saw no one familiar. Lorenzo pointed me to a chair with a view of the entire room. He took a chair to my right that faced the entrance.

A waiter arrived. “¿Que va a tomar?”

“Dos cervezas,” Lorenzo said, followed by an unfamiliar brand.

The waiter brought two bottles and two glasses. He laid two menus on the table. We poured our beers and sipped.

“I’ll order for you,” Lorenzo said, pushing his glasses closer to his eyes with a finger while staring at the menu.

“What do you like?”

“I like it spicy. Is the food here hot?”

“So-so.” He rocked his hand, palm down.

Several couples arrived and were seated. I scanned each furtively, wondering if my memory of Christine’s face would allow me to identify Carlos. I also worried that my disguise would not hide my identity.

Lorenzo continued reading the menu. “I’ll order something medium—for both of us. You wouldn’t understand these . . .”

Most of the patrons appeared to be Latins, although some looked Anglo-like. As steaming dishes of black beans and rice were served at a table near us, the aroma of onion, garlic and cilantro wafted to us.

Lorenzo looked up from the menu, sniffed, and followed my gaze. “Moors and Christians,” he said.

“What?”

“It’s traditional. Black beans and white rice. The beans are the Moors, the rice Christians.”

“And both get eaten.” I chuckled. “There’s a lesson there, you suppose?”

I sipped my beer. Two men came through the swinging doors. The near one was not familiar. The one on the far side was completely bald. A shiver ran through me as he turned. I immediately recognized the face of Christine—this was Carlos.

Although it had been a while since I’d seen that face silently gazing at *Reel Time*’s wake during the hijacking, and despite the unexpected bald head, the face was one I could not forget.

The host showed the two men to a table near the wall to my right.

Our waiter returned, and Lorenzo ordered. When the waiter left, I said, "Pass the sugar."

Lorenzo's eyes met mine. I reached for my knife and aligned the blade toward Carlos. The blade now pointed behind Lorenzo, but he made no effort to look. He simply nodded.

With due care, I stole stealthy glances at Carlos. He seemed in serious conversation with his companion, a thick-necked man with a heavy mustache. The waiter came to their table, and they ordered. It was at this moment that I noticed a bulge in the left lapel of the thick-necked man's suitcoat. I diverted my eyes back to our table, and noticed there was a similar bulge in Lorenzo's sport coat.

As the waiter brought our first course, steaming bowls of soup, I saw two men standing next to the swinging doors. They had apparently just entered Dos Caballeros.

Both men's faces swung side to side searching the interior. One of them gestured to the other. They pushed through the doors where they were met by the host with a sheaf of menus. They engaged in a brief intense conversation with the host. After a moment he nodded and led them toward the table where Carlos and his companion were seated. As they passed within a couple yards of our table, I realized that the shorter of the two men was B.I. Khan.

To cover my surprise, I quickly spooned some of my soup to my mouth. "Ouch!" I exclaimed—the soup burned my lips. Lorenzo frowned at me, glanced at the two men being led by the host, and back toward me. He spooned some of his soup, brought it to his lips, and blew carefully to cool it. When he tasted the soup, he murmured a sound that meant delicious.

## Dangerous Parallel

The two men greeted Carlos and his companion at the latter's table, and Khan and his companion pulled out join them.

Lorenzo backed his chair from the table and said, "scuse me." He wiped his lips with the side of his index finger, stood, turned and walked toward the rear of the room without looking toward the four men's table. I watched as he entered a room through a door labeled "Caballeros."

Furtively, I glanced again at the four men. The waiter was now serving them drinks. They were talking, earnestly, mainly Carlos to Khan, who was seated with his back to me. Carlos looked unhappy, often tilting his head to the side. The thick-necked one didn't say a word. Khan's companion, with dark curly hair and a gold chain around his neck, looked Latin. Only Carlos—the Cuban—did not look Latin.

I tried hard to assess whether either Khan or Carlos recognized me, but it was impossible to tell. They had not turned in my direction. But because these were men potentially expert at deception, I chillingly realized I should assume they'd identified me. How would I communicate my fear to Lorenzo?

Lorenzo returned from the restroom and I saw that he carefully observed the men at the table with Carlos as he walked between tables. He sat down and pushed a piece of toilet paper toward me. On it, in pencil, he'd drawn the room, the doors, and squares for our table and the table with the four men. Around the square of their table, he'd drawn four circles representing the four men. He placed

his pencil on the toilet paper next to a large question mark he'd drawn and stared at me.

I took the pencil and placed an "x" inside the circle indicating Carlos. Lorenzo glanced at my mark, slid the paper to him and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. "Forget what I said about eating slow," he said. "Eat fast."

The waiter brought our main dishes. Lorenzo took four big bites, shook his head in enjoyment, and said, "You ready?" He signaled the waiter, who gave him the bill. He placed a wad of cash next to the bill, and stood up. I followed, and we left the table.

As we pushed out through the swinging doors, Lorenzo muttered, "No wonder I get gas." Outside, he handed me the keys to the Chevy. "Get the car and swing on by here. I'll be waiting."

I hurried around the corner, still excited by sighting both Carlos and Khan. I trotted to the Chevy, not knowing what Lorenzo planned to do. I got into the car, started it and backed out of the slot.

Lorenzo was standing between the corner and Dos Caballeros. It was a street with parallel-parked cars. When he saw me, he hurried around to the driver's side before I'd come to a complete stop. "Move over," he ordered. I put the car in 'park' and complied.

He drove forward a few dozen yards beyond the entrance to the restaurant, and double-parked, with the motor running. As he set the handbrake he said loudly and not to me, "This is two-six. Got a positive. We have two parties of two. Standing by."

## Dangerous Parallel

The radio under the dash crackled. “Gotcha. Positive. And two parties of two,” a male voice said. Another voice said, “Ten-four.”

Lorenzo readjusted the outside rear-view mirror to permit him to view the entrance to Dos Caballeros. We waited.

I considered what I should tell Lorenzo. He probably didn’t know Khan and didn’t know what I knew about Khan, so I decided not to mention that Khan was part of the group. “I don’t know, but it’s possible one of those guys recognized me,” I said.

“You mean Carlos,” he said, glancing at me.

“Yeah, but he might not let on about it.” I said, lamely.

The sun had set but it was not yet dark. Cars came by in our lane, drivers annoyed. One honked at us for blocking the lane. An Anglo man with a Latin woman walked toward us, and entered an old Camaro parked ahead of us. When the Camaro pulled out of the parking space, Lorenzo pulled into the space, but left the motor running. He readjusted the outside mirror, placed his fingers on his glasses and pushed them closer to his eyes.

After a time, the radio crackled again with, “What’s up?”

Lorenzo kept his eyes on the mirror. “Standing by. Two-six.”

Another fifteen minutes passed. I felt like a benched football player, uncomfortable, anxious to know the score, but wishing not to interfere with a winning play. The Chevy motor droned on, abetted by the air-conditioner that whooshed a continuous blast of cold air.

The interior grew chilly, and finally, very cold. Lorenzo didn't notice and never let his view stray from the mirror.

Lorenzo snapped to the radio, "There's the mark. Two guys in suit coats. He's the baldy."

"Roger," a voice replied. "We have the baldy."

A short time later, a voice from the radio said, "Green Ford van. South on twenty-fifth. You see it, Ed?"

Another voice replied, "Picking up the green Ford van."

Lorenzo spoke urgently, "Two-six. Second party. Repeat, second party of two. Two guys, one blue jacket, one brown suit."

"Roger." This voice was followed by a minute or two of silence. Then the voice returned. "Brown Mercedes, 340-SL. Heading south . . . no, turned down the alley. Mack, can you get back there . . ."

Lorenzo abruptly swiveled in his seat toward the rear. A brown Mercedes flashed by us going north. Lorenzo pulled from the parking space, saying loudly, "Two-six. Picking up the Mercedes." He pulled into the traffic lane, barely clearing the car parked in front, and accelerated.

The Mercedes ahead turned right at the next intersection, and disappeared. Lorenzo pressed the gas pedal. The rear tires chirped.

"Not supposed to do this," he muttered.

The intersection had a stop sign, but Lorenzo only slowed, saw no cross traffic, and swung right. I yanked the dark-rimmed eyeglasses from my face to see more clearly. The Mercedes was nearly two blocks ahead.

The radio chirped. "Okay, two-six. We copy."

## Dangerous Parallel

Lorenzo accelerated to highway speed. “This guy is hauling ass,” Lorenzo said. “He’s spooked. What the fuck happened?”

The radio didn’t reply.

The Mercedes, now distant, turned left.

Lorenzo gave it more gas. I held on to my seat belt, figuring we were going to crash. Luckily, there was little cross traffic.

Lorenzo glanced at me. “This it?”

“Think so,” I said, meaning this is where I thought the Mercedes turned left.

The radio snapped, “Give us your location—we’ll intercept.”

Lorenzo threw the car left, just in front of a car approaching on the cross street. Our tires squealed and the other car braked. The Mercedes was quite a ways ahead, although lack of light made it hard to see.

“Bullshit,” Lorenzo said, to the radio and me. “No way without lights and siren.”

The Mercedes, now a long way ahead, took a right and disappeared.

Lorenzo slowed as we came to that intersection. We turned onto a crowded artery. “Sonofabitch is lucky he wasn’t creamed.”

I got a quick glimpse of a street sign. It read N.W. 54<sup>th</sup> St. Straining to see in the dusky distance, I could not locate the Mercedes. Lorenzo kept his foot on the gas, but it was becoming obvious we were not catching the Mercedes.

Ahead was an intersection with overhead traffic signals. Signs read US-441. Traffic signals showed red. Lorenzo braked.

## Dangerous Parallel

“There!” I yelled. The Mercedes was ahead, to our left, stopped in the left turn lane.

Lorenzo dove left, cutting off a pickup truck already in the left turn lane. Its driver squealed his brakes and laid on his horn.

There were about eight cars between us and the Mercedes. As the left-turn traffic slowed to a stop, the pickup driver behind us stuck his head out his window and cursed us at length. Lorenzo smiled thinly.

The left turn arrow turned green. The Mercedes wheeled left and passed the car ahead of it. By the time we arrived at the intersection, the light was amber. Lorenzo pushed it, and we squealed left, accelerating rapidly.

I could not see the Mercedes. We were now at highway speed, with another traffic signal some distance ahead. It turned red, and Lorenzo slowed.

It was almost dark, but I was able to see the Mercedes accelerating away on the other side of the intersection.

Lorenzo slapped the steering wheel with both hands. “Shit, shit, shit.” We stopped behind heavy traffic.

“Two-six,” Lorenzo said in a tired voice. “Mercedes northbound on U-S four four one at sixty second. We lost it.”

The radio crackled, “Copy, two-six.”

Lorenzo turned to me. “What the hell went wrong, Farris?”

I yanked the wig from my head and flopped it onto my lap. “Moors two, Christians zero.”

Lorenzo farted.

## CHAPTER 19

It was nearly dark when we got to FBI headquarters, but the place was brightly lit.

I'd shed the rest of my disguise, changed into my own clothes, and joined Lorenzo in Eppington's office. I rubbed my upper lip.

Eppington frowned. "You okay, Billy?"

"Sure. No problem, except for taking off the mustache."

He turned to Lorenzo. "I know it was a tough decision, Jose. Our plan didn't anticipate that the Mercedes would immediately take that alleyway. The tail was out of position."

"Right. When I saw the Mercedes smoking up behind us, I knew right away something had spooked him," Lorenzo said. "He didn't aim to be tailed."

"It's okay. We got the plate ID," Eppington said. "Sarah should be coming with the info shortly."

Lorenzo grasped his lower lip and pinched it thoughtfully. "I doubt the driver would have led us to his address. He'd probably have driven all over the state of Florida trying to lose us. And without a warrant . . ."

Eppington nodded. "Yeah . . ."

Lorenzo looked at me and grinned. “Anyway, I apologize, Farris. You shouldn’t have had to endure my crazy driving.”

“I’m okay,” I said. “Several Miami drivers, however, are unhappy with you.”

“Fortunately,” Eppington said, “we had better luck with the other tail. We have some kind of a fix on Carlos Silvan.” He nodded toward me. “Thanks again, Billy. Your identification of Silvan as the suspected killer was key to—”

“Excuse me, Mark,” said the woman who’d appeared in the doorway. “You said I should interrupt . . .”

“Yes, Sarah. What have you got?”

She paused and glanced at the ceiling. “Very strange.” She relaxed one hip inside her pink outfit and looked at a note in her hand. “The plate’s registered to Benny Lupine, L-U-P-I-N-E, address on South Broadway, Orlando.”

Eppington frowned. “What’s strange?”

“The vehicle is a 1988 Ford F-150—a pickup truck.”

“Hmm.” Wrinkles came to Eppington’s ebony forehead.

“A stolen plate. Was it reported?”

One side of Sarah’s lips lifted. “Unfortunately . . .”

“Sure,” Eppington said, “that pickup is probably parked on Lupine’s lawn with the hood up and the wheels off.”

Sarah dropped her hands to her side and left.

“How do you score that one, Farris?” Lorenzo said.

“Can’t fault the Moors offense too much,” I said.

Eppington shook his head. “I’m not even going to touch that.” He stood up and began to fasten the button on one sleeve. “Well, gentlemen, we have work to do. We still might be able to identify the Ford van.” He took his suitcoat from the top of a filing cabinet and slowly pulled it on. “Whatever—tomorrow’s a brand new day.”

###

The next afternoon, I was on *Reel Time* at the dock while Zack stood dockside, one foot propped on our cooler's lid. The charter party had gone away with their fish and some happy—I hoped—memories. I was spraying the deck with fresh water from the hose and thinking about the contrast between yesterday's wild ride from Dos Caballeros and the watermelon party with Julia that had been so rudely interrupted.

Zack looked thoughtful. "So now there's no doubt Carlos was Christine. And he's tied in with Khan, right?" He squinted out at the harbor. "But we still don't know what this is all about."

I stopped spraying to pick up a stray lure on the deck. "Yup." I placed the lure in the tackle cabinet.

"So how come Khan and company got away?"

"Good luck and fast driving. The driver—it was the other guy, not Khan—was good. He drove through a lot of stops without hitting anyone."

"Sounds like Khan was desperate."

"Something spooked him. There must have been Feds around the restaurant. Maybe they spotted one—who knows?"

Zack lifted his foot from the cooler and squinted. "I'm betting Khan identified you—from when you two shook hands—on the Hatt."

"Lorenzo and Eppington say otherwise. And I never saw them pay me any attention."

Zack stuck his hands in the pockets of his shorts. "If I was you, Junior, I'd grow some eyes in the back of my head. It'll help alert you to assassins." He turned. As he

started to walk away, I turned the hose on him. He laughed, jogged from under the shower, and hurried off.

I finished my chores and went home. In the mail was the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the catalog from Captain Jimmy's Fishing Supply. I was paging through it when the phone buzzed.

It was Candy Narsom. "Jules was so pleased with the job you did—the anniversary party—and he asked me to see if you'd do a repeat."

"Another anniversary?"

"Oh, no. It's a different event. A very nice cruise to the Bahamas. Not a lot of people like before, just a few—"

"Oh. That's got to be more than a day or two."

"Yes, it'll be four days."

"That would be tough—I have commitments . . ."

"You're married?"

"No, business commitments. Crewing on fishing charters and . . ."

"Was the money adequate for the anniversary party?"

I recalled the hundred-dollar bills. "Oh, sure. It's just that—"

"It would be more generous for this trip." She sounded excited.

"Uh-huh, I understand. But . . ."

"You can't do it?" She sounded vexed.

"When is it? Do you have a schedule?"

"I, well . . . I should have contacted you sooner."

"What do you mean?"

"We were planning to leave tomorrow. Tomorrow, maybe noon. Please say you'll do it. I know I should have called earlier, but . . ."

"Candy, let me call you back—what's your number?"

She gave me the number and I said I'd call her back within a quarter-hour.

I punched Zack's number, and explained the situation.

"I know you just can't get that broad off your dirty mind," he said.

"I might be able to find some of the missing pieces to this puzzle. And my mind is spotless."

"Okay, spotless. If Conners is not running that day, maybe Werner Stoddard will work the Boyle charter. I'll call Stoddard, then call you back."

A few minutes later, Zack called and said Stoddard had agreed to work the charter. I called the Narsom number.

"Candy, this is Billy. I've cleared everything, so I will be able to work the four days."

"Oh, wow! Wonderful. Jules says to ask if you'll agree to five hundred."

"Five hundred?"

"Five hundred a day."

"Oh, yeah. That's generous. When should I be there?"

"Please come early, there's lots to do. Could you make it by eight?"

I told her I'd make it. She was bursting with enthusiasm. My enthusiasm, I realized, would depend on who was accompanying the Narsoms on the cruise. And then there was the thought of getting on the road at four in the morning . . ."

I punched Julia's number. "Got any watermelon left?"

"No. I threw what was left out after you left—what happened?"

"To start with, I flew to Miami in a chopper."

“Really?”

“Yeah. Then there were the Moors and the Christians at Dos Caballeros, and—”

“Moors and Christians?”

“Followed by a car chase right out of the movies.”

“You’re making this up.”

“Nothing but the truth. Suppose you come to my house. We’ll rustle up a nice supper and I’ll wow you with incredible stories.”

“Incredible means not believable. And what have you got to ‘rustle’ with?”

“I can thaw some mahi-mahi out of the freezer.”

“And . . . what else?”

I went to the fridge and opened the door. “Well, let’s see . . .”

She wanted to be helpful. “How about this,” she said. “I bring a couple potatoes. Maybe some lettuce. Do you have some tomatoes, or zucchini, for a salad?”

“No zucchini. Uh, the tomatoes might be a little . . . old.”

“Black rather than red?”

“A couple of spots.”

“How about some Zesty Italian dressing?”

“The bottle is . . . um, almost empty.”

“Listen, Billy. It’ll save me a lot of carrying if you bring the fish over here. Okay?”

“Well, if you insist.”

“I don’t insist, but transferring half my kitchen to your place doesn’t appeal. All right?”

“I see what you mean. I’m on my way.”

I went to the freezer and dug out a pack of dorado fillets. Underneath the dorado and flounder were the shark steaks, and

## Dangerous Parallel

beneath them, the money. It was there, nice and frosty. I shook my head—it's hell being rich and poor simultaneously.

## CHAPTER 20

It was not a promising start to the cruise. Despite the tonnage and power of the big yacht, pushing the heaping swells of the Gulf Stream aside induced an irregular swinging motion that sabotaged normal body movements. A trough of low pressure to the southeast had brought rain and wind quartering from the port side. Traversing the Hatteras's deck required careful placement of feet and a firm grip on the rail, or, where available, hands with fingers spread on the overhead.

Candy Narsom had made certain I knew everyone on board. Besides the Narsoms, Captain Angelo and an Asian female helper named Choy-Lin, there were Bob and Brenda Forbes, B. I. Khan, and Terri Chapman, whom I hadn't met before. She was a bit taller than Khan, forty-ish, with a nice figure. I figured she was Khan's companion. She seemed familiar with boat behavior, and when we prepared to leave the Narsom dock, she helped secure the lines.

Belowdecks, suitcases in the passageways had become obstacles. I'd endeavored to secure luggage and supplies as they were loaded, but not all had been stowed securely. I resolved this by moving them into the stowage lockers in each stateroom. During this process, I noticed that Khan had brought to his stateroom a heavy leather briefcase that he secured between bed and nightstand. This cruise, it seems, was to include some business.

In the galley, eggs were stored well enough, but a jar of jelly had eluded us and become a sticky mass of shards. I scraped it up and threw most of it in the trash. “Never mind,” Choy-Lin said, waving me away. “I clean floor. You mind bar.”

We were about an hour out of Fort Lauderdale. The passengers had retreated below, either seasick or to avoid having to move without colliding with bulkheads. I was alone in the salon, rearranging glassware and liquor. That done, I went forward to check conditions.

Carefully bracing myself, I found Captain Angelo at the helm. He was straddle-legged, hands on the wheel, his butt pressed against the captain’s chair. Outside the slanted glass in front of him, wipers swept streams of water aside on each stroke.

“You seem to have your sea legs,” he said.

“The Stream gets really bumpy when the wind turns to the north.”

“That’s for sure.” He glanced at his displays. “Once we get to Great Isaac, we’ll be out of the worst of it.”

“I hope so.” I retreated to the chart table, where Angelo had laid out his charts. Great Isaac is about fifty nautical miles east, across the Gulf Stream. I placed my index finger on the Northwest Providence Channel.

“Where will we go once we enter the Channel?”

“We’ll turn toward the Berry Islands, and then Nassau. It’s about a hundred-seventy miles—a good eleven hours at fifteen knots—though we may not average that.”

“That’s our destination?”

“No. We’ll dock and check in with the authorities. After spending the night, we’ll push on to Eleuthera.”

I traced the passage through the Berrys, Bonds Cay and Great Stirrup to Nassau. About fifty miles east of Nassau is the narrow island of Eleuthera.

Earlier, inside the Narsom mansion, Jules Narsom had quietly said to me, “I really appreciate you coming along on such short notice—I never know until the last minute when I can get away.” This appeared to contrast with Candy’s apology for her tardy call for me to help man the cruise. Was she simply covering for Jules’ last minute decision?

“So tomorrow, it’s on to Eleuthera, and . . .” I said, watching foam-topped pyramids of water as they slanted before exploding into our bow.

“I plan to swing around the north end and anchor in the protection of Harbour Island.”

“Should be interesting.”

He smiled. “I’ll have me a little Junkanoo or Goombay. Ever been to Eleuthera?”

“No.”

“Great island. Of course it’s gradually been invaded by shore-to-shore resorts. Still, there are more than several lifetimes-worth of beautiful islands out here.”

“You’ve been there often?”

“In twenty-five years at sea, you get around. “I’m going to try this autopilot again,” he said. “Maybe it will give us a better ride.”

We stood silently for a while, evaluating the way the electronic machine steered the boat. “Doesn’t seem to make much difference, but it’s easier on me, at least.”

## Dangerous Parallel

I calculated we'd have at least two more hours of uncomfortable slogging. After that, I thought, I'd best be prepared for many of the guests to gravitate toward the salon, at least thirsty, and maybe hungry. With this kind of sea, food was out of the question. I'd have to depend on booze, pretzels and more booze to keep the peace.

###

The sun had not yet risen above the palms along the shore of Nassau harbor. I rose quietly from my bunk in the bow's crew quarters, dressed, and went to the galley.

Choy-Lin had a toothy smile for me. "You like coffee? Cream, sugar?"

"I'll take it black." I took the steaming cup into the salon and sat examining the harbor and the marina where we were docked. It had been just a collection of bright lights when we arrived last night. Angelo had gone ashore to locate a Bahamian official so that we could legally enter the islands. Then we had fueled with nearly four-hundred gallons of diesel. Finally we had tumbled into bed, tired from all the pounding.

Our boat was docked bow-in alongside the transient wharf.

Khan soon arrived in the salon, followed by Jules Narsom and Terri Chapman. Choy-Lin was busily chopping and frying in the galley when Bob and Brenda Forbes appeared from below.

"I'm all black and blue," Brenda said, "I feel like I've spent a whole day on a roller coaster."

Bob Forbes addressed Narsom and Khan, "Not all that bad, really."

“Where’s Candy?” Terri said, joining the group with her coffee.

Jules paused. “She’s recovering, I think. As I mentioned last night, she was sick all day yesterday. I tried to tell her when we left home, ‘You’d better take a pill or wear a patch.’ But she didn’t want to. They really prevent seasickness, you know.”

“It’s all in the head,” Khan said, with a professorial air. “You must be strong, that’s all.”

Terri frowned. “I don’t think it’s that easy. It’s a real affliction, *mal de mer*.”

Narsom stood with his cup of coffee. “Today is much calmer. I hope the rotten weather has passed.”

Charles Angelo entered from the steps leading to the bridge. He pulled his captain’s hat from his head. “The weather looks good. We’ve reestablished the trades. These clouds will clear by noon. I suggest we get underway right after breakfast.” Everyone seemed pleased with that idea.

Choy-Lin had spread a pan of scrambled eggs with chopped onions and mushrooms and mounds of buttered toast on the dinette table. Out of the oven came a rack of hot and crisp bacon. Everyone helped themselves, piling plastic plates high with more than they’d eat.

Less than an hour later, I stood on deck, watching Angelo on the bridge. “Just hang on to the line, Billy,” he said, loudly. I held the line chocked securely around the cleat. He put the starboard diesel in forward gear, easing the stern of the boat slowly sideways away from the dock against the spring line. “Okay,” he said, “that’s good.” He applied a little power, and I lifted the line’s loop from the piling. We made a wide arc into the harbor and pivoted to the north.

The diesels throbbed softly as we turned into the Northeast Providence Channel. Terri Chapman helped me secure all the lines and fenders on deck. When we finished, she smiled at me.

Before entering the cabin, I lingered at the rail. All the superlatives I'd heard about the beauty of the Bahamian water seemed pale and inadequate. For a brief moment, my mission dissolved in its seductive depths.

###

It was just noon when we rounded Bridge Point and turned into the sun. Soon, I was at the cathead awaiting Angelo's command to secure the Hatt's anchor chain. When he was sure we had a good bite in the bottom, I dropped the chain stopper and he shut down the diesels.

"If it's all the same with you," Angelo said, "I'll go ashore with the group today. You can do the same tomorrow, while I stay aboard. I don't like to leave her anchored out without a crewman aboard."

"Fine," I said. "No problem."

We clambered to the tender and undid its cover and fastenings. After swinging the davit out, we deposited the Whaler next to the Hatt's hull. Its fifteen horsepower motor is adequate to transport four people and gear.

Angelo began ferrying the first group of passengers ashore. After the second group was ashore, I realized Candy had not joined. She was evidently staying in the master stateroom, seasick or recovering from the rough ride. I stayed on board the yacht with Choy-Lin, who was busy either in the galley, or taking care that the heads were clean and the below-deck's beds freshly made.

A short time later, while Choy-Lin was busy preparing dishes for later in the day, I went below. The door to the master stateroom was closed, but the other stateroom doors were open. In the second stateroom on the starboard side I saw Khan's jacket draped across the settee. I entered and quietly closed the door behind me. On the floor next to the hanging locker was Khan's briefcase, hardbound with leather. I lifted it to the berth, wondering what caused its heft.

I tried the latch. It didn't move. A small, built-in combination lock with three thumbwheels numbered from zero to nine, locked the briefcase.

The thumbwheels were positioned at eight-five-three. I recalled a common practice with combination locks. Users often set the numbers such that only one number needs to be set in order to trigger unlocking.

I began turning the right-hand thumbwheel one number at a time, from its initial setting of three. During this, I tried to open the briefcase after each setting.

Four, nothing happened.

Five, nothing happened.

Six, nothing happened.

On seven, the mechanism clicked, the latches released, and the case opened.

On the left side of the case was a fitted leather holster holding a heavy Smith & Wesson .357. I did not remove it from the holster.

On the other side of the case were leather pockets containing sheaves of paper. I paged through the papers, searching for anything significant.

I found the current month's page torn from a year's calendar. The fourteenth of this month, a Monday, was with a heavy pen line. Inside was the inscription, FARO.

A similar line encircled four days beginning on the 16<sup>th</sup>. Its notation, "Narsom" seemed to refer to our cruise to the Bahamas.

I paid most of my attention, though, to the circle around the 23rd of this month. It held the word "JARRALITO."

The sheaves also included several four-page contracts between Independent Bankshares International (IBI) of Abu Dhabi with B.I. Khan, Jules Narsom, and Nathan Walsh. I skipped through the fine print to note the sums involved. They ranged from seven million to twenty-five million U.S. dollars. Adding them in my head, I came to \$85 million.

As I returned the papers to their pockets, footsteps sounded in the passageway. I quickly closed the briefcase, returned it to the floor, and turned toward the door. The latch on the door clicked and the door slowly opened. It stopped with a gap of about four inches. I saw Candy's face. "I thought I heard something in here," she said.

"Just me," I said. "I thought Mr. Khan had bought a newspaper when we were in Nassau, but I don't see it here."

Candy pushed the door open further. Her only attire was a pair of white panties.

## CHAPTER 21

She made no attempt to cover her nearly-naked body. “How come,” she said between yawns, “you didn’t go ashore with the rest of them?”

“I could ask you the same,” I said, smiling and taking in her beautiful curves.

She approached. “I guess I wasn’t fully recovered from being seasick on the way over.” She was now close enough I caught her scent. “But . . . I’m feeling better now,” she said, smiling.

My body began to react. “Look, Candy. I think we’d better . . .”

Her hand was at my crotch. Her breathing was growing shorter, and so was mine.

I thought of the risk and the high stakes. “We can’t afford to do this,” I said.

She remained silent, her hands and body warm against me. Her eyelids rose slowly, revealing the palest of blue eyes. “Billy, I . . . I know we shouldn’t, but . . .”

I grasped her bare shoulders with both hands. “Maybe,” I said, “if things were different . . .”

She turned slightly to the side, her arms now crossed. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.” She looked away and frowned. “You don’t know . . .”

The warmth and softness of her shoulders was exquisite. I separated myself from her.

"I'm so afraid . . ." She faced me again, her eyes meeting mine. "Oh, Billy!" She abruptly threw both arms around me, then let them fall to her sides. A critical moment passed.

"It's okay," I said, hardly knowing what to say.

"Oh," she said, half turning again. "I'm such a fraidy-cat." There was wetness on her cheek. "Will you forgive me?"

I nodded. "It never happened." I withdrew my hands. "Let's go up and see if Choy-Lin has something cold to drink. We need something . . ."

She nodded. "Yeah, we need something." She stepped toward the stateroom's doorway, into the passageway, and on to the master stateroom. I breathed a sigh and followed her. Her door closed as I passed and climbed the stairs to the salon.

Choy-Lin offered me a tall glass of limeade on ice, which I took out to the sidedeck.

In a short time, Candy, now dressed in a peach-colored jump suit, joined me with her limeade.

We stood, taking in the sun, the sparkling water and the green splash of palms along the shore. With her eyes intent on the scene, she said, "Isn't this the most beautiful place in the whole wide world?"

"A slice of paradise," I said, looking at my limeade.

"Billy—oh, I hate you," she said, and laughed. "I'm going swimming." She turned quickly and disappeared into the salon.

A few minutes later she appeared at the stern in two iridescent pieces of orange-colored spandex. She dove from the from the aft swim platform into the water. As her head reappeared from beneath the sparkling foam, she addressed me. "Haven't you heard? It's unsafe to swim alone." She flashed me a grin.

"Coming," I said, as I stepped into the salon. I planned to make a quick stealthy trip to Khan's stateroom to return the combination thumbwheel on his briefcase to its original setting.

Choy-Lin appeared from the galley as I started down the steps. "Say, Mr. Billy, can you help me? The trash bag so full, I cannot pull out."

She led me into the galley. "It's so heavy, I cannot . . ."

I lifted the bag of trash to the deck.

"Bag old, okay?" She offered me a new, unopened bag.

I installed the new bag.

"You put in trash locker, right?" she said, nodding.

"Yeah," I said. I tied a knot in the bag and hoisted it, and went to the locker.

After I'd secured the bag in the locker, I stepped to the stairs that led down to Khan's stateroom.

Behind me I heard Candy's voice. "I thought you were going to join me for a swim?"

I turned to see water dripping from her hair and body onto the salon threshold. "Yeah. I had to help Choy-Lin with the trash. You go ahead, I'll be out as soon as I change."

"I think I'll wait right here." She smiled. "Can't wait to see you in a bathing suit."

At the foot of the stairs, I turned toward the bow, toward the crew cabin. Although I didn't glance back, I figured Candy

was watching—she'd see if I went aft, toward Khan's stateroom.

After I changed, I climbed the stairs in my blue swim trunks,

Candy applauded. "It was worth the wait."

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I hurried by her, jumped to the swim platform, and quickly dove into the water.

When I surfaced, she was a yard away sweeping wet hair from her face. I dove underwater, went deep and swam around to the other side of the hull, where I surfaced and waited.

Candy came around the hull doing a fast crawl. When she saw me, she shouted, "No fair." She splashed water toward me with her hand. "You bastard! You scared me half to death."

I laughed. She had an angry look that slowly faded to a smile.

I swam away from her, alongside the Hatt's hull. She followed. At midships, I slowed.

Candy passed me, her flutter kick splashing. I followed.

Near the bow, she paused and I took the lead. We continued this pattern, swimming and alternating between leading and following, around the Hatt's hull. Finally, we arrived back at the stern.

We hoisted ourselves onto the swim platform, where we sat, breathing heavily, while exchanging grins. Once we were rested, I pulled the fresh water hose from its receptacle, sprayed the seawater from Candy and then from myself. We returned inside and changed.

By the time I emerged in my starched uniform, the sun was sinking toward the palms and pines of Eleuthera. Angelo arrived with three of the guests in the Whaler. I helped everyone back aboard, and Angelo turned the boat shoreward to board the remaining guests.

With the last guest aboard, Angelo and I attached lines and hoisted the Whaler into its cradle. After that, I hurried to the salon, where Forbes was waiting at the bar.

“Ah, there you are,” he said, as I pulled his favorite brand of vodka from the shelf. “You can’t believe this island, the people, the sand . . .” Soon, others came up to order their favorite libations. Most seemed genuinely pleased with their island adventure—even Khan, who otherwise came across as thoroughly preoccupied.

Choy-Lin had prepared a modest buffet on the marble-topped table, but the guests, who lunched late while on the island, scarcely touched it.

Later, I served nightcaps at the bar. Talk subsided, and soon the guests returned to their staterooms. I helped Choy-Lin clear the buffet, collected and cleaned the bar glasses and stowed all the liquor and wine. I pushed the appropriate buttons on the control panel, and the lights and sound in the salon turned off.

I walked to the stern rail. The sky was nearly cloudless, and the moon had risen. Scattered lights shown ashore, punctuating the swaying silhouettes of pines and palms. Truly tired, I headed for the crew cabin and the softness of my berth.

###

When I reached the salon deck the next morning, I heard weather radio issuing from the bridge. Angelo sat in the helm

seat with his coffee, listening. Juggling my coffee mug, I joined him,

“The Bermuda high is building,” Angelo said. “We should have good weather today and very good weather tomorrow for our return.”

The beauty of the natural harbor formed by Harbour Island was easy to see from this level.

“It will be a straight run,” he said, “about fourteen hours. As you know, the actual time will depend on the currents and the strength of the Stream. Can you spell me at the helm?”

“Sure, as long as I’m not tending bar or otherwise needed.”

Angelo switched the weather radio off. “I plan to get under way before dawn—say about four. That’s my best guess for arriving Lauderdale before dark.”

“Okay. I’ll turn in early tonight.” I mentally calculated I’d be lucky to get five hours of sleep. “I’ll be on deck at four ready to weigh anchor.”

We climbed down from the bridge and headed into the salon for Choy-Lin’s buffet breakfast. The only guests present were the Forbes, Khan, and Jules Narsom.

The Forbes chatted with enthusiasm at the buffet. Khan and Narsom, by contrast, huddled on a portside couch in deep, but inaudible, conversation. Two mugs of steaming coffee sat untouched beside them.

When Angelo and I entered, both Khan and Narsom glanced at us, reached for their coffee and stopped talking. Something was up.

Terri Chapman joined me at the buffet and we exchanged small talk. I selected a hard-boiled egg and a

slice of whole-wheat toast. I was about to grab a small can of apple juice when Narsom came to the table. He smiled, weakly. "Say, Billy. Can you spare a minute?" He gestured for us to leave the table. "I have a couple of questions for you."

"Sure," I returned my plate to the table and excused myself to Terri. I followed Narsom to the forward end of the salon, near the entrance to the bridge, where Narsom turned to me.

"We've a bit of a problem, Billy. Mr. Khan says his luggage has been tampered with. Now I know you were here yesterday afternoon while we and the guests toured the island. Can you enlighten me on what went on during our absence?"

"Let's see," I said. "We anchored sometime after noon. Angelo finished ferrying you and the others to the island about—what was it? About two?"

He looked off. "Probably. I wasn't paying much attention. Go on."

"That left me, your wife, and Choy-Lin aboard until you and the guests returned. What was the problem with Mr. Khan's luggage?"

"I don't know exactly," Narsom said offhandedly, "but he's upset."

I was sure Narsom knew precisely what Khan was upset about.

Narsom said, "Did you or Choy-Lin handle any of his luggage?"

## CHAPTER 22

Jules Narsom had just asked me, “Did you or Choy-Lin handle any of his luggage?”

“I think we did, when we loaded everything at your home. And during the outbound leg, it was quite rough, as you remember. Luggage and other things were bouncing around. If I recall, I collected some luggage—some of it was Mr. Khan’s—and stowed it in stateroom lockers so it would be safe.”

“But you weren’t aware of—I mean you didn’t open, close or tamper with Khan’s luggage at that time?”

“I frankly don’t recall, Mr. Narsom. It was fairly hectic. We were trying to get everything stowed safely before someone was injured or things got broken. Is the damage to Mr. Khan’s luggage serious?”

“I can’t say—we haven’t discussed it. This just leaves Choy-Lin. Do you recall seeing her around Mr. Khan’s things?”

“She made the beds, freshened the heads and so forth. You should talk to her about it—I wasn’t paying much attention—well, except when she asked me to help in the galley with the trash.”

Narsom nodded. “Okay, Billy. Maybe what you’ve said will satisfy Mr. Khan.”

“Your wife might know more,” I said. “I believe she was on the stateroom deck when Choy-Lin was working down there.”

“I’ll talk to Choy-Lin. And discuss this with Candy.” As an afterthought, he added, “You can understand I don’t want any of my guests thinking their belongings are being tampered with onboard my yacht.”

I nodded. “I understand.”

Narsom returned to the couch with Khan. I returned to the table and my breakfast. As I passed them, I sensed Khan’s eyes studying me. After conferring briefly with Khan, Narsom disappeared down the stairs to the staterooms. Khan remained with his coffee. Terri Chapman joined him.

After I’d eaten my toast and egg, I returned to the buffet for a couple of sausages and more coffee. Choy-Lin approached from the galley.

“You like coffee?” she said.

“Black and blacker,” I said, smiling.

Candy came into the salon with Jules. They joined Khan and Terri. Choy-Lin hurried to them and offered to serve. “No, thanks, Choy-Lin, just some coffee,” I overheard Candy say.

Choy-Lin took a couple of mugs and the pot to their snack table. As she poured coffee, I noticed that Candy was staring at me, unsmiling, with a questioning look that I didn’t acknowledge. Jules said something to Choy-Lin. Choy-Lin shook her head, then returned to the galley. Jules said something to Candy, then joined Choy-Lin in the galley.

###

Later that morning, Angelo and I deployed the Whaler to the side of the Hatt. I told everybody in the salon I would be ferrying those who wanted to go ashore.

## Dangerous Parallel

The Forbes quickly said they'd go, as did Candy and Terri Chapman. Jules Narsom and Khan said they'd remain on board.

"Let's rent a golf cart and ride around Dunmore town," Terri said. Bob Forbes said, "Okay with me, but I got to have some more cracked conch with that terrific sauce!"

I told those going I'd have to make two trips because the Whaler was limited to four people. I hoped Terri would join the Forbes for the first trip, leaving me alone with Candy on the second. But Terri immediately gushed she would "keep Candy company" on the second ferry trip.

After gassing the outboard motor, I began ferrying. The wind was moderate, and the water held only small waves, so ferrying went smoothly. On Harbour Island, the group rented a golf cart and spent hours enjoying the charms of Dunmore Town. Bob got his conch and sauce, and the women picked up trinkets.

On the first ferry trip back to the yacht, Terri joined the Forbes, leaving Candy and me together for the final ferry trip.

"Quite a trip," she said as we pulled from Dunmore Town dock.

"You mean to Dunmore Town?"

"No. I mean the whole thing."

"Uh-huh." I slowed the motor a little.

"Just so you know, Billy," she said, "I didn't say anything."

"I told you. It didn't happen."

Her eyes went from me to the ocean. "Mr. Khan says somebody got into his briefcase."

“I thought his luggage was locked.”

Her eyes returned to me as she shrugged. “That’s what he told Jules.”

“Is it a big deal?”

“I don’t know.” She threw her head back and wound two fingers through her hair. “I don’t keep up with the business.”

For several minutes we didn’t talk. I watched as she peered into the clear water flowing by. Finally she looked at me. “There may not be another time to tell you.” She paused. “I think you’re very nice. I . . . Mr. Khan is . . . well, just be careful, okay?”

###

The return to Florida took nearly thirteen hours. After securing the boat at the Narsom dock and helping with the unloading, I drove to Seguro Key. I fell into bed and slept soundly until I was awakened by pounding on my door.

“Oh, it’s you.” I squinted against the brightness of the morning sun. It was Zack.

“Got a shark trip tonight. Thought I’d come by and see if you’d like to join me.”

I gave Zack an evil look. “Cut the sarcasm, Captain Ahab. I need some coffee before I can deal with anything.” I headed into the kitchen.

“Okay, okay. Scrape the sleep out of your brain.” He stepped inside and closed the door. “Get your coffee. And tell me what you found out.”

I took the can of coffee from the cupboard and faced Zack from the kitchen doorway. “One sentence tells it: I screwed up.” I spooned three measures of coffee into the brewer.

Zack grinned. “I thought you were going to tell me something new.”

“Thanks.” I told him I’d broken Khan’s combination, which allowed me to open the briefcase. I told him about the S&W pistol, and that I’d found some papers with important information. I told him I’d been interrupted by Candy, which caused me to shut the briefcase fast and leave Khan’s stateroom.

“So Mrs. Narsom caught you red-handed?”

“Not exactly. I gave her an excuse why I was there. A story about searching for a newspaper.”

Zack frowned. “She didn’t see you with the open briefcase?”

“I closed and replaced it before she opened the door.”

“So your screw-up was getting caught in Khan’s stateroom?”

We sat down at the kitchen table.

“Partly. I didn’t have time to return the thumbwheel of the combination lock to its original setting. So when Khan later went to open his briefcase, he saw that the thumbwheel number was set to seven and not three, as he’d set it.”

Zack thought it over. “So you’re telling me Khan knows you broke into his briefcase?”

“He knows *somebody* broke into his briefcase. He knows it’s either me, Candy Narsom, or the Chinese helper.”

“But you said Mrs. Narsom caught you in Khan’s stateroom. So she knows you’re the one who . . .”

“She probably thinks it’s me,” I said, “but she’s not telling.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because she thinks I’m very nice.”

Zack burst into laughter. I didn't laugh. After a few moments, he looked at me soberly. "What? You're trying to say the Narsom lady has the hots for you?"

"I didn't say that." I got up, ran water into the brewer and turned it on. "She said she thinks I'm very nice."

He shot me a look of disdain. "Hmm, I guess you must have hidden talents. On a serious note, I think you'll not make Khan's Christmas shopping list."

I told him about the contracts, the calendar with the marked dates and the appearance of code names FARO and JARRALITO. "Walsh, Narsom and Khan are due about \$85 million from IBI, Independent Bankshares International, of Abu Dhabi."

"Why are these guys getting tons of money from Abu D?"

"I don't know. But something important is scheduled for the twenty-third of this month. It's marked 'JARRALITO' on the calendar."

You think it's tied somehow into the 'Texas project?'"

"Maybe." I took two mugs from the cupboard. "Maybe they plan something at the 'ranch' they keep talking about. I wonder if it's all connected to the shrimp boat—the one in Oak Point. Remember what I told you what that boat rat in the bar said—about 'bonus time.'"

Zack rubbed his chin, thinking. "Crap! We don't know anything except a bunch of chatter. This is nothing but a useless—"

"Wait. The date that was circled—yes! The date with FARO inside was the day Lorenzo and I were at Dos Caballeros!"

"So?"

“That’s when Khan met with Carlos. This was Khan’s calendar. I’ll bet FARO is the code name for Carlos

“Okay,” Zack said. “But I don’t see how that helps.”

I sat down at the table. “If something big is scheduled for the twenty-third, the name Jarralito might refer to its location—like a town or maybe a ‘ranch.’ If it does, then that’s where the ‘pickup’ is supposed to happen. I wonder if they’re going to . . .”

The coffee brewer beeped. I pulled the pot and poured two cups.

Zack was on his feet, staring at the calendar on the kitchen wall. “That’s three days from now. But Jarralito—you suppose it’s a town? In Texas?” He sipped some of the steaming coffee.

“Whoa, Junior. This coffee’s strong enough to eat my dental work. You got some cream and sugar?”

###

When I arrived at Julia’s, she offered me a cup of hot tea.

“Thanks, but no.”

She stirred her cup and told me to pull up a chair.

I said, “I came over because I need your help.”

Julia laughed. “I know.” She showed me a straight face. I chuckled, and she laughed.

She smiled. “I’m your faithful female helper. What do you need?”

Here’s the problem. Have you ever heard of ‘Jarralito?’ J-a-r-r-a-l-i-t-o?”

She nodded, and pronounced it with the “j” sounding as “h.” She said, “I think it means ‘little pot’ in Spanish.”

“Oh,” I said.

“You look disappointed.”

“We—Zack and I—thought it might be a town. A little town in Texas, maybe . . .”

“It could be. There are hundreds of towns in the Southwest with Spanish names. I can look it up . . .” She went to her computer and tapped some keys. “Huh,” she said. “The only town that comes up is El Jarralito, in Mexico.”

“And . . .?”

“If the town is very small, the Internet will not necessarily list it. We’d have to see what a gazetteer says.”

“A gazetteer?”

She smiled. “I thought you’d never ask. A gazetteer is a geographical dictionary. We have them for—”

“You mean at the library?”

“I don’t have one here, hunk.”

“Let’s go.”

“The library’s closed. Did you forget it’s Sunday?”

“Nuts. Have you got a key?”

“Sure, but . . .”

“Let’s go.” I headed for the door. Julia frowned, but followed, taking her ring of keys from the countertop. As she closed the door, she said, “Billy Farris, you’re impossible.”

As we drove toward Marathon, I said, “Is ‘faro,’ f-a-r-o, a Spanish word?”

“I think so. But I can’t recall what it means.”

Inside the library, Julia seemed a little nervous, but began to relax as she searched the gazetteers. She pulled several volumes from the shelf and searched their indices. Finally she found a reference to Jarralito, and handed me the book. She selected a Spanish-English dictionary from a different shelf.

I figured out from the gazetteer that there was a town called Jarralito. “It’s in New Mexico,” I said. “But I really a map of New Mexico to place it.”

“Faro means lighthouse or beacon,” she said.

“Oh, great,” I said. “A beacon lighting my way.”

Julia returned the books to their shelves and led me to the atlases. From there I went through atlases and maps. Finally I said, “I found it. It’s a tiny town northeast of Santa Fe.”

“Okay, cowboy.” Julia said, looking over my shoulder. “How long before you’re riding off into New Mexico, ‘the Land of Enchantment?’”

It seemed pointless to reply. I looked at her and smiled.

## CHAPTER 23

While Zack and I waited at Miami International for our flight, I wrote a short email:

*Mark,  
I'm already on your computer screen, of course,  
but here goes:  
I can't explain what I'm doing because a  
mistake could mess everything up.  
I believe Carlos Silvan is a Cuban agent, code  
name FARO. He and others are into a serious  
plot with "something big" scheduled on or  
about the 23rd of the month. It might involve  
Oak Point, Texas. I'm telling you this so you  
can take whatever actions the bureau feels  
necessary.  
The "draw" you talk about seems unlikely. The  
chessboard may already be upset. Please track  
the chessmen on the floor—Regards, Billy*

This seemed like the only way I could bring Eppington into the picture without him trying to stop Zack and me from investigating Jarralito. If Jarralito turned into the real deal, I was hoping he'd send the cavalry to Oak Point. If our guesses about Jarralito turned out wrong, he could always blame the tipoff on me.

We arrived at Albuquerque International in late afternoon. Zack rented a Toyota while I waited for our bags at the carrousel. I snatched the bags and met him outside. I climbed in the passenger side and noticed the dashboard sticker.

“Hey,” I said, “this car has side air bags.”

“Damn,” he said. “I thought that’s what the airline served for a snack.”

I chuckled. “As if that bag of crackers you can’t open isn’t bad enough.”

“You don’t understand. You’re supposed to eat the package whole. No waste, improved ecology.”

“Thanks, chief. I never knew you were a tree-hugger.”

We climbed steadily, past flat-topped buttes and exit signs for Pueblos. To the left was the green fringe marking the Rio Grande, more a trickle than a stream. On the stereo, some group beat out high-energy rock that encouraged Zack to let the speed creep past the limit.

At Santa Fe, we took a second-floor room at La Fonda and unloaded our stuff. We crossed the plaza to a Mexican place where I feasted on enchiladas laced with napalm. Zack stuck to something merely hot—chile rellenos.

By the time we returned, it was dark. The stars seemed close enough to touch. Inside La Fonda, we went to the cantina. I asked the barkeep, “Will you sell me a lime?”

He seemed confused. “Sell you a lime?”

“I like limes. I’ll pay for it.”

“Uh, we don’t sell . . .”

I placed a dollar bill on top of the bar.

“Here,” he said, pushing a lime toward me. He picked up the dollar and handed it to me. “No charge,” he said, with a look that said ‘who is this guy, anyway.’

Zack and I stopped at the small liquor store next to the restaurant and bought a bottle of Tequila. At the top of the stairs we pulled a couple bottles of 7-Up from the soda machine and went to our room.

With his knife, Zack cut some slices of lime. With ice, the Tequila, 7-Up and the salt shaker I’d stolen from the Mexican food joint, we enjoyed our cool drinks sitting on the edges of the two beds.

“I don’t know what I’m doing here,” Zack said. “This is the craziest idea yet.”

“Definitely,” I said.

“We can’t resist jumping on coiled rattlesnakes. Drink up.”

I nodded. “Our dedication to ultimate mayhem is astounding.”

Zack said, “That guy Khan, he worries me. Something about the way he said his enemies would live a long life without hands.” He stared at me. “And now, you, Billy—you’ve become one of his enemies.”

“Not to worry. Clark Kent will emerge from the telephone booth in his blue tights and rescue us. Have some more Tequila.”

“This is good,” he said, holding up his glass. “Delicious.”

“I thought you said it tasted like turpentine.”

“Why can’t you ever get it right? I said, *pure* turpentine.”

We laughed, and drank some more.

Finally, Zack said, “What happens tomorrow?”

## Dangerous Parallel

“We need to find Jarralito. It looks to be about thirty miles from here. And maybe look for a ranch.”

“That’s crazy, Billy. We don’t have any idea what ranch we’d be looking for.”

I held up a finger. “There can’t be a lot of ranches out there. Jarralito is a tiny town. We’ll have to look for clues and hope.”

Zack said, “Glad you have a detailed plan, Commander.”

I gestured for a halt. “I’m counting on Khan showing up. He’s the kingpin. Maybe Carlos. If this deal is as big as they seem to think, these guys will be there.”

“If Khan is around and spots you, you better hope your life insurance is paid up.”

“I’ll keep a low profile.”

“Okay, I see your plan,” Zack said. “Zack leads, Billy cringes. Zack takes the bullets, Billy phones for the ambulance.”

“Glad you understand.”

Eventually, the Tequila took over. We both slept well.

###

Next morning, I was shaving. Zack held up the Tequila bottle. There was a little Tequila left.

“What should I do with this,” he said.

“Leave it for the housemaid.”

“Maybe she doesn’t drink Tequila.”

“If she’s wise,” I said.

We took a quick breakfast downstairs and headed to the parking lot behind La Fonda. There was little traffic downtown, and soon we were on the highway, climbing to

Glorieta Pass. I studied the map we'd brought with us, aiming to guide us to Jarralito.

We turned off on a two-lane blacktop labeled NM-702, leaving the mountains behind. Low brush dotted the barren vistas. We encountered no vehicle traffic. In less than twenty minutes a metal sign on the roadside said "Jarralito." We raised a cloud of dust pulling to the stop on the shoulder.

The only house in sight was on the opposite side of the blacktop. Its front door was missing as was glass in its windows. Its roof had collapsed into the interior several years earlier.

Slightly ahead of us on the right was a wide stretch of sandy soil with a wood store building behind two old gas pumps. The store had a pitched metal roof and faded white paint. A big sign above the door said COLD BEER. I noticed that the glass globes on top of the gas pumps were tan from accumulated dirt.

"This is Jarralito?" Zack said.

"I guess this is it. Let's park."

Zack pulled the Toyota to a stop beyond the gas pumps. When we stepped out, I noted that the high air was eerily quiet. The only sound was a hiss coming from a tangle of air hose nestled at the foot of one of the gas pumps.

We entered the store to the creak of the spring on the door. We glanced around in the darkness. No human was visible.

In the near-blackness close by a wall was a reddish-colored cooler. A hum suggested it was powered. I lifted the cover, which revealed sodas and beers half-submerged in cold water. I pulled two cans out, a 7-Up and a Pepsi, handed the 7-Up to Zack.

With my eyes now accustomed to the dark, I saw a man seated behind a rack farther to the rear. He looked to be older than 80, with a white beard. He sat behind a counter. He gave me a wrinkled smile.

“Two cans of pop,” I said.

“Two dollars,” he said, and I paid him.

We returned to the Toyota, drove around the pumps and turned left past the crumbled house onto the gravel road that intersected the blacktop.

The landscape was slightly hilly, with low junipers, short grasses and a few cacti. The only sign of human habitation were poles with wires that lined the road.

Zack said, “There sure is no place to hide around here.”

Finally a few buildings appeared in the distance. “Pull off here,” I said.

Zack peered through his binoculars. “The nearest house is adobe, small, with a wood building behind, like a garage. I don’t see any cars there. Beyond is a gray wood house with a tin roof. Behind it is a small barn. An old Dodge pickup is parked in front of the gray house.”

“Anything else?”

“Not that I can see.”

Zack turned the car around, and we drove back toward the store building. We crossed the blacktop road and continued on the gravel road.

We rounded a hill with reddish rock outcrops at its base. We continued on beyond them to a crossroad where a small wood sign with an arrow pointed south. In neatly-lettered black paint was the legend, “NARSOM, 1/4 MI.”

“I’ll be damned,” I said.

Zack laughed. He turned onto the crossroad, but in a direction opposite to the sign's arrow.

"Where are you going?" I said.

"Just wait."

He drove a short distance, pulled to a stop, and let the motor idle.

"We'll not attract attention here," he said. He squirmed around and aimed his binoculars out the Toyota's rear window. "The Narsom ranch is a house with two outbuildings. One looks like a two-car garage. The other one is more like a barn. Two cars parked outside, one blue and one—oh, hell, I can't tell."

I said, "Can you see a fence? Is the property fenced?"

"Can't see a fence, but if it's wire with posts, I might not make it out this far away. Here, have a look."

The house was a single level dwelling of wide clapboard construction with a pitched, shingled roof. The garage was similar. The barn was older, with a pitched, corrugated metal roof and big doors. A pole carried electric wires to the house. On house roof was a complicated antenna.

I said, "There's no way I can see to approach nearer without being seen. Can you turn around and get back to Jarralito?"

Zack jockeyed the car in forward and reverse until we faced the other way. We returned to the intersection and drove the gravel back to the store.

"That old guy will know our car," Zack said, as he turned onto NM-702.

We drove back to Santa Fe and La Fonda.

###

At about a half-hour before midnight, Zack parked the Toyota off the gravel. He'd driven to a wider spot, turned around, and parked so the car faced the Jarralito store and gas station, which had apparently closed for the night. After locking the vehicle, we hiked across the base of the hill near the crossroad leading to the Narsom ranch.

Fortunately, the moon had set. The sky was velvet black. The thin air between us and the galaxies showed a multitude of stars that didn't twinkle, probably because of the altitude.

Seeing detail in the distance was difficult, but the starlight made it easy to see objects close in front of us. We stopped and Zack steadied his binoculars on one of the rock outcrops. "Whoa, that's a busy place." He handed the binoculars to me.

Inside the ranch house, many lights showed, and more than two figures could be seen moving past windows. No lights shown outdoors. One of the two cars we'd seen earlier was still parked in its original location. The other car was now parked next to the garage.

I handed the binoculars to Zack. "Does it look to you like one of the barn doors is open?"

"Yeah, I think so . . ."

"Can you see what's inside?"

"Not from this angle. We'll have to move." He led me at an angle. We settled behind a rock outcrop closer to the ranch.

"Ah," Zack said, "I can see . . . a big—yeah, it's the back of a truck. A big truck."

"Let's move closer."

## Dangerous Parallel

We moved forward carefully, avoiding juniper branches and reminding ourselves of the sound of our footfalls.

A breeze from the west arrived, rustling the junipers. It startled us.

We stopped, and I took the binoculars. I now saw the men inside the house more clearly. Two of them sat in one room illuminated by light that flashed and changed color. I couldn't see the screen but they seemed to be watching TV.

As I watched, a third man appeared in the same room, crossed in front of the window, and disappeared. He may have appeared at a different window.

"Let's get closer," I whispered.

## CHAPTER 24

We moved forward. I looked again through the binoculars, straining to see through the window. A man, his back to us, was seated at a desk. Another man appeared in the room and went toward the seated man. When the seated man turned in his seat, I immediately recognized Khan. The standing man seemed familiar, but I couldn't place him.

"Khan's here," I said.

I scanned the first window. The light wasn't good enough to identify the facial features of the men watching TV, so I turned my attention to the barn. One of its two doors was open. The side of the truck inside was barely visible, but I was able to confirm the logo as "Estrella Foods." I was about to tell Zack when he announced: "Car! Get down!"

I turned, lowered the binoculars and crouched behind the nearest bush. Headlight beams flared as the car rounded the base of the hill. Zack was also ducking.

He cried, "Oww!" I saw he'd brushed a cactus near the juniper he'd knelt behind.

The car drove to the crossroad, slowed, and turned onto the Narsom road toward us. As it rushed between us and the ranch, I saw two occupants in the front seats. It was a gray sport-utility vehicle. A big cloud of dust flying up behind the car made further viewing impossible. As the

denseness of the cloud lessened, a blurry red light showed. The car was braking. The headlights of the car lit the side of the house momentarily. I turned my binoculars back to the window where the two men watched TV. They quickly stood up and hurried out of view.

“Damn!” Zack said, “that cactus bit me!”

“Shh!” I said.

The dust cloud dissipated. The car was now stopped between the house and the barn, motor running. The men from the house moved around the car and were occasionally brightly lit passing through its headlights. Voices, but not words, were heard.

The car abruptly began moving. The beam of its headlights arced swiftly across the mesa, momentarily shining on the landscape in front of us. We ducked down.

The car backed up to the barn. Brake lights came on again, turning the closed door of the barn a bright pink.

The barn door slowly rolled open. Men began working nearby. After a few minutes, with headlights still blazing, the car backed into the open doorway. The motor sound ceased, the headlights went out. My eyes adapted and I again saw men moving around. The barn door had closed. Only the rear and part of the side of the Estrella truck remained visible through its open door. A few minutes later, the men crossed to the house and went inside.

Zack and I exchanged glances in the dim light. He indicated he’d taken some cactus quills in his butt. I suppressed a chuckle.

After a few minutes, Zack said, “Nothing’s happening. What now?”

“The lights are still on in the house. Maybe we can sneak over there.”

“You’re out of your mind.”

Moving quickly between bushes, we stealthily worked our way toward the house. When we got to the gravel road, we crouched behind a fairly tall juniper that gave us decent cover and an excellent view. We now saw the people inside the house without the binoculars. I realized I couldn’t identify the two men who’d returned to watch TV.

Four other men gathered in an adjacent room. Three of them sat in chairs, leaving Khan standing. He seemed to be explaining, occasionally gesturing with hands and arms. At this time it occurred to me that one of the sitting men was the man who’d accompanied Khan inside Dos Caballeros restaurant—the same man driving the Mercedes who’d eluded Lorenzo and me in Miami.

I said, “Let’s get to that barn.”

Zack gave me a look of irritation, then gazed skyward while shaking his head.

We moved by increments in a crouch, keeping below the general level of the bushes. We kept to the near side of the gravel road. We passed beyond the house and moved toward the garage. We crossed the gravel road, being careful to minimize the sound of our feet on the gravel. Using the garage building as cover, we paused, breathing heavily.

I peered around the corner of the garage towards the house. I could see right through a rear window into the room where the four men were seated. I heard occasional

voices and music jingles coming from the TV. Adeptly, the four men stood and passed out of view.

I heard a door open. Men's voices drifted through the air.

"They're outside," I whispered. "Watch out." We clung to the side of the garage, hearts pounding, barely breathing.

Sounds made us think men were passing on the other side of the garage.

"Quick," I said, "move around to the side." Zack followed me around to the side of the garage. As the men passed, I heard Khan's voice. He said, ". . . and burn the gloves . . ."

Zack and I cautiously peered around the corner, looking toward the barn. A man with a flashlight lighted the way for four other men as they entered the barn.

The first thing I heard was a heavy clunk from something like a door. Next, squeals, like nails being pulled from wood. Screeching sounds and thumps followed. Occasionally, men grunted. I couldn't decide where the sounds originated, because we couldn't see inside.

Accompanying the noises, flares and reflections of light moved, stopped, and disappeared. This looked like someone directing a flashlight's beam.

"Take it over there . . .," someone said.

"Okay, now . . . easy," another said.

I heard Khan say, "No, no, use that one, over there . . . you must observe!"

More shuffling sounds as well as thuds, scrapes and metallic clunks issued from inside. The activity continued for what seemed like a long time. A voice said, "Sixteen-sixty," and Khan said, "Get Enrique."

One of the men trotted out of the doorway, across and into the house. He soon reappeared with the man I'd seen with

Khan at Dos Caballeros. “So this is Enrique,” I said to myself, noting the curly hair and thick neck with the gold chain. A minute passed, and Khan said, “Okay, that does it . . .”

The sound of a motor being started followed.

Two men pushed the barn door to the side and the sport-utility vehicle emerged with two men inside. They looked similar to the occupants who’d arrived in that car.

“Take cover!” I said to Zack. We fell to the ground alongside the garage.

The car turned onto the gravel road and roared past us as we lay flat to the ground. The car continued on the gravel to the crossroad, turned and disappeared over the rim of the hill, leaving a giant pall of dust behind.

Several of the men left the barn and returned to the house. Enrique closed the barn door. “You must start early . . .” Khan said to Enrique as they walked to the house, “. . . time to be there . . . avoid the interstate . . .” He handed the flashlight to Enrique, and I caught a few more words: “I’m going . . . Albuquerque . . .flight time . . .”

Khan and Enrique entered the house. Zack and I were now on our feet.

Shortly the door at the front of the house squeaked and slammed. Zack and I went to the other side of the garage and peeked toward the front. The silhouette of Khan carrying his heavy briefcase crossed briskly to the the sedan parked there. He started the motor. We ducked down and pulled back before the car’s high beam headlights flashed across the road near us.

Khan turned the car sharply. It bounded over small berms at the edge of the road, turned around, and motored

## Dangerous Parallel

on the gravel road toward the crossroad. Clouds of dust blocked our vision until the car reached the crossroad, where it turned left and disappeared over the hill, gravel flying.

## CHAPTER 25

As soon as we were out of earshot of the Narsom ranch, Zack said, “Wow. Did you get all of that?”

“This is big,” I said, glancing back over our path to see if we might have tripped alarm wires or somehow alerted the occupants of the house. Everything seemed okay, but the knot in my gut persisted. “I wish we could have seen what was going on in the barn.”

Zack led up the rim of the hill. “It’s obvious Khan is directing this thing.”

We hurried, dodging scrub and cacti toward our car. When beyond the gravel crossroads, we began jogging. Only the ‘thud, thud, thud’ of our footfalls broke the quiet.

We arrived at the car breathing heavily. There was no traffic on the blacktop highway. I glanced at the Jarralito store, dark and dismal.

Zack started the motor. From the south, headlights appeared on the highway. A speeding sedan approached and zoomed past. Zack turned onto the highway and our headlights caught the small whirls of roadside dust stirred by the passing car. As we angled around, our headlights also caught a pickup truck parked on the gravel road on the opposite side of the highway.

“I don’t remember that truck being there,” I said as we gained speed on the highway I’d identified as NM-702.

Zack glanced into the rearview mirror and shrugged.  
“Nobody behind us.”

“I don’t think we were sighted—spying on them back there.”

“You better hope so.” Zack studied the road. “I’m not keen on spending the rest of my days without hands.”

“I wish you’d forget that.”

“Listen,” he said, giving me a quick glance. “I’d like to forget this whole business.”

“It sounds like Enrique is going to drive the Estrella truck to Texas tomorrow.”

“Hells bells, Junior. That’s a thousand miles if it’s a yard. That will take them . . .”

Zack didn’t finish because the interior of the car became illuminated from behind. “Car behind,” he said, glancing at the rearview mirror.

“You sure it’s not a pickup?”

“Hard to tell. Still a ways back.”

“If it’s a pickup truck, it could be the one parked down that gravel road.”

“Uh-oh,” Zack said. “How would someone there in a parked truck know us or what we were doing?”

I tried to think of an answer. “All I can think of is Eppington—he probably knows we flew into Albuquerque. But Epp wouldn’t—”

“Crap,” Zack said, slapping the wheel with his hand. “I sure hope his outfit isn’t leaky.”

The Toyota’s interior grew brighter. I avoided turning my head to look behind us. “What do you see now?”

“It’s hanging back, matching our speed.”

We climbed a gentle upward slope where the two-lane road cut through rock. The flare of our headlights traced chiseled surfaces on both sides.

“I can see it now. It’s a pickup,” Zack said.

We neared the crest of the hill. I saw traces of bore holes in the rock walls. They were evidence of where dynamite had been used to blast rock during construction of the highway.

The shadow of our car, which fell to the road, abruptly shifted right—toward the rock wall.

“Crazy jerk is going to pass,” Zack said. “Doesn’t he know any—”

The pickup’s headlight beams moved from behind to alongside. It passed. I glimpsed two dark-haired men in its cab.

The pickup abruptly veered sharply in front of us.

Zack yelled, “Look out!” He whipped our car to the right to avoid hitting the pickup. We bounded off the pavement, gravel pounding the car’s underside.

Zack tried to brake and steer on the shoulder, but our speed was too great. Momentum took control. The right front of our car hit the rock wall. My right hand flew to the door latch, flipping it.

Horrendous sounds of ripping metal followed. Showers of sparks lit everything like daylight. Shards of metal and glass flew. Airbags exploded. My chest collapsed as the airbags ballooned. My door shot outward and disappeared. The right front tire exploded. Hard knocks jerked my body forward and side to side.

The grinding screeches finally ended as the wreck slowed.

Now there was silence—except for the motor, which continued running.

Smoke and dust filled the partly-collapsed passenger compartment. The transmission made rhythmic growls. A hissing sound persisted—probably a broken radiator.

I struggled to find my seat belt under the airbag. Something interfered with my vision. When I wiped it from my eyes I realized it was blood.

A lick of bright orange flame rose from the hood. I unfastened my seatbelt and smelled gas. I saw Zack fighting his air bag.

“C’mon Zack.” I yanked on his shoulder. “Gotta get out of here.”

Dazed, he unlatched his belt. He then tried to unlatch his distorted door.

I pulled his arm. “No! Dammit, Zack—this way!” He shoved the airbag away with amazing strength.

I squeezed out of the narrow space between the rock wall and the damaged doorframe. Zack seemed to follow.

The close-coupled *brrrrrp* of an automatic weapon sounded. Bullets crashed and ricocheted around us. One whined over my head and popped into the rock wall.

I crouched as low as I could below the car’s profile. Zack lunged flat onto the gravel. We huddled together in the ditch next to the rock wall.

A second round of *brrrrrp* sounded, followed instantly by a whacking and ringing as bullets tore through the car’s metal and ricocheted onto the rock. Several penetrated the windshield and struck where we’d sat a few seconds earlier.

Smells of burning rubber and raw gasoline grew stronger. Heat radiated from the front.

## Dangerous Parallel

I said, “This thing’s gonna blow.”

“Stay down,” Zack said. “They’re still here.”

We waited for more shooting. Clipped voices echoed, followed by the slamming of car doors. Tires chirped and a motor roared.

As the motor sound began to fade, Zack said, “They’re gone!”

“C’mon, we gotta—” I said, crawling, pushing up and finally bolting on foot.

The Toyota’s gas tank exploded with a deafening roar. Everything turned to daylight.

The concussion flattened me. I sensed Zack fell behind me.

Pieces of metal from the car clanked off the rock wall and fell to the ground.

Orange light flickered across the rock wall. Big flames obscured the car’s charred skeleton. Zack was hunched over on elbows and knees between me and the car. I crawled to him, grabbed his shoulder. “You all right?”

“Huh?” He rolled to his side. “Wow,” he said, “that was . . .”

Blood covered his cheeks, shirt and hands. He looked at me, said, “You all right?”

“Shit, I don’t know.” Breath came in short bursts. “I’m alive, I think. No thanks to those . . . sons of bastards.”

The engine was no longer running. The only sound now was the snap of the flames. A huge plume of black smoke wafted from burning rubber.

I stood, slightly wobbly. “They’re gone,” I said looking beyond the wreck. I glanced back at Zack. He was still down. Something didn’t look right. “You sure you’re okay?”

Zack stared at his left hand. It was completely red. “Something nicked me—here.” His hand went to his left thigh.

I squatted to get a closer look. The light from the flames revealed a small tear in the upper left leg of his trousers. The area was wet with blood. I grabbed the raw edges of the cloth and ripped it open. Several inches of raw flesh showed.

“You might have collected one of those bullets,” I said, unbuttoning my shirt. “Press on it—see if you can . . .”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, wincing. “I know. Stop the damned bleeding.”

I got my shirt off and we used it and Zack’s belt to crudely bandage his thigh.

“Running us off the road into the rocks wasn’t good enough,” Zack said, shaking his head. “Bastards machine-gunned us for good measure.” He looked at me. “If this is your idea of mixing with the upper class like the Narsoms, think again.”

The fire continued to burn. I went to the edge of the pavement near the top of the hill and searched both directions. There were no cars heading our way.

Zack pointed to a twisted piece of wreckage some distance from the fire. “How come that door is clear back there?”

I felt my forehead, my shoulder and my arm. They hurt. I was bruised, with some cuts. “I think the door came off when my airbag blew—”

“That’s weird.”

“For some reason, I think I unlatched the door.”

“You were planning to step out of the car at fifty miles an hour?”

“Damned if I know. But I think I unlatched it—without thinking.” I tried to wipe the blood from my face. “Guess what. That must have saved us. If that door hadn’t come off before the car smashed into the wall, we’d have been trapped inside.” A shiver of fear shot through my body. “Trapped behind our airbags, we’d have died in that rain of bullets.”

All four tires of the wreck were now afire, shedding thick, acrid smoke that made me nauseous. “We’ve got to get away from here.”

As I spoke, headlights appeared in the distance from which we’d come. “Here comes a car.”

“If it’s more shooters,” Zack said, “I’m gonna volunteer to be first.”

The stake-bed truck slowed a good quarter-mile from us. I guessed the driver saw the flames and chose to approach cautiously.

Zack and I crouched alongside the rock wall, wondering if the truck bore friend—or foe.

The truck came closer and drove onto the shoulder fifty feet from us. A man stepped from the cab and advanced through his headlights toward us. Tangles of inky hair dangled over his brown face. “Wha’ happen?” he said.

“We ran off the road and hit the rock,” I said, trying to puzzle out the man’s expression from the dazzle of the headlights.

“You—your friend, you hurt,” he said in a guttural voice.

“A little,” I said. “My friend’s got a bad leg.”

The man wore beads around his neck. His hair was tied in a scraggly bun behind his head. Thinking him a resident of a local pueblo, I breathed a sigh of relief. “Can you get us to a doctor?”

As the man spoke, the bulge of tobacco in his cheek wobbled. “Ain’t got first-aid in the truck. I’ll haul you to Santa Fe . . . there’s hospital there.”

“Great,” I said. I helped Zack to his feet.

The man retreated to his truck. In the cab sat a woman and two children. I heard the bleating of sheep.

I helped Zack limp to the truck. The man stood outside, and said something to the woman in a language I didn’t understand. The passenger door opened and she and the two kids got out. They began to climb into the stake bed with the sheep.

“No, no,” Zack said to the woman, “we’ll ride in the back. You get back in the cab.”

The woman looked from Zack to the man with the beads, who stood at the driver’s side door. He didn’t look at her or say anything. The woman again looked back at Zack.

Zack nodded. “It’s okay.”

The woman nodded toward her children, who had climbed up the side. They jumped down and scrambled into the cab.

Zack limped toward the bed of the truck.

The woman eyed the man with the beads as she slowly stepped up and joined the kids in the cab. When she closed the door, the man with the beads opened the driver’s side door and climbed behind the wheel.

In the meantime, I helped Zack get onto the bed and scoot forward among the sheep.

## Dangerous Parallel

I sat beside him with our backs to the cab. The man put the truck in gear and we drove onto the highway. As we passed the burning wreckage, another wave of fear surged through my body. “I don’t know how we survived that,” I said. “I guess we were just lucky.”

“Speak for yourself, Junior,” Zack said, in a nasty tone. “I have a bullet in the leg and cactus quills in my butt. And guess what? I’m sitting on a pile of sheep shit.”

## CHAPTER 26

We rolled along the Interstate in the bed of the old stake truck, the wind roaring and buffeting us behind the cab. The wool on the sheep wiggled. They complained.

“How’s the leg?” I hollered.

“I don’t think—” His voice was weak. “I think that bullet just creased me.”

“Just hang on, we should be there shortly.”

He looked at me. “What’re we gonna say—about all this?”

“Keep it under your hat until we get some guidance.”

“Guidance?” He seemed irritated. “We get run off the road into a rock wall, machine-gunned, and you’re going for guidance?”

“Eppington should know something. I’ve still got his eight-hundred number. But first—”

Zack’s jaw slumped and his hand went to his left thigh. “I don’t get you . . .”

“Main thing is to get you patched up.”

“I’ll say. This so-called bandage on my thigh is pretty amateur.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say to the guy who saved your life.”

“Did you forget you’re the guy who got us into this jam in the first place?”

I didn't answer. The sheep bleated. Some lights of Santa Fe showed.

Zack said, "What're we gonna tell folks—about what happened?"

"Let's keep it simple. We ran off the road and crashed—forget the truck, the two bandits and the machine-gunning—okay?"

"Damn! Why'd we ever . . ."

"It'll work out, Zack." I gripped his arm. "Just hang on."

We arrived at the hospital. The driver turned into the entrance marked Emergency. When the truck stopped, I shoved the sheep aside, climbed out the rear, and helped Zack down. I shouted a quick "Thanks," to the family and took Zack's arm. Like two arthritic oldsters, we hobbled through into the E.R.

The nurse was a woman in a pale green outfit with tight curls encased in a hair net. She glanced at us, down at the belted bandage, and said, "What happened to the leg?"

Zack mumbled about going off the road and hitting the rock wall.

"I think it got sliced by sheet metal," I said.

She took us to a small alcove, where she frowned. "Whew," she said, "what's that *smell*?"

"I already told you," Zack said, irritated. "We had a car crash."

"Actually," I said to the nurse, "I think you're smelling the sheep we came here with."

She frowned more. "I see, sir." She said to Zack, "Off with the pants."

She looked me over. “Looks like you got scraped up, too,” she said. “A little antiseptic and couple of Band-Aids will take care of that.”

“I’ll be okay,” I said. “Just take care of my friend.” I unbuckled the belt and lifted my folded shirt off the wound. I helped Zack shed his pants. He sat back on the examining table in his jockey briefs, staring at the bloody wound on his thigh. I unfolded the shirt and decided I’d have to rinse out the blood before putting it back on.

To me the nurse said, “You’ll have to fill out the paperwork.” To Zack she said, “Lay down. I’ll be right back.” She nodded toward me. “Follow me, sir.”

“They’ll take care of you,” I said to Zack. “I’ll be out there.”

I followed the nurse to her table in the lobby. She selected a sheaf of papers. “Fill everything out—don’t omit anything, no matter how peculiar it appears.”

I sat down in the empty waiting area. The nurse scurried off.

I punched the number for Eppington. After two clicks and a beep, a woman’s voice said, “Operator. What party are you calling?”

“Mark Eppington.”

“Your name?” I told her. “Please hold,” she said. The line went dead.

Finally, Eppington answered. “Have you no mercy, Billy? It’s four in the morning.”

“You at home?” I said.

“Yeah. What’s up?”

“Can anyone else hear me?”

“You calling on your cell?”

“Yeah.”

“Hang up. I’ll get right back.”

I obeyed. Several seconds ticked by. My phone rang, and Eppington said, “Okay, Billy, go ahead.”

I said, “I’m here in a hospital with Zack Montrose. Don’t spread what I’m saying around.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’ve got a leak.”

“A leak?”

“Somebody knew we were here. And why. We were shot at.”

“What? You’re going to have to explain—”

“I don’t have time to give you blow by blow. Here’s what I know. There’s a shipment going to Texas. Corpus Christi area. I don’t know what it is, but it’s big.”

“What do you mean, ‘big?’”

“Why else would the gang behind it try to kill us?”

“Gang? Now wait a minute . . .”

“They think we’re dead already. There’s a guy named Khan—”

“What? Stop. You’ve got to explain—”

“No time. When I get there, I’ll contact you.”

“What? When you get . . . *where?*”

“I’ll contact you. At the Corpus Christi airport.”

“I don’t understand. Corpus Christi is—”

“You better get there right away.”

“Okay, Billy—just calm down. When will you be there?”

“Uh . . . today—what time is it?” I glanced at my watch. It was a little after two a.m. “Yeah, today. Got to go. See you there.”

I started filling out the many treatment forms. In addition to everything else, they wanted to know Zack's medical history, which I didn't know. I faked it.

A big man with thick round shoulders in a pale green outfit came up to me. "You're Bill Farris?" he said, tapping the palm of his hand with a stethoscope.

I told him I was Billy. He said he was Dr. Worl, W-O-R-L.

"Mr. Montrose says he was injured during a car crash. Tell me what happened."

"I don't remember much. It was dark. Maybe I was asleep. Next thing I know we're into a wall of rock."

Dr. Worl pointed to my sheaf of forms. "That accident report has to be filled out completely, you know. It goes to the police."

"I'll do the best I can."

The doctor's nose was weirdly crooked, like he'd played middle linebacker without a helmet. "As soon as your friend's wound is deadened, I'll close it. It wasn't made by sheet metal. It's a bad tear, like a puncture that broke through. It looks more like a bullet wound."

"Yeah, it was a really bad wreck."

"Afterwards, he'll be good to go. They'll give you wound-care instructions. I hope all is well for the both of you . . ." He turned and left.

It was after three a.m. when the taxi arrived. We got in, Zack cussing the hospital gown they'd draped around him. At La Fonda, I went inside and glanced around. Back at the taxi, I told Zack it was clear. He hobbled into the lobby in the gown, and I tried to shield him from the clerk on duty. When the door closed on the elevator, Zack said, "That doc was good."

"How do you know?"

“He got those cactus quills out of my butt.”

“I see what you mean.”

In our room, Zack said, “Where’s that tequila? I hope the maid didn’t take it.”

The bottle was on the washstand. I poured what was left into two plastic tumblers. We belted the tequila. Zack laid back on one of the beds and fell asleep. I finished my tequila and fell asleep in the armchair.

###

We descended over Corpus Christi Bay. We’d had an hour’s layover at DFW, where we changed planes. The delays had accumulated well beyond my hopes—it was now past six in the evening.

Zack was still asleep in the next seat. I tried to calculate where the Estrella truck would be. If it had left Narsom’s ranch early, they might now be on the road for fourteen hours. That would put them near the Texas-Mexico border between Big Bend and Del Rio. They’d need perhaps six more hours to reach Corpus Christi—unless, of course, they’d left earlier.

The announcement “...the Captain has turned on the fasten-seat-belt sign” woke Zack. “Damn,” he said, “I was having the best dream.” He looked a little better now, though still in some pain from his stitched-up thigh.

Once on the ground, we slowly made our way through the terminal, Zack limping gamely. I searched the nearby people warily, half-expecting to see Eppington, but no familiar face materialized. As we left the restroom, I heard a public-address announcement:

“Arriving passenger Mr. Farris, please go to a white courtesy telephone for a message.”

The female voice on the recording directed me to pick up a message at the 'Information Desk.'

I turned to Zack. "Where the hell is the Information Desk?"

He shrugged. "Maybe we passed it already."

We eventually found the Information Desk, where the clerk asked for identification before handing me a piece of paper, folded twice with a sticker that sealed it.

"That's Eppington," Zack said, "he's cloak and dagger all the way."

The paper directed us to go to the airport manager's office, which involved another search.

Eppington was inside the office with a worried look on his face. He saw Zack's limp, and the lump of the bandage in his pants' leg. "What happened to you?" he said.

Zack smiled. "It's a damned government plot."

Eppington didn't react. "You can tell me about that later. Right now, you'd better follow me." He led us out of the office to the main lobby. From there we went to the parking lot. We had to stop several times to allow Zack to catch up.

We approached a black Chevy Suburban with darkened windows. Eppington opened a side passenger door and motioned for us to enter. There were two men in the front seats. As we got in, the driver turned and his steel-rimmed glasses slid nearly to the end of his nose.

"Is it the Moors," he said, "or is it the Christians?"

"Sonofabitch," I said, laughing. I introduced Zack to Lorenzo and his seat-mate, Agent Clancy.

Eppington gestured at two nearby vehicles, a Suburban with dark glass and a Chevy mid-size. "I've brought backup,

just in case.” He entered and took the rear seat. “Okay. Now tell me what is going on.”

Zack told about being run off the road on the Interstate by the two men in a pickup, the car crash, and the gunfire that came close to killing us.

Eppington’s face was grim. “Wait a damn minute. You mean after the crash, these two thugs fired machine guns into the wreckage to finish you off?”

“How else did I get this souvenir,” Zack said, pointing.

Eppington glanced at the thigh lump. “Not too bad, I hope.”

“A nick. Twenty stitches.”

“Look, Mark,” I said, “we’re got to talk about the leak—and the gang.”

Mark squinted. “How do you figure a ‘leak?’”

“I sent you an email saying Carlos Silvan, the Cuban agent code named FARO and others are planning ‘something big’ near Oak Point. Right?”

Eppington nodded.

“And your computer showed I was in New Mexico, right?”

“Well, uh . . . the airline flew you to Albuquerque.”

“The ‘gang’ had access to those facts. That’s the only possible way they could have set up the two killers to intercept us.”

“What if someone saw you poking around—wherever you were?”

## CHAPTER 27

Eppington was ‘what-if’ing me inside the black Suburban. “Sure, Mark,” I said. “We were at their ranch—their New Mexico headquarters. But we were damned careful. I’m pretty sure they never spotted us.”

Zack said, “I’m with Billy on this. I’ll bet those guys with the guns were set up earlier.”

“So you both think we have a leak?”

“Exactly,” I said. “How else would the leaders know we were on to them and that we were there last night?”

Zack nodded.

Eppington looked worried. “I see what you mean.”

I gave Eppington the details we’d learned about the shrimp boat, Carlos, Khan, and the shipment to Oak Point. “We know almost nothing about the actual plan,” I said. “But with hundreds of millions of dollars changing hands, it’s got to be big.”

“So you think Carlos Silvan, code-named FARO, is the Cuban contact for this man Khan?”

“Right. Khan’s the brains. Zack and I believe the shipment is going to Oak Point, where the shrimp boat is moored. From there, who knows?”

Eppington’s eyes went to agent Clancy. “Oak Point? You’ve got maps—where is it?”

Clancy pulled open a large folding map of Texas. He consulted its index and held the map for Eppington to see. right here,” he said. “Less than forty miles from us.”

Eppington’s eyes narrowed and he pursed his lips. He looked at Lorenzo and Clancy. “This is a serious situation. Whoever’s leaking knows everything except what’s happened since Billy’s call to me last night. And now Carlos has given us the slip.”

I said, “What?”

Lorenzo said, “He’s really good. He must have figured out we were shadowing him. He went inside a building in downtown, knocked an air-conditioning service technician over the head, stole his uniform and walked out, right under Monroe’s nose. He drove off in the serviceman’s van.”

“Monroe?”

“Agent Monroe,” Eppington said. “Couldn’t really blame him. Carlos is good. But dammit, Billy, you should have told us earlier. We—”

With an edge, Zack interrupted, “Oh really? We’d be dead for sure by now if we’d blabbed to you earlier . . .”

I said, “You might not have believed what we thought then, anyway. We knew something was up, and we had hunches, but we didn’t know enough to convince you.”

Eppington held his hands up, palms outward. “Okay, everybody. Hang just a minute.” He pulled his cell phone from its belt holder, and quickly punched it numerous times.

In less than a minute he seemed to address the two agents: “I’ve reviewed the news reports on the New Mexico crash. They all say the smoldering wreckage of a

single vehicle on I-25 was reported and the State Police are investigating, but there's 'no evidence of driver or passenger remains in the vehicle.' That means the gang—or suspects—knows they did not kill Billy Farris or Zack Montrose. We, the Bureau, are now responsible for their safety. Is that understood?"

Lorenzo and Clancy nodded.

Eppington continued: "We've got to get on top of this. Clancy, you brief the Corpus crew. Establish a plan for Oak Point. But warn everyone to keep base in the dark about what we're doing and where we are, et cetera. Got that?"

"An Oak Point plan. No base contact. Got it." Clancy left the suburban and went to the other suburban.

"What's your best guess, Billy, as to when that truck left—uh . . ."

"Jarralito, New Mexico," I said. "It's about twenty-five miles from Santa Fe. I'd say early this morning—around five."

"Lorenzo," Eppington said, "get the maps you need and figure the minimum and maximum ETA."

"Sure," Lorenzo said. He opened the door, and hopped from his seat. He circled to the rear, opened the door, grabbed a large briefcase, and slammed the door behind him.

Zack and I were alone with Eppington. I said, "Maybe it's not my business, Mark. But I'm wondering—do you intend to bring Doug Howlandger in on this?"

Eppington kneaded his lips with his hand and finally spoke. "I've been thinking about that. He's in charge of the foreign aspects of this investigation. As far as I'm concerned, we'll just let him see if he can find Carlos Silvan. That should keep him out of our hair."

###

Emilio Sanchez from the Corpus crew, Clancy, Lorenzo and Eppington stared at the map laid out in the cargo area at the rear of the Chevy Suburban. Lorenzo tapped it with his index finger. “Where highway one-twelve crosses here—that’s the only choke point within an hour’s drive. The town is Zapala.”

Zack and I watched with fascination.

“Describe that truck again, Billy,” Eppington said.

“It’s white, one of those big box units with a separate two seat cab, dual wheels under the box, I think. Lettering on the sides says ‘Estrella Foods, Inc.’”

“We don’t know how many people are inside,” Eppington said, “could be a dozen in the box. There could be another vehicle accompanying it. Emilio, I want you to take the whole Corpus crew—six—plus yourself and the two units. Set up the intercept at the choke point.

“Billy thinks the two guys in the cab will give up without a fight, but we can’t depend on that. After the capture, load the crew you can spare in the box and drive it to the Oak Point rendezvous with the *Veronica B*. Make sure you have the same number in the cab as they have. We don’t want Oak Point to be spooked.”

Sanchez smiled. “Prisoners will be consigned to the county—temporarily. Voice and data links will enable a full stealth setup when we arrive. The only thing is—there are a bunch of boats at the harbor—we need a way to identify the target boat.”

“I can draw a diagram showing where the *Veronica B*. is,” I said. “If you’re in the area, her white and red trim are fairly easy to spot.”

“But it’s going to be dark,” Lorenzo said.

“True,” Eppington said. “Still, it gives them some backup.” Some paper was produced, and I drew a diagram showing the position of the boat. Eppington said, “That does it. Any questions, Emilio?”

Sanchez shook his head.

Eppington got out and lingered by the open door of the big vehicle. “We can’t alert anyone at base. Keep voice and data traffic to a minimum. Maintain radio silence until you’re at the harbor. Good luck.”

Emilio gathered his crew next to the other Suburban. They began their planning.

With Lorenzo driving and Clancy in the rear of the Suburban that Eppington called the ‘MC2V unit,’ we later followed the Corpus crew out of the airport. At the highway, they turned toward Zapala and we turned in the opposite direction.

The sun slipped close to the horizon and the sky dimmed. I gave Eppington some of the detail from my prior trip to Oak Point harbor. Clancy was busy in the rear arranging the small armory stored there in plastic bins. He laid out weapons, belts, sights and ammunition, checking everything.

Eppington studied the Suburban’s navigation screen. “Take route 361,” he instructed Lorenzo. “We’ll stop at the Port Aransas Coast Guard Station.”

When we reached the Station, Eppington left us, bounded up the stairs and disappeared. After a few minutes, he returned. “Okay, let’s get to Oak Point.”

After taking the ferry and briefly driving inland, we entered a long causeway. Although I’d approached from a different direction, I immediately recognized the environs of

Oak Point. The sparse illumination from the few streetlights accentuated the shabbiness of the town.

At the same motel where I'd stayed on my visit, Eppington rented a unit and ushered Zack inside. When he returned to the car, he looked upset. "Zack wasn't happy about being left out," he said, "but I can't be responsible for an injured civilian on this operation.

"It's potentially hazardous." He paused. "Although I need you to identify the players, Billy, I'm reluctant to risk your skin. Are you up to participating?"

It sounded dangerous. "Are you kidding? I'd rent a skateboard with a missing wheel just to get there."

Eppington laughed. "I hope we can avoid that."

I said, "Turn right at that intersection just past the small bridge." We drove onto the pot-holed road that twists past Tate's bar. My hasty exit from it on the previous visit flashed into my memory. We turned onto the harbor road. Other than an occasional light showing through a boat porthole, the docks seemed deserted. As we neared the *Veronica B.*, a rusted sedan pulled from a nearby shrimp processor compound and flashed by us on its way out of the harbor area.

We drove past the *Veronica B.* The rusty Dodge pickup was angle parked at the dock. Lights burned in the deck house.

"With all the antennae on its roof," Eppington said, "this is a distinctive vehicle. We need to park it where it's hard to see and approach on foot."

"There's a spot near the end of the harbor road that might work," I said, thinking of my previous parking spot.

Lorenzo drove there, then parked in a darker area on a gravel road that teed into the harbor road. A sign on the timber and tin garage at the corner said "Diesel Injectors."

We gathered at the open rear of the Suburban. Clancy handed Lorenzo two miniature radios, a flashlight, and a pump shotgun in a cloth cover. Eppington's jacket hid a shoulder holster with a .45 automatic, which he checked. Clancy loaded himself up with several dark jackets with white FBI lettering, and two more shotguns with covers. "Walk next to me," he said to me, "it'll help hide the guns."

We walked in a close group alongside the fences, shacks, docks and finger piers. I felt the guns were hidden as well as possible, but wondered what would happen if we encountered someone along the way. Fortunately, we didn't.

We walked without talking until we reached the *Veronica B*.

As we slowed near the abandoned building next to the boat's dock, Eppington spoke in a low voice. "Let's pause here until our eyes are fully dark-adapted." We moved into the shadows where several nets were draped over wood supports.

Eppington turned to me. "What's the chance we can get inside that building next to the dock?"

"I'm pretty sure there's a door on the far side, but I don't know about getting inside . . ."

"Clancy," he said, "you set up here. Give me three of the jackets and a shotgun." Lorenzo handed one radio to Clancy and the other to Eppington.

We left Clancy and crossed to the building. While Eppington kept watch at the corner, I tried the door, but it wouldn't open. As I was reporting this to Eppington, Lorenzo

whispered a short distance from us that he'd found a way inside.

We went to him. He raised a rotted plywood cover hinged from the top. The hasp and the locked padlock that hung from it had pulled through the wood. This revealed an opening in the side of the building, probably for deliveries. After lifting his leg into the opening, Lorenzo ducked inside. Eppington and I followed.

It was very dark inside. Very dimly, I made out what looked like a couple rows of shelving separated by aisles. Dirt and debris covered the floor.

We edged our way toward the side that fronted *Veronica B.*'s dock. On that wall was a window, less than two-feet square, divided into four sections. None of the four held more than a few shards of glass. Through this we glimpsed the pilot house of the shrimp boat, less than a dozen feet away. Most of the deck house, however, was hidden from view.

Creaking noises from the *Veronica B.*'s hull rubbing against pilings as well as sounds of a radio or TV drifted to us. I explored a corner of the interior. A fairly large crack between two boards allowed me to view the Dodge parked on the harbor road. Beyond, and to the side, I saw the net repair shop where Clancy was crouched, nearly invisible, under draped nets.

As we waited, a three-quarters moon rose. It shed a pale light that filtered inside through the many rust holes in the corrugated metal roof. The agents removed the covers from the shotguns, and each of us pulled on a FBI jacket.

Lorenzo had struggled with the door I failed to open. Finally he worked it quietly from the inside until it came loose loose with a squeak. “Not locked,” he said quietly, “just jammed.”

“As soon as we sight the truck with Emilio,” Eppington said to Lorenzo, “we’ll set the ambush. We’ll wait until the guys inside the *Veronica B.* show themselves before we jump. I’ll give the word.” He repeated this on his radio, and I heard Clancy say, “Understood.”

Lorenzo said, “Billy, you stay right here, inside. Here’s a shotgun, loaded, with the safety on.” He leaned closer, to make sure I understood. “It’s for your personal protection only. Here’s the safety, flip it off, you’re ready to shoot. But I don’t want you even putting this gun to your shoulder unless you think somebody’s trying to kill you. You get me?”

I told him I was not a hunter, and probably couldn’t hit anything with the gun anyway.

“You don’t have to have terrific aim with these,” he said, patting the barrel. “That’s fortunate, for guys with lousy vision—like me.”

Eppington, who’d been quiet for several minutes, said, “This is the part I hate. Being ready, thinking, thinking, and thinking some more. The thinking will drive you crazy.”

## CHAPTER 28

I stared, but couldn't see the hands on my watch. "What's the time?" I said.

Lorenzo replied, "Eight-fifty-three."

It seemed later. "Shouldn't we be seeing them by now?"

Neither Eppington or Lorenzo answered.

Minutes passed. A rumble came from the direction of Tate's bar. It grew louder. I ducked to the corner where the crack between boards allowed me to view the harbor road.

Eppington said, "What do you see, Billy?"

The headlights were blinding. I barely saw a row of yellow lights high above the dazzle of the headlights. "It's a truck . . ."

"Standby," Eppington said, probably to Clancy on the radio.

As the truck came towards us, it didn't look right. It's side, now slightly visible, looked brown. I searched for the Estrella logo. There was none. The truck roared past.

"False alarm," I said. "That's not it."

"Crap," Lorenzo said.

What seemed like another hour went by. The quiet and the darkness made me drowsy, despite the growling of my stomach. I realized I hadn't eaten anything since lunch.

“Lorenzo—what do you think?” I said. “Did something go haywire?”

“Don’t know,” Lorenzo said. His voice was calm, matter-of-fact.

Later, Eppington said, “Lights out.” I could tell he was looking out the broken-glass window. “The cabin lights went out in the boat.”

I noticed that the sounds of music and voices from the TV or radio had also ceased. I was dejected. I began to rethink everything. Had I got the plan wrong? Was the shipment headed for a different location? Houston? It didn’t match what I knew. Was the *Veronica B.* scheduled to leave here and rendezvous with the truck at a different port? I couldn’t be sure.

The radio crackled. Clancy said, “What’s going on?”

Eppington said, “We’re standing by. No activity so far.”

Another half hour dragged by. I said, “What’s wrong, Mark?”

“I don’t know,” Eppington said.

I became disgusted. Why were these FBI guys so matter-of-fact? Didn’t they realize their plan had gone all wrong?

A minute later, the rumble of a truck sounded. I ducked to the corner where I could see through the crack between boards. First I saw headlights, then the yellow running lights, then the cab. The truck slowed, lighting up the roadway in my view. Its side came into view and I saw the logo, ‘Estrella Foods, Inc.’”

“Billy,” Eppington said. “Is that—”

“Yes, yes, that’s it!”

Softly, Eppington said, “Clancy, this is the Estrella truck. Standby for my command.” A pause followed. Eppington was adjusting something on the radio.

“Emilio,” Eppington said, “This is Mark. We’re stationed here in the building next to the *Veronica B*. Why the delay?”

Silence.

The truck stopped, and I heard the gears grind. The front wheels squealed as they turned. The truck began backing toward the dock.

“Clancy, do you read?” Eppington said.

“Loud and clear,”

“Emilio Sanchez,” Eppington said, “this is Mark Eppington. Come in.”

Silence.

The truck inched backwards, the diesel’s roar interrupted as the driver made steering corrections.

“Shit,” Lorenzo said. “Something’s wrong with the radio.”

“Emilio, please come in,” Eppington said, his voice now louder. In a softer voice, he said, “Lights on. Suspects alive on the boat.”

Lorenzo said, “Okay, Mark. Your call. What now?”

“Stand by,” Eppington said.

The chatter of a mechanical brake sounded. The driver’s door swung open, and the driver’s upper body emerged. I strained to see who it was—it was John Peterson!

“Mark,” I said, “It’s all wrong. The driver is Peterson, one of the gang!”

Eppington said, “Standby. The intercept failed.” He paused. “FBI not on board. Repeat. FBI not on truck. Standby.”

“Understood,” said Clancy’s voice.

I felt around for the barrel of the shotgun. It was cold, but not as cold as my hand.

The diesel of the truck went to an idle. Peterson stepped out onto the sand. A clatter came from the boat.

“Standby,” Eppington said. “We have a man on deck of boat. Black cowboy hat. Unarmed. He’s heading to the side. Now onto the dock.”

“Number two and three on the boat,” Eppington said. “Half dressed. They’re hanging back.”

The black cowboy hat appeared on the dock. It was the man I’d seen driving the Dodge pickup on my previous trip.

Peterson shouted, “You planning to unload?”

I couldn’t hear cowboy hat’s reply, but he nodded. He stood at the rear of the truck.

“How many you count?” Eppington said to Lorenzo, who had moved to the window.

“Five total if there are two on the boat.” Lorenzo sounded unsure. “...and if there were two in the cab of the truck.”

Eppington said, “Clancy—can you see the truck?”

“Affirmative. Standing by.”

“Bullshit,” Peterson said to cowboy hat. “I’m dead tired.”

Eppington said, “How many in the truck cab.”

Clancy’s voice said, “Can’t tell. Don’t know.”

Cowboy hat gripped a handhold on the rear of the truck and placed a foot on the step. “What?”

“I’m not unloading nothing tonight.” Peterson said. “Too tired.”

“Clancy, you cover your side,” Eppington said. “We’ll take the rear and the far side. On the count of five.”

“Affirmative,” Clancy said.

“Five. Four.” Eppington counted as he and Lorenzo grasped their guns and slipped quietly out the door. Two.”

My eyes strained to see the gang react.

“One. Zero.”

Clancy entered the scene from my left.

Eppington and Lorenzo appeared. With his .45 leveled at cowboy hat, Eppington shouted. “FBI! FBI! Freeze! Hands above head! You are all under arrest.”

Lorenzo aimed his shotgun at Peterson.

Clancy approached the truck with his shotgun aimed, shouting, “Freeze! Don’t move a fucking muscle!”

Peterson and cowboy hat raised their hands, slowly.

I went to the broken glass window in time to see one man on the *Veronica B.*’s deck retreat into the cabin. The lights went out.

I returned to the crack between boards. A third man rounded the front of the truck with his hands raised to shoulder level.

Clancy shouted at him, “Hands on head! Go to the side.”

Lorenzo approached cowboy hat, his shotgun aimed with one hand. “Get over there with the other guy.” He gestured with his other hand. “Move!”

With the three men now on the driver’s side of the truck, Eppington said, “I’m agent Mark Eppington, FBI. You are under arrest. Turn around, place your hands on the side of the truck and spread your legs. Now!”

Lorenzo aimed his shotgun toward the *Veronica B.* and shouted, “On board the boat! You are under arrest. Come to the rail. Now!”

I went to the window. The only sound now was the creaking of *Veronica B.*'s hull against the pilings. Lorenzo slowly crossed the gangway onto the deck of the *Veronica B.* with his shotgun aimed toward the cabin. Once there, he scrambled to the cabin in a crouch. At its side, he stood up, reached with one hand and flung the door open.

Eppington appeared on the gangway. "Lorenzo—I'm covering you," he said, his .45 ready.

Lorenzo slipped through the doorway and disappeared.

Eppington crossed onto the deck of the *Veronica B.* with his gun ready, and scrambled to the cabin. At the side of the cabin he stood up next to the open door, listening.

I glimpsed a moving light inside the cabin that I took to be from Lorenzo's flashlight. Shortly, the cabin went dark.

From the left, I glimpsed lights moving on the harbor road. As I turned to see, a shot came from the *Veronica B.* A second, louder blast, followed. When I glanced back at the boat, Eppington remained outside. "Lorenzo?" he yelled. When there was no answer, Eppington swung into the doorway and disappeared.

I rushed to the crack in the boards. The lights that I'd seen were gone. Clancy held his shotgun on the men at the side of the truck, but glanced intermittently and anxiously toward the *Veronica B.*

I returned to the broken glass window. Eppington shortly appeared at the cabin door with his arms around Lorenzo. They staggered across the deck. Lorenzo's arm and hand gripped his stomach. Eppington could barely support Lorenzo, whose shotgun remained tucked under his arm. The two men tottered on the gangway, scarcely moving.

Eppington lost his grip. Lorenzo slid spread-legged to the dock. His shotgun clattered to the timber. He moaned and sucked in his breath.

Eppington tried to lift Lorenzo, but couldn't. Lorenzo coughed. Blood overflowed his lips.

I grasped the shotgun in one hand and stepped through the doorway.

A man stepped out of the *Veronica B.*'s cabin doorway with a pistol in his hand. "Okay, Mark," he said. "Just stay where you are."

The light caught Doug Howlandger's face just right. I couldn't believe it was him.

Eppington knelt beside Lorenzo, his .45 still in his shoulder holster. He tightened his arm around Lorenzo's shoulder. In a loud, angry voice, he said, "You're dirty, Howlandger. You'll never get away with this."

Howlandger edged sideways so that Eppington remained between him and Clancy. "Don't try anything, Clancy," he yelled, "or your boss is dead."

Howlandger did not see me at the door of the building. I wanted my breathing to cease, thinking it would alert him to my presence.

Lorenzo moaned, and slumped forward. Eppington said something to him while glaring at Howlandger.

At the side of the truck, Clancy continued to aim his gun at the captives, but his attention was drawn to Eppington and Howlandger. The captives turned their heads to see what was happening.

I lifted the shotgun to my shoulder and raised the barrel. In what seemed like a day and a half, I searched with my right hand for the gun's safety.

Eppington must have seen me. His hand went toward his holstered .45.

Howlandger said, "Gently, Mark, gently." He waved his pistol and raised his voice. "Drop that gun, dammit!"

Another man appeared at the doorway to the cabin doorway. Swaying, he grasped the doorframe for support. "Dammit, Howlandger," he said, "you gotta help me." The front of his shirt was red with blood.

My thumb felt the shotgun's safety. I flipped it off. I moved out, aiming the shotgun at Howlandger. I opened my mouth to tell him to drop his gun, but the man at the cabin doorway saw me. He yelled, "Look out! There's a guy—"

Howlandger whirled toward me. He aimed the pistol at me. A shot rang out and a bright light flashed. I pulled the trigger. The shotgun's stock bit my shoulder. It made a deafening roar. Howlandger fell backwards, screaming.

I turned slightly and pointed the shotgun toward the man at the doorway. He hesitated for an instant, then ducked inside. I didn't realize I couldn't fire the gun, so I pumped the shotgun and a casing flew out. The smell of burned gunpowder filled the air.

Eppington was now on his feet, his .45 trained on Howlandger. Doug lay on the deck, not moving, but his right foot twitched. Eppington rushed to him and snatched Doug's pistol from his limp hand. He quickly turned both guns toward the captives, who'd begun to talk about getting away. "Keep your hands on the truck," he shouted, "and everything will be cool."

Eppington glanced up at me. "Billy. Are you okay?"

I now realized Howlandger had fired his pistol at me, but had missed. I could hardly believe the sequence.

“Yeah—I . . . I guess.”

“Just cover Howlandger,” Eppington said. He turned and hollered at Clancy, “Get on the horn. Get some help!” He holstered his .45, dropped Doug’s pistol, and knelt next to Lorenzo, who had crawled onto the dock and collapsed.

Howlandger was not moving. It was hard to tell if he was breathing.

Just then, a roar came from the big diesel of the *Veronica B*. It began running—fast. I heard the gears. The boat moved a couple feet away from the dock. Its lines to the pilings went taut, then snapped and fell into the water. The boat shuddered, and without resistance, the stern lept upward. The *Veronica B*. continued to plow from the dock, pushing a big wave ahead of its stern. It was moving fast toward open water—in reverse!

Over the roar of the diesel, I heard Clancy’s voice. He shouted into his radio, “Roger, roger—Oak Point harbor, agent down—agent down! Hurry!”

## CHAPTER 29

The small waiting area off the emergency room held only two chairs and a vinyl couch. A clerk behind the information desk was either absent or nonexistent. Antiseptic recently used to sterilize the room smelled worse than paint thinner.

“You drove the Suburban yourself?” the officer said to me.

“I didn’t have any choice . . .”

“Yessir. But it’s a government vehicle. We’ll have to take custody.” He turned to another officer standing nearby. “Greg, find out how we’re supposed to clean that vehicle.”

The ‘Greg’ officer nodded and went out through the double entrance doors.

I wondered, not only about the status of Lorenzo, but if all this furor—the coming, going and questioning by police and deputies and technicians and clerks—would ever end.

“You’re not a member of the FBI, but you brung this injured man here . . . who told you to do that?”

“FBI Agent Mark Eppington. He led the operation. He had to—”

“Yessir. I bet I talked to him.” The officer consulted his notes. “He had suspects there, and another man shot.” He paused. “Now this man here,” he gestured toward the wall, “you say—”

“He’s FBI Agent Lorenzo Sanchez. He was shot by Doug Howlandger.”

“Yessir. Sanchez. You saw the shooting?”

“No. . . I was—”

“So how come you know Howlandger shot Sanchez?”

“Because he had the gun. Lorenzo had gone inside—”

“Okay, let’s skip that. How come this here Sanchez didn’t come by ambulance?”

“The ambulance never showed. They called and called from the harbor. Lorenzo was in bad shape. We figured it would be quicker to drive him . . .”

“So how come you didn’t bring this other man who was shot . . .?” The officer checked his notes again. “Name of Douglas Howlandger . . .”

“It was hard enough getting Lorenzo here. I ran all the way to the Suburban. Drove back to the dock where Mark and I barely lifted Lorenzo into the cargo space. He was weak, bleeding. We were afraid he’d die. Worst part of it was, I didn’t even know how to get here. Luckily, there was this guy—”

“Yessir. We talked to that fella.” The officer picked my driver’s license from his knee and glanced at it. “Well, for sure—you’re not from here, you’re from Florida. Visiting, I take it.” He paused, saw I didn’t add anything, and replaced the license on his knee.

“So’s I can understand,” he began, “when you got here to the E.R., you told nurse Tilda to send an ambulance to the Oak Point harbor? Is that what you did?”

“Yes. I knew there was . . . I knew Howlandger was shot.” My mind instantly filled with the yellow flash of Howlandger’s pistol, then the roar of my shotgun. I felt sweat trickle under my armpits.

“You saw the shooting?”

I didn't want to talk about it. I said, "I saw the shooting." My stomach cramped. I narrowed my eyes and said, "Can we wrap this up? I've answered some of this earlier. I really want to find out how Lorenzo is doing."

"Yessir. Just one more ques—"

The entrance door flew open, Mark Eppington entered and strode to me. "Billy! What have you heard?" His jacket had a bloody smear on it. "Is Lorenzo—"

The officer interrupted. "You're the—you're Eppington, right?"

"Yeah," Eppington said. He sat down beside me on the couch. He glimpsed the Lone Star emblem on the officer's shoulder patch, whipped out his identification, showed it to the officer, and put it away. He turned to me with bloodshot eyes. "What do you know?"

"I haven't been able to find out anything. They took him—"

The officer interrupted. "I talked to you at the harbor, I'm pretty sure."

Eppington nodded.

I said, "Soon as I got here, they took Lorenzo into surgery. What about Howlandger?"

"He's still alive—I think." Eppington pulled on his tie to loosen it more. "When I got to the hospital in Corpus, he was already in the operating room. He was breathing when the EMTs arrived at the harbor, but he lost a lot of blood. He was drifting . . . drifting in and out." He saw the uneasy look in my eyes. "I know it isn't easy, Billy. But you didn't have a choice. He aimed for you."

"I can't believe he missed," I said, shaking my head.

“He didn’t know it was you—that’s what he told me. I could barely hear him, but he said all he saw was the shotgun—he just pulled the trigger.”

“Pardon, Eppington. I need to tell Farris something—Okay, Farris, I think I’ve got what I need from you.” He handed me my license. “I’m fixing to leave, but we’ll be in touch with you, if need be.” He got up and joined two other uniformed officers.

Eppington glanced at the three and said, in a quiet voice, “I can’t believe Doug. I’ve worked with him for years. Always seemed okay. Maybe not as dedicated as some, but . . .”

“He’s the leak,” I said. “I’m betting that’s how the gang found out about me and Zack.”

Eppington looked at the floor and shook his head. “I had trouble accepting that. I was wrong.”

“It’s been a hell of a night.” I said. I stood up to stretch my legs.

Eppington stood up and said, “I got to admit, there were rumors. Rumors he had a twelve-room mansion in Jamaica. Somebody swore Doug had a big sailboat, too. But I always figured, maybe he’d managed well . . .”

I was feeling weak, but fought it. “What happened to the boat?”

“I told the guys at the Port Aransas Coast Guard Station to keep watch. The *Veronica B.* won’t get far. Clancy’s taking charge of that issue—after the formalities.”

“Formalities?”

Eppington rubbed his eyes with both hands. “God it’s late. Yeah, getting the suspects Mirandized, questioned, all

the paperwork, locking them up. Meanwhile, I've got to return to the Oak Point dock."

"Again?"

"Yeah, it's the truck. The hazmat response team has arrived, and I'm told they've sealed it. Don't know what that's about, but I'll find out." He waved his hand toward the hallway. "Let's see what we can find out about Lorenzo."

We went down the hall off the waiting room, where Eppington found a nurse named Helen. "Helen, my man Lorenzo is in there," he said, gesturing towards the door marked 'Surgery.' "He was shot in the line of duty. I'm Agent Mark Eppington of the FBI, and I've *got* to know how he's doing. Can you help me?"

She smiled. "I'll see." She pointed. "Just go back to the waiting room—someone will find you."

We ambled back.

Eppington looked at me with a slight smile and said, "I know you're wondering about all that you're going through. Don't kid yourself, a lot of people are going to be asking you a lot of questions. Some of them will be tough to answer. But the worst questions will be those you ask yourself."

He turned and looked at the night out the single window. "You saved my butt. You saved all our butts. I know you didn't ask for what happened, but . . ."

"We'll have to talk about that," I said.

"Yeah, later, after I figure out what the hell went wrong. I still don't know what happened to the intercept."

I glanced at my watch. "You haven't heard from them?"

"A garbled radio message, after you left. It sounded like they were miles away. Nothing after that." Eppington heaved a sigh.

A doctor in scrubs, with a skullcap and a mask dangling around his neck, approached. “Mr. Eppington?”

Eppington said “Yes, Doc . . .”

“Lorenzo Sanchez is going to be okay. He’s lost blood, but the bullet only nicked his right lung. We removed the slug. He’s being stabilized. You’ve notified next of kin?”

Eppington shook his head. “No, not yet. But most definitely, his family will be notified very shortly.”

The doctor turned to leave, then turned back. “Shouldn’t we do something about all these guns?”

Eppington didn’t react. “We should do something about crime, Doc.”

The doctor said, “I’ve got to go back now, there’s more to do.” He turned and hurried toward the hall.

As the doctor disappeared from view, I said, “When’s your birthday, Mark—I mean what’s your sign?”

“October thirtieth. Scorpio.”

“That’s your problem. Scorpions are sensitive, emotional and independent. What they lack is the asbestos butt to insulate them from the hotseat.”

He laughed, then we both laughed. I didn’t feel right again.

“Excuse me, Mark,” I said. I hurried to the restroom where I vomited into a toilet. I went to the sink, threw some water on my face. I sat on a toilet until the feeling passed. After some minutes, I returned to the waiting room.

Eppington was right outside the restroom door. “You all right? I was about to come and—”

“Billy!” Zack came around from behind Eppington. “I knew something—“

Eppington interrupted. “Zack came in while you were in the restroom. I told—”

Zack interrupted. “I’m sitting there, watching a movie on TV. A flock of cop cars go racing by, lights flashing, sirens blaring. This fat broad—the one who runs the palace—she comes by all red in the face, says ‘accordion to Granny, her scanner says there’s a big ruckus at the harbor, shooting and all.’

“Well they didn’t have to send me a telegram. I took off for the harbor, but with this lousy leg . . .”

Eppington said, “I told Zack about the shot you had to take.”

Zack said, “Yeah—are you doing all right?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “It’s been a hell of a day.”

Eppington’s cell phone jangled. He turned away with the phone next to his ear.

I said to Zack, “How’d you get *here*?”

Zack said, “When I got to the harbor, it was all over, except for the parking fees. I never saw so gol-darned many cop cars in one spot in all my life. I tried to find you, Billy, but nobody told me anything. I figured you were either dead or wounded, so I hitched a ride here. You don’t look so good, but you don’t have bullet holes, near as I can see.”

I gave him a weak smile. “I’ll be better when I get some rest.”

Rubbing the lump made by the bandage on his thigh and glancing around, Zack said, “This ain’t exactly the place for that.”

About that time, Eppington lowered his phone, and said, “That was Clancy. He says the Port Aransas Coast Guard chopper is out tracking the *Veronica B*. The man on watch says the pilot reports the track is ‘very erratic.’ The boat wanders around San Antonio Bay like its helmsman doesn’t know where he’s going. An armed Coast Guard boat has been dispatched.”

“That’ll take ‘em a while,” Zack said.

“Let’s finish up,” Eppington said. “I’ll drive you back to the motel, Zack. Billy and I will check through the police station, then I’ll get him back to your motel for some rest. Okay?”

For a change, Zack agreed. By the time Eppington and I completed the paperwork at the police station and returned to the motel, a dull glow outlined the eastern horizon—it was not more than a half hour before sunrise.

## CHAPTER 30

I awoke to Eppington's knock with a shock. Diffuse sunlight filling the motel room showed how truly shabby the place was. My watch showed almost ten o'clock.

"Sorry to wake you," Eppington said, "but the ride's here for Zack."

"Uh . . . what?" My brain was not working.

He smiled. "We brought two units. One is designated to get Zack to the Corpus airport for his flight home. Am I getting through to you?"

"Oh, yeah," I said, realizing Zack was in the cottage across the lot. "Is he ready to go?"

Eppington gestured, and I saw Zack jamming a suitcase in the rear of a gray van parked in front of his cottage. Vapor streamed from its exhaust.

"I'll be with you as soon as I'm dressed."

"No rush," Eppington said. "I'll be waiting in the Suburban."

I dressed quickly and left the cottage without shaving. Zack stood at the passenger's door of the gray van, talking to the driver behind the wheel. I went to him and said, "You're one lucky son of a bitch."

"Watch your language, Sonny." He smiled. "The word police are everywhere."

“I’m sorry you’re leaving. I hope the Keys have been warned.”

Zack grinned and climbed into the van. “Listen Junior. You better get your butt back quick. I’d hate to have to hire someone competent to crew in your place.”

“Okay,” I said, “I’ll be in touch when I know something.”

“Hell’s bells!” He closed the door. “I’ll be retired if I have to wait that long.”

I waved as the van pulled away.

At the Suburban, I told Eppington I’d be ready as soon as I shaved and washed up. He smiled, “First stop will be for coffee and maybe a Texas-sized breakfast.”

At The Wagon restaurant with steer’s horns adorning all four walls, Eppington treated me to coffee, ham and eggs, and a short stack of pancakes. It was the first real meal I’d had in twenty-four hours.

“I figured you’d want to know about the boat,” Eppington said as we drank our coffee. “As soon as it was light this morning, the crew of the Coast Guard chopper ‘rescued’ the man driving the *Veronica B*. He finally gave himself up and they hauled him off the boat in one of those baskets. When they got him up inside the chopper, they saw his arm was injured. He’d apparently used a makeshift tourniquet to lessen the bleeding while trying to drive the boat to escape.

“But according to the Coast Guard, he didn’t understand how to navigate—he kept looking for the Gulf of Mexico and not finding it. He didn’t recognize that there’s no direct access from San Antonio Bay to the Gulf of Mexico.”

I chuckled. “Yeah. The barrier island, I think it’s called Matagorda, blocks the passage to the Gulf. You have to take the Intracoastal to one of the ship channels to get to the Gulf.”

Eppington nodded. “I figured you’d know all about that. This guy didn’t.”

“What’s the status of the boat now?”

He took a sip of coffee and said, “The word I got this morning was that it had been declared ‘a hazard to navigation.’ I’m told this declaration permitted the Coast Guard crew, which arrived at the *Veronica B.* by boat, to board it.

“You’ll be dumbfounded to know what the Coast Guard boys found on board—huge bundles of cash—all in twenties. They’re counting it now, but they say there are millions and millions of dollars on that boat.”

Minutes later, before we left the restaurant, Eppington got a phone call. After he finished it, he said, “Well, Billy, the FBI people at Port Aransas have tentatively identified the man driving the *Veronica B.* They say he’s Carlos Silvan!”

“I’ll be damned,” I said. “So both Carlos and Howlandger were on board—”

Eppington held up his hand, palm toward me. “Just a minute. I don’t want to get ahead of the facts. Those folks who identified him as Carlos say he denies he’s Carlos Silvan. Maybe he took some shrapnel to his arm during the boarding operation. He claims he’s Luis Rodriguez, but he doesn’t have any identification on him.”

“If it’s Carlos, I could identify him.”

“We may need you to do that.”

“If Carlos and Howlandger were both aboard the *Veronica B.* at Oak Point, it sure looks like something big was planned.”

Eppington nodded. “The arrival of the Estrella truck.”

“The shipment on board the Estrella truck,” I said.

Eppington frowned. “Yeah. The shipment.”

I gave him an expectant look.

“Maybe we ought to get on with our business,”

Eppington said, rising from his seat and pulling his wallet from his back pocket. “I’ll catch the bill.”

Before I could say anything, he headed to the cashier, where he paid by credit card. Once we left the restaurant and entered the Suburban, he said, “I needed to be discreet in the restaurant, Billy. I’ll explain after we get done at the hospital.”

We drove through Portland to Corpus Christi, and ramped onto South Padre Island Drive. At the Medical Center, we parked and inquired at Emergency. We were directed to the Intensive Care Desk, where Eppington stood for several minutes, waiting for information.

After a brief conversation with a second nurse who’d arrived after a short time at the desk, Eppington approached me.

“Howlandger’s under guard,” he said. “They’re not allowing visitors. He has survived several major surgeries and is heavily medicated. His condition is rated as ‘critical.’” He looked at me carefully with his hands clasped together. “Do you have any questions . . . or concerns?”

I thought about the shooting and events that had occurred afterwards. “I guess not.” I paused to try to put my reactions into words. “I think my hope is that he survives. That may not matter to him. He might not even know who I am, or what I did. He’s probably not conscious right now, right?”

Eppington shrugged. "He's heavily doped up, I imagine."

"You know, it's very hard to express my feelings. In some ways, I think my mind doesn't want to accept what occurred."

"That's probably true," Eppington said. "I mean about the mind not accepting." He stood still, seeming to wait for me.

After a moment, I turned away from the desk and we started out of the area. When we reached the elevators, Eppington said, "I'm truly sorry this happened to you. There are some professionals at Headquarters whom you might . . ." He glanced at the expression on my face. "But maybe not."

We didn't speak until we arrived back at the parking lot.

I said, "What's next?"

"I've got to stay here a while. But you—you're probably anxious to get back to Florida, right?"

"Yeah—Zack and I have probably missed a charter or two."

"Okay. I'll take you back to Oak Point. You can pick up your gear and I'll see you get to your flight home." He paused. "Of course you realize there are going to be calls on you . . . because you're a witness, a participant. You understand that, don't you?"

"I suppose I do. I hope it's manageable."

Eppington went to the side of the Suburban. "We'll do what we can to keep it that way."

I said, "That's not totally reassuring."

He opened the door and ducked in. "We're not in charge of everything."

I got into the passenger seat and closed the door. "What about the Estrella truck?"

"Oh, yeah." He started the car. "You see, the Estrella truck has become sort of a jurisdictional football."

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, it’s a little weird. As I told you earlier, the Texas hazmat crew arrived not long after we were overrun by local police units. This was before anyone found the keys to the locks on the truck’s cargo box. The hazmat people poked around and ended up pasting plastic stickers over the rear doors. They couldn’t—or didn’t—explain why, but indicated that the truck had to be sealed, pending further action.”

“So they regarded the vehicle as being some kind of hazard to the environment?”

“You’d guess that to be it.”

“Seems odd.”

“I admit, I didn’t fully understand. Well, the next thing was that the IRU arrived. When the ‘Region Four Incident Response Unit’ got there, they claimed the Federal government had the responsibility, and they took over from the hazmat people.”

“What the heck is their job?”

“They say it’s safety and security.”

“That’s not very specific.”

“I’m not up on the negotiations, but it’s the Federal Government. The truck is still parked where it was. They’re not talking to us about it, not to anybody. So that’s where we are as of a few hours ago.”

###

As I entered the lobby at Key West International, Julia rushed to me with her wonderful smile. We hugged and kissed. Repeat.

“I missed you,” she said. “I thought I’d never hear from you, then I get two calls in a few hours.” She laughed.

At baggage claim, she linked her arm with mine as I scanned for my bag. I wondered if the airline had transferred my bag when I’d changed planes at Miami International. “It’s been hectic . . .,” I began.

“Never mind explaining.” She squeezed my arm. “It’s so good to have you home. The only thing is . . .”

“The only thing is . . . what?”

“On the first call you said you were at Corpus Christi. That’s Texas.”

I saw my bag. “Right . . .”

“I thought you went to New Mexico.”

I pointed, went to the carousel and picked it up. “Yeah, we went to New Mexico. But then, other things happened. I’ll tell you about it later.”

We headed for the parking lot.

Julia said, “Zack stopped by the library on his way from the airport. He was limping. He said he’d injured his leg in a car accident. But you know Zack. Is that what happened?”

“Yeah, we did have a car accident.”

“You weren’t hurt, were you?”

“No, I’m fine.” I grinned at her.

“Zack also said you might have to stay in Corpus Christi for a while. He said some bad things happened, but that you were okay. What did he mean by ‘bad things?’”

“Well, that’s Zack for you. He was probably referring to the food. In Texas they have what they call Tex-Mex.”

“Spicy?”

“If you think tacos, nachos, chili con queso, fajitas and salsa are spicy, yes.”

## Dangerous Parallel

“I like some of those.”

We arrived at Julia’s car. “But I’ll bet you’d enjoy some good old American home cooking.” She opened the door and got behind the wheel. “Would you go for that?” “As sure as I am you are driving.”

## CHAPTER 31

What remained of the roast beef on the platter between us was now at room temperature. Two nearby dishes with bits of steamed and sauteed vegetables looked much less appetizing than they had an hour earlier.

I grasped the wine bottle and poured what was left into our two glasses.

“That’s about it. It’s some kind of a conspiracy involving dirty money, drugs, a shrimp boat, a food-distributor and their truck, a New Mexico ranch, an American bank and a bank in Abu Dhabi. It all came to a climax with the FBI raid at Oak Point harbor in the middle of the night. And that’s how I came to shoot the CIA guy, Doug Howlandger.”

“But you didn’t have a choice.”

“I sure thought I was going to be shot. It wasn’t personal—he didn’t recognize me. But it wasn’t personal with me, either. I just reacted. It all happened in a fraction of a second.”

“I’m so thankful, Billy.” Julia sipped her wine. “I’m so grateful he missed.”

“I’m lucky to be here.” I sipped some wine.

“This CIA man, Howlandger, survived, right?”

“Yeah. But I’ve got to face the possibility that he won’t make it.”

“He was wrong in what he did, though. He was threatening to kill . . . the black FBI agent.”

“He had his gun on Eppington, threatening, yes.”

“He was distracted, and then shot at you.”

“Yeah . . .”

“That’s attempted murder.” She sipped some wine.

“He’s sure to be prosecuted if he lives.”

“I’m not sure what he might face.”

“But he was wrong.”

“Sure, he was a turncoat. He threatened Eppington and shot at me. But even that doesn’t always rate the death penalty. I mean if he dies, that’s just like the death penalty.”

“But you—you’re not part of the FBI or anything. It seems so unfair—you being placed in that position . . .”

“They needed me, and I agreed to be there,” I said. I emptied my glass. “Unfortunately, the FBI’s planning didn’t account for the Estrella truck not being captured.”

Julia rose from her chair and went into the kitchen. I heard the refrigerator door open and close.

She returned with a squat green bottle with a wired top. “I can’t handle popping corks,” she said and handed the bottle to me.

I opened the bottle and poured.

“To my hero, to my love,” she said, and we drank.

She said, “But what about the other men, what about . . . Carlos, or Khan?”

“That’s a whole other story.” I grasped the bottle.

“We may not have enough champagne to endure that.”

She smiled. “Try me.”

###

Arnie's buttocks overflowed the chair. With a cigar smoldering in his jaw and his arms folded across his middle, he resembled a cartoonist's bomb—the cigar being the fuze. Zack leaned against the wall of the boatmen's shack, his face showing no expression as he stared out the window on the opposite wall.

"Trouble is," Arnie said, "you two think this is some kind of a lark—a game, while I'm here with this investment, and these charters are ready to go."

I sat across from Arnie. I said, "Look, Arnie, we're sorry, but we were involved. We couldn't make it."

Arnie's cigar wiggled up and down. "Involved? Yeah, I'd say you are involved, all right." He pulled the cigar and pointed the unlit end at Zack and then me. "Too bad you're not involved in the charter fishing business."

I said, "I know it's bad to cancel. But you know we sometimes cancel because of the weather, anyway."

"That's another thing. The weather's been beautiful. Great weather for offshore fishing." He inspected the wet end of the cigar.

I said, "But these folks are rescheduled, aren't they?"

Arnie waved the cigar. "Of course I rescheduled 'em. I ain't no dummy, am I?" He plunged the cigar back in his jaw. "That ain't the point. There's only so many days in the month and only so many months in the year. I got an '*in*,' '*vest*,' '*ment*,' see? When that boat ain't fishing, I'm losing money."

I looked at Zack. His face registered a glazed look.

I said, "I see what you mean, Arnie."

"No you don't," Arnie said. He switched the cigar to the opposite side of his jaw. "How would you know about an

investment? You two ain't got the price of a hot dog between ya."

I thought about the two-hundred thousand in my freezer. I said, "Uh, you have a good point there."

Zack's eyes flicked toward me for an instant. He quickly resumed his stare out the window.

Arnie pulled his spiral-bound notebook from the pocket in his cargo pants. His stubby fingers flipped pages.

I went to the door and opened it to let the cigar smoke out. I turned back out of Arnie's view, made a face at Zack, indicating he should do something or say something.

"See right here," Arnie said, pointing at a page covered of scribbles. "I ain't been paid for the last two charters you guys run. And that don't count the . . ." He yanked the cigar from his jaw, and picked a piece of it from his teeth. "And that don't count the money you owe on account, Zack." He gave Zack a peeved look.

I looked expectantly at Zack.

Zack didn't move a muscle, except to breathe. He remained silent as a stone, continuing his stare out the window on the opposite wall.

"Aw screw it," Arnie said. He flipped the notebook closed, slapped it against his knee, and returned it to his pants pocket. "Get out of here. But you better by god not forget the Christianson charter tomorrow."

Zack roused himself as though from sleep. He sauntered out the door, barely limping. I followed him. The two of us ambled to the dock and went to where *Reel Time* was moored.

Zack plopped down on the cooler. The dock dog, Tripper, took Zack's action as a signal. He waddled to Zack, his tail wagging in slow-motion.

"You didn't say shit in there," I said.

"Yup."

"Well?"

"You don't understand."

"What don't I understand?"

"You don't understand that Arnie has to blow off." Zack waved his hand. "If you say even one thing, it feeds his need and he goes on and on." He patted Tripper's head and scratched below his ears. "It's best to say nothing."

"But I thought—"

"Nope."

I sat down on the other end of the cooler. "Well, I suppose you know."

Tripper dropped to the dock and rolled to on his side. I scratched his belly.

"Believe me, I know. You shut up, he says, 'Aw screw it,' and stops."

"Okay, but what about the money?"

"He'll get his money." Zack stood up and turned to face me. "You still got my share of the money, don't you?"

"Minus what you paid Arnie. But you're not thinking of . . ."

"Listen, Billy. The Feds are gonna lock up all these crooks, and we can stop worrying. What's the point of having all that money if we can't use it to help us? Have you thought about this? If we put in together, we could buy a decent boat with that money. Not a brand-new boat, but one better than this Bertram. Then we'd be—"

“I don’t think—”

“We’d be independent! No more splitting with Arnie.” Zack grinned. “Every charter fee totally ours. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds terrific,” I said. “But I think—”

“We got to do it. I’m not going to put up with that damned Arnie for the rest of my natural-born life!”

“But right now, there’s a lot going on. Eppington says the FBI will round up more suspects in the next few days. He asked me everything I knew about the gang: the people at the ranch, people connected to the Council, Southwestern Independent Bank and Independent Bankshares International. There’s going to be charges and trials.”

“I expected he’d do that.”

Tripper rolled back. Once again on his paws, he ambled toward a spot of shade.

“He said I should expect to testify.”

“Hell no, Billy. You got to get out of that.”

“He says I’m a witness. He says I’m a participant.”

Zack looked at the sky and slowly shook his head.

Tripper sat in the shade. His jaw opened and his tongue curled with a big yawn. His head settled to the dock between his front paws.

“Lorenzo’s still in the hospital. And who knows if Howlandger will survive.”

Zack looked at me with narrowed eyes. “I sure wish you weren’t such a damned hero.”

I glanced to confirm he was joking, but he wasn’t. I said, “That’s no worse than plotting to get shot in the leg.”

“What d’you mean, plotting?”

“Plotting so you can get one of those cards for your truck and park in the handicap space.”

With that, Zack threatened me with bodily harm. We chuckled for a minute, then went to The Reef for a couple of beers. When the Christianson charter came up in the conversation, I remembered that our supply of leaders, swivels and weights was low.

When I got home, I dragged two boxes from behind the couch and started sorting through my collection of fishing supplies. The phone rang. Mark Eppington wanted to know how I was doing.

“I think I’m okay,” I said. “How’s Lorenzo?”

“They’re talking about evacuating him here to a Miami hospital—probably next week. I talked to him yesterday. He sounded good.”

“How about . . .”

“Howlandger’s hanging on. Don’t have much new on him.” He paused. “Say Billy, how’s your schedule? Could you come up our way—say tomorrow—sometime?”

“Sorry. I’ve got a charter tomorrow that I’ve got to make.”

“How about the day after?”

“Yeah, I guess I could. Let’s make it after eleven. It’s quite a drive.”

“Hey, kick down, man. Catch a plane out of Key West International. I think there’s a commute that flies into Fort Lauderdale.”

“You sure that’s okay?”

“When you gonna get the message? We’ll fix you up with a travel voucher. Whiskey can meet you and transport you here.”

“Okay. I’ll see what I can put together.”

## Dangerous Parallel

“Terrific.”

“You’ll have my flight number, I suppose.”

“Whiskey knows all. He’ll be there.”

## CHAPTER 32

As soon as I was on the ground, Whiskey was on my phone with directions on how to find him. Despite feeling that the FBI was starting to invade my life at an alarming rate, I was glad for the help.

Whiskey stood near the kiosk he'd identified for me. When I got close, he shielded his mouth behind his hand and said, "What a knockout!" His hand dropped, but his thumb directed me toward a tall, dark-haired flight attendant in the line for a news seller's cashier. She wore a curvy Delta Airlines uniform.

"Fort Lauderdale never looked so good," I said.

"Don't say I said anything."

"Why?"

"Mrs. Wiskewski is very narrow-minded about these things."

Eppington met me in the hall entrance behind the secretary. He offered coffee, and I sat down at his desk with a steamy cupful.

"They're flying Lorenzo in tomorrow," he said with a grin. "Janice and the daughter—they're real anxious." He sat with his hands clasped behind his head.

"He's going to be okay—no disability, I hope."

Eppington lowered his arms and leaned forward. As usual, his jacket was on the back of his chair and his cuffs were

unbuttoned. “Doctors won’t promise. But rumors are he’ll be back on duty in a couple of months. We should keep positive thoughts.” He picked up a ball-point pen and began doodling on a piece of paper. In a moment he fixed his eyes on mine. “I thought it not right to tell you over the phone, Billy.” He brought the pen to a momentary stop. “Howlandger died day before yesterday.”

I felt at a loss. “I don’t quite know . . .”

“That’s the way it is, Billy. I wanted to tell you face-to-face.” He studied me, trying to perceive my reaction. “I know you wouldn’t ever want to kill anyone. On the other hand, I appreciate the fact that I’m here because of what you did. And, you may have saved other agents’ lives, as well.”

“Please,” I said. “Don’t go there. I didn’t wish this. I’m no hero.”

“I understand. But I’ll also tell you what, for sure.” He pointed the end of the pen at me. “You saved my job. When the Corpus crew didn’t show in the Estrella truck, my plan went south. You rescued me from a disaster.”

“How come the Corpus crew didn’t intercept the truck?”

Eppington tossed the pen onto the top of the desk. “You’ll not believe what actually occurred.” He opened his desk drawer, withdrew a map, and unfolded it.

“The Estrella truck, with John Peterson driving, came through Victoria. Because their route from New Mexico passes through Victoria, this was expected. But because Victoria is a populous town of over fifty-thousand, we did not want to try to set up an intercept there.”

Eppington glanced from the map to me. “I’m telling tales out of school here. This is confidential information. You understand?”

I nodded. “I understand.”

Eppington tapped the map. “Here at Zapala, roads from Victoria to Oak Point meet and cross. It’s sparsely populated, flat land with prairie grass, mesquite and cactus. Emilio and his Corpus crew set up at this ideal choke point. They would intercept the truck regardless of which road, either Route 35 or Route 77, the truck took from Victoria to Oak Point.

“Unfortunately, Peterson made a wrong turn at Victoria and got lost. By driving a long way round through the Powderhorn oil field here, he eventually reached Oak Point. It took him a lot of time because of the roundabout route.”

I said, “So that’s why Emilio and the Corpus crew never saw the truck?”

“We never expected them to take such a backwards route to Oak Point.” Eppington folded the map and returned it to the drawer. “I take the blame for that.”

“So what was in the truck?”

Eppington drew back. His eyes flickered, closed to open. “Billy, I just don’t know. There are plenty of rumors. I don’t want to repeat them. What I do know is, the Estrella truck’s gone.”

He paused. “A wrecker-tow truck, a commercial job, arrived yesterday. It was one of those big rigs with a derrick and three rows of wheels at the rear. The driver had paperwork from the Incident Response Unit authorizing him to tow the unit away.”

“That’s the IRU, the Federal outfit you said had taken custody?”

“Yeah.” He paused again. “So the driver hoists the rear end of the truck up off the ground with the derrick and hitches it onto the rear of the wrecker—the front wheels of the truck staying on the ground.”

“So the truck could be towed—backwards?”

“Yeah,” Eppington said. “But here’s the part I don’t get: the driver claims he doesn’t know where he’s supposed to take the Estrella truck.”

Eppington shrugged.

I frowned. “That’s pretty mysterious.”

“Damned mysterious. Now you can be sure, the commercial tow truck has radios inside. The driver can be directed from a remote location. I was thinking this whole thing was very irregular, so I queried my boss. He said he did not know anything about it, but would inquire. That’s all I know right now.”

“On a better note,” Eppington said, “we have arrested sixteen people, including Narsom, Walsh, and the Estrella Foods manager, Enrique—I forget his surname. Two of the sixteen are cooperating and providing additional leads.

“We’re searching for the ‘vendors,’ and for the two shooters who ran you and Zack off the road and tried to kill you, but no luck so far.

“The search of the *Veronica B.* recovered tons of money. I think it’s now over twenty-five million dollars—all in small bills.”

“Wow,” I said. “That’s a fortune. No wonder Carlos tried to escape with it.”

“He should have studied a map. He didn’t understand the barrier islands along the coast of Texas.” Eppington’s lips curved into a sly smile. “He’ll now have time for

remedial geography—he's in Coleman Two for safekeeping.

"Coleman two?"

"That's the high security federal prison at Sumterville."

"Has he been charged with murder?"

"Yes, felony assault with intent. For the shooting of Lorenzo. And for conspiracy, and a number of others I'm not aware of."

"But how about the murder of Vincent Pragg?"

Eppington pursed his lips as though struggling to recall something. "I think they're working on that. You and Zack are witnesses." He narrowed his eyes. "Has the Monroe County State Attorney contacted you?"

"No."

"Well, it may get complicated. Because the attack took place at sea, there's the issue of maritime jurisdiction between state and federal . . ."

"Oh, no," I said, "you mean we don't even know who's going to handle it?"

Eppington smiled. "It partly depends on where the boat was at the time of the attack. You know, 'high seas,' 'twelve-mile limits' and all that. I'm sure prosecutors will be contacting you on it."

"And you said—because I'm both witness and participant—I should expect to be called to testify at trials on the Oak Point raid and shooting . . ."

"That's right, Billy. Texas authorities will be contacting you about that. Soon, I would guess."

I'd thought little about how these trials, and my part in them, intersected. I sighed.

Eppington looked at me. "Yeah, I hear you." He pulled back from his desk. "How about we go down the hall. There's coffee there, and a machine for water or sodas."

We walked to the counter with its coffeemaker, foam cups, and a nearby vending machine.

I waved my hand indicating the gridded glass of the building. "You get tired of all this glass?"

Eppington seemed surprised. "Not really. I rarely notice."

After we'd satisfied our thirst, Eppington said, "I wonder if I could impose on your goodwill for some more help."

We left the area and took the elevator. At a small office with a wall of cabinets, he introduced me to a woman with glasses and cornrowed hair. "This is Cynthia-Descarre, our photo analyst. She'll guide you through the process." Cynthia helped me view hundreds of their mugshots, with the prospect that I might be able to spot a participant.

Afterwards, I said, "They all look guilty. But none of them looked familiar."

Cynthia smiled and said, "Well, thank you very much, Mr. Farris." She then led me to what Zack and I called 'Marlene's shop,' the room housing the sketch computer. Marlene worked with me for more than forty minutes to produce a computer-generated drawing of Khan. She returned me to Eppington's office.

"Here he is," she said, handing a printout to Eppington, "your Mr. B. I. Khan."

He grinned. "He even looks guilty."

I said, “He’s definitely a scary guy.” Then, after Marlene left, I said, “How’s the search for him going?”

Eppington placed the tips of the fingers of both hands together in front of him. “All of this takes time. So far, we haven’t located him. We’ve tagged everything in his abandoned apartment, and locked it up. We’ve impounded other evidence. We’re working with New Mexico and Texas authorities—this sketch will certainly help.”

“Well then, I guess I should go . . .”

“Sure.” He punched his phone. “Farris will be ready in about ten minutes,” he said into it. He looked at me. “There’s just one more thing, Billy. I’ve heard that a Texas grand jury in Corpus Christi will be asked to decide on manslaughter charges against you. I think you—”

“Manslaughter? For shooting Howlandger?”

“Yes. But don’t worry yourself about that. Once they understand the circumstances—”

“Crap!”

Eppington’s eyes opened wide. “Listen. We’re not going to stand for an indictment against you. The county prosecutor there is just trying to make it easy for himself.”

“How?”

“He wants the jury to do their investigation and come up with their decision. That way, he’s not on the hook for the decision. At least that’s what we think.”

“What if they decide to indict me?”

“We’ll watch the jury’s progress. If it starts looking bad, we’ll go there and insist on testifying. We’d testify that you acted in a responsible manner—that you perceived a clear and present danger and acted appropriately—courageously—to meet it.

## Dangerous Parallel

“Thanks again, Billy. I’m sorry if some of today’s visit was upsetting.”

“I’ll survive, I bet,” I said with uncertain bravery. So ended my cheerless day at the FBI.

## CHAPTER 33

Zack was counting the money while I finished scrubbing *Reel Time*'s deck.

I said, "You paying Arnie?"

Zack yanked his sunglasses down so I'd see his gray eyes narrowed at me. "Do you really have to ask?"

Oh-oh. Change the subject. "Did you get rid of that insurance guy?"

"Not really."

Old Tripper padded up to Zack, tail sweeping its arthritic arc. Zack looked at him. "The insurance company doesn't want to pay Internation."

"Internation. That's the rental . . ."

"Yeah, the company I rented the Toyota from. In Albuquerque." He rubbed the fur behind Tripper's ears.

I chuckled. "Our first one with side air bags."

"Or that pile of burned-up sheet metal we left beside the road."

Tripper cocked his head to one side, like he was listening to Zack. "The guy called again yesterday. He says they're holding it up. For more detail."

"What'd you say?"

"I told him I couldn't give him more than what's there. 'Some crazy driver swerved in front of us, I dodged, went off the road. End of story.'"

Tripper lost interest and headed for his laying-down spot on the dock. I began spraying the deck with fresh water.

Zack watched Tripper. “The insurance guy says, ‘what kind of car?—you never said.’ I told him I was too busy dodging it to know what it was. Next he wants to know what we were doing there that time of night.”

“I hope you told him what we—”

“I said we were checking out where to hunt antelope, and got lost.” He gave me a thin smile. “Trying to find our way back to Santa Fe.”

“He didn’t buy that?”

“Nah.”

“Maybe he thought you were drunk, or—”

“Nope. My blood test before the surgery proved I was clean. Zack grinned. “I imagine he realized a brilliant boat captain like me never gets lost.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” I said. “As long as the road to Santa Fe has plenty of channel marker buoys.”

We laughed.

Laughs had become our insulation, now that we were busy fishing again. Once the stitches were out of his thigh, Zack moved with the same ease he’d always shown. The Gulf weather had been kind, the customers generous, the alcohol-fueled jokes thick. But residue from our adventures in New Mexico and Texas kept intruding.

Multiple arrests were made and charges filed following the Oak Point shooting. The wide scope of the arrests suggested a large conspiracy, but the government avoided addressing the issue. Instead, they filed specific charges against the criminals for felonies like assault, resisting arrest, illegal entry, etc. Most of the filings were

in Texas, although Carlos Silvan and the man called Enrique were charged in Florida. But, as seems to be the rule, the more numerous and heinous the crimes, the longer prosecutors take to get to court.

The government was also silent on the role of both Southeastern Independent Bank of Fort Lauderdale and Bankshares International (IBI) of Abu Dhabi, as well as ‘the vendors.’

One evening after a charter I stopped at Julia’s. She was in the kitchen and the small TV was on.

“Come on in,” she said. “I’m mixing up a—wait.” She pointed at the TV, as a news announcer spoke:

“Speculation surges following the filing of sealed charges against Nathan Walsh and Jules Narsom, executives with Southeastern Independent Bank in Fort Lauderdale. Prosecutors declined to speak to our reporter as to whether these charges were related to last week’s preliminary hearing attended by officials of the FBI.”

The video switched to show a fifty-ish man, well-tanned, wearing rimless sunglasses, with a beautiful blond woman anxiously clinging to his arm. They hurried into a building.

“Shown here are the Narsoms as they entered the courthouse for the hearing. Neither Walsh nor Narsom answered reporters’ questions.”

“Is that the Narsom—” Julia said.

The video switched to a white-bearded man in a dark suit standing behind several microphones. The announcer continued:

“However, Walsh’s attorney, Abraham Tiscoff of the Tiscoff and Brondt law firm said the charges were ridiculous, they would be vigorously fought, and that the executives would be cleared of all charges. Meanwhile, both bank executives remain free on one-point-five million dollars bail.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s Jules and his wife.” Except for the dark glasses, he looked as he had aboard the yacht. She looked as beautiful as ever, but her smile could not disguise the worry that must have burned inside.

Julia said, “She’s beautiful. Are these charges related to all the other arrests?”

“They probably are, but I don’t have inside information.”

Julia turned off the TV and returned to her cooking. “You’re going to have to testify at these trials—right?”

“I’m afraid so.” I realized now was the time. “I’m going to have to testify—probably more than once—that I killed Douglas Howlandger.”

Julia looked at me as if I’d abruptly turned purple. “I’d better sit down,” she said, putting her utensil aside and pulling a chair from the table. “You killed Howlandger?”

I nodded.

She sat down. “I knew he’d been killed—but I didn’t know . . . why? And why you didn’t tell me before . . .”

Only once or twice had I recalled the wrenching moments of gunfire. This confession to Julia forced me to answer the ‘what if’ question: What if I’d kept to the shadows and never touched the shotgun? Every scenario I created in which I didn’t kill Howlandger fell apart—became totally untenable. I concluded I was just fooling myself—no matter what other action I imagined, I’d have regretted it more than pulling the trigger that night.

I looked at Julia and said, “I killed him because that was the only action available. Other good men would probably have died if I didn’t.”

Several moments of silence followed, during which Julia just stared at me. Then she rose, came and hugged me. “Oh, I’m so sorry for you. But it’s such a shock. Don’t get it wrong—I’m glad you told me.”

Thus began a long evening during which I did a lot of explaining.

###

One of the days we didn’t have a charter I met Zack outside the grocery.

“I’ve got something for you,” he said with a big grin. He led me to his truck. He reached inside and pulled out a postcard-size mailing. “Just got this in the mail.” He handed it to me.

It was a color-printed card directed to “Captain Zack Montrose” at his home address.

I read it out loud: “To All Mariners in South Florida and Caribbean. The United States Coast Guard advises that all boaters maintain awareness of the possibility of hijackings and

acts of piracy in the following waters: South Florida, the Florida Keys, the Dry Tortugas, and other waters of the Caribbean Sea.”

We laughed. Zack said, “Did you notice? They didn’t advise what you were supposed to do about a hijacking—just be aware of the possibility.”

Although I wasn’t sure the mailing supplied his motivation, Zack later moved his pistol to a nook under the controls on the flying bridge of *Reel Time*.

Some days later I got a phone call from Eppington.

After asking how I was, Eppington said, “Say, Billy, I have an unofficial request. I wonder if you’d meet me at the Dockside Raw Bar in Key West at seven tonight. It’s not business—I’d just like to see you.” Of course I agreed.

“Does sound sort of unusual,” Julia said that afternoon after I’d finished cleaning *Reel Time*. “He always seems—from your conversations—so business-oriented, professional . . .”

“Strange, too,” I said, “that he’d come down to Key West after normal working hours.”

“I hope it’s not bad news. Like a bad decision by the Texas grand jury.” She smiled. “Maybe it’s good news, like a reward for all the help you’ve provided.”

“Maybe.” My mind refused the bright or happy options. Instead, I envisioned unfortunate twists and dark surprises.

###

Eppington stood on the dock, gazing at the pink clouds across the Gulf.

“Sorry to interrupt your dreaming,” I said.

“Boy, this sure is beautiful down here.”

His bright smile hid an uneasiness that matched my own. Accompanied by more small talk, we took one of the tables with umbrellas. Eppington ordered a scotch and water. I had a draught beer. We talked casually on his plane trip to Key West and the charters Zack and I'd recently run.

The reason for Eppington's invitation remained untouched. Finally, I said, "What's this trip all about, Mark?"

He smiled. "First, I wanted to take you to dinner. Most of the time, the bureaucracy does a lousy job of thanking those who help us do our job. That part is—let's say 'semi-official.'

"Second, I have good news. The grand jury in Texas has voted. They returned a "No Bill."

"Does that mean no charges?"

"Exactly."

"Whew—that's a load off my mind."

He laughed. "I thought you'd be pleased.

Third, some not-so-good news."

"Oh-oh."

"We've been unable to find Khan, or even a warm trail. He's vanished. This might mean some risk for you.

"Expert opinion, based on information we've gathered on him, is that he's probably left the country, perhaps to Pakistan. Do you think Khan might have figured out who you are—that you played a part in these events?"

I thought through the maze of my involvement. "Khan knows me through the Narsoms. Candy Narsom introduced me to him, using my name, aboard the Narsom yacht. I remember Khan remarked about my injured arm."

Eppington nodded.

"After the Howlandger shooting, my name appeared on Texas newscasts . . ."

Eppington broke in. "Yeah, but in a way, we're fortunate. As far as I know, your name hasn't appeared in news outside of Texas in connection with that."

This didn't strike me as particularly comforting.

"And the name 'Howlandger' has more-or-less faded from the news," Eppington said.

I sensed the Feds were anxious to see Howlandger's name disappear from the news. They couldn't be pleased that a federal agent had betrayed his allegiance. But I didn't choose to remind Eppington of any of this.

"Right after the hijacking," I said, "my name appeared in local news here in Florida."

Eppington nodded. "Yeah. It's difficult to know how much attention Khan paid to that."

I said, "I guess it depends on whether Khan remembers my name and matches it with news reports."

Eppington's face was unsmiling as he absently stirred the cubes in his glass. "Carlos Silvan, who's in prison awaiting trial, knows you from the hijacking. We can hope others charged in this case are not tracking names in the news.

"Once you are called to testify, though, defense lawyers will seek your identity." He glanced at the fading sun. "To be on the safe side, I'll recommend any testimony you give at upcoming trials should be presented anonymously."

The waitress approached and gave us menus. "You might like to try an appetizer of smoked fish sauce with crackers . . ."

"Thanks," Eppington said, "but I'll have a half-dozen oysters on the half shell, the crab melt, and . . . the clam

chowder. Oh, and another one of these.” He held up his glass. “How about you, Billy?”

I ordered the basket of shrimp in beer batter, a green salad, and another draught.

Eppington looked out over the blue-green water and grinned. “It’s so beautiful.” He looked back at me. “Just one more item of business, and then we can simply enjoy. We’re making some progress in tracing the two men who shot at you following the car crash. But I can’t give you more than that. And, oh yes, the *Veronica B.* has been confiscated—it will be sold off at government auction.”

## CHAPTER 34

About two months after the shooting at Oak Point, I received an email:

“From Office of the Special Agent in Charge, To Billy Farris: As Agent-in-Charge of the office responsible for addressing extraterritorial enforcement in Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America, it is my pleasure to invite you to a small ceremony to take place at 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, two weeks from this date. Please plan to arrive at 2 p.m. at Agent Mark Eppington’s Miramar office.”

I phoned Zack. “I just got a strange email from ‘Office of the Special Agent in Char—”

“Yeah, me too. Something about a ‘small ceremony at Miramar.’ What do you think?”

“It doesn’t sound threatening.”

“Yeah.” he said, in a level tone. “It doesn’t sound threatening.”

“They probably want to thank us for our help.”

“That’s possible.” He paused. “Or, it could be something else.”

“You mean—”

Zack quickly talked over me. “Yeah, yeah, that’s what I’m thinking. You going to be at your place for a while?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll put the coffee on.”

After Zack and I talked, I agreed to phone Eppington on his secure line.

“It’s legit,” Eppington said, and chuckled. “The Bureau wants to honor you and Zack for your contributions to our success.

“Maybe you haven’t heard, but the State Department has issued a complaint to Havana. It begins, ‘The U.S. government strongly condemns the Cuban regime’s failure to investigate and detain Carlos Silvan in connection with his activities supporting this conspiracy.’ We expect his trial to begin next month.”

“You think I’ll be called as a witness?”

“That’s in the hands of the U.S. Attorney. In the meantime, please be sure to attend our ‘small ceremony’ in your honor.”

###

Eppington greeted us with the familiar smile and the loosened tie, although he wore a sports jacket, the same one he’d worn in Key West.

“Before the ceremony, I’ve got to tell you something surprising. It’s really unofficial, but you deserve to know about it. We now know why you were hijacked and why Carlos Silvan killed Vincent Pragg on your boat.”

Zack said, “To cause us six months of heartburn.”

Eppington laughed. “Yeah, that’s for sure. But . . . do you remember when I told you that we’d impounded a lot of evidence at Khan’s apartment?”

I nodded.

“We get the impression Khan left in a terrible hurry, didn’t have time to be sure he left nothing incriminating. There was plenty of worthless material, but some of it has been useful.

“In particular, there was a note from Vincent Pragg. It warns Khan that his ‘scheme to wreak havoc in the western hemisphere’ will come to nothing unless he is paid ‘half-a-million in hundred-dollar bills’ by a certain date. As it turned out, that was two days before he was killed.

“In other words, Vincent blackmailed Khan. In addition to the demand for cash, the note says certain things that make clear Vincent had learned details of the conspiracy and was threatening to inform U.S. authorities if Khan did not pay him off.

“Banking records found in the apartment indicate Khan did pay Vincent cash, but only half of what he demanded. What Vincent didn’t know was that Khan was planning revenge.

“In an email we’ve decoded, Khan promised Vincent that the second half, a quarter-million dollars, would be forthcoming if Vincent cooperated with Carlos Silvan in Carlos’s need to escape by boat to Havana. Vincent, anticipating receiving the full half-million dollars, apparently agreed. In his reply email to Khan, Vincent gives specific details where the second cash payment is to be deposited—in a certain baggage storage locker at Miami International Airport.

“So Vincent expected to receive this second payment after he and Carlos, disguised as his wife, hijacked *Reel Time* and rendezvoused with the trawler at the twenty-fourth parallel.

“But—as an intercepted message proves—Khan in the meantime ordered Carlos to kill Vincent as soon as his escape from the U.S. was assured. Following the recovery of Vincent’s body at Seguro Key, we accessed the airport locker Vincent had specified for the deposit, using a key found in Vincent’s blue bag. It was empty, so Khan probably never delivered the second quarter-million.

“All we know for sure is that Sheriff Flannigan found fifty-thousand dollars, all in hundred-dollar bills, in Vincent’s blue bag. We think that money is part of the two-hundred-fifty Khan paid Vincent. But so far, no evidence for the two-hundred thousand has surfaced.

“Of course it’s possible Vincent squirreled the money away, Vincent had a partner, or Carlos stole it . . . We just don’t know.”

“Not to go negative or anything,” Zack said, regarding Eppington with a sober look, “but doesn’t this mean Vincent planned to kill Billy and me following the rendezvous?”

Eppington squinted at Zack, but didn’t reply.

I said, “Vincent was a landlubber. He didn’t know how to operate a boat or navigate. He would most likely have waited to kill us until Seguro Key was in sight.”

Eppington smiled and leaned back. “Listen to you two—talking so easy about being killed!” He went to the doorway of his office. “I think we’d better go to the conference room.”

We were ushered into a room full of people, some of whom I didn’t know. Most of them were standing. Eppington

stepped forward. He introduced Leonard Hiarta, Special Agent in Charge, then a heavy gray-haired man.

“Please welcome Richard DeScallo, Deputy Assistant Director from Washington.” Everyone applauded.

DeScallo stationed himself in front of Zack and me.

“I’m here today to thank you,” he said, “on behalf of the United States, as well as the Bureau. Your assistance was essential to the apprehension of criminals responsible for the theft, transport and intended transfer of a quantity of weapons-grade uranium to a foreign power. Your action assured that the transfer did not occur. This action may have saved many lives that might otherwise have been lost to the explosion of one or more atomic bombs.

“We regret that the plaques I am awarding to Mr. Billy Farris and Mr. Zack Montrose do not indicate the true nature of these awards. They do not so specify because to do so might endanger you two gentlemen. All the plaque says—I’ll just read it—is ‘In recognition of your courage and patriotism in service to the United States of America, our appreciation and thanks.’

“The plaques are signed by the Assistant Director and by me.” DeScallo handed me the larger framed plaque, then the other one to Zack. Everyone applauded.

Eppington said, “Now, I believe Agent Lorenzo will make a few remarks.” Lots of applause and laughter.

Lorenzo, looking thinner than before the Oak Point shooting, stepped in front of Zack and me. He pushed the steel-rimmed glasses higher on his nose. “You have all noted that Billy’s plaque didn’t say anything about him being a hero. But when you think about it . . .

“For one thing, Marlene put him through the Henry Montana—the shotgunner—routine on the computer. More More than once. And he survived!”

Chuckles rose from the group. Marlene Barnes looked like Lorenzo had just mentioned the color of her underwear.

“Whiskey subjected Billy to the perils of Miami’s Expressways, not to mention Miami International and that other burg, Fort Something-or-Other.”

Wiskewski took a slow and solemn bow, then waved at me. Everybody laughed. He stepped forward and said, in mock solemnity, “But more than the foregoing,” “Billy made it through M. L. White’s shop—” He paused for effect. “—without a skirt.”

Loud laughter followed. When it subsided, M. L. White in his lab coat, said, “I really lobbied hard for that dark-skinned belly dancer . . . “

When the laughter and applause diminished, Lorenzo said, “But I . . . I’m responsible for the fellow you see here. Before I got hold of him, he was just a nice fellow, his forehead smooth as a cue ball, his hair a shade darker. He didn’t drink unless joined by others. But in less than thirty short minutes in my favorite Chevy from the car pool, just a mile or so down Northwest Fifty-Fourth Street at seventy-five miles an hour without benefit of siren or flashing lights, he’d aged five years.

“What really turned his whiskers gray was the left turn onto the Four-Four-One without benefit of a left-turn signal.” The group laughed loudly.

“This Farris, he’s not just a hero, not just brave, he’s *mature*.”

As the group laughed and clapped, Lorenzo looked at me, grinning. “Billy, I want to tell you . . . well, thanks. The Moors

and the Christians are now—well, perhaps tied. He shook my hand.

Eppington came forward and shook hands with me and Zack.

As the group broke up, I said to him, “I had no idea—uranium?”

Eppington smiled. “Neither did the hazmat folks or the Incident Response Unit. But later, they noticed a gadget in the glove box of the truck. It turned out to be a Geiger counter. You know, one of those instruments that goes ‘click, click, click’ when it detects radioactivity? Turns out, Khan had to make sure the uranium was packaged a certain way with wood separators to prevent it from going off, or whatever . . .

“Aren’t you going to stay for coffee?”

Zack said, “We really have to go. Some stops to make, and it’s a long drive . . .”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s been an enjoyable afternoon. Thank Mr. DeScallo for us.”

###

We were up and over the bridge leading into Key Largo.

Zack said, “Like your plaque?”

“It’s okay,” I said. “But when we stop, you better lock up—I wouldn’t want it to end up in some flea market.”

We turned at the Ocean Bay Drive signal.

I said, “This is it.”

“I hate it.”

“There’s no choice, Zack.”

“Eighty-three Benjamins in my pocket says you’re wrong.”

## Dangerous Parallel

“You heard what Epp said: ‘...so far, no evidence for that two-hundred-thousand has surfaced.’”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “I heard.”

We parked in the lot. Zack locked the truck.

Inside, a nice older lady with blue-ish hair said, “Good afternoon. How may we help you gentlemen?”

Zack stabbed my ribs with his elbow.

I said, “We’re here to open an account.”

She smiled. “I can help you. A joint account—for the two of you?”

“Absolutely not,” Zack said. “I wouldn’t be caught dead sharing an account with this bum.”

Thus went our business of signing up for savings accounts at Harbor State Bank, the last of our twelve banks along the Keys.

END