

Russell E. Vance, III



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR.

Russell E. (Rusty) Vance, III, PhD. is a retired psychotherapist who, after retiring, has followed his passions and dreams. He and his wife, Pamela, spent the first ten years of his retirement as nomads spending over 90% of their time off-the-grid far out into the Sonoran Desert or in the dense cedar and hemlock forest of Glacier National Park in northwestern Montana where they served as volunteer campground hosts.

An unabashed tree-hugger and environmentalist, Rusty's post-retirement advocacy became wildlife management, living among and helping keep deer, mountain goats, moose, big horn sheep, bears and other creatures safe. Many of his stories carry a strong environmental message. `

Rusty enjoys spending his evenings writing stories. He has published five novels –*AGEH*, *New Prince of Coillearnach*, *Tree of Life*, *Crack in Time*, *The Tillman Place* and *Mountain of Gold* – and several novella.

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Sadly, the pirate's life has been romanticized in books and movies for the greater part of two centuries. Adults laugh as children don bandana headwear and pretend eye-patches, swing wooden swords and sing "*yo, ho, yo, ho a pirate's life for me.*" But in the seventeenth century it wasn't funny and it was often difficult, if not impossible, to tell the difference between the supposed good-guy, the privateer, and the despicable pirate.

So, what is the difference between a pirate and a privateer? Well, for starters, they're not mutually exclusive. That is, one can be a pirate as well as a privateer. At the same time, one can be a pirate without

being a privateer, while the privateer was generally called and considered a pirate by the country he was contracted to pillage but a hero by the country that hired him to do the pillaging.

Confused? You're far from alone. Captain William Kidd was executed by the British for piracy in 1701 as the result of confusion as to whether or not he had gained some treasure by piracy or under a letter of marque which the British government would have given him.

For the most part the person who was your ordinary, run-of-the-mill pirate was the worst scum imaginable and not a person you wanted your children emulating. A privateer, on the other hand, could be a well-educated, wealthy, highly respected, family man who would have been the 17th century version of a government contractor such as Sir Andrew Barton, Sir Francis Drake and Sir George Clifford. Such men received what was known as a *letter of marque and reprisal* which was basically a government license to attack and capture enemy vessels. While piracy was universally reviled, being a privateer with a letter of marque combined patriotism and profit and therefore was considered an honorable profession. In wartime a country would use the privateer to bolster its naval power and harass the enemy. Article 1 of the United States Constitution lists issuing letters of marque and reprisal as a power of Congress but the United States has not granted one since 1815 and accepted the 1856 Paris Declaration which forbids the practice.

When the competition for the riches of the New World became fierce in the 16th and 17th centuries, the European monarchies turned to privateers to help reduce the competition. A letter of marque and reprisal effectively transformed a pirate ship into a naval auxiliary. If captured, the crew was entitled to being treated as prisoners of

war instead of being hanged as pirates. There were, of course, those innovative individuals who employed what is known as ‘flag of convenience’ to get letters of marque. One sees the remanence of ‘flag of convenience’ at every modern seaport. Many ships owned by United States companies are registered in and fly the flag of a foreign country – most commonly Panama and Liberia – because the taxes on the ships are much less in those countries. In a modern bustling port, it is almost impossible to determine the true nationality of a ship by the flag it flies. Only one of the cruise ships owned by US companies flies the American flag. Most, including the Disney Cruise Line, fly the flag of Bahama. Ninety percent of all ships that enter US ports fly foreign flags.

An outstanding example of the use of ‘flag of convenience’ was Captain Luke Ryan, an Irish smuggler who played a very important part in the American Revolution as a part of ‘Benjamin Franklin’s Navy’. In a period of less than three years, Captain Ryan and his lieutenants commanded six vessels under the flags of three different countries and were on the opposite side in the same war.



On this spring day in 1693 a small figure stood on the quarter deck of a Spanish brigantine with his feet apart shouting orders as the crew added sail and the sleek ship began to gather speed. A crewman approached. The ship was moving at eight knots. The man smiled. With a good wind she would

be up to over ten knots. He looked up. Only the main sail, fore sail, fore stay sail and jib were up. They didn't really need any more. With this wind they would have a fast run home.

Captain Damian Rey was a little-known Spanish privateer with a letter of marque from King Phillip V of Spain. Damian was the son of a merchant ship's captain who worked for a wealthy trader in Valencia on the east coast of Spain. His father rarely sailed out of the Mediterranean.

As was traditional, Damien had signed on as a cabin boy when he was a teenager and advanced quickly. Later he married Bonita Garcia, from the Basque region, who was a chamber maid working for his master. He signed on as Second Mate for a voyage to the New World because the pay was good and would be paid to his wife in his absence. With his earnings he hoped to buy his own ship and follow in the footsteps of his father.

The voyage was made on the merchant ship Encarnacion. They had safely made the trip to Havana where they were loaded with Spanish plunder from the mainland of what is today Mexico along with some spices, sugar and tobacco. They were hardly out of the harbor when they were attacked by a pirate brigantine named Cuchilla Noche.

Despite the size of the Encarnacion, it was no match for the Cuchilla and its cut-throat crew of pirates. Within a short time the Cuchilla was tied to the Encarnacion and pirates were throwing grappling hooks over the Encarnacion's rail faster than the Encarnacion crew could cut them.

It was immediately evident to Damien that the pirates meant to take no prisoners. Prisoners took room and had to be fed. Some pirates would keep a naval officer, and an occasional merchant captain, to

ransom, but for the most part boarding meant killing everyone. It was just easier.

Damien took a handful of seamen over the far side of the Encarnacion from the Cuchilla. They swam around the ships and climbed onto the Cuchilla. Almost all of the Cuchilla crew were on the Encarnacion. Before anyone knew what was happening, Damien and his men had overpowered those still on the Cuchilla, cut the lines holding it to the Encarnacion, and were floating away.

Pirates tried frantically to make their way back to the Cuchilla but without success. They had done such a good job disabling the Encarnacion that they couldn't even fire a canon.

Over the next couple of years Damien made a fair living hauling people to the mainland and returning to Havana with plunder and goods bound for Spain. During his travels he discovered the small village of Cayo Hueso just ninety miles north of Havana. It was quiet and peaceful. He sent for his wife and soon they had a beautiful home and three children on the small island. Damien was the pillar of his community and, in many ways, the community depended upon him for communications with the outside world and luxury items from Spain to make their lives easier. He didn't really want to be a privateer. He preferred to be a merchant, but in the late 17th century salvage was big business in the Caribbean and England, France and Spain were in constant competition and conflict. There were as many privateers and pirates sailing the Caribbean as there were merchants. For sheer survival Damien got a Letter of Marque and Reprisal from King Phillip V and the rest, as the saying goes, is history.

Damien and Bonita would be very proud to know that one of their descendants, the name anglicized to Ray, was a member of the original Florida State Legislator when Florida became a US State in 1845.



Captain Rey had just successfully attacked a British merchant ship that was carrying salvage it had taken from a Spanish ship. According to the rules of Marque and Reprisal Damien was entitled to seize and sell the ship as well, but he almost never did that. He would generally just take their plunder, which had probably changed hands two to three times already, and leave the captain his ship.

He was heading back to his home in Cayo Hueso – modern day Key West – when the lookout spotted a British warship.

Captain Rey would have preferred to have returned home but he knew that the British warship would have no qualms about sailing into tiny, unprotected Cayo Hueso, landing marines and taking their treasure and most likely destroying the village. He decided that he would make a run for Havana. It was a Spanish colony, not much farther away than Cayo Hueso, with a sizable garrison and undoubtedly one or more Spanish warships. The British were already at war with France and would avoid starting a war by attacking a Spanish garrison.

The Cuchilla Noche was fast for its size. It was 97 feet long, weighing in at only 355 tons. She had two masts, 16 guns and a crew of 75. Rey knew however that, in the long haul, she was no match for the relentless British warship.

They were being followed by the British warship known as the Red Lion. It was old, but it had just been rebuilt 35 years earlier and was now a powerful 48-gun ship of the line. It was 112 feet long and weighed in at 717 tons with three full-rigged masts.

Captain Rey called for the main topsail, fore topsail and flying jib to be raised. He had every inch of sail available flying. He plotted a heading straight to Havana and the chase was on.

Cuchilla was close to half way to Havana when the Red Lion came within canon range. Dodge and tact as he might, Rey was pummeled by canon fire from the Red Lion's bow guns. He tried not to give the Red Lion any more target than necessary but he decided to try making a large circle around the Lion and pulling in behind her. It was definitely high risk, but he didn't have a choice. He was losing sail and the damage was becoming extensive. Even though he hadn't fired a shot he had already lost two guns.

The tactic didn't work. As the Cuchilla turned to port the warship turned to intercept. The Red Lion brought herself parallel to Cuchilla and opened up with her large guns. Cuchilla tried to fight back but it was over quickly. Sinking and losing more ship and crew with each volley from the Lion, Captain Rey ordered 'strike the colors' – lower their flag. That was the universal sign of surrender.

Captain Rey took one last sighting with his astrolabe. With his beloved Cuchilla broken and slowly sinking, Captain Rey stood

quietly with his crew waiting their fate at the hands of the British Navy.



Coral Reef . . . Adobe Stock Photo

If you have never been scuba diving you've missed one of the most peaceful and sometimes surreal experiences in life. You can go SCUBA (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus) diving a dozen times in the same place and each dive will be totally different. Diving is, in many ways, the ultimate freedom and calmness. You are absolutely free from gravity, feeling weightless. The calmness is beyond description.

Diving is an escape from the mundane. It is a naturalist's paradise where one experiences a wide variety of life beyond imagination. Looking into the bowls of a sunken ship a hundred feet down and find yourself face to face with a three-hundred-pound Giant Gropper makes all the training and effort to get there look trivial. Divers are rightly wary of sharks, but to get to watch the giant predator of the deep draws every diver like a magnet. Then there are the barracuda,

literally meters long, hanging motionless, showing their teeth to the diver as though daring you to get closer. Rays and mantas are magnificent and almost every diver who has gone diving in the Caribbean has experienced gliding over what appears to be a flat sandy ocean floor only to have two eyes suddenly open and look straight up at you. Dolphins and seals like to play with divers, while many a new diver has become so engrossed in following a giant sea turtle that their dive buddy has to grab them by the fin to stop them from following the massive animal far out to sea. Sunken ships to Angel fish bigger than diner plates, the opportunity for adventure is endless to the diver. But for many divers, the perfect dive is just to hang motionless, suspended above a reef teeming with amazing life.

There are a significant number of skills that must be learned to be a proficient diver, but if you practice them faithfully they become second nature. At first it may seem contradictory but the interesting thing is that part of what makes diving so peaceful is that you don't dare to either daydream or think about anything other than what you're doing. It is like meditation. You must constantly keep your focus. You must constantly keep focused on where you are, what you are doing and the condition of your equipment. The seasoned scuba diver becomes the master of multitasking. You must keep track of your gas consumption, depth, time and other information displayed on your dive computer. You must keep track of your location, any currents, drift and other factors that might cause you to end far away from where you need to be. You need to keep track of your dive buddy, and you must be in control of your buoyancy. You can't be crashing into coral reefs and destroying hundreds of years of growth or popping to the surface and end up in the hospital or worse.

This translates into the diver having only time to concentrate on their dive. There is no time to worry about the business deal that might go bad, the boss asking the impossible or the fight you had with your spouse. Diving becomes a deep relaxation, like meditation focused on one's breathing, as the dominant sound in the silence of the depths is the sound of your breathing through your regulator.

Generally Thaddeus Joseph Royer, known as 'TJ' to his friends, didn't have any problem with his concentration. He had been hanging almost totally motionless – called neutral buoyancy – for several minutes just a few yards from the coral reef off Key Largo. He was watching the aquatic life and taking pictures. His diving buddy was the fifteen-year-old daughter of his ship's captain, Amanda Fanger.

She was an excellent diver and often TJ's Dive Buddy. She was a good dive partner. She never got very far away and, besides seeming that they always knew what the other was thinking, they were able to communicate with sign language. At this moment Amanda had lost interest in what was happening on the reef and was following an eel at a respectful distance.

That was when TJ's attention was caught by a female figure approaching. Since he didn't believe in mermaids, it must be a female human. He couldn't help but to notice that she wasn't wearing a wetsuit, nor was she wearing a shorty – a wet-suit with short sleeves and walking-short length legs. She had on a bikini. Well, he figured it was a bikini because there was a glimpse of skin at the hip-line. Her BCD (Buoyancy Control Device or Buoyancy Compensator) covered everything from the waist up, but what he could see definitely caught his attention.

In fact, TJ was so distracted that he suddenly realized that he was dropping like a rock toward the sea floor and had to take a deep breath to regain control of his buoyancy. After soundly chastising himself for being distracted, he wondered if she knew the effect her apparel, or lack thereof, would have on male divers.

The woman waved at TJ and continued her slow, methodical survey of the reef. He saw other divers moving into the area. Obviously, a dive tour had arrived. It was time for Amanda and him to leave. With one last appreciative look at the female diver swimming away TJ got Amanda's attention and they headed back to their boat.

Their boat was the 107' catamaran sailing yacht "L'Esprit Libre", one of the largest sailing catamarans ever built. TJ had commissioned it almost two years previous just after he won \$417 million dollars in a Power Ball lottery. It's beam (width) was 41 feet with a maximum draft of only 7'6" but a bridge clearance requirement of 148 feet due to the great mast. The main sail was electrically furled into the boom while the fore sails were hydraulically furled. When under sail, a great place to ride and relax was on the large fore deck trampolines with the water rushing by below you.

The grand salon occupied much of the main deck and had a more intimate dining arrangement. The grand salon opened onto the aft deck exterior salon with lots more room for lounging, al-fresco dining for eight and scuba diving preparation. All of the sailing and scuba equipment was located in the aft port hull and there was access from the aft deck to the compressor and the membrane system that produced nitrox gas to fill the diving cylinders.

The boat had a high freeboard – the distance from the waterline to the upper deck – to provide safe passage around the yacht at all times.

L'Esprit Libre could very comfortably accommodate seven passengers in three staterooms with crew quarters for five. Her 164 square foot master stateroom had a 180-degree view over the bow of the yacht. There were two guest cabins, located in the starboard hull, that were both spacious and had their own bathrooms. The crew quarters were located in the port hull and equally as elegant. TJ figured that this would be his crew's home most of the year and wanted it to be as pleasant as possible.

The fly bridge was accessible from the aft terrace. Here there was even more space to relax and enjoy a panoramic view of the sea. The fly bridge's navigational area was well forward giving lots of room for dining and a BBQ area with a dumb waiter going down to the galley. L'Esprit's dinghy was stored under the aft deck.

TJ's crew comprised of Captain John Fanger, his family and two young sailors. John was a retired Navy commander. He had retired after returning from his second combat tour in the Middle East. He wanted to be near his family and had seen enough combat. His wife, Lillian, served as the ship's cook, housekeeper and medic. She was also an excellent sailor and would help out with the rigging at times. She and John had met when he was fresh out of the Naval Academy and she was a Navy nurse. They were both avid scuba divers and commanding the L'Esprit Libre was just what John needed. At the grand old age of fifteen their daughter, Amanda, had the best of all worlds. She could spend her day near her parents and diving. They had signed her up with the famous American Academy in Chicago. The American Academy is a home school academy known for

educating ambassadors' children and the children of actors and others who travel a lot and want their family to accompany them.

The two sailors were Lydia Ingle and Brad Lareby. Brad, twenty-seven, had been a Navy diver. He was planning to make the Navy a career but was discharged after he was injured while working on a ship at sea. Lydia was twenty-four years old. She was an avid scuba diver and an excellent yacht racer. Captain Fanger had recommended the couple. TJ wanted to take good care of his crew, and, as a retired commander, Captain Fanger knew just how to do that.



The next day TJ and Amanda were again diving the reef off of Key Largo and again TJ spotted the bikini diver. Then again, it was hard to miss her. This day she was wearing a white bikini and the contrast against her very dark skin was like a magnet to the male eyes. She was very skillfully moving along near the base of the reef. TJ had to admire her buoyancy skills even though that wasn't what caused him to watch for such a long time. As he watched he realized that he never saw her use her inflator which meant that she was controlling her buoyancy with her breath.

A skill which many scuba divers work to acquire is buoyancy by breath control. It is like rough tuning with equipment and then fine tuning with your breath. The rough tuning is adding or expelling gas from your BCD until you are able to stay relatively stationary. From that point the diver can cause themselves to rise by taking in a breath or descend by expelling air from their lungs. That's the fine tuning.

This woman was obviously quite skilled and could hang within inches of the bottom without touching.

She was getting her dive light out and about to look in a hole when Amanda signaled to TJ.

“That’s where I found the eel yesterday,” Amanda said in sign language. TJ was closer to the diver than Amanda. He started swimming rapidly hard toward her, shaking a rattle that is designed to gain another diver’s attention.

Her face was close to the hole. She heard TJ’s rattle but it was too late. She had moved back a couple of inches to turn her head, but it wasn’t far enough. The eel, undoubtedly feeling trapped, made a break for safety. In doing so it hit her squarely in the mask, knocking her mask off and stunning her. The force of the impact pushed her head back and the eel’s great tail knocked out her regulator as it swam over her head.

TJ was only a few feet away. The diver was not moving. He took a hold of her BCD and put the regulator of his pony tank to her mouth. He gave her his pony tank because it was plain air. His cylinder was filled with Nitrox, a gas with a greater percentage of oxygen so that he could have more bottom time, among other benefits.

The diver, Cecelia Gilbert, was, in fact, a seasoned diver. The tremendous force had, indeed, stunned her causing her to be briefly unconscious. Even though she was unconscious for only a moment, she experienced disorientation and fear when she regained consciousness. She couldn’t see but she knew that she was being held. Struggling with panic she realized that someone was holding her nose and a regulator to her mouth. She accepted the regulator, cleared it, and started working to calm down. She had swallowed a

fair amount of water and was coughing it out through the regulator which was being held tight to her mouth. As a veteran diver she knew that she didn't dare remove the regulator to cough. A little-known fact, and one that most people don't really want to think about, is that a diver can actually vomit without removing their regulator. In fact, that is the only safe way. As she regained her composure she gave the "okay" sign - thumb and index finger held together forming a circle with the other three fingers extended to the side.

TJ and Amanda were glad to see the "okay" sign. Amanda had her spare mask from her BCD pocket in hand, and on seeing Cecelia's signal started to put it on her. Cecelia realized what Amanda was doing, finished putting on the mask, and cleared it. She wanted to smile and hug the two divers but the best she could do was again give the "okay" signal.

The dive master from Cecelia's group had seen what had happened and was immediately there with her dive buddy. Communicating with Amanda by sign language, TJ had Amanda tell the diver master, using a waterproof notepad, that they would take Cecelia to his boat. After all, it was closer, he had a registered nurse on board, and the diver master had the other divers to consider.

The dive master knew both TJ and Amanda, so when Amanda suggested that he go ahead and take care of his other divers, he agreed. He knew that Cecelia was in good hands.

TJ checked Cecelia's regulator. He didn't figure that the eel had hit it hard enough to damage it, but he wasn't taking any chances. He pushed the purge button and tried it himself. It seemed to be okay. The free-flow he had seen just after the eel hit her took a lot of her

air. She just barely had enough to get back but he felt that she would be more comfortable and more efficient swimming using her own regulator as long as possible. She could use their pony tanks if she ran too low.

By this time Amanda had written on her tablet that they were going to take her to their boat and that they had cleared it with her dive master. "Okay," Cecelia signaled.

TJ fished through the large pocket of his BCD and found a length of cord. Cecelia watched curiously as he threaded it through one of her D-rings. She gave him the "what?" sign. He wrote on Amanda's tablet – "just to be safe." Cecelia was okay with that.

With Amanda on one side and TJ on the other - both within arm's reach and tethered to TJ - Amanda took a compass heading, pointed and the three divers swam toward TJ and Amanda's drop line. At the drop line TJ checked to be sure Cecelia was still okay as they began their ascent with Amanda closely watching her dive computer and giving hand signals to the others if their ascent got too fast. TJ had again taken hold of Cecelia's BCD and was letting Amanda direct their ascent.

When they reach 15 feet they stopped. This was a normal safety stop for divers but Cecelia signaled that she was low on air. TJ acknowledged that he understood and pointed to Amanda who was patting her pony tank.

During the safety stop Cecelia held onto the line as did TJ. He also still had a hold of Cecelia's BCD. Amanda was lying motionless in a horizontal position to one side, as though suspended, watching her dive computer. She would only look up at the other two briefly to check on them.

Amanda gave the signal to ascend. She began the ascent slowly, keeping a close eye on her dive computer and holding her hand with the inflator system control over her head. That served two purposes. It helped be sure there was nothing above her and, as needed, she would expel gas from her BCD with the inflator system control to slow or stop her ascent. TJ and Cecelia did likewise staying right next to the young woman.

TJ was very happy to see Cecelia calmly and skillfully ascending despite being extremely low on air. Nevertheless, he kept hold of her. He knew that he could rely on Amanda to set the proper ascent rate.

Even at 15 years old she had a Master Diver card and was working on an emergency rescue certification. A Master Diver with SSI requires the successful completion of six specialty certifications and at least 50 logged dives.



When Cecelia broke the surface she pulled her mask down and looked at the two people on either side of her. The man was ruggedly handsome and probably in his late 40s, she thought. The woman was actually a young girl. They were smiling.

“How are you doing?” asked TJ.

“Fine,” Cecelia smiled.

TJ took a whistle from his pocket.

"Watch your ears," said TJ. He faced away from the others and gave three short blasts on a whistle, waited a moment and then repeated. Four people almost instantly appeared on the ship above.

"What's wrong? What's happened?" demanded the older man. The whistle is a universal marine distress device so hearing it had caused Captain John Fanger not only to run to the dive ladder but automatically switch into command mode.

"Everyone's safe," TJ replied, "but this lady had a nasty encounter with an eel. Fortunately, we were close by. She was one of Darryl Henderson's groups. We told him we'd bring her up."

"Are you okay, Miss?" the Captain asked Cecelia.

"Yes," she replied.

"Okay. Fine. Here's how we're going to exit the water." The captain paused for only a moment. "Amanda will take off your fins."

"When she does, put your feet on the railing of the dive ladder but do not start climbing. Okay?"

They all indicated understanding and followed his instructions.

Amanda gave Cecelia's fins a toss onto the deck above.

"Now, Miss, they're going to remove your BC but don't worry. We won't let you fall."

Cecelia smiled at the Captain and signaled okay. She had, by instinct, inflated her BCD when she surfaced so that it was serving as a flotation device. When Amanda and TJ removed the BCD it floated in the water.

While Cecelia's BCD was being removed TJ's two mates took their places on either side of the steps at the top of the dive ladder.

"This is Lydia and Brad," Captain Fanger said by way of brief introduction. "They are going to lift you from the water. They know what they're doing, so let them do their job. As soon as your legs are clear, I'm going to take a hold of your legs and the three of us are going to carry you to a nearby bench. Okay?"

Cecelia acknowledged understanding and immediately Brad and Lydia reached down and lifted the small woman, now clad only in her bikini, from the water.

In less than a minute she was lying on an upholstered bench and the three were stepping back to make way for a woman with a stethoscope around her neck.

"This is my wife, Lillian," explained Captain Fanger. "She a nurse. Just lay there until she gets a chance to check you over."

Cecelia could see people scurrying around the deck. Lydia quickly appeared with a blanket and pillow. Amanda and TJ threw their fins on deck and were climbing on board as quickly as their bulky dive equipment would allow. Under normal conditions one does not remove their partially inflated BC until they are safely on board just in case they fall backwards into the water.

The woman, introduced to her as Lillian, carefully checked Cecelia physically and asked a lot of questions which Cecelia recognized as being to test her cognition.

Satisfied that Cecelia was okay, Lillian said, "you can sit up now, if you want."

Cecelia began to sit up. She realized that she was a bit dizzy and that she had a horrible headache. The eel had really hit her hard.

“You’re a lucky lady,” said Lillian helping Cecelia into a sitting position. “Your mask dissipated most of the force of the eel’s head-butt. You’re going to have a headache and, at worst, a couple of black eyes.”

“Thank you,” Cecelia smiled. “I already have the headache.”

Lillian rummaged through her bag and pulled out a bottle of acetaminophen. “You shouldn’t need anything stronger than this,” she said.

Cecelia got her first look around. They were on a large deck with upholstered benches. Along the one side was a bench that was obviously designed to sit on while getting into one’s diving equipment. Everything was white. Straight ahead was a covered area with a table and chairs, a couple of webbed recliners and some overstuffed chairs. Just beyond was a glass wall. The sliding doors stood open. She could just see into the more formal salon. This wasn’t a dive boat, she thought. It was a private yacht.

TJ stepped forward, smiled and extended his hand.

“Welcome aboard L’Esprit Libre,” he said taking the hand which she extended in return.

“Thank you so much!” Cecelia smiled. Suddenly felt like she was total losing her composure. She could no longer remain calm and stoic. “Oh, thank you!!” She started crying.

TJ sat down on one side of her and Lillian on the other.

“It’s okay,” they both comforted her. “We’re just happy you’re safe.”

Cecelia looked up and smiled at the crew that had gathered around her.

"You're one heck of a good diver," said TJ.

"What?" Cecelia replied in amazement.

"You took an extremely hard hit in the head and had to have swallowed lots of water," TJ continued, "but you didn't panic and try to bolt to the surface."

Cecelia smiled at the compliment.

"You've done a lot of diving haven't you?"

"Yes. My late husband was a Navy Seal. I started diving with him when we were married."

"I'm sorry for your loss." said TJ.

"Thank you. It's been several years."

"Speaking of Navy," TJ began to introduce those surrounding Cecelia. "This is Captain John Fanger, U.S. Navy retired. He's accustomed to being in command so I always listen to him. This is his wife, Lillian, and his daughter, Amanda. The two who lifted you out of the water are Lydia and Brad. My name is TJ Royer."

"Nice to meet all of you. My name is Cecelia Gilbert." Cecelia sat looking at Capt. Fanger. Then she made the connection. "Are you Commander John Fanger?"

"Yes," said the Captain.

"You commanded the USS Gravely. My husband served under you. He talked about you all the time."

“Oh, my gosh!” The mention of his last combat command brought recognition. “Francois Gilbert. He was a great sailor. I'm so sorry for your loss. I can't tell you how much I wanted to attend his funeral, but I was still at sea.”

Capt. Fanger turned to the others. “Her husband was a part of a Seal team that rescued several Americans and allies. He was killed getting them to safety. He's a true hero and I'm proud to have known him.”

“Then the least we can do is provide his widow with some simple comforts,” said TJ. They all agreed.

“Oh, I can't impose,” Cecelia attempted to resist, “you've done so much for me already.”

“Nonsense.” Lillian said sternly. “You're not going anywhere this evening. And it has nothing to do with being the widow of a war hero. You took a hard hit to your head. Unless there's someone waiting for you on shore who will stay with you tonight, I'm not letting you go anywhere.”

“There's no one waiting for me, but . . .”

“Lillian was a Navy nurse,” TJ interrupted. “You don't argue with an ex-Navy nurse.”

Cecelia just smiled.

Lydia had slipped off to the bridge and soon returned. She had called the dive company to tell them that Cecelia was okay and would be staying on board the L'Esprit Libre. She promised that they would return her air cylinders in the morning.

“TJ,” said Lillian, “we need to get this lady some clothes.”

"Oh, yes."

"She's about my size," said Amanda. "I'll find something for her."

"Well thank you," said TJ.

"Do you think you can walk?" asked Amanda.

Amanda led Cecelia down to her stateroom where she went through her wardrobe holding things up to Cecelia from time to time.

"This is a lovely boat," commented Cecelia.

"Yes," said Amanda. "It belongs to TJ. He and my Dad were good buddies, so when TJ had it built he asked my Dad to be the Captain. We live on the boat. It's great."

"That must be exciting."

"Yes. L'Esprit Libre is one of the largest sailing catamarans in the water and can easily do 16 knots under sail with a descent wind."

"Wow."

"We try to use sail as much as possible. It's a lot more fun and TJ and Dad hate to burn the fuel."

"You really like living on a boat."

"Oh, yes," Amanda said excitedly. "I home school through American School in Chicago. Our home port is Key West. We're supposed to take two to three weeks every couple of months, but TJ will give us time off whenever we want. He's a great person to work for."

A short while later Cecelia and Amanda emerged with Cecelia looking like a teenager – white pleated shorts and a blue sailing

motif boat-neck shirt. Everyone was gathered around the table in the exterior salon.



Cecelia couldn't help but be struck by the opulence of the L'Esprit Libre. The main salon was done in white with red trims and highlights. The sofas were white leather with bright red ottomans and footstools. The coffee table was a natural wood as was the highly polished bar. There was a more intimate dining area in the main salon but TJ and the others were scurrying around putting out plates, table settings and food on a large dining table just outside the open glass doors. It too was white with natural wood trim.

As they drew close to the group she blushed when she noticed TJ's smile and approving look. He and the others greeted the two.

Cecelia couldn't help but notice how TJ included everyone at the table.

What, she wondered, did he do to be able to afford such a magnificent yacht? She looked at the handsome, rugged face with a beard that was probably a day or two old. He had a boyish smile. He looked too innocent to be some sort of corporate baron or financial tycoon. But then, she mused, what did she know? He could be a mobster. Who or whatever he was, she liked him and caught herself wishing that she had some of her own clothes so that she didn't look like an orphan teenager.

While TJ had to admit that he really appreciated Cecelia in her bikini, he realized that Amanda never made those shorts and shirt look like that. Even though Cecelia was a small woman, her long legs gave the impression of height. Her long black hair fell past her shoulders and framed her round face. She had the face of a young girl. Her eyes were hazel, which, against her dark brown skin made them more noticeable and sensuous. As she drew nearer TJ noticed that she had freckles which enhanced her girlish appearance.

It wasn't lost on the others in the room that TJ and Cecelia were standing there looking at each other. In fact, they stood looking at each other for such a long time that it was becoming uncomfortable for the others.

"Well," said Lillian breaking the trance, "my daughter's clothes fit you well." She motioned toward the table, "I hope you like pasta. One of TJ's favorite meals is a simple rotini tossed in olive oil, Italian spices, garlic and Parmesan cheese."

"That sounds lovely," said Cecelia, suddenly realizing that she had been staring into TJ's eyes.

During dinner Cecelia had to tell Captain Fanger all about what she had been doing since her husband's death. They talked a lot about her husband and the Captain sang his praises. Cecelia was a sous chef at the famous Circa 1886 Restaurant. The Circa 1886 was a fine dining restaurant located on the grounds of the Wentworth Mansion in downtown Charleston. She had two grown children – a twenty-four year old daughter who had married a Navy officer and had a two year old son, and a twenty year old daughter who was about half way through New England Culinary Institute. That's also where Cecelia had studied.

Lillian had been jumping up and down in her role of hostess and cook, so no one thought about it when she got up. Stepping just out of sight of Cecelia and TJ she motioned for her husband. John excused himself.

“What?” he asked after Lillian had led him out of earshot.

“Did you see the two of them look at each other?”

“How could you miss?”

“Well,” said Lillian, “there’s not a chance in hell for it to be any more than that if – one, we don’t stop talking about her deceased husband, and two, we don’t get out of the way.”

“Oh,” said Captain Fanger rather sheepishly.

They returned to the table.

“Amanda and I are going to take care of the dishes and then work on some of her homework,” Lillian announced. Amanda gave her a funny look. “I promised Amanda I’d help her with some of her biology.” Amanda got the hint.

“And I need to excuse myself. I’ve got some planning to do for the rest of the cruise,” said Captain Fanger.

Brad and Lydia had already excused themselves and had picked up on Lillian’s ploy. They asked if they could use the dinghy to go ashore and get some personal items. That left Cecelia and TJ.

“Why don’t you two go up and enjoy the sunset from the fly deck?” Lillian addressed TJ and Cecelia. “I’ll bring up some coffee and cognac.”

TJ, being a relatively naïve bachelor, totally missed what was happening. Cecelia, on the other hand, saw right through Lillian’s

ploy. She blushed and then, woman-to-woman, looked directly at Lillian's smiling face. Well, perhaps it was more of a smirk.



The fly deck was a large upper deck. It's practical purpose was a navigation center and where the crew worked while the ship was under sail. Otherwise it was a beautiful expansive deck with a large table and cushioned bench seats in the middle with the best view in the house.

Cecelia and TJ sat on the fly deck talking and watching the sun set over Key Largo as they sipped on Fussigny cognac.

"But," Cecelia concluded her long explanation about graduating from New England Culinary Institute and being a sous chef at the famous Circa 1886 Restaurant in Charleston, "you've heard all about me. What about you? Who is TJ Royer?"

"Oh, I'm just a very lucky man who knocks around the Caribbean and eastern seaboard scuba diving and taking in the sights."

"You can do better than that," Cecelia chided. "You practically got my children's birth dates."

"Oh," said TJ in mock seriousness, "what are they?"

Cecelia laughed and gave him a friendly jab in the ribs with her elbow. "You know what I mean."

"Okay," said TJ. "I am just a very lucky man. I was an innkeeper in Key West when I won a large lottery." Cecelia gasped.

“My reaction exactly,” laughed TJ. “I ordered this boat, hired a crew, gave my chef 60% of the profits to keep the inn running smoothly, and set off to prowling the waters off the eastern United States for lovely young women to carry off.”

Cecelia blushed. “Are you always such a flirt?”

“Flirt!?” exclaimed TJ. “I just tell the truth.”

Cecelia just smiled and turned her gaze toward the setting sun. The clouds were turning a beautiful crimson. A good sign for sailors.

“I envy you,” she said softly.

“I very honestly try to avoid telling people the truth,” TJ said seriously. “Most of the time I find it extremely embarrassing to be so damn rich.” He paused. “Like now.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to embarrass you,” said Cecelia.

“That’s okay,” TJ smiled. “I think it would be different if I had earned the money.”

“Well, I for one think you surely made a good decision on how to spend it.”

“I think so.”

“Where did you find such a great crew?”

“Oh, John and I had been buddies for a long time. We went to school together. He went to the Naval Academy and I went to Florida State. He became a Navy officer and I headed off to make my fortune.”

“As an inn-keeper?”

“Well, I really wanted to be a chef, like you, but I didn’t have the natural talent you guys have. I ended up working at and then buying a small hole-in-the-wall bar.”

“Really?”

“Yep. It was literally the space where the exterior walls of three building met. We had a tin roof. I rented a back room from one of my neighbors and had an accordion metal gate across the open fourth side.”

“Sounds intriguing.”

“That’s what the tourist thought,” TJ laughed. “I sold cheap food and twenty ounces of beer for two bucks.”

“My kind of place.”

“Actually, it was fun. And I was always busy.”

“When did the inn-keeping start?”

“Oh, that started about twenty-five years ago. I didn’t have anything to do with my money except go diving, so I saved enough to buy what had once been a fine old Key West home called Trevor House for almost nothing because it was in such bad repair. A local foundation helped me fix it up if I promised to keep it as historically correct as possible. I didn’t mind that because I love that type of thing. There are stories that it is built over the foundation of the home of the privateer Captain Damien Rey. I have a small dining room that can handle about twenty at a seating and fifteen rooms.”

“It sounds lovely.” Cecelia couldn’t help but be enthralled by this man.

“It really is,” TJ said proudly. “I knew that I didn’t have the skills to be the chef, so I would go from restaurant to restaurant in Key West. If I thought their food was particularly good I’d try to snatch their sous chef. I knew I couldn’t afford their chefs and I would offer the sous chef 20% of the dining room profits above their salary.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Cecelia. “No one around Charleston gets that type of deal.”

“In any case,” TJ continued, “rooms are at a premium in Key West and people love rooms in old historic houses, so between the rooms and a good dining room, I did quite well.”

“Then you won the lottery.”

“Yep,” TJ leaned back against the padded bench as he continued his story. “John had retired from the Navy and I talked him into bringing his family to Key West. There’s still a lot of prejudice toward blacks up north, even if they’re retired Naval officers who had done two combat tours. I really believed that he could do well with his skills in Key West.”

“Did he?”

“He wasn’t doing badly. He risked a large portion of his savings and started a little charter company. It kept him busy and his family fed. It might have done a lot better if I hadn’t asked him to captain the *L'Esprit Libre*.”

“Amanda is definitely happy with the arrangement.”

“Oh, yes,” TJ laughed. “Amanda has everything she wants. I’m thrilled having John and his family, and I think they’re happy too.”

Cecelia and TJ could see the ship’s dingy approaching. Brad skillfully brought it alongside one of the stern steps so Lydia could

jump aboard. Then he disappeared under the ship's stern where the dingy was secured safely out of sight.

A few moments later the lights blinked. Cecelia hadn't even been aware that the ship's lights had come on – the red and green marker lights and the safety lights along the edge of the decks. Brad came up the steps.

“Sir,” he said, “the batteries are fully charged so I checked that everything is running on battery. Do you need anything before I go below?”

“No, Brad. Thank you.”

Brad said ‘good-night’ and left.

“What’s their story?”

“Brad was a Navy diver,” said TJ as he poured each of them a bit more cognac. “He had planned to make the Navy a career and then got injured doing a repair on a ship’s hull. I think they were in the Mediterranean somewhere. He was discharged. Lydia has been his longtime girlfriend. She’s an avid recreational diver and outstanding sail-boat racer. John recommended them. They’ve been together for so long that I forget that they’re not actually married, but they’re a great couple and outstanding sailors.”

“It is really beautiful out here,” said Cecelia looking at the distant shore. “Do you anchor out here to make the diving easier?”

“That’s a benefit, but I generally don’t get a berth unless I need to on-load fuel or supplies.”

“Really?”

“Yes. L'Esprit Libre is really quite green. She has a bank of solar cells that charge a set of batteries big enough to run the ship for several hours. There is an electrical system that keeps track of need and demand. If the battery system isn't providing the necessary power the diesel generator will automatically start.”

“Wow, that's neat,” said Cecelia with sincere enthusiasm.

“Amanda said that you and Captain Fanger prefer to use the sails.”

“Yeah. That's another way of saving money and energy. All of us love to sail, so it's far from a hardship. A hardship is when we have no choice but to use the engines.”

“Do you use them often?”

“No. Docking and outrunning hurricanes is about it.”

Cecelia smiled.

They sat silently for some time as the last bit of light disappeared in the west. All that was left were the lights of Key Largo to the west and those of a distant cruise ship to the east making its way from one of the northern Florida ports to the Bahamas. Cecelia had no more become aware that it was becoming chilly than TJ opened one of the seats and produced a soft, warm blanket. She let him wrap it around her shoulders. She wondered whether or not it was her imagination that his hands paused for a moment on her shoulders. She didn't want the evening to end. Neither did TJ.

It was TJ who finally broke the silence.

“I would really like you to sail with us for a while.” It was awkward, but it worked.

“Oh, that’s very nice of you but I don’t know.” Cecelia didn’t have any reason not to stay and she really wanted to, but courtesy seemed to deem some minimal resistance.

“Do you have to go back to work?”

“No, I’ve got another week, but . . .”

“Do you have some reservations?”

“Well, no, but I don’t want you to feel like you have to entertain me. You’ve done so much for me already.”

“Even if you weren’t the widow of an American hero, I would want you to continue to cruise with us because I enjoy your company.”

Cecelia just looked at TJ. He couldn’t have been blunter. He sat silently looking at her and waiting for an answer. She wondered if it was her imagination or were those puppy-dog eyes.

“I don’t know what to say,” Cecelia sputtered. “I mean . . . well, that’s different. I mean . . . I really like being with you too.” She paused, then almost exploded with “and I’d love to go with you.”

TJ released air as though he had been holding his breath and gave Cecelia one of his big boyish smiles. TJ leaned toward Cecelia and she leaned toward him. There was an awkward pause. They both gave self-conscious laughs and turned back toward the lights of Key Largo. TJ sat as close as he thought he could get away with. Cecelia tried to get nearer without getting caught. They both ached to touch or be touched, but it wasn’t going to be this night.



TJ awakened at his usual time. It was just six o'clock. But this day he didn't jump up. He lay in bed thinking. Like a gentleman, TJ had walked Cecelia to her stateroom the night before. After the usual pleasantries she had again expressed her appreciation for his hospitality as well as her rescue and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He had done nothing but mumble "you're welcome". He wondered if he should have said or done something different. Perhaps, he queried, this is why he hadn't had a girlfriend since college. He knew how to flirt but not how to take the next step. Finally, he rolled out of bed. As he emerged on the main deck he could smell Lillian's delicious coffee. There must be something about nurses. They don't know how to sleep past 5am. Lillian was always the first one up. John was at the bridge checking weather and

taking the pulse of the ship. Brad and Lydia were sipping coffee on the aft deck.

“Good morning, sunshine,” Lillian said cheerfully. “Did you and Cecelia have a nice evening?”

“Yes,” replied TJ without really paying much attention. He was looking around for Cecelia.

His lack of attention and obvious searching wasn’t lost on Lillian. She laughed heartily and said, “Take it easy, Romeo, she just hasn’t come up yet.”

Amanda, who had wedged herself into the corner of the dinette and out of sight, looked up from her book and laughed at her Mother teasing TJ.

TJ walked toward the dinette and, pointing a finger at the young girl, said, “don’t you even!”

Amanda laughed and went back to her book. TJ sat down. Almost instantly Lillian put a cup of coffee, a soft-boiled egg, slice of toast and glass of mango-orange juice on the table before him. This was his normal breakfast. He was a creature of habit, and Lillian knew all of his habits well.

TJ had finished his breakfast and was sipping his second cup of coffee when Cecelia came up the steps. She was wearing a simple green sun dress with dark green piping, gathered at the waist and hemmed at a couple of inches above her knees.

“Good morning,” said TJ jumping to his feet.

“Good morning,” Cecelia replied with a smile. Addressing Amanda she said, “Thank you for the dress.”

“Welcome,” said Amanda trying hard to appear not to be carefully watching what was going on. “I just thought you’d like something different.”

“It’s very nice.”

Lillian offered Cecelia a wide variety of breakfast items. Cecelia settled on coffee and a piece of toast. As she ate they made plans for the day. First thing they would return the rental air cylinders and pick up Cecelia’s luggage. The only thing that wasn’t easily decided was where to next.

“There’s a storm brewing in the Atlantic east of Nassau that seems to be on a line from Abaco Island to Jacksonville,” said Captain Fanger. “I’d suggest that we consider something south.”

“How about we take Mrs. G to see the Blue Hole,” Amanda suggested. “Have you ever been there?”

“No,” said Cecelia, “where is it?”

“There’s a national park on North Andros in the Bahamas,” explained Captain Fanger. “and then there are blue holes in the ocean off both North and South Andros.”

“Yeah,” Amanda chimed in excitedly, “they’re these neat geological formations that put freshwater holes in the ocean. There’s one where there’s a rim about forty feet down that makes it feel like a cave. If you go much deeper you do need to be cave certified, but the top forty to sixty feet is really neat!”

“Mrs. Gilbert might not be up to diving quite yet,” suggested TJ.

“No,” said Cecelia. “I’m ready to go back in any time.”

“Then we can take Mrs. G to a blue hole” Amanda insisted.

“What do you think, Captain?” asked TJ.

“That should be okay. The storm should be north of Abaco Island by the time we get over there.”

“Does that sound okay to you?” All eyes turned to Cecelia.

“That sounds great,” she said.

“But you’ll need to wear something other than a bikini to dive the blue holes,” Amanda added looking straight at TJ and smirking.

“Oh,” Cecelia was embarrassed. “the zipper on my wet-suit broke and the dive shop didn’t have anything to fit me.”

“Don’t worry,” TJ spoke to Cecelia but looked back at Amanda. “that won’t be a problem.” Amanda just ducked her head behind her book and snickered.



Captain Fanger, Brad and Lydia stayed on board to do a final check before heading out to sea. Lillian went with Cecelia, TJ and Amanda to return the air cylinders and pick up Cecelia’s luggage. She figured that Cecelia might need someone to protect her from the good-natured banter that often occurred between Amanda and TJ, especially now that Amanda felt that she had something “on” TJ.

At the hotel TJ sat in the bar and had a beer while the women went to Cecelia’s room to pack. It didn’t take long before he was summoned to the room to carry the luggage. Cecelia had objected but Lillian told her that TJ needed to make himself useful. They were

laughing. TJ had the feeling that he somehow was the butt of the joke. Cecelia's appearing almost embarrassed to look at him confirmed that he had something to do with the hilarity. Amanda could hardly contain herself and Lillian just smirked.

"What?!" TJ demanded.

"Nothing," offered Lillian.

Blushing profusely and still laughing, Cecelia put her hand on TJ's arm and said, "It's okay. They've just been telling me all about you." The room burst into gales of laughter. TJ just shook his head and headed down the hall with Cecelia's luggage.

TJ had bribed the desk clerk to make it appear to Cecelia that she was paying the bill when, in fact, TJ had already paid. The hotel shuttle dropped them at the public pier where they had left the dingy.

Within an hour they had returned to the L'Esprit Libre and everything was ready for departure. Lillian insisted upon making a light lunch before they set sail.

After lunch Cecelia was positioned on the aft deck to watch the show. And a grand show it was. Brad and Lydia went scurrying up and down the stairs between the sail storage in the aft port hold and the fly deck. She heard Captain Fanger call "lift the anchor," and Amanda, sitting at the bridge controls reply "ay, ay, Sir," as she reached forward and flipped a switch.

"Hoist the mainsail," came the Captain's command.

As the mainsail moved majestically up the tall mast Cecelia could see it catch wind and the boat start to move. It was an awesome feeling. No motors. Just the gentle breeze of the open sea. L'Esprit

Libre began to gain speed as Captain Fanger expertly set course and adjusted the boom giving more sheet to the wind.

To Cecelia they seemed to be flying through the water. Captain Fanger watched carefully as they whizzed past a dive boat heading toward the reef and then, when Cecelia thought they could go no faster, the Captain ordered the jib. The jib billowing out in front of the boat was a breath-taking sight. Cecelia watched Brad and Lydia move effortlessly around the rigging. It seemed so natural to them. As Cecelia moved forward to watch more closely she could see that Lydia had a great smile on her face as she almost danced among the sails and lines.

“We’ve got a good wind,” Amanda said as she came and stood by Cecelia. “I bet we’re doing at least 15 knots. They’re showing her off.”

TJ joined them. “While we’ve got some good wind, you need to go up front for one of the most exciting rides you’ll ever enjoy.”

“All right!” exclaimed Amanda. “Come on, Mrs. G!”

Amanda led the way forward along the starboard deck. The boom was out to port.

“We’ve got to be careful,” TJ called as they walked onto the forward deck. The jib sail was billowed out above them. “The jib is well above us, but we need to watch in case they need to change it or it luffs.”

Cecelia stood in awe. She looked up at the large jib sail above her and felt the wind in her face. She became aware of the sound of waves rhythmically hitting the twin hulls as the sleek boat cut through the water.

TJ took her by the hand and pointed to the two trampolines that stretched across the gap between the two hulls. He stepped onto the starboard trampoline and helped Cecelia get on. Amanda was already lying face down on the port trampoline watching the water rush by below. They sat down. Cecelia sat in silent wonder holding tightly to TJ's hand. There were no words to describe the sensation as she looked through the trampoline into the sea. The speed of the water going under them made her dizzy. She looked up at the great white jib and the expanse of blue sky and sea beyond. She found herself laughing giddily. She looked at TJ. He was watching her with a big smile on his face. He was enjoying seeing her reaction.

He leaned close as he spoke. "There are times when I never want to go back."

"I can see why," Cecelia called back.

Cecelia didn't want to leave the forward deck but the crew had to tack, which meant that the giant sails were going to change sides and the crew needed them to clear the deck so they were free to work the sails.

As dark descended the L'Esprit Libre was almost to the northern tip of North Andros. They had covered almost one-hundred nautical miles in slightly over nine hours. Captain Fanger decided that it would be best if they were to anchor just west of Joulter Cays. There was a cluster of very small islands there in shallow water. They could spend the night there without having to have someone stand watch because large ships wouldn't risk the shallow waters and numbers of small islands.

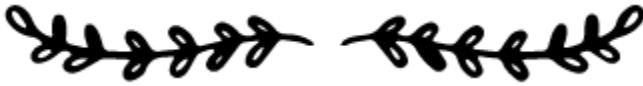
It had been an exhilarating day for everyone. TJ escorted Cecelia back to her cabin.

“Thank you so much,” she said, “it was a wonderful day.”

She started to kiss him on the cheek as she had done the night before but TJ gently cradled her head in his hands and guided her lips to a collision course with his. She didn’t resist.

They had no idea how long that kiss lasted. Had you asked either of them they would have told you it hadn’t lasted long enough. They both stood holding hands and looking into each other’s eyes. Nothing was said. Neither of them knew what to say.

“Good night,” Cecelia finally said, kissing TJ again gently on the lips. She turned and entered her stateroom. TJ just stood there looking after her. Finally he said “Good night” to the empty passageway and walked away.





Cecelia was awakened the next morning by the sounds of alarms.

She grabbed her dressing gown as she rushed up the stairs to the main deck. TJ was right behind her and Lillian, Amanda and Brad appeared up the starboard stairs.

Captain Fanger and Lydia were standing at the navigation control center studying a computer screen. John looked up to see the grand salon filling with people.

“Sorry,” he said. “It was a weather alarm. Nothing for us to worry about right now.”

“Right now,” TJ repeated.

“Another storm has developed southeast of San Salvador. It’s headed straight at Nassau and central Florida. If we hadn’t received this warning we’d have sailed right into it.”

“It’s a good thing you had us stop here last night,” offered Brad.

“That did work out well, didn’t it,” the Captain smiled.

“Does this mean we can’t take Mrs. G to the blue holes?” asked Amanda.

“Not today,” replied Captain Fanger, “but we have at least three options.” Everyone stood waiting. “Well, the cruise ships are going to lay off the leeward side of South Andros until tomorrow night and then make a run for south Florida. We could tag along with them, but they’re doing that because they want as few unhappy sea-sick passengers as possible and they have sailing schedules to keep. Second option – we could make a run for Key West right now and we’d probably only get grazed by the storm. Third option – we can ride out the weather with the cruise ships and then go on to the blue holes by going around the south end of South Andros.”

With that said all eyes turned to TJ. It was his boat and ultimately his decision.

“I hate having sailed all the way here only to turn around and go back. Besides I was rather looking forward to the blue holes myself.” TJ paused. “I’ll entertain any objections but I would pick option three.”

Everyone started talking at the same time but the obvious consensus was that they all agreed with TJ.

“How soon do we need to get underway?” TJ asked the Captain.

“One of Disney’s ships just went by. I’d say we should head out as soon as possible to avoid getting into a traffic jam.”

“Do we have time for breakfast?” asked Lillian.

“Oh, yeah,” said the Captain. “we just don’t want to dawdle.”

Lillian set out a quick and nutritious breakfast while the rest of the crew got ready. Cecelia insisted upon helping Lillian.

Once everyone had had a hearty breakfast, they weighed anchor and put out every inch of sail they had. Captain Fanger told TJ that they had at least 75 nautical miles before they passed Gold Cay and Williams Island. Anything south of that should be safe. Brad and Lydia were doing a great job maximizing the sails. With her yacht racing experience Lydia knew just how tight she could pull. The wind was strong and they were doing at least 17-18 knots if not more. At that rate they should round the western most point of South Andros in less than six hours.

By noon the sky had started getting dark and they were running into patches of rain. The wind was still from the northeast which told Captain Fanger that the center of the storm was most likely still south and east of Nassau. At noon the L'Esprit Libre was almost due west of Nassau. Captain Fanger kept a close eye on the radar and his charts. Amanda acted as helmsman so that Brad and Lydia were free to take care of the sails. Captain Fanger would call out bearings to her. She would loudly repeat the order followed by “ay, ay, Captain.” There was nothing that TJ, Cecelia and Lillian could do at this point other than make sure that everything was battened down for foul weather.

At about 2pm Gold Cay and Williams Island were coming into view.

There is about 2.5 to 3 nautical miles between the two islands. Captain Fanger checked his radar again and saw no signs of other vessels. He set a course to go between the islands. It was the fastest way around the western horn of North Andros. L'Esprit Libre sped between the islands and soon those aboard could see the western most point of North Andros off the port bow.

Captain Fanger had Amanda turn southeast as they passed the horn. That would keep them running parallel with the island. The wind was now coming almost directly from the south. That meant that the storm was north and east of them, probably about ready to slam into Nassau. To maintain their southerly course Captain Fanger had to make sweeping tacts back and forth.

They had only sailed in this fashion for about an hour when Captain Fanger noticed ship traffic on his radar. It was getting too dangerous to continue under sail. Besides, he figured that these giant cruise ships had equipment and information that he didn't have. If they had picked this spot to ride out the storm, he would be wise to follow their lead. He called for Brad and Lydia to be ready to furl the sails. In traffic it would be a lot easier and safer to move under diesel power.

L'Esprit Libre was literally drifting in between the giant cruise ships as Brad and Lydia were furling the sails and Captain Fanger was engaging the diesel engines.

"Hail, hail, the gangs all here," sang the Captain. Cecelia was looking at the giant fourteen and fifteen story high cruise ships around them as the people on the cruise ships hung over the railing to watch Lydia and Brad skillfully furl L'Esprit Libre's sails.

“There’s the Disney Wonder,” Captain Fanger pointed out to Cecelia.

“And over there is the Caribbean Princess and Carnival’s Ecstasy.” There were other ships, but they were too far away for Captain Fanger to recognize without referring to the AIS.

The AIS is the ‘automatic identification system’. It is part of the global maritime safety system which had been required on ships over 400 tons since 2004. TJ had had AIS installed on L'Esprit Libre for safety. It broadcasts a vessel’s identification, course, speed, destination, estimated time of arrival and dimensions.

Soon the radio was cracking and Captain Fanger turned his attention back to finding a place to anchor. “This is the sailing yacht, L'Esprit Libre. Captain John Fanger, USN Retired in command,” the Captain spoke into his headset. “We’re just looking for a place to ride out the storm. Hope you boys don’t mind us parking here?” He smiled at the replies he was receiving.





Captain Fanger and TJ checked out the batteries and amount of fuel they had. The batteries were at almost 100% but they also had plenty of fuel, so they decided to use the generator and reserve the batteries as a backup. The two men inspected the entire boat to make sure that it was ready to get tossed around a bit. They had been through some pretty fierce storms in L'Esprit Libre and she had always done well, but they didn't want to leave anything to chance. They started the generator.

While TJ and John toured the boat, the others gathered in the grand salon and the aft exterior salon. It was raining pretty steadily by this time and the boat bobbed in the water but it wasn't raining so hard that they couldn't sit in the covered but open-air aft salon. It was still light so they were entertained by watching the passengers on the cruise ships partying despite the rain. Sound travels well across water and they could hear the music and the occasional passenger trying to call to them. They couldn't understand what the person was saying, but they'd wave.

Lillian was thinking that they should have something to eat before things really got rough.

“Do you get sea-sick?” she asked Cecelia.

“I don’t know,” answered Cecelia. “This is the first time I’ve been on a ship during a storm.”

Lillian laughed. “That’s a ship,” she said pointing at one of the cruise ships. “This is a boat. A ship will roll and pitch in a storm. With their stabilizers those people might find it difficult to walk straight down a deck and might even roll out of bed, but a boat . . . well, we could very easily find ourselves looking in their Deck 1 portholes at one moment and their Deck 4 portholes the next.” “Oh,” said Cecelia feeling almost queasy from the thought.

“I’m not trying to scare you, really. I just don’t want you to be surprised or think something horrible is happening.”

“Thank you.”

“Everyone here gets ready for a blow differently,” Lillian continued. “John eats a good meal and has a glass of wine. Once the storm starts he won’t leave the bridge. TJ also eats a good meal as does Lydia. Being a yacht racer, Lydia lives for big waves and being pounded by the sea. If there’s anything that needs to be done on deck during a storm, Lydia insists that she be allowed to do it. She’ll even grab a sandwich during a storm if she gets hungry. Nothing seems to upset her stomach. But she never drinks before a storm. Brad, on the other hand, will drink a couple of Ensure and lay down to rest. Amanda and I both eat light. We just don’t want anything heavy in our stomachs if they start going up and down.”

“Perhaps I should join you and Amanda,” said Cecelia thinking about a large dinner bouncing up and down in her stomach.

Lillian smiled. “Probably wise if you’ve never done this before.”



By early evening those on L’Esprit Libre were forced to retreat into the grand salon. The howl of the wind and the spray of water across the deck made Cecelia very nervous. She looked around at the others. They didn’t seem to notice. She tried for some time to ignore what was going on outside but the constant rise and fall of the boat made that impossible. After a while she decided that she might be able to better block out the storm in her cabin.

For several hours she lay in her stateroom trying to remain calm. TJ had checked on her on the way to his cabin. She had lied. She told him she was fine when, in fact, she was becoming more frightened as time went by.

Finally she could not handle it any longer. She struggled to stand up and made her way to TJ’s cabin door and knocked. TJ opened the door and grabbed the frightened Cecelia and sat her in a nearby bright red overstuffed chair. Like most of the yacht, his cabin was done in white with red or natural wood accessories.

“You don’t look so good,” he said trying to keep things as light as possible.

“I’m sorry,” Cecelia babbled through her tears, “I tried to keep calm, but I’m terrified.” She looked around his cabin. It was large, taking

up most of the front of the boat. In the middle was a king size bed. The wall across from the bed was all windows. TJ had the blinds pulled. Unlike the guest staterooms, there was no television. Then she looked back at TJ who hadn't taken his eyes off her. "May I stay with you . . . at least for a little while?"

"You can stay with me as long as you want," said TJ taking her hands. "Would you like to lay down?"

Cecelia looked at the bed. TJ had obviously been lying in bed reading. The covers were turned back, there was a pile of pillows on one side and a book. When she looked back at him he smiled and said, "I'll be a gentleman."

Cecelia laughed. That had probably done as much to relieve some of the tension and fear as anything. TJ turned back the covers on the opposite side of the bed from where he had been reading and then helped Cecelia across the pitching and rolling floor. He helped her climb into bed, tucked her in as you would your child, and made his way to his place.

He picked up his book and asked, "will the light bother you?"

"No," said Cecelia trying to lay still and be brave.

Her bravery didn't last long. TJ had hardly opened his book when Cecelia moved across the bed to him.

"Hold me. Please hold me," she cried. "I'm so frightened. I'm sorry. Please don't let me go."

TJ put his book on the night stand and switched off the cabin lights. He had a salt lamp which he left on as night light. Its soft radiance filled the room with a comforting glow. Cecelia snuggled close and put her head on TJ's shoulder. He held her tight against him.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

“Shhhhhhhhhh” TJ said pulling her closer.

He lay there looking at the ceiling and thinking about what was happening. He was embarrassed at his own thoughts. She was trusting him to protect her. Yet it seemed that every nerve in his body was on high alert to any contact with the soft, warm body next to him.

After what seemed an eternity he could sense that her breathing was calm and even. She had fallen asleep. He dared to stroke her cheek with his free hand and kiss her on the top of the head. She wiggled and snuggled a bit closer – if that was possible – at his touch.

It was in the early morning hours when TJ was aware that the storm was no more than heavy rain. But it wasn’t the storm that awakened him. He could hear one of the great cruise ships getting underway. The weather had obviously broken and they were going to make their run to southern Florida. He knew that Captain Fanger was in the navigation center and probably wishing them a safe voyage. If the worst of the storm had actually passed, the Captain would share watch with Brad and Lydia through the rest of the night so that only one of the three had to be awake at any time.

Cecelia was not clinging to TJ as she had earlier in the night, but she was still nestled up against his side. Putting his head back on his pillow he drifted back to sleep.



In the morning L'Esprit Libre was one of only a few vessels still moored by the island. The large cruise ships had made their run to southern Florida. Lydia was on watch as the sun rose. She could only make out a small freighter and another yacht near them. The rest she identified on the AIS as a tanker, another freighter, a yacht and a charter ship scattered along the island. The freighter nearest them was already beginning to move.

The storm was dumping large amounts of rain on central Florida but the weather promised to be clear and beautiful for the rest of their cruise to the Blue Holes. Lydia decided that it was quite safe to switch to battery and turned off the diesel generator.

Lillian was making coffee and preparing for breakfast. TJ had slipped out of bed without waking Cecelia, and he and Amanda were checking the boat for any storm damage. So far they had found none.

They were on the fore deck when Cecelia opened the blinds in TJ's cabin. Both she and Amanda jumped. She hadn't expected to see anyone outside the window and Amanda hadn't expected to see anyone in TJ's cabin.

Amanda looked at TJ.

"She was frightened by the storm," he said.

"Uh-huh," replied Amanda.

"Nothing happened," TJ insisted. "She was frightened . . . wait! Why am I trying to explain myself to a fifteen-year old girl?"

"Because you can't," Amanda laughed.

TJ knew that he hadn't heard the end. Amanda would get maximum mileage out of this situation and he knew it.



It did turn out to be a beautiful day for sailing. There was still a brisk breeze from the west-northwest as a result of the clockwise rotation of the storm that was now west and a bit north of them. Captain Fanger and his crew took advantage and pulled the mainsail in as tight as they could.

Brad and Lydia were showing Mrs. G the ropes of sailing a catamaran and Amanda and TJ were taking turns at the helm under the close scrutiny of Captain Fanger. TJ had Brad and Lydia pull in the jib as he pulled in the mainsail. Mrs. G hung onto the railing as the starboard hull began to lift from the water. TJ looked down at the row of instruments in front of him. They were doing almost 24 knots. He looked at Captain Fanger and grinned.

“That’s about the fastest she’s ever gone,” he called to the Captain. That’s when Lillian Fanger could be heard coming up the stairs.

“Amanda Fanger,” she shouted. “This is a luxury yacht, not a racing cat. If you don’t put that hull back in the water right now, you’ll . . .” She didn’t get to finish her sentence. She came around the corner to see Amanda holding onto the rail grinning and pointing at Lillian’s boss.

They both looked embarrassed while everyone else laughed hysterically.

“I’m sorry,” they both said at the same time.

“No, it’s your boat,” said Lillian.

“May be,” replied TJ, “but you’re right.”

Even with the starboard hull back in the water L’Esprit Libre was doing 18 knots. And so the day went.



TJ and Mrs. G were sitting on the aft deck sipping wine. The last remnants of a beautiful red sunset were just disappearing in the west, but TJ wasn’t looking at the sunset. He was staring at the great mainsail above them. It was the perfect ending to a beautiful day of sailing. Well, almost perfect, Cecelia thought.

She was trying to figure TJ out. He had kissed her. He had held her gently but tightly. He would take her hand in the gentlest and almost sensual of ways. He had given her all the right signals but he hadn’t touched her. The entire crew assumed that they were sleeping together. That made Cecelia laugh but she knew that it really embarrassed TJ. She wondered if it was because she was not only a widow but the widow of a war hero whom Captain Fanger knew. Did he think that that made her off-limits and that Captain Fanger would be angry with him?

Not too subtly she moved over and leaned up against TJ. He looked at her, smiled, and extended his arm so that she was resting against his chest. She wondered if he was content with this. Lydia was on the fly bridge. With sails, compasses, radar, and a great big ocean in front of her, she was too busy driving to see if anyone was necking

in the back seat. The rest of the crew had had an enjoyable but exhausting day sailing and were probably already asleep.

‘This,’ Mrs. G resolved, ‘is the twenty-first century. I don’t have to wait for him. If I do, we might never get anywhere.’

With that Mrs. G stood up. She was wearing a moo-moo over her bikini. She hiked the moo-moo up to her armpits, climbed onto TJ’s lap, put her arms around his neck and gave him a passionate kiss. Her entire body tingled with anticipation of how he would react. What was he going to do?

TJ dropped his wine glass but didn’t even try to look. He put his arms around Cecelia, embracing her, and returned her kiss. ‘That’s a good sign,’ Cecelia thought. His brain may have not yet figured out what to do, but his body knew and it responded immediately. She could feel him as she pushed her body tightly against him and moved her hips so that there was greater contact. ‘That’s a better sign,’ she mused.

Mrs. G took her mouth from TJ’s only long enough to say, “They all think we’re sleeping together.”

“Yes,” said the surprised and breathless TJ.

“Is that so absurd?”

“Yes, I mean no, I mean . . .”

“If you don’t want to make love to me,” Cecelia whispered into TJ’s ear as she pushed her hips against him, “now’s the time to tell me.”

As she began another long passionate kiss, Mrs. G realized that TJ was moving. He slid to the edge of the sofa, put his hands under her bottom, and was standing up. If he was trying to shake her loose, she

thought, she wasn't going to go that easily. As TJ stood up, Cecelia held tight.

Once on his feet TJ moved toward his cabin. Cecelia realized that he wasn't trying to get her loose. He was holding her against himself. She buried her face against his neck and smiled as he staggered across the grand lounge, down the short stairs into the master stateroom.

TJ tried to lay down on the king-sized bed as gently and gracefully as possible, but it ended up more like a belly-flop. Cecelia didn't care. She was on top of TJ whose legs were dangling over the side of the bed, almost touching the floor.

Mrs. G rolled off the bed and flipped off the light. The moonlight illuminated the room with a gentle glow. She slipped off the moo-moo and bikini and was standing by the bed naked. TJ thought this was the most seductive thing he'd ever seen.

"I've heard jokes about cowboys making love with their boots on, but I don't think you're going to accomplish much fully dressed." TJ couldn't really see her face but the voice was a tease. Sheepishly he sat up and started to take off his shirt. Mrs. G grabbed the waistband of his bathing suit and started pulling. She had his trunks almost to his knees before he got hold of her arms and pulled her to him. 'Finally!' she thought.



TJ was awakened early by the sunlight coming through the stateroom's expanse of windows. He looked over at the sleeping figure of Cecelia lying naked next to him. In her sleep she was trying to block out the light. He quickly slipped out of bed and closed the shades.

After gently pulling the sheet up around Mrs. G, TJ threw on some clothes and went topside to see what was happening. They had rounded the southern point of Andros Island during the night. The storm was too far north to affect them but the trade winds were providing a nice breeze out of the east. Captain Fanger was taking advantage of them, as he had the storm's rotation, and was running as close to the wind as possible. He had easily attained 15 knots. He would try to sail closer to the wind once he had a full crew on deck to manage the sails. With a full crew they would probably be able to achieve 18 knots. The captain had taken them out into the deep blue water trench that runs north and south between Andros and New Providence. They were about two to three miles east of Andros. In the deep water they could make time without worrying about underwater obstacles. Captain Fanger was always cautious even if the draft of L'Esprit Libre was only a little over 7 feet.

TJ stopped and got a cup of coffee before heading to the fly bridge where Captain Fanger was sitting on the high swivel chair facing the wheel and a panel of instruments. Brad was sitting in the chair next to the Captain and Amanda was lounging on the bench seat behind them.

"Good morning," said TJ cheerfully.

“Good morning,” the Captain replied without looking up. He took another look at the compass in front of him and turned to Brad, “Take over, here, will you?” said the Captain. “Keep her at 343.”

“3-4-3. Aye, aye, Captain,” replied Brad taking the wheel.

The Captain now turned to face TJ. “We should be just off Bastian Point within two hours at this speed.”

“You certainly have her flying,” said TJ.

“To be sure,” smile Captain Fanger. “You can always count on the Trade Winds. We’ve been pushing 18 knots since Brad and Amanda got up.”

“Wow! I’m impressed.”

“If I run too much closer to the wind, the missus will be up here scolding me for lifting the hull off the water.”

TJ smiled. He had been scolded more than once for running so close to the wind that one of the catamaran’s hulls would be lifted off the water. It did make a mess downstairs and Lillian Fanger would get especially upset if she were in the kitchen when it happened.

The Captain and TJ were planning their approach to the blue hole near Bastian Point. There was a very small island – hardly more than an oversized sandbar – just north-northeast of the point. If they dropped sail just past the island and motored due west, passing just north of the island, they would be in shallow but safe water very near the blue hole.

While TJ and the Captain were strategizing on the fly bridge Mrs. G was waking up in TJ’s stateroom. She stopped by her cabin to get dressed and then to the grand salon where Amanda was sitting in her usual corner of the dinette reading one of her text books.

Amanda looked up. “Good morning, Mrs. G.”

“Good morning, Amanda.”

“We’re just a couple of hours south of Bastian Point where the blue hole is.”

“Great,” Mrs. G smiled as she sat down at the table. “What are you reading.”

“History,” said Amanda lifting to book so Cecelia could see the cover. “It’s pretty interesting.”

“School work first thing in the morning.”

“I talked Dad into letting me take a turn at the helm last night when I should have been studying.” Amanda shrugged. “Now I’ve got to make it up.”

Lillian came up the stairs from the galley. “What can I get you for breakfast?”

“Oh, I’m just going to have some juice and coffee,” Cecelia said smiling. “I can get it.”

“You wouldn’t want to put me out of a job,” Lillian teased.

“Sorry,” said Cecelia as Lillian left to get the coffee and juice.

Mrs. G sat quietly watching Amanda read and occasionally looking out at the rapidly passing scenery.

“We’re moving pretty fast,” she said to Lillian as Lillian put the coffee and juice before her.

“Almost 20 knots,” said Amanda, looking up from her book. “Dad’s running really close to the wind. I wish” She looked up at her Mother, stopped in mid-sentence, and returned to her book.

“Do you guys dive in the blue hole very often?” Cecelia asked.

“Not too often,” replied Lillian. “They’re often referred to as vertical caves and Brad is the only one with the skills, experience and certification to do more than drop down forty or fifty feet.”

“They’re all over the Bahamas,” Amanda couldn’t stay out of the conversation. “There are one hundred and seventy-eight blue holes inland and fifty in the sea just around Andros.”

“Wow,” exclaimed Mrs. G.

“And there’s one on Long Island that’s over two hundred meters deep.”

“That’s a bit deep for my card,” Mrs. G said laughing.

“Blue holes formed during the ice age when the sea level was much lower,” Amanda continued, “so when the sea level rose it left the blue holes with both freshwater and saltwater. The halocline – that’s where the saltwater and freshwater meet – the halocline causes a corrosive reaction that creates horizontal caves extending off the vertical shaft. Some of them get pretty long. There’s one that’s over six hundred meters in the Sawmill Sink on Abaco Island.”

“That’s amazing,” said Cecelia. “How far down can we go?”

“Forty or fifty feet is about it,” replied Amanda. “After that you really need to be cave certified.” She paused, almost returned to reading, and then added, “But we’ll get to see a lot of neat things just down that far. Someday I’m going to get cave certified.” She looked up and smiled at her Mother whose expression made it clear what she thought about her daughter cave diving.

Mrs. G became aware that the boat was slowing down. Amanda pointed off the port side. “That’s South Bight between those two points. We’re almost there.”

Amanda was excited. She looked up at her Mother who, knowing that she wasn’t going to get a bit of serious studying done, said “Oh, alright.” That’s all it took, and Amanda climbed across the bench and ran up the stairs to the fly deck.

Lillian laughed and shook her head, “If she ever graduates, I’ll be amazed.” Cecelia gave her a quizzical look. Lillian explained. “There’s so much going on . . . there’s so much life to live out here that she never has adequate time to study.”

Mrs. G and Lillian followed Amanda to the fly deck, but at a much more leisurely pace. The jib sail was luffed and Captain Fanger, Brad, Amanda and TJ were lowering the mainsail. Lillian stepped up to Amanda and said, “I’ll help here. You take Mrs. G and show her how to pull in the jib.”

Cecelia found the experience almost as exhilarating as raising sail. Soon the L’Esprit Libre was drifting with the wind toward the island. She was still on the foredeck with Amanda when she felt the vibration of the powerful twin diesel engines. As Mrs. G stood watching from the foredeck, Captain Fanger steered the boat toward a small island then, just a bit north and east of the island, turned due west. He went a short distance before turning southwest.

“Come up here,” Captain Fanger called to Mrs. G.

She and Amanda hurried to the fly deck. She looked out over the bow of the boat toward where the Captain and Amanda were pointing.

“There it is,” said the Captain. “Can you see where the water suddenly becomes a dark blue?”

“Yes,” Mrs. G replied excitedly. “Yes. I see it.”

“That’s a blue hole.” Captain Fanger said as he continued to slow the boat. “I’m going to stop out here so we can drop the anchor and use the anchor cable as a dive line. That will save a lot of air. Brad will go down and tie off a guide rope between your safety stop point and the stern ladders.”



Captain Fanger brought the boat to a stop and dropped the anchor. L'Esprit Libre bobbed gently in the water as everyone prepared for the dive. The Captain decided that he would be the one to stay on board. Lillian and Amanda checked tanks while Brand and Lydia, who had just awakened and still looked like she was asleep, started preparing equipment and tying the guide line.

“Air or Nitrox?” Lillian asked TJ.

“This would probably be a good place to use Nitrox,” said TJ. “I mean, there’s no way we’re going beyond our MOD.”

Nitrox is a combination of the words NITrogen and OXYgen. The air we breathe and which is generally compressed into a cylinder for diving is 21% oxygen and 79% nitrogen. It is technically a type of

nitrox. However, when you increase the oxygen to 22% or greater you have what is called “Enriched Air Nitrox” or EAN. While TJ’s equipment had the ability to produce any percentage they wanted, 32% oxygen and 68% nitrogen was the most common among recreational divers. That’s what they had ready for their dive into the blue hole.

Because Nitrox contains less nitrogen, breathing nitrox is the equivalent of diving with regular air at a substantially shallower depth. This means that the diver has more ‘bottom time’ – i.e. the amount of time from when you start your descent until you surface. A lot of divers say that your body is less fatigued using Nitrox but there is no medical evidence to support that.

Lillian and Amanda were analyzing the tanks. Analyzing a tank is where the diver puts a measuring device on a cylinder to determine how much oxygen is in the gas. In this case they were wanting 32%. Each diver would be responsible for checking their own cylinder again before entering the water.

Through the entire process of preparation Amanda, Lydia and Brad had a running debate on which features Mrs. G should see and the order of their importance. By the time they stepped off the L'Esprit Libre the six of them were super charged with anticipation.



With the nitrox and a couple of lengthy surface intervals, the group was able to make three dives into the blue hole. Mrs. G was the first one on the aft deck after the last dive. As before, Captain Fanger was there to meet them and help them aboard. Mrs. G looked totally exhausted but was still going strong because of the adrenaline rush one gets from such dives. Captain Fanger smiled. He had seen and experienced it so many times before. He glanced at his watch. He figured that her body would calm down just after dinner, be asleep by eight and sleep through anything.

For her part Cecelia was talking almost non-stop. She had to tell him about every phenomenal thing she had seen.

“She’s been like that since she hit the surface,” Lillian teased. Cecelia just blushed, paused a moment, and then was soon back describing something else.

“How deep did you go this dive?” asked Captain Fanger.

Lillian looked at the dive computer she still had on her left wrist. “Looks like 57 feet,” she said. “We spent a lot of time exploring the ridge right about at the halocline. We did drop down to the first horizontal passage so that Mrs. G could see it. Amanda and I stayed out from under the overhang and kept an eye on them while TJ took her to the opening so she could shine her light into the cave. And I thought Amanda got excited about these things.” They both looked over at Cecelia, who was chattering non-stop to Lydia, and laughed.



Delaware Hospital for the Criminally Insane

Tall, over-weight, with unkempt bushy hair and a shaggy beard, Caesar Reyez stood at the Knoxville, Tennessee library copier making copies of pages he'd marked in a book *'Pirates and Privateers in the Caribbean'*. Occasionally he would look around suspiciously.

Until three days before Caesar had been a prisoner at the Delaware Hospital for the Criminally Insane with the diagnoses of Anti-Social Personality Disorder and Schizophrenia, delusional type.

Caesar had had a difficult life. The child of an alcoholic father who couldn't stay out of prison and a mother who spent most of her life in a psychiatric hospital due to schizophrenia, Caesar had been passed from one foster home to another. Many of them were very

good foster homes, but inevitably he would have to be removed because he became a danger to others.

He ended up in the Delaware institution after being found unfit to stand trial following a botched bank robbery attempt where he brutally beat a teller for no discernible reason. While at Delaware he met Anthony Macon.

Anthony had not been in touch with reality for many years and was quite delusional. Anthony had decided that Caesar was a long-lost relative of the pirate, Damian Rey, and that the two of them were destined to find Rey's ship and again hoist the Jolly Roger.

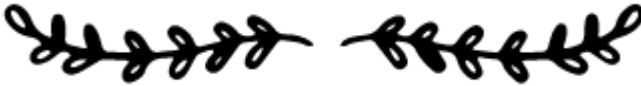
Caesar fell right into Anthony's delusion and the two became inseparable. They would spend hours planning how they were going to find Damien's ship and become modern day pirates on the great Cuchilla.

Being mentally ill does not make one less intelligent. They had spent weeks working out how they would become a part of the trustee work program. It was working until Anthony became ill and was diagnosed with cancer. As Anthony lay dying, Caesar promised that he would fulfill their mission and rescue Anthony from Davy Jones' locker.

After Anthony's death Caesar very purposefully acted in the ways he knew the shrinks wanted him to act. After months of, according to his chart, "no delusional episodes", Caesar demanded a sanity hearing. He escaped, killing one of his guards, during transportation to the court house.

Now, several days and hundreds of miles from his jailbreak, Caesar climbed into the most recent car he had stolen since his jailbreak. This time he had changed license plates with a second car so that,

unless the owner of the second car realized that they didn't have their correct license plate, he was driving a car with plates that wouldn't come up on a police hot sheet. He briefly looked through the pages he had copied, turned on the engine and headed toward Interstate-75. He had to go to Key West.





Those aboard L'Esprit Libre decided that their next destination should be their home port of Key West. Mrs. G was running out of vacation time and they were beginning to run low on supplies since they had been gone for almost six weeks.

The trip from the Bastian Point to Key West took four days. Unlike previous days of sailing where the object was to see how fast they could get L'Esprit Libre going, these were leisurely days of sailing. Captain Fanger took the boat around the north side of Andros Island and set a course for Key West. With the Caribbean seemingly all to themselves, even Mrs. G. got a turn sitting in the high chair before the great wheel carefully watching the compass to maintain their course. She did so well that Captain Fanger actually stopped starrng at the compass and turned his attention to the AIS to check for any ship traffic ahead.

While under sail, the crew generally liked to steer from the fly-deck. It gave them more of a sense of control because they could see how the sails were reacting to any steering and wind changes.

In the evenings, Amanda would generally go to her cabin as it got dark to do homework, while the adults not on duty would sit in the grand salon sipping on wine and talking. After a full day of sailing, even the youngest would be sufficiently exhausted to head off to bed early. The combination of fresh air, sun and physical exertion helped everyone sleep well.

TJ and Mrs. G. thought they were being quite discrete. They seldom left the salon together and Mrs. G. would wait in her cabin for a while before going to TJ's stateroom. Everyone knew they were spending the nights together but let them live in the fantasy that it was a secret.

The fourth morning Cecelia was awakened by the sounds of the twin diesel engines starting up. She knew that meant they must be entering Key West. TJ was already gone, but that wasn't unusual. She went up on deck by way of her cabin.

The boat was a bustle of activity. Lillian was trying desperately to get people fed while Lydia, Brad and Amanda were busy preparing to dock. Much to Lillian's chagrin Mrs. G grabbed a cup of coffee and headed to the fly-deck. She had, thought Lillian, picked up one of TJ's worst habits.

Captain Fanger was at the helm and barking orders to the others. TJ sat in the adjacent chair watching. They had entered the channel under sail and were now motoring between Tank Island and Key West. Since they were going to be here a while and needed to on-load fuel and supplies, they were heading toward a berth at Key

West Bight Marina at the foot of William Street. That was less than three blocks from Trevor House, TJ's inn and restaurant.

Mrs. G walked up and put her hand on TJ's shoulder. He turned, lifted his coffee cup in salute and smiled. Pointing off to the starboard – right – of the boat, TJ pointed out the famous Mallory Square which was totally deserted at this time of the morning. Even though, as Amanda loved to say, in the open sea L'Esprit Libre could 'turn on a dime and give you nine-cents change', this situation was different. There was lots of boat traffic – mostly fishing boats heading out to sea – with buoys and markers seemingly everywhere.

What made the L'Esprit Libre such a phenomenal sailing vessel in open waters was a hindrance in close quarters. The twin hulls didn't allow for as sharp a turn as a single hull vessel could make. Nevertheless by the time that Lydia, Brad and Amanda had the sails down and stowed, Captain Fanger was pulling up to their berth. Skillfully he put the starboard bow close to the dock and reversed the powerful engines. The boat seemed to be suspended long enough for Brad to jump from the boat to the dock with a bow line. Soon the L'Esprit Libre was tied fast.

Brad disappeared down the dock and soon returned with an oversized golf cart for their luggage and other items to go ashore. Everyone talked excitedly as he took the golf cart on ahead and the rest followed on foot. Mrs. G had been to Key West on several occasions, but for some reason it looked different walking down the relatively deserted famous Caroline Street with a group of sailors and trying to get her land-legs. She could imagine how the sailors and privateers of old must have felt arriving home after weeks at sea. TJ and his crew were definitely excited even as much as they loved their travels.

Just a bit past halfway between Elizabeth and Simonton Streets TJ turned to his right and held out his arms.

“Trevor House,” he exclaimed with a broad smile.

Before them, sitting well back from the street, was one of Key West’s fine old homes. It was a white, three-story house with railed balconies on the first two levels and green shutters on all the windows. It was surrounded by stately old Live Oak trees that partially hid and complete shaded the house. Cecelia stood in awe, which was not lost on TJ. He grinned with pride.

The day staff was just beginning their chores when TJ and the others arrived. The inn staff all had to crowd around and ask about their trip and where they had been. As the staff returned to work, and the Fangers, Brad and Lydia headed toward their homes, TJ gave Cecelia the grand tour ending up in his suite on the third floor which was little more than a converted loft. Nevertheless, it was eloquent. Mrs. G. would have never suspected that it was TJ’s room or that he had done the decoration.

It was a bright room, done in white and yellow. The furniture was 18th. century period with a large four-poster bed dominating the bedroom, which was actually the largest and central room. The suite went from the front of the house to the back with the bedroom having a balcony which overlooked the back garden and the addition which had been built to provide additional rooms.

As Cecelia admired the room TJ came up behind her and put his arms around her. She turned to kiss him when there was a knock at the door. A staff member was at the door with Mrs. G’s luggage.

“Just leave it there, Randy,” TJ instructed. Randy did as instructed, smiled at Mrs. G, put his hand to his forehead as though tipping his hat, turned and left.

TJ looked at the luggage and then at Mrs. G. “Unless you don’t like the room?”

“It’s gorgeous!” exclaimed Cecelia, “but where are you going to sleep?”

TJ looked crestfallen. He hadn’t seen the twinkle in Cecelia’s eyes and she generally wasn’t much of a tease. Mrs. G thought he was going to cry. Quickly she went to him and gave him a kiss. He gently lifted her up and carried her to the bed where they made love as the city was waking up.



A light breeze kept the sheer curtains, pulled across the balcony door, in constant motion. TJ, with Mrs. G lying on his shoulder, lay under the soft Egyptian cotton sheet starrng off into space.

“And, you know,” TJ was saying, “this house was supposed to have been built on the foundation of the home of the Privateer Captain Damien Rey.”

“Who’s he?” Cecelia asked.

“He was a seventeenth century privateer with a letter of marque from the King of Spain when Key West was called Cayo Hueso.”

“Bone Island?” Mrs. G. wrinkled her nose.

“Yes. It was evidently littered with bones of earlier inhabitants when the Spanish settled here. I’m told that the English called it Key West because the Spanish word ‘hueso’ sounds like the English ‘west’.”

“I’ll have to admit that, based upon the meaning of the words, I like Key West better. But tell me more about Captain Rey.”

“He was evidently a very wealthy and successful privateer and family man. Stories say that he was quite a gentleman which seems contradictory to being a privateer. He supposedly built a home here for his wife and three children. The story is that he had raided an English salvage ship and was sunk by a British warship trying to get back to Key West.”

“Whatever happened to his family?”

“No one really knows but old-timers say that they were buried in a cemetery that was literally washed away by the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935.”

“And your inn is built on their home’s foundation?”

“So the story goes,” TJ smiled.

“Have you every explored it?”

“Explored?”

“Explored, dug around, looked under the foundation?”

“No,” said TJ. “there’s a portion behind the wine cellar that is mostly collapsed and probably, at one time, had a well, but I’ve never done more than look in.”

“Oh, can we go explore it?” Mrs. G. was up on one elbow looking at TJ with excitement in her eyes. “Please!”

The two got dressed and headed to the wine cellar. In a far corner was what appeared like a hole in the wall but was, in fact, the remains of a doorway after the jambs and lintel were long gone. Only the sill remained to indicate that a door had indeed been there. Peering in with a flashlight, Mrs. G. could see a brick-lined hole in the floor that was probably the well. Despite TJ's discouragement, she went into the room.

"This is fascinating," exclaimed Cecelia. "Can you imagine the pirate's . . ."

"Privateer," TJ corrected.

". . . privateer's wife or children coming down here and drawing water?"

Before TJ could answer Mrs. G's attention was caught by another opening.

"There's another room here," she said.

"Or what's left of it," replied TJ. "Be careful."

Mrs. G just smiled as she poked her head inside the opening and shined her flashlight around. It was, as TJ said, mostly collapsed.

She wondered if the signs of shelves were from the Rey family or later occupants. She was about to ask TJ what he knew when her attention was caught by what appeared to be the corner of a tin box.

"Look," she said, shining her light on the object. "That looks like a tin box! A three-hundred-year-old tin box would really be neat! You'd be the star of the local historical society."

She started to climb into the small area but TJ stopped her. Her discovery had peaked his curiosity as well, but he wasn't going to

have Cecelia climbing into dangerous and partially collapsed rooms. Carefully he crawled into the room and retrieved a tin box.

TJ passed the box out to Mrs. G so that he would have both hands to make his way out. He could hear her gasp as he neared the opening.

“Look!” She was so excited that she could hardly stand still. TJ looked into the box now illuminated by Mrs. G’s flashlight. It was filled with papers and a leather-bound book.

“Wow!” TJ shared Cecelia’s excitement. “But let’s get it out of here so we can look at it in safety.”

They took their treasure to the wine cellar. Both were too excited to go any further. Putting it down on a table Mrs. G gently opened it. The contents were quite fragile and written in Spanish. One piece of paper was obviously Captain Rey’s Letter of Marque. There were also personal letters from the Captain to his wife. The book turned out to be a journal belonging to Captain Rey’s wife, Bonita.

Mrs. G took pictures of the documents with her smartphone so they did not have to disturb the fragile paper more than necessary. Excitedly they returned to TJ’s room where they put the pictures on his computer so they could more easily read the old Spanish print.



Captain Damien Rey had not only survived his capture but had documented it in letters sent to his wife, Bonita. Cecelia felt great empathy with Bonita Rey. She was a sailor’s wife who routinely watched her husband sail off to unknown

danger. They had both been left behind with the often-daunting task of maintaining a home and raising children alone. Bonita had been fortunate that her husband had survived, but how long had she waited in fear and apprehension for news? How many months did she wait, assuming that her husband was dead? Cecelia knew the dread and the fear and the anguish and the painful, sleepless nights. She began to cry as TJ read Bonita's diary out-loud and the letters she received from Damien.

"Dearest Bonita," Damien's first letter began, "By now I hope you know that I am alive and was captured by the British. I am in prison at Ft. Charles in Jamaica. They are not mistreating us but life is still hard. I have made friends with a native man who works in the prison. He will occasionally bring us extra food and made it possible for me to send you this letter."

"The Cuchilla is lost. We were about half way between Golden Island and Havana when the Red Lion caught us. I was running to Havana because I didn't want to lead a British warship to Cayo Hueso."

"Many of the crew died either during the battle or from wounds. Two men from home were among those who died. Juan Carlos Perez died in the battle with the Red Lion. Marcos Lopez died in my arms here in prison. They were good men and I feel responsible for their death. May Raphael never become a privateer or go to sea in the Caribbean. Please tell Juan and Marcos' families of their death so they will not be looking for them if we ever get released."

"There is talk of release, but there is also talk of sending us to Brimstone Hill on St. Kitt. If they move us there I'm afraid it is a sign that they have no inclination of letting us go."

“Please know that I love you very dearly and think of you constantly. Give my love to the children, and please discourage Raphael from seeking revenge. Help him find peace. I pray nightly for you and the children, and that we might see one another again on this earth. Your love gives me hope.”

“The man should never have been a pirate,” whispered Cecelia.

“Privateer,” TJ softly corrected.

“Whatever,” Cecelia spit the word. “People do horrible things to survive. Men do some even dumber and more horrible things in the name of honor. And no matter, it is always the woman who gets left behind to assure that the family survives.”

“Do I detect a rebuke?”

“Damn right!” Cecelia was struggling to maintain her composure. “Damn, damn, damn right! There was no good reason for Francois to be in the Middle East. It was all about greed and people with power sending young men off to die for their wealth, their power and their ego! Damien Rey should not have been a party to the ‘I steal from you. You steal from me. And we all steal from the natives.’ He was right. It was his fault. It was a stupid male decision justified by the ‘I did it for my family’ bull-shit.” Cecelia became quiet and stared out the window at the trees of the courtyard gently blowing in the ocean breeze. TJ knew there was nothing he could say. He knew that she was right. He knew that she still felt tremendous pain. He wanted to put his arms around her and comfort her, but he wasn’t sure that that was even the right thing to do. Perhaps just sitting and sharing her pain was all he could do.

After a while Cecelia said softly, “I know how Bonita must have felt. Damien could have fed his family by fishing these beautiful

waters. They had everything they needed right here. He didn't have to go off and fight for some other man's oil . . . I mean gold."

The reality of her bitterness was out. For all of the years since Francois' death she had been angry, and TJ could feel it. Her slip had, in one word, told a long and painful story. Francois had not died for his country. He had died because of his country's leader's greed. Yes, he had died as a hero, saving the lives of others, but there was no good reason, no convincing her, that any of those people should have been there in the first place. Bonita must have carried the same rage inside her.

Men, both TJ and Cecelia thought, would always do this. They would start wars or they would go off to wars and the death and destruction would be justified by religion or patriotism. Cecelia fought the hatred she so often felt welling up inside her, but even years later she hated religion and patriotism. Francois, to her, wasn't a patriot. He was a dead husband, a dead lover, a dead father who would no longer hold and love her; who would no longer hold his children, and who would never see his grandchild. And for what!? She and Bonita both understood how a woman could unconditionally love and, at the same time, curse their men.

TJ had given Cecelia both space and time. Quietly he continued to read Bonita's diary.

When Cecelia sat back and withdrew her gaze from the window, he said, "I can't even imagine your pain." He leaned over and gently kissed her. It was an 'I'm-here-for-you' kiss.

Cecelia looked up and smiled. The letters and memories had dragged her through the nightmare of memory with which she had learned to live.

“What else is in her diary?” she asked.

“It was undoubtedly good that they were here and not in Spain,” TJ answered. “They were able to live relatively comfortably. They had a good garden and the eldest boy, Raphael, was evidently a good fisherman. The community was very small and close-knit.”

“How did he get home?”

“His one letter says that there was talk of sending some of them to England. Probably a political move or to scare other privateers. Then Bonita’s diary tells how a small caravel sailed into the harbor one day with Damien and Eduardo Mendez, another man from Cayo Hueso.”



The story goes that the native who had been sneaking food to Damien and the others got a key to the shackles and gave it to Damien just before they were loaded onto a ship for St. Kitt.

Damien waited until the ship was moving to unlock all of the shackles. Seventeenth century sailing ships couldn’t just stop anywhere. The prisoners broke out of the hold and jumped overboard.

Muskets are notoriously inaccurate but if you have enough of them firing at the same general location they’re bound to hit something.

A number of the prisoners were hit by several barrage of musket fire from the Royal Marines on board.

Eduardo and Damien stayed close to the ship instead of trying to swim away. They were right under the Marines but went undetected because all of the men swimming away provided targets. The two men stayed up against the ship as it moved past them leaving them bobbing in the wake. The warship had continued on its course probably glad to be rid of the prisoners who went overboard. Shooting them in the water was a lot easier than feeding and guarding them.

Since the seventeenth century ships sailed with the tides, it was hard work swimming to land about a thousand yards away. Once they were safe on shore the two men lay down in the sun and soon fell asleep. It was the best sleep Damien had had since he was captured.

Port Royal, Jamaica was not only the port and garrison for the British Royal Navy but the most wide-open, lawless pirate town in the Caribbean. Every block had at least one bar and brothel. Because of its character the only way Damien and Eduardo would get caught was if someone from the fort happened to see them and get soldiers there before they could disappear. The chances of that happening were quite remote.

It was a long hike from the beach where they came ashore to Port Royal even though they could see it across the channel. When they arrived they walked along the quay. Damien didn't want to steal some's boat because that would be stealing their livelihood. Damien didn't really know what to do until he saw a small caravel tied to the quay. A caravel is a small fast Spanish or Portuguese sail boat. They were designed for speed and maneuverability.

“That sure isn’t English,” said Damien.

“Maybe someone uses it for fishing?” Eduardo offered.

“I don’t see any signs of fishing,” Damien noted.

Damien stepped into a nearby pub. Publicans always know what’s going on. The publican told him that the Navy had towed it in and hauled the master and his mates off to Ft. Charles.

“We’re going to steal it, aren’t we?” asked Eduardo.

“What do you think the chances of that poor bugger ever getting it back from the British?”

“Next to none,” Eduardo stated the obvious.

“Besides,” Damien said off-handedly as he was looking for a way to get to the boat, “I still have a letter of Marque. I’m just doing my job. Right?”

There was only one Marine standing watch. Damien really wondered why the British bothered, but it didn’t matter. The Marine was there. He tried to lure the Marine away where they could bushwhack him but he wouldn’t leave his post.

Just down the quay was the privateer brig, Sea Horse. Damien saw a group of men hanging out nearby. The odds were good that some, or all of them, would be from the Sea Horse.

Damien moved toward the group and started laughing. As the men stopped to look at Damien, he said, “Do you know what that stupid Marine just said?”

“No, what?” asked one of the men.

“He said that the crew of the Sea Horse fight like girls and that he could take any four of them with one hand tied behind his back.”

Damien paused for effect and noticed the men looking toward the Marine. “Boy is he going to be sorry when the Sea Horse crew hears that.”

Eduardo and Damien moved on a short distance and looked back. The group was moving toward the Marine.

“I think that, if he had a choice, he would have rather been bushwhacked by us.”

While the Marine was being shoved around by the crew of the Sea Horse, Damien and Eduardo slipped onto the caravel and pushed off.

Because of its design, the caravel was also excellent at sailing close to the wind; that is almost into the wind. The boat was a single mast with a triangular sail and a jib. Although it usually had a small crew, it was possible to sail this caravel with just two men.

Not only was there a land wind; that is wind blowing from the land to the sea, which is common at night; but the tide was going out. The light, sleek boat began to drift toward the channel and the open sea. As soon as they got a short distance away they hoisted the jib. It wouldn't be quite so obvious. It caught the land wind and soon they were slipping silently through the channel very near where they had jumped from the warship.

Once in the open sea they put up all the sail they could handle and headed around the east end of the island of Jamaica. Once they had an opportunity to relax they explored their new boat. There was a stash of Spanish gold in the small hold.

It was going to take about fifteen hours to cross from Jamaica to Cuba. The night was calm and clear with a full moon so the fugitives

decided to risk crossing at night. They should be close to Cuba by noon. From there they sailed along the northern shore of Cuba to San Carlos y San Severino de Matanzas; modern day Matanzas. It was a new settlement. That made it easier to trade gold for supplies. To be safe they sailed to a small remote bay between Matanzas and Havana where they could moor and rest for the night. They had another fifteen hours to get home to Cayo Hueso.

Once home, Eduardo and Damien divided the gold and vowed not to tell anyone about it. They agreed that they didn't want their story to somehow make its way back to a British port inviting a British privateer to visit Cayo Hueso. Eduardo used his share to buy a ship. He became a privateer. He died about ten or twelve years later in a gun battle with a British warship.

Damien used his share for his family and community. He ended up spending a bit after Eduardo's death to bribe a privateer to leave Cayo Hueso alone. Some was spent on luxury items from Spain like dishes and even furniture, but a lot was spent on buying fishing boats for Raphael and their son-in-law, Tomas.



Carefully replacing everything in the tin box, TJ put it in the inn's safe. Excited, and with their curiosity peaked, they headed off to L'Esprit Libre to look at charts.

Laying out the charts on the grand salon table TJ and Mrs. G plotted a course. According to Captain Rey's story he was just west of Gold

Cay heading west to home when they spotted the Red Lion. He then decided to run for Havana. The line of their plot went right across Cay Sal Bank, an area of the Caribbean that was much shallower than the rest. It was even shallow enough to dive without special equipment. Rey had said that he was almost half way to Havana when the Red Lion caught him. Half way along the course they plotted would put it right in the middle of the bank. Cay Sal Bank is an atoll of roughly triangular shape with the south side, facing Nicholas Channel, being 105 kilometers and the two sides being 66 kilometers each. There are islets along all but the southern side where there are only numerous rocky coral heads. Cal Sal Bank is the second largest atolls in the world with actual land area, second only to Great Chagos Bank. There are ninety-six cays in Cay Sal Bank with the average lagoon depth being only 30 to 60 feet.

The two stood looking at the chart and then at each other.

“Do you think that it could be possible that the Cuchilla is that shallow and hasn’t been found?” asked Mrs. G.

“You wouldn’t think so,” replied TJ, “but no one has had any idea where to look for her so they’d have had to just stumble on the wreck.”

“Could someone have found her without knowing it was the Cuchilla?”

“I guess that’s possible,” said TJ still studying the map.

“Then again,” Cecelia continued, “she could still be there.”

“Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking?” TJ may be slow about some things related to women, but he had known Cecelia long enough to know her look of excitement.

“It would be fun even if we didn’t find the Cuchilla.”

“Where are you going to find a treasure hunting boat?” TJ teased.

Mrs. G stepped close to TJ, put her leg between his legs, pushed her thigh tightly against him and, moving in a most erotic and sensual way, said, “I know this really sweet, filthy rich, playboy . . .”

TJ really didn’t hear what she said. He was totally caught off guard by what she did and he was still reacting to her thigh moving against his groin. “Keep doing that and you might not get off this boat any time soon.”

However, Mrs. G was now feeling a bit embarrassed that she had even thought of seducing TJ into using his boat to go treasure hunting. She stepped back.

“I’m so sorry,” she apologized. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why not?” asked TJ seriously wishing that she hadn’t moved. “I thought it was quite nice,” he smiled sheepishly.

“I’m not talking about that,” said Cecelia. “I’m talking about trying to get you to go treasure hunting.”

“It really does sound like fun,” TJ smiled. “Even if the Cuchilla isn’t there we’d have some excitement and some great diving.”

“Then you want to do it?”

TJ looked at the excited freckled face whose hazel eyes told him that she was about to burst with excitement and anticipation. There was no way he was going to say ‘no’. He would do anything for that look.

“Sure,” said TJ. “But only if you do that leg thing again.”

Mrs. G gave him a playful shove. “I’m serious.”

“I am too,” TJ replied. “That map really makes it tempting. It would be something different and exciting. But we need to see if the others will go along.”



That evening TJ had the crew over for dinner in the garden. He and Mrs. G told them about the letter, the diary and showed them the course they charted.

“I know you guys are due some time off,” TJ started to say.

“That sounds awesome!” exclaimed Amanda.

“Sorry,” said TJ, “only your parents have a vote on this one.” Amanda sat back in a pout but her father came to her aide.

“I’ve never been on a real treasure hunt,” Captain Fanger said, “it could be neat.”

Lillian was also enthralled with the idea but, even if she hadn’t been, she knew the look on her husband’s face. “We don’t have anything planned. Why not?”

Amanda Fanger almost jumped out of her seat.

Lydia and Brad were hooked before TJ and Mrs. G ever got to the part about looking for the sunken ship. “Count us in,” they said in unison.

As they excitedly talked about what they needed to do to prepare for such an adventure, a Honda Civic with its drink holders filled with

coffee cups, front floor littered with McDonald's bags and smelling like cigarettes, was crossing Stork Island. Caesar Reyez was in town.



Mel Fisher's Maritime Heritage Museum, Key West, FL.

If they knew nothing else about treasure hunting, the new treasure hunters knew that it took a lot of planning and they would need some help.

The next morning TJ and Mrs. G headed to Mel Fisher's Maritime Heritage Museum. There, if anywhere, they should be able to research the process of treasure hunting. Mel Fisher, originally from Indiana and a one-time chicken farmer, discovered the wreck of the Spanish galleon *Nuestra Senora de Atocha* with an estimated \$450 million cache in twenty-two feet of water.

Little did they know, as they talked to a local treasure hunter named Charlie Blackman, that the large, over-weight man with the scraggly

beard was very interested and listening intently. He was there when they first spoke to Charlie and he was there again when they walked down to Captain Tony's saloon to talk over a beer.

"So, now where do you think this wreck is?" asked Charlie after they found a booth and ordered a beer.

"Sorry, Charlie," TJ laughed. "I'll pay you for consultation, with a bonus if we find anything, but I can't tell you where we're going. I don't want to get there and find a traffic jam."

Charlie laughed good naturedly. "Your boat's faster than mine anyway. How about 5%?"

"Come on, Charlie, even I know about the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage. At 5% you'd probably get more than us."

Again Charlie laughed good naturedly. "What are you offering?"
"How about 50% of whatever I personally realize from a find?"

"Whoa! And what might that be?"

"I'm going to get one-sixth of whatever we net. That means you'd get about six and a quarter percent of the net – not the gross find."

"Hey, that's better than nothing," smiled Charlie. "Would I get some credits?"

"You'd definitely be mentioned as our principal consultant and I'm sure there'd be plenty of work, museum and book possibilities as well."

"Sounds like a deal to me." Charlie extended his hand and the two men shook.

Charlie went on to give TJ and Mrs. G a list of things they were going to need and began their treasure hunter education.



A little more than two weeks later the ‘Cuchilla Expedition’, as the group had started calling it, had everything ready.

According to Rey he had attacked the British merchant, Peter Bonaventure. It had off-loaded slaves and was heading home with a load of Spanish treasure that a British privateer had taken from a Spanish ship just a month earlier. He had boarded her just north-east of Nassau and set a course for home. He was just passing Gold Cay, North Andros - the western most point of the Bahamas - when he spotted the Red Lion. That's when he made the decision that he would be safer running to Havana than to Cayo Hueso. He had thought that he had enough lead on the Red Lion that he could outrun her. He had said that they were over thirty-six leagues west when the Red Lion caught up.

A league is the distance that an average male could see standing at sea level which works out to about 3 miles. Marking off thirty-six leagues on their line from Gold Cay to Havana they arrived at the coordinates. That is where they needed to start.

A friend tossed Brad the bow line as Captain Fanger skillfully backed the L'Esprit Libre from its berth, turned and headed toward the open sea. The anticipation was electrical as they passed between

Key West and Tank Island. Lydia and Brad stood at their stations awaiting the magic words 'hoist the mainsail.' They were just passing the entrance to the cruise ship harbor when Captain Fanger checked the wind direction and gave the order. Lydia and Brad jumped into action and the band of treasure hunters gave a cheer.

With the prevailing winds in the Strait of Florida, Captain Fanger planned to run southwest for a short distance so that they could make a tack and pass the point at Ft. Zachary Taylor with plenty of room to spare.

The adventure had begun.

Shortly after they sailed a sleek yellow and black Fountain 47 Lightning was seen slowly heading toward the Caribbean.





During the same two weeks that the Cuchilla Expedition was preparing to sail, Caesar Reyez was doing preparation of his own. His, however, consisted of finding some way to follow TJ to the treasure and take it away from him.

Reyez had followed TJ and Mrs. G from talking with Charlie Blackman to Trevor House. Asking questions around the marina, he had learned about TJ's boat, L'Esprit Libre, as well as his owning Trevor House. This meant that TJ already had the means of searching for the Cuchilla.

Caesar's first plan was to hire on as a crew member and then take over once the Cuchilla was found.

He waited for TJ outside the Trevor House and followed him. When he thought it was an opportune time, he approached TJ and Mrs. G as they were having lunch on the beach with Charlie Blackman.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Royer, but my name is Jimmy Brown."

"Hello, Jimmy," TJ replied amiably. "What can I do for you?"

“I need a job, Mr. Royer,” said Caesar.

“Oh,” said TJ, “I’m not the one you need to talk to. Dustin Lewis is my manager. He handles all the hiring.”

“Thank you, but I’m looking for a sailing job, and I understand that you have a catamaran named L'Esprit Libre. I was hoping to get a job sailing for you.”

“Again,” TJ smiled, “I’m not the one who does the hiring, but we do have a full complement and we’re very pleased with them.”

Caesar could feel his anger rising. At the same time, he knew that he had to keep his cool. He didn’t dare get into trouble or attract attention.

“I’m really desperate, Mr. Royer,” Caesar insisted. “If I don’t find work soon I’m going to be on the street.”

“In that case let me give you some names of good people who are hiring.” Mrs. G had a tablet in her purse and handed it to TJ who wrote down three names. “If you have the credentials and can pass muster, I’m sure one of these three boats will hire you.”

It was a bust. Caesar worked hard to keep a smile. He hadn’t thought about needing any sort of credentials. What type of credentials, he wondered, would you need to work on a boat?

“Thank you, sir,” Caesar said through clenched teeth.

How, he wondered, could he follow this man to the Cuchilla? He would need a boat. But he knew nothing about boats even if he could steal one.

After working very hard to contain his anger and think things through, Reyez remembered a friend he had made in prison some

years before who might know of someone nearby who would be interested in the caper. He would have to take the risk. Not only was it a risk to call his old prison friend but he would have to share the riches of Cuchilla with another person.

It took a couple of days, but Reyez tracked down Larry Grosner, his one-time prison friend, and gave him a call.

“Hey, man,” Grosner had said, “I’m still on parole. I could go back to prison just by talking to you.”

“No one will know we just talked,” insisted Reyez.

“What do you want?”

“I need someone who has a boat to help with a job in Key West.”

“Hey, man,” said Grosner, “I’m trying to go straight.”

“Of course you are,” Reyez had a devilish smile as he spoke. This was the leverage he needed and he was going to be able to do it without having to take on another partner. “I’m your friend, and I want to help you, so when you confess a name I’ll forget what I know about that job in East Lansing where the night guard got killed.”

“Awe, come on, Caesar,” Grosner pleaded. “I’ve got a wife and a kid. Don’t do this to me!”

“You know, Larry, they say that confession is good for the soul.”

“Okay! Okay!” begged the exasperated Grosner. “There’s a guy named Peter Columba I met in the Florida pen. He was in for smuggling and bragged that he was going to have the fastest boat on the water.

I don't know where he is or if he's still in business. That's the best I can do."

"That's good, Larry," Reyez said with a smile. "Now that wasn't so hard, was it?"

"Just please, leave me out of it."

"Sure, Larry. Sure. And you just forget that we've ever spoken or my very sensitive conscience will mandate that I remember all about East Lansing."

It didn't take long to track down Peter Columba. He had a speed boat shop on Windley Key between Key West and Key Largo and Caesar Reyez showed up at the shop a few days later.

Peter Columba was a small-time smuggler with an extremely fast go-boat. His boat shop was a front for smuggling drugs and any contraband that would fit in his boat. He had successfully stayed below the radar since his time at Florida Correctional.

"Mr. Columba," Caesar Reyez said with a smile, "a mutual friend of ours, Mr. Grosner, gave me your name."

"I don't think I know a Mr. Grosner," Columba returned Reyez's smile. "Did he buy a boat from me?"

"No," Caesar's smile vanished, "he did time in the Florida pen with you, and from what I understand you're still being a bad boy." Caesar didn't really know if Columba was still smuggling, but he'd know soon by Columba's reaction.

The response was instantaneous and told Caesar that Columba was still a smuggler.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," insisted Columba.

“Okay. Okay,” replied Caesar. “I believe you, but if you were a bit of a pirate, would you be interested in some really good booty?”

“I’m sure a real pirate would be interested in almost any booty?” Columba was more comfortable speaking hypothetically. “But I’m not a real pirate, so . . .”

“Of course, you’re not,” Caesar again smiled, “but a real pirate might do almost anything for a percentage of several million dollars, don’t you think?”

“I’m sure almost anyone would.” Columba was getting interested. “What type of piracy are you talking about?”

“Oh, the relative of Captain Damien Rey is looking for a boat and crew to take back what is rightfully his.”

“I see,” said Columba, “and what might that entail”

“A fast boat, tight-lipped crew, and the ability to hijack a treasure hunter.”

“Hijack a treasure hunter?”

“Yes, there is a treasure hunter in Key West who knows the location of Captain Rey’s ship. All Captain Rey’s relative wants to do is follow them and take what is rightfully his.”

“Is that all?!” Columba said sarcastically.

“It would be worth unknown millions of dollars.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?” Caesar said absolutely without expression.

Peter Columba, small-time smuggler and drug runner, wasn't too sure about hijacking a treasure hunt. The money sounded good but it could get messy. Besides, the penalty for smuggling drugs and other contraband wasn't nearly as severe as piracy, kidnapping and possibly murder.

Caesar Reyez was losing his patients and tired of the hypothetical word game.

"I'm the rightful heir to Captain Damien Rey's ship, Cuchilla, and all her treasure."

"Still but . . ."

"The Cuchilla is probably worth over one-hundred million dollars. How many smuggling trips would it take for you to make half of one-hundred million dollars?"

"Well over 100 trips."

"And your chances of getting caught would increase with each trip. Right?"

"Yeah, but if I get caught I'm not facing life in prison or worse."

"You're not going to get caught."

"Easy for you to say. Besides, what if they don't find the Cuchilla?"

"The guy who is leading the expedition has a fabulous catamaran. His boat alone must be worth millions! That's not a bad consolation prize."

"Okay. But if I agree I won't do it for less than 60%. I would have a lot bigger investment and risk."

Caesar paused and thought about that for some time. "Okay. 60-40. But I get the Cuchilla after we sell the treasure."

Now it was Columba's turn to ponder. He had always thought of himself as a rather harmless, lovable smuggler. The move from harmless, lovable smuggler to pirate was a big one. Until now he could justify his illegal activity as a 'victimless' crime. Being a pirate would mean that there would be victims.

"Come on, Columba," said Caesar. "You don't want to be working for those cartels all your life - taking all the risk and getting only pennies on the dollar."

That was a good point, thought Columba. And if he ever lost anything he was smuggling he knew that the cartel would definitely take it out of his hide.

"Yeah, but . . .," Columba was still struggling.

"Yeah, but what?"

"You're talking about hurting or killing people."

"Oh, come on, your pansy waist. Are you fuckin' Mother Theresa?"

"No, but I'm no killer either."

"If anyone has to be killed, I'll do it and you can pretend you tried to stop me."

"Like that will make much difference in court."

"Oh, for pity sake. You know you want to do it, and I need a boat. I'll give you 70%. You can give the extra 10% to charity." Caesar would probably have just killed Columba and taken his boat if it hadn't been for the fact that he knew nothing about boats and he'd have to find a crew.

Peter Columba, despite his desire to be seen as a harmless, lovable smuggler, was in reality a ruthless man. He didn't really care about

the people he might hurt. He just cared about what would happen if he got caught because he was, in fact, a ruthless coward. Now he was looking at 70% of millions of dollars. If they scored big, he would have enough to buy his own island and not have to worry about anything.

"Okay, you've got a deal. 70-30."

Columba had a good crew and a fast boat. His go-boat, shamelessly named the Beatsurbutt, was a modified Fountain 47 Lightning. It was 47'3" long with a 9' beam and a draft of only 38 inches with the motors in the water. The motors were two Mercury 850 horse power engines that, in an unmodified Fountain, can exceed 116 knots per hour. With the modifications Columba made they still pushed the go-boat at a top speed of 93 knots per hour. That's about 80 miles per hour across water. The unmodified 47 carried 340 gallons of fuel giving it a cruising range of 322 miles at 90% capacity. Columba had added a 100-gallon tank. The extra weight cost him five percent of the 47's original top speed, but it was worth it. This modification increased his cruising range to 429 nautical miles at top speed and 1500 nautical miles at 35 knots per hour. With this capacity they could go anywhere in the Caribbean on a single tank.

What really brought the Beatsurbutt's top speed down to 80 miles per hour were the modifications Columba had made to the interior. Go-boats are designed for racing, so normally there would be just a small cockpit for the crew. Columba had used the hollow area within the hull to provide a small cabin capable of sleeping a crew of four. A panel could be inserted, which gave the appearance of a wall, permitting a hiding place for cargo.

At thirty-five knots per hour Beatsurbutt could catch almost anything in the water except another go-fast boat. When he gave it the gas, there were a slim few boats who could keep up. However, he did know that the Coast Guard had some modified Fountains of their own that could do 90 miles per hour fully loaded with armament and the military personnel to use it.

Columba generally had only two crew members. Buddy Walters had grown up on the ocean and started racing boats when he was a teenager. He was a superb mechanic when he was clean and sober. Drug use is how he got recruited by Columba. Columba saved him from the dealers. He had actually kicked the habit but liked the money he made maintaining the smuggler's engines and really loved it when they had to do things like run the Straits of Florida at top speed. He was also an accomplished diver and would retrieve contraband either dumped or hidden underwater.

Neville 'Tinman' Dupuch knew nothing about boats and the ocean when he first started working for Columba. He was Columba's strongarm and body guard. He got the nickname 'Tinman' because he was heartless. He had become a good 'go-fast' driver so Columba didn't need to hire a third person as a backup driver.

Peter Columba had grown up in northern Florida where his youth had centered around fast cars and fast women. By the time he was eighteen he was the undisputed king of street drag racers and made the famous television Dukes of Hazard look like novices. He joined the Navy to avoid some possible legal problems and became a highly skilled diver. After the Navy, Columba combined his love of speed and the sea in boat racing. He became a go-boat driver for a lower echelon mob boss who used the racers as cover for picking up drugs off-shore and avoiding the Coast Guard. Columba would take the

racer a couple of miles off shore where drugs had been dropped in water no deeper than one-hundred to a hundred and twenty feet. He would dive down, retrieve the drugs and put them in a special false bottom that was only accessible from under the boat. Then he would wait for night when he would fly past the Coast Guard ships and boats. If they did find him on their radar, he would disappear in a marina filled with boats. On the rare occasion that they actually searched the boat, they found nothing.

The mobster got careless and got caught. Columba took off with the go-boat before the police could seize it. It still had a stash of drugs in the secret hold. He went to Miami where he sold the drugs. He barely had time to stash the money when he was caught and did time for being the mob boss' driver. When he got out he moved to Windley Key and made a living taking divers out to the reefs. He was smart enough to wait a while before getting the drug money and buying the Beatsurbutt. He started to freelance as a smuggler, and the rest is history.



Caesar was concerned about following L'Esprit Libre without being spotted.

"We don't have to worry about that," Columba laughed. "We can follow them on what is called AIS and just sit back and wait. We'll let them waste fuel searching and we'll swoop in for the take."

Caesar was coming to the conclusion that Columba was definitely going to earn his share.

AIS, Columba explained, is a system that ships use as a safety system. It broadcasts their identification, course, speed, destination, estimated time of arrival and ships dimensions. A part of the global maritime safety system, since 2004 all ships over 400 tons are required to have an AIS. With an inexpensive radio scanner turned to either 161.975 or 162.0025 MHz and ShipPlotter software, anyone can easily find a ship and get its information.

“But his cat isn’t any four hundred tons,” objected Caesar.

“Doesn’t matter,” Columba smiled. “AIS is now integrated into modern radar systems. If his boat is relatively new, it will have the integrated radar. Even if it doesn’t have AIS installed, she can be tracked when she turns on her radar.”

“Doesn’t the same thing work for your boat?” Caesar looked concerned. “Can’t the Coast Guard just track us by our radar.”

“They could if I hadn’t thought about it.” Columba swelled with pride. “Beatsurbutt has AIS and two radar systems. I can disable the AIS and the modern AIS integrated radar and use an old non-integrated radar system. I have a scanner and the software so that I can track other ships while being invisible.”

It wasn’t easy to impress Caesar Reyez, but he was sufficiently impressed by Peter Columba and Beatsurbutt.

With the cargo hold filled with supplies and 440 gallons of fuel, the Beatsurbutt sat in a berth near L’Esprit Libre and waited for the catamaran to sail.

Caesar watched as L’Esprit Libre disappeared over the horizon. Moments later Beatsurbutt’s two Mercury 850 horse power motors

roared and the go-boat began to move like a barracuda after its prey.
This was going to be fun, Caesar thought.



As Columba followed the L'Esprit Libre's AIS signal well out of sight, TJ, Mrs G and the crew of L'Esprit Libre sailed happily toward the coordinates they had calculated totally unaware of the danger close behind. As they sailed they talked excitedly about what they expected it to be like to be the first to see the Cuchilla in over 300 years.

With all hands on the fly deck, Captain Fanger turned from the navigation console and called, "everyone look alive, we're coming up on the coordinates."

The boat came to life. Quickly Lydia pulled in the jib. Captain Fanger had the mainsail lowered and used the diesel engines to place the L'Esprit Libre exactly on the spot.

"It's less than 100 feet deep here," Captain Fanger called to TJ.

"Anything on sonar?" asked TJ.

“Naw,” said the Captain, “but I didn’t expect to see anything even if it’s down there.” He paused as he looked closely at the screen in front of him. “it’s probably so buried in silt that there’s no way it would be picked up by sonar.”

Captain Fanger dropped the anchor and the others stowed the sails. TJ and Mrs. G went to the grand salon where they laid the charts out on the table.

As the others gathered around TJ went over their dive plan.

“Okay, gang,” he said, “as expected there’s nothing on sonar. We’re going to have to go look for ourselves.” The others nodded understanding. “It’s under 100 feet here, so we can use Nitrox 32.” Again agreement.

TJ went on to set up dive teams. Each team would have a pie shaped area to search with the tip of the pie at the anchor/dive line. If they found anything they would plant a marker, take a compass reading to the dive-line, return to the line and shake the rattle each carried to get the other diver’s attention. Everyone was to start back to the safety stop mark before they hit 800 psi. Team members were to stay close together. There was no rush. Diving was to be by the books. They could easily do two or three dives a day.

The water was warm and was phenomenally clear. Visibility was outstanding. The ocean floor was flat and sandy with very few features so that teams were easily able to cover large areas each dive. By the end of dive day two the dives were becoming a bit monotonous.



It was, in fact, dive day three when Brad noticed an anomaly in the sea floor. In fresh water diving one can actually see the thermocline. Most people don't realize that water temperatures don't change gradually. A thermocline is the place where two water temperatures collide. In fresh water that usually means that the warmer water is on top of the cooler water. The thermocline actually shimmers. This phenomena isn't as obvious in salt water, but what Brad was seeing appeared to be a thermocline on the sea floor at about 70 feet.

He approached cautiously. His instincts, from many years of diving, told him that this wasn't a normal situation. Hovering over the anomaly, Brad carefully reached out and touched the shimmering water. As with a freshwater thermocline his hand passed through the water. But in this instance it also appeared to pass through the sand. Brad attempted to grab some sand below the anomaly but he couldn't. He was so intent upon the anomaly below him that he didn't notice his fins coming close to the sea floor behind him. When one of his fins touched it not only sent up sand where it touched, but what appeared to be sand under the anomaly was identically disturbed. Once Brad noticed he experimented. He touched the anomaly with no sense of touching the sandy floor of the ocean. When he touched the sea floor outside the anomaly there was always an identical disturbance under the anomaly.

Brad found this not only curious but a bit unnerving. He had thousands of dives under his belt, but he had never seen anything like this.

He picked up a piece of rock and dropped it on the anomaly. It didn't stop on the sea floor. It disappeared. Instinctively he moved away. This, he thought, could only be a cave or a type of blue hole.

He knew that the collision of fresh and salt water has a chemical reaction. Perhaps that was what was causing the anomaly.

Lydia, who was his dive buddy, saw Brad's curious behavior. When she approached he warned her not to go near the anomaly. Again he threw a rock into the anomaly. Again the rock disappeared. Lydia looked at Brad and held her hands by her side with palms out – the universal sign 'I don't know.' They decided to surface. The other teams saw them and followed.

“What's wrong?” asked TJ. They hadn't been down twenty minutes.

“There's a strange anomaly down there that rather freaked me out,” Brad responded.

“Strange anomaly?”

“Yes,” Brad continued. “It looked like a freshwater thermocline but there was no sea floor under it. When I threw a rock on it, the rock disappeared.”

“Yeah,” Lydia confirmed. “I saw him do it. It was weird.”

“I wonder if it's something like a blue hole and the anomaly is the chemical reaction of salt and fresh water in front of a cave.”

“Guess that could happen,” Captain Fanger joined in. “Never heard of anything like that, but . . .”

“How big was it?” asked TJ.

“I don't know,” said Brad.

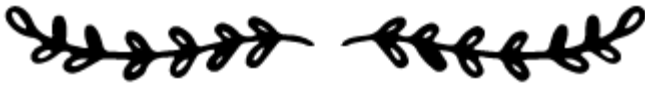
“Was it big enough for a 400 ton boat?”

“I don't know,” Brad said with emphasis this time. “I was too freaked out.”

Captain Fanger looked at TJ, “You don't freak out a diver like Brad with just anything out of the ordinary.”

“Sounds like we need to investigate,” said TJ. “We haven't found anything anywhere else.”

The group agreed. If nothing else it gave them a short respite from the drudgery of criss-crossing the ocean floor.



The next day Brad, Lydia, TJ and Mrs. G went to explore the anomaly. This time they went prepared. They didn't dive with nitrox so they could easily and safely switch and share cylinders. They took cave diving equipment and dove with doubles – two air cylinders linked together. Further, each one carried a pony tank as a bail-out.

The first thing they did when they arrived was to measure the anomaly. The Cuchilla was 97 feet long with a beam of about 20 feet and would have been almost 200 feet high to the top of the mast. The anomaly was a circle with a diameter of at least seventy-five to eighty feet. If the Cuchilla had gone down bow first, she would have fit into the hole without her masts.

TJ and Mrs G started probing the anomaly with a weight on the end of a cave line. While they were doing that Lydia and Brad started along the circumference of the hole looking for any evidence that the Cuchilla might have gone into the hole.

TJ and Mrs G were puzzled. They let out less than twenty feet of line. The Cuchilla was 97 feet long. If it was below the anomaly and

the hole was less than twenty feet deep, most of the ship should be sticking out. Mrs G was shaking her head in disappointment when they heard Lydia's rattle. She was waving as frantically as one can wave under water.

As TJ and Mrs G approached, Brad and Lydia were clearing away silt from what appeared to be a debris field. There were pieces of what could be a mast, but the irrefutable evidence was the remains of a metal band that would have encircled a ship's mast and several metal pieces that were clearly from the rigging. They were on the southwest point of the circle. The Cuchilla had been heading southwest. These could be what was left of her masts. But if the hole below the anomaly was less than 20 feet deep then where was the rest of the ship?

TJ looked at his air gauge and dive computer and gave the signal to ascend.

On board the four excitedly told the others about their find. Although a coincidence almost beyond belief, the Cuchilla could have gone bow first through the hole leaving her masts and rigging on the side. What they couldn't account for was the shallowness of the hole.

Could it have filled with silt and debris over the years. The only way to answer their questions was to dive through the anomaly.

“First,” said TJ, “we must make sure that the water is safe.

We'll go get some samples.”

TJ and Brad went for the samples. The water in the anomaly was no different than the water around it. This left only making plans and preparing to enter the anomaly.

Brad was the logical leader. He was a certified cave diver. TJ, although not certified in cave diving, insisted on being Brad's dive buddy. If someone who was not cave qualified was going to risk being Brad's partner, it was going to be him.

They settled on doubles with pony-tank back-ups. Brad gave TJ a crash course in caves, and the next morning; loaded down with line, lights and other safety equipment; they headed to the anomaly. Lydia and Mrs. G would be at the anomaly with two more full 80 cu. ft. cylinders and ready to pull them out by their line, if necessary. The first thing that TJ and Brad noticed, once inside the anomaly, was that there was light ahead. It looked like surface light. Looking back their cave lines disappeared into the sand. Then they realized that their bubbles were going down. At least that direction had been down when they entered the anomaly. Now their bubbles were going toward the light. The sand, through which their cave lines passed, looked like the anomaly they had entered. Then Brad looked at his dive computer. It said that they were in 24 feet of water. Brad pointed at his computer and signaled for them to return.

Brad and TJ returned through the anomaly and the four returned to the boat. Their experience was anything but normal. It was as though they had passed through the sea floor at 70 feet going down and were suddenly on the sea floor at 24 feet looking up. They had no explanation. It didn't make sense.

"I know it doesn't make sense," Brad insisted, "but there was nothing to indicate that we were in danger. We really need go back and check it out."

Everyone agreed. The four explorers headed back to the anomaly. This time, when they were on the other side and their dive computers

said they were in 24 feet of water, TJ dropped a weighted line through the anomaly. It went only a few feet and stopped. That wasn't possible. On the other side Lydia and Mrs G were waiting in 70 feet of water. But then again, weights don't float.

The water was relatively clear with no signs of obstacles or cave walls. Brad signaled for them to move toward the light. Their computers said they were ascending, so they did a safety stop when their computers told them. Five minutes later their world was turned upside down. They broke the surface in a lagoon. As they looked around there was the Cuchilla beached in shallow water.

“What the hell!” Brad exclaimed as they removed their masks.

“Where are we?”

“I haven't the foggiest,” replied TJ. “But there's the Cuchilla.”

“What do we do?”

“Let's go back and tell the others. Then we can come back with more supplies.”

The excitement and wonder aboard L'Esprit Libre was tremendous. They realize that everyone wanted and deserved to go explore the Cuchilla. They also realize that it was a calculated risk, but one they all decided to take. Securing the L'Esprit Libre was the first step. They didn't plan to be gone long, but it didn't take long to steal a boat. They decided that the best they could do was the same as they would do when docked at the marina. It was far from totally secure, but it would hopefully be sufficient.

Then they had to take time to figure out what supplies they needed to take. Since they had no idea where they were going to be, they decided that they needed to take air, food, water and protection.

Each diver would have a full 80 cu ft bailout cylinder with them and they would leave at least 3 additional tanks by the anchor. They packed a number of energy bars and other light-weight items that didn't require cooking. Each of them took a litre of water. These items were packed in water proof bags. Since buoyancy would be a problem, they decided to weight the bags and send them down the anchor line. Protection was an issue. Brad wanted to take a revolver. The Captain and TJ didn't want firearms. They finally compromised and let Brad put a small .22 caliber pistol in his dry-bag. They scrounged around the boat and came up with four super powerful pepper sprays also known as "bear spray".

"If these things can repulse a bear," said Captain Fanger holding up one of the canisters and checking the expiration date, "they'll definitely work on anything we might encounter."

"No disrespect, Captain," said Brad, "but I'd rather have fire power."

Mrs. G started to laugh. Brad, looking a bit perturbed asked,

"what's so funny about that?"

"I'm sorry," Mrs. G apologized, "but it made me think of a National Park Service Ranger who talked about just that and told a lot of funny bear stories. He worked at a national park out west. Way up in northwest Montana. He told about people who would say just what you said. He asked how many of them thought that they were a good enough shot to hit a zig-zagging bear traveling up to forty miles per hour when you're scared to death. And if you were lucky enough to hit them it had better be with a bullet the size of a small cannon or you're just going to annoy the bear. No, he was a back-country ranger and carried a small cannon but he said he'd still use bear spray. He knows that works."

“I still want my gun,” Brad said somewhat defiantly.

“That's fine,” said Captain Fanger. “You have your gun. We have our bear spray. And hopefully we'll have no reason to use either.”

“Amen to that,” said Lillian.

Several hours before their planned descent Brad and Lydia went to the anomaly. Capt Fanger put L'Esprit Libre right above them and lowered the anchor. Brad guided the slowly descending anchor to a position near the anomaly. They then sent down the dry bags, a second anchor and extra air cylinders along with two large lockers. Lydia and Brad put the dry bags in one locker and the cylinders in the other.

Once the supplies were in place the two attached two lines from cave spools to the anchor and left the spools near the edge of the anomaly. One of the spools was attached to a second small anchor that had been sent down. They looked at their work, decided that everything was ready, and surfaced.



When the time came for the dive the mood on L'Esprit Libre was excited anticipation muted by sombre concern for the unknown. They were all anxious to explore the Cuchilla, but there was still no explanation of the anomaly – what it was, where was it taking them. Their imaginations were untethered and their thoughts had a tendency to migrate toward the science fiction where they would encounter a world filled with prehistoric creatures.

Gathering around the two lockers the team each took their dry bags and went to the edge of the anomaly. They knew the drill. They had gone over it many times in their on-board rehearsals. Brad and TJ would enter the anomaly first with the small anchor and the cave line. Once on the other side Brad would place the anchor on solid ground, attach a dive marker line to it, and release the marker. Mrs G had a hold of the cave line that TJ took through. When Brad had

the anchor secured and the marker up, TJ would pull on the line to signal that it was okay to enter.

The rest of the team passed through the anomaly, one at a time, holding onto the cave line. Captain Fanger was the last one through. Once he arrived TJ led the way to the surface taking the cave line spool with him. This gave them two guides. They should be able to see the dive marker and find the way out. The second line was redundancy – a common practice among recreational divers and a necessity for cave divers.

The seven divers inflated their Buoyancy Compensators when they surfaced. The lagoon was little more than an oversized pool, no more than 100 yards across at any point. The water was a bit on the brackish side. There was one small beach where the Chucilla was beached. Other than that, the heavy jungle foliage grew to the water's edge giving the group a very closed-in feeling. The heat was excruciating making the water uncomfortable especially wearing diving gear and three-millimeter wet suits.

As they hung suspended in the water they stared with speechless wonder at the Cuchilla. After a long moment TJ led the way to the beach near the ship. As planned, the men exited the water first and stood scanning the beach and the jungle less than twenty yards away. The women stayed in shallow water. All of them kept their diving gear on so that they could retreat and submerge quickly, if necessary.

Brad opened his dry bag and pulled out his pistol while the Captain and TJ got out their pepper spray. Brad and TJ moved carefully toward the jungle. There was almost an eerie silence. Peering into the thick growth they decided that there was nothing in there and that it was safe, for the moment, to come ashore.

Captain Fanger, who had quickly switched to leadership mode, determined that he and Brad should reconnoiter the area around the lagoon. He had spotted what appeared to be a path entering the beach. The two men followed the path.

Both men had spent most of their lives living in the tropics but none of the foliage appeared at all familiar. There were low growing palms but they were not any recognizable variety. There were a number of large trees. Two of them resembled palm trees, but not the type usually found on a tropical island. One was much like the California Date Palm and there were signs of fruit. The other seemed to be a type of Pindo Palm. What struck Brad and the Captain as odd was that both of these were desert palms. One of the trees that you might expect on a jungle island was the Ficus family and was covered with Strangler Fig, a vine that would have to be considered a parasite because it lives off of host trees and eventually causes their death. There were some skeletons of Wimba trees, which indicated that this was, at one time, a lush rain-forest. Even though it was still hot there was little sense of humidity once one got away from the lagoon. A type of Kapok tree was also struggling to survive. Small fruit trees were seen near the water along with a large flat leaf plant with a large bulbous rhizome system that could be seen running just below the sand. All around these was contradictory foliage; desert and jungle. The only conclusion one could draw was that this was a place in transition.

A short distance from the beach the trail divided. Brad and the Captain went to their left. According to their compass they were heading southeast. The path was narrower and the jungle almost obscured it in places. What awaited them less than twenty yards from the intersection was startling. Even though they had found

evidence of people they weren't ready for what they encountered. In a very small clearing that was threatened by the jungle, there were three graves. Each grave was outlined by large stones with the area within the ring of stones being filled with gravel that was a mix of colors. The graves were not marked but it was logical from the sizes that there was probably an adult and two children. The graves were obviously visited frequently because the earth between the graves and jungle was well worn and the jungle had not overgrown the area.

Brad and the Captain stood silently looking for several minutes.

“Guess we'd better go back and check the other trail,” Captain Fanger finally broke the silence.

With one last glance back, the two men headed back to the intersection and took the path that led almost due west.

A couple hundred yards up the new path brought the men to the edge of the jungle. As they approached the edge of the jungle the foliage changed quickly and dramatically. First, they ran out of the larger trees and even the Pindo Palms were remarkably fewer in number, being replaced with small trees like Palo Verde and bushes like Cresote. These were plants one found in the desert, and there was good reason.

Ahead of them was wasteland. It reminded them of the Florida scrub ecosystem but not nearly as lush; if the term 'lush' could have ever been applied to the scrub areas of Florida. There were low bushes and a few plants scattered out from the jungle. This undergrowth became less and less dense the farther it was away from the jungle until there was almost nothing. In the distance in every direction they could see other areas with large trees and jungle.

Some of the areas appeared to be relatively large - perhaps two to three hundred yards across. Others were quite small.

As Brad scanned the scene before them with binoculars he suddenly stopped and held the binoculars away from his face.

“Oh, my God!” he exclaimed.

“What!” Captain Fanger strained to see what Brad was seeing without success. He took the binoculars from Brad's hands and looked through them.

“Where the hell are we?!” he said.

Through the binoculars the men saw the ruins of a city in the distance. It was large enough that there was what was left of a once extensive skyline. Tall slender, black towers stood like the skeletons of dead trees after a forest fire. Shells of buildings stood stark against the sky. With their binoculars they could see that many of them had begun to crumble, or perhaps were the victims of bombing and shelling. It was a skyline that both had seen all too often in the Middle East.

“I don't know, Captain,” replied Brad, “but it sure as hell isn't Kansas.”

“It's like we've . . . we've....” Captain Fanger was a military man. He was a realist. He believed in fact and evidence. He couldn't bring himself to say it.

“Like we've stepped into another world?” Brad finished his sentence. “Is that what you're trying to say, Sir?”

“It can't be!”

“That looks pretty damn real.”

The two spent some time walking in each direction from where the path to the lagoon met the wasteland. It didn't take long to realize that they were in an oasis like the ones they saw around them. Considering the distance to the lagoon and what they observed as they walked around their oasis, they calculated that it must be close to a half mile in diameter with the lagoon in the center. This was one of the larger of the oases.



While Captain Fanger and Brad were exploring, the others were checking out the Cuchilla and beach area.

The Cuchilla was sitting upright on the beach with its keel buried deep in the sand. It was as though it had been sitting in deeper water at one time and was now stranded high and dry. It appeared amazingly well preserved. As they drew near they saw a rope ladder hanging from the side. It wasn't the type of ladder one might have found on a 17th. century brigantine.

“Do you think there were survivors?” asked Amanda.

“No,” said Mrs. G, “that ladder isn't that old. There's someone living on this boat.”

“You're kidding me,” said Lydia.

“Not at all,” Lillian was not even looking at the ladder. She stepped to one side. “And they have a camp fire.” Just beyond her was a fire pit.

“Hello!” called Mrs. G. “Hello in there.”

There was no answer. TJ put the ring of his pepper-spray in his mouth so that he would have both hands free and began to ascend the ladder.

“Be careful,” Mrs. G called after him.

The four women stood watching as TJ disappeared into the ship, emerging a few moments later to exclaim, “there's no one here, but there has been.”

Soon all five of them were standing on the deck of the Cuchilla. After looking around and admiring their find, they decided that they needed to start taking pictures and making notes of the ship. They needed to catalog the contents of the ship. TJ got the job of keeping watch while the others explored. Lillian started taking pictures, studying and making notes on the area where people were living.

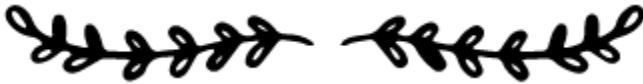
She found two areas that were padded with fresh foliage from the forest and covered with old, well-worn and patched blankets almost like a nest. It did seem that only one person slept in each of these nests. There were no signs of clothing but there were two boxes near one of the sleeping nests. One box contained a steel gorget; a piece of armor designed to protect the neck; and two small chains. Each was wrapped in a piece of fine linen. The second box contained a number of short lengths of a plant which resembled bamboo. Each one had a piece of cloth protruding from one end. Pulling on the cloth of one, Lillian discovered that they were filled with gunpowder, sand and small pebbles. These were primitive hand-

grenades. It was unlikely that they could kill anyone, but, with the sand and pebbles, they would inflict significant pain. Wrapped in a small piece of linen was flint and steel.

Lillian called to the others. “Hey, come look at this.” “What did you find?” TJ shouted from the deck above.

“At least two someones are living here,” she yelled, “and they're prepared to defend themselves.”

Amanda and Mrs G joined Lillian.



Standing watch on deck, TJ was trying to keep up with the conversation going on below deck while maintaining a watchful eye on the nearby jungle. Suddenly two figures were standing at the far end of the beach. TJ was surprised. When they had checked the perimeter they didn't see a path there, but there was a woman and a young girl standing like statues. The woman held a cutlass in her right hand, with her left hand held in front of the child as a signal to stop.

Keeping out of sight, TJ watched as the two stealthily moved toward the ship. The child was naked apart from a 17th century gold bracelet around her ankle. She was holding a crude spear. The woman, whom TJ guessed was the child's mother, had a strip of white material around her waist which appeared to serve more to cushion a large belt and scabbard than as a loin cloth. She wore no other clothing. She did, however, wear a beautiful 17th century gold and emerald

necklace and a black felt hat with large plume. Both of them carried cloth bags.

They were studying the pile of scuba equipment lying on the beach when Amanda, unaware of what was going on, came up behind TJ.

“What are you doing hiding?” she asked.

The woman and child turned and took a defense stance facing the ship. TJ realized that there was no longer any reason to hide. He stood up.

“It's okay,” he shouted. “I'm friendly.”

Amanda's mouth dropped open as she looked down at the woman and child who were now moving slowly toward the jungle ever keeping their weapons pointed at TJ.

“Please,” TJ pleaded, “don't leave. I won't hurt you.”

By this time Lillian and Mrs G had joined the other two on deck and were looking in amazement. The woman and girl continued to very slowly work their way toward the jungle as TJ continued to assure them that they were friendly.

With an almost imperceivable twitch of the woman's shoulder the two began to run and were quickly out of sight in the jungle thickness. It was, however, only moments before screams could be heard and soon thereafter Captain Fanger and Brad came into view. Brad was holding the still struggling woman with his left arm diagonally across her chest and his right hand holding her right arm behind her back. Captain Fanger had the young girl around the waist and was holding her a good twelve inches off the ground. The girl kicked and wiggled.

TJ and the others descended the ladder as quickly as possible. By the time they got to the Captain and Brad, the woman and child had stopped struggling but stood with defiant looks.

"I tried to tell them we are friendly," TJ said as he approached.

"Well, they didn't get the message," replied the Captain. "She just about took off my head with a cutlass."

"They probably don't understand us," offered Lillian.

"I wonder how we let them know we want to be friends," said Amanda.

"You have strange accents," the woman said, still looking angry, "but I can understand you."

"Oh," exclaimed TJ, "you speak English."

"I don't know what you mean English, but I speak the same tongue as you." The woman's accent sounded Jamaican.

"We didn't mean to frighten you and we mean you no harm."

To demonstrate Brad let go of the woman and took a step back just in case she had any surprises like a karate kick or something. The woman stood still.

"Where did you come from?" she asked.

"We came from the lagoon," said TJ.

"From the water?"

"Yes. That equipment you were looking at allows us to breathe under water."

"You jest."

"No. It's the truth." TJ paused. "But where are we?"

“This is Dinja.”

The group looked at each other. They were all thinking the same thing. This was becoming more of a sci-fi adventure than a scientific expedition or treasure hunt.

The woman introduced herself as 'Sah'. She was an Il-mexxej spiritwali which, by her description, was a spiritual leader. She talked to the dead and protected the ancient story of her people. She and her daughter, Praveome, lived on the ship because the Kenniesa, ruthless scavengers and marauders, were afraid of it. She wasn't afraid of the dead. They were her friends.

Within a short time Sah, Praveome and the others were relaxed, talking and asking each other questions. The signs of friendship and trust were beginning to appear.

Sah and Praveome were very curious about the scuba equipment and the group's strange dress. By now the group had removed their wet suits, because of the extreme heat and humidity, and were wearing bathing suits. Sah and Praveome obviously thought this garb was quite funny although they were quite taken with the bright and colorful pattern of Brad's bathing suit.

As they talked, Sah shared the story of her people and her world, Dinja.

“Many generations ago Dinja was green and covered with water. There were great seas. People and animals abounded and food was plentiful. The Dinjana, our ancestors, were very advanced and prosperous. They had actually evolved into a very homogeneous society. It took what seemed countless generations but they overcame physical and cultural differences. They built great cities

and machines. They had marvelous places of study and learning. Unfortunately, they were also very selfish and greedy.”

“Even though they really knew better, they were raping the land. If something didn't provide for their pleasure or their wealth or their comfort they removed it – destroyed it . . . killed it. They did that with forests and animals.”

“They wouldn't believe the mexxej spiritwali or scientist that they were killing the Dinja. In less than three generations the Dinja became the way you see it today. The Dinjana started to fight among themselves for food and water. Cities were either destroyed by war or abandoned.”

Those who had stayed with the ship hadn't seen the desolation which Brad and Captain Fanger had encountered. The Captain shared their exploration with the others.



Figure 1 'Distant city in ruin' by danjohnpantr

“Yes,” Sah interjected. “The city that you saw in the distance was called 'Bajja Sabitha'. That means 'beautiful bay'. There was water between here and there. Many years ago this was an island.”

“How could this happen?” asked Amanda.

“How did it happen so quickly?” Lydia added.

“It really wasn't hard,” Praveome spoke for the first time. “Our ancestors were very advanced and had machines that could level forests in a few days. They just kept cutting to make money. And they tore down mountains and poked holes in the ground to get oil to run their machines. People like my mother and father tried to tell them that there would be an exponential effect which would destroy Dinja, but the people sneered at them and called them names. No one wanted to believe that they were killing Dinja and killing themselves.”

The group sat in silence trying to fathom the horror story they were hearing. But this wasn't a story. It had happened.

“Where is your father?” Cecelia asked after several moments.

Tears welled up in Praveome's eyes. She tried to speak but nothing came out. Her mother quickly came to her rescue.

“My mate and my two sons were killed by Kenniesa almost two years ago,” Sah too was having difficulty speaking. Cecelia reached out and put her hand on Sah's shoulder.

“My husband was also killed by senseless violence,” she said softly. The teary-eyed Sah looked at Cecelia and shook her head in understanding.

“The Kenniesa,” Sah continued after a moment to compose herself, “are a very loose confederation of Dinja's violent and sociopathic elements.”

“One of the symptoms of il-hin tat-tmiem - the final days of destruction - was how the old prejudices began to grow as people started fighting over food, water and good land. No one wanted to accept responsibility for the dying Dinja so they blamed another group. Then they took the next step which was like the coup de la morte for civilization. They revived the old religions.”

“Reviving a religion did this?” Lillian faced betrayed her shock. She thought of the small gold cross that always hung on a chain around her neck.

“Actually,” Sah paused momentarily. She knew nothing about the stranger's religious beliefs. “I'd have to say 'yes'. The religions were not innately bad but the religious beliefs were altered, used and abused to justify hatred and killing.”

“Oh, my God,” Lillian gasped.

“That's what they said,” Sah continued. “There were two major religions that participated in the genocide. They were called Muzew and Musulmana. They both claimed that there was a god who preferred them and told them to destroy the other.”

“You're kidding,” Lillian exclaimed.

Sah sadly shook her head.

“Is it that much different back home?” questioned Brad. “Why don't we sail in the Mediterranean Sea or Indian Ocean?”

“Oh, that's because . . .” Lillian didn't finish her sentence.

Brad was right.

“The minghajr Alla do not believe in a god and are rejected by both religions. The Il-mexxej spiritwali are the spiritual leaders of the Minghajr Alla. We aligned with the scientific community to try to convince the people that they were killing Dinja.”

“Even though so many generations had passed and people did not remember the real difference between Muzew and Musulmana, most people remained divided into these groups and blamed, killed, stole from, and tortured one another. Social chaos caused social deterioration into an ignorant, primitive, superstitious and frequently violent total lack of civilization. This deterioration of civilization led to the development of the Kenniesa. They run in packs but would kill another Kenniesa without a second thought for something they wanted. The Kenniesa leaders rule by fear and are frequently challenged. The Kenniesa who control this part of Dinja call themselves Muzew and claim that the Muzew deity has anointed them.”

“They said we are blasphemers. They killed my mate and my sons because, they said, their god didn't want them mating and producing more blasphemous scientist.” Sah took a moment to regain her composure. “They called us impure but we were good enough to take along as slaves and concubines.”

The group listened silently. Each in turn tried to say something but they realized that there was nothing they could say that could comfort the pain. The best that came out were murmured 'I'm so sorry' and 'that's horrible'.

“Praveome and I escaped one night when the Kenniesa were drunk. Only one other slave was willing to take the risk to flee, and she was almost ready to have a baby.”

“We were able to get several oases away before morning and hid in the thickets of an oasis when it became light. The band of Kenniesa evidently didn't think we were worth the effort to pursue us. The young pregnant woman who escaped with us went into labor on the second day. She and her child died in birthing. Praveome and I continued from oasis to oasis at night until we worked our way back here. We buried my mate, Missier, and my sons Ewwel and Tieni, and set up camp in this old ship. We had heard the Kenniesa talking and they are afraid of the ship.”

“That's incredible,” said Captain Fanger. The other verbalized agreement. “Is there nowhere you can go? Aren't there any villages where you would be safer than living alone?”

“We are a remnant of the Minghajr Alla. That was one time the largest spiritual group on Dinja. There are almost none of us left and those who are left are mostly il-mexxej spiritwali and scientist commonly known as xjentist. il-mexxej spiritwali and xjentist are feared and hunted by the ignorant people because we have attempted to regain scientific knowledge and skills. Both religious groups call us blasphemers however both will go to an il-mexxej spiritwali for medical care.”

The group talked well into the evening, asking questions and learning about each other. The darkness of despair would show on Sah's face when she heard of some of the things happening in her new friends' world. To her it sounded like il-ħin tat-tmiem.

Well after dark the ground shook. Praveome moved close to her mother.

“Earthquake?” said Amanda.

“What?” Sah's attention had been turned to her frightened daughter.

“What did you call it?”

“Oh,” Amanda said realizing that this wasn't earth. “We call seismic events like that 'earthquakes'.”

Sah smiled. “We call them 'thawwad'.” Looking back at her daughter, “they are growing much more frequent. Dinja is very unstable. Praveome understands that.”

“You mean you could have a volcano here?”

“According to scientist with whom I've spoken, there are growing numbers of volcanos along with great chasms from which magma streams. We fear the end is near. We have thawwad almost daily now.



Picture credit: https://www.gateworld.net/wiki/Bola_Kai

There were several small tremors the next morning while Sah and Praveome talked with their visitors from another world. Their visitors' world sounded like Dinja before the destruction began. Lillian and Cecelia took pictures of every part of the ship while TJ, Amanda and Capt. Fanger made detailed notes and lists. Lydia stood watch on the ships bow as Brad moved back and forth along the perimeter of the beach.

It was Amanda who first entered the armory. It was filled with cutlass, boarding pikes, muskets and musketoons, and pistols. There was also a large store of powder.

"Shouldn't you teach Sah and Praveome to use this stuff?" Amanda asked.

"I hate the idea of escalating their conflict," said her father, "but considering her vulnerability it would be good self-defense."

"I don't think the two of them are going to go on a shooting rampage if we teach them about guns," TJ laughed.

"You're right," said the Captain pointing one of the old pistols at the far end of the armory and pulling the trigger. The flint gave off a spark as it hit the frizzen. "And they still work fine," he smiled.

The hold of the ship was filled with priceless treasure - gold and jewelry that hadn't been seen for almost 500 years.

"Are these things valuable in your world?" Sah asked.

"Oh, my, yes!" exclaimed Lillian. "Not only are they made of very valuable materials but they are even more valuable as pieces of history."

"What would you do with them?"

"Museums," chimed in Cecelia. "Museums would love to have this treasure."

"Museums?"

"Museums are a building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited," Lillian explained.

"Interesting," said Sah looking around at the treasure trove around her. "You can take as much as you want. We have no museums for it."

"That's very gracious of you," said Cecelia.

"No. It came from your world and it should return." Sah paused and picked up a beautiful broach. "We have no use for such things. We just want to survive."

Lillian and Cecelia looked up at Sah and then at each other. There was nothing they could say. All of a sudden their treasure hunt seemed petty and insignificant. They were embarrassed.

As the group was exploring the ship, Brad's attention was caught by what sounded like voices not far away. Investigating he found a small band of five men just entering the oasis. They were wearing loin clothes and what looked like hats made from palm fronds that almost covered their faces. They were armed with clubs and spears. The clubs were like the Irish shillelagh while the spears were just straight pieces of wood, probably branches, that were sharpened on one end. Primitive but deadly. One of the men had a cutlass.

Brad made his way back to the ship as quickly and quietly as possible and warns the others.

"If we're very quiet they may go away," said Sah.

"Our diving gear is out there," said Brad. "We don't have time to move it and we really can't let them mess with it."

"That's for sure," replied Captain Fanger thoughtfully. "That's for sure."

"Then we kill them," offered Sah. "If they return to their camp they will bring a war party. We need to kill them."

Everyone looked at Sah. What she said sounded so cold and brutal but they realized that this is the type of decision she had to make to survive. They knew that she was right. If they couldn't hide from this scouting party they would send a larger group. Whether or not she wanted to kill she knew that they would not hesitate to kill her. The idea of living in peace in this place seemed impossible. If you

had food and water someone was going to come and be willing kill you for it.

The group didn't have time to discuss their problem and think about any alternatives. They heard voices outside the ship. Looking over the rail they saw the scouting party. They were at the edge of the jungle, looking at the dive equipment near the water and talking excitedly.

"Ahoy," called Captain Fanger standing up and moving toward the ladder.

The scouting party stopped and stared at the captain. TJ and the others could see them look at each other as they watched him descend the ladder. Brad had his pistol at the ready. The captain had a can of bear spray.

"Stay here," he said to the women. "Brad, let's go back up our captain." The two men started down the ladder.

The man with the cutlass stepped forward. "Who are you?" he demanded. "Are you Minghajr Alla?"

"I'm Commander John Fanger, United States Navy retired," said the captain. "My men and I are just here for a short rest."

"You are on our land," the leader said. His hand was on the hilt of the cutlass and he was obviously sizing up the captain.

"Would you refuse some travelers a brief rest?"

"Yes."

From the deck of the ship Sah recognized the cutlass the leader was carrying. Her hands and feet hardly touched the ladder as she

descended the ladder and ran toward the leader. TJ grabbed her around the waist as she passed him.

"That Kenniesa killed my mate and my children," she screamed. "That is Missier's sword!" With that she jabbed TJ with her elbow right under the ribs. He released his grip on Sah and doubled over in pain. She ran at the leader with her cutlass. In a moment the leader of the scouting party was standing there holding his abdomen and looking down at the gushing blood. Sah was holding her cutless high above her head ready to bring it down on the Kenniesa's left shoulder when the man dropped to his knees and then face first in the sand.

One of the Kenniesas behind the leader lifted his spear and started toward Sah. Brad lifted his pistol and fired. The man jerked back and fell to the ground. The others, terrified at what they had witnessed, began to flee.

"We can't let them get away alive," screamed Sah throwing her cutless like a knife at one of the fleeing men. It stuck and he fell forward.

"Damn!" yelled Captain Fanger. "Let's stop them," he said as he started to run after the remaining two Fenniesa, "but let's see if we can avoid any more killing."

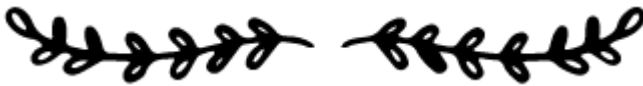
TJ and Brad quickly joined him. Sah called to the captain over her shoulder, "you dare not let them live." She put her foot on the back of the fallen Kenniesa and pulled out her cutlass as the three men passed her. "If you do not kill them, many more will come and they will kill us," she called as she rejoined the chase.

Captain Fanger caught up with one of the fleeing men. The man turned and held his club at the ready. Captain Fanger had no weapon but he had years of Navy combat training.

"Go after the other one," Captain Fanger barked as the others arrived. "I'll take care of this one." TJ, Brad and Sah continued the chase while the Captain studied his adversary.

He noticed that the man was holding his club in his left hand. The man was left-handed meaning that his attack would come from the captain's right. Keeping to the man's non-dominant side the captain did a sweep throwing the man to the ground. He was then on the Kenniesa, disarming the man and rendering him unconscious with a rear choke. It was over in moments.

Looking after the others the captain saw them returning without the Kenniesa. He had escaped.



Life on the Beatsurbutt was getting tedious and the four men were getting on each other's nerves. They hadn't seen any signs of life or activity on L'Esprit Libre for two days. Finally Caesar decided that they must move. Peter Columba didn't like the idea but he had to agree that if they didn't do something soon they would end up killing each other.

The two 850s rumbled and growled as the big go-boat pulled alongside L'Esprit Libre. The men on the cigar boat watched carefully but no one came to challenge them. Buddy pulled up so that Caesar, Columba and Tinman could jump on deck of L'Esprit Libre.

Tinman tied Beatsurbutt to the stern cleats while Caesar and Columba started searching the deserted boat. Within a few minutes all four men were rummaging through the paper and maps that had been left behind.

"It looks like they've all gone diving," said Columba.

"Sounds like they found something," replied Caesar.

"Yeah," said Columba still studying a page of planning notes. "I'd guess they found something strange down there and decided to check it out." He paused. "If these notes are right, it should be right at the bottom of the anchor chain.

"Well go check it out," Caesar barked.

"It isn't that easy," Columba bristled. "We're only in sixty to seventy feet of water. If they're right below us they can see the hull of the ship. They'd spot us by the time we hit the water."

"Then sneak in," Caesar wasn't to be put off.

Columba sulked away.

"There's all sort of dive equipment over here," Buddy called from the sail and dive equipment room in the aft port hull. He held up some fins and a BC.

"Let's get geared up," Columba snapped. "Caesar wants us to follow them down."

"You're kidding," Buddy called in a loud voice, "they'll see us when we hit the water."

"I don't give a shit," Caesar yelled from the grand salon. "Get the hell into that water and find out what they're doing."

Within minutes Buddy and Columba were trying to slip off the boarding platform without making a splash. With the tremendous visibility in these waters it didn't really matter how quietly they entered and they knew it. If TJ and his crew were looking up they were spotted. Soon Buddy was pointing at the bare ocean floor below. 'Where are they?' he wrote on his waterproof tablet. Columba just shrugged and continued to descend slowly.

At the bottom of the anchor chain they found the supplies and saw the cave lines leading into the anomaly. The two divers hung above the anomaly for a moment, looked up at the boat above knowing that Caesar was waiting for results, looked at each other and then followed the cave lines into the anomaly.

Surfacing in the lagoon, Columba and Buddy arrived just in time to witness the encounter with the Kenniesa. When they had an opportunity the two men went ashore as far down the beach as possible from the ship and slipped into the jungle.





With the Kenniesa securely tied to a tree it didn't take Captain Fanger very long to get him to divulge the location of the rest of their group. A band of around thirty were camping on an oasis about a half day's hike from their location.

Sah's oasis is well known in Kenniesa stories. According to the stories the ship is a dragon that spits fire. Sah grinned. They were obviously talking about her handmade grenades. They had always sent Kenniesa running. The band usually avoided Sah's oasis because they were afraid of the "dragon", and scouting parties normally went around, but this group desperately needed water.

Sah's oasis was rapidly becoming the last oasis with fresh water and the Kenniesa believed that they were going to have to face the dragon.

This was very unsettling to the group. It meant that whether or not this scouting party returned the rest of the band would soon be coming. If the man who escaped took half a day to return to his camp to report, that meant that they probably only had a little more than a day to prepare for the attack.

While Sah and her new comrades made plans, Columba and Buddy were watching from a distance and trying to figure what they were going to do. They decided that they would attempt to board during the night when one of the women were on guard. Two men should be able to over-power any woman was their thinking.

It didn't exactly work that way when the time came.

Through the rest of the day they watched the group on the Cuchilla Noche scurry about. They had no idea what was going on and could only tell that TJ and his crew were moving things around. They couldn't see over the deck rail. Was this some sort of salvage operation? Were they collecting items on the deck to take back through the anomaly? They really began to wonder when the covers over the canon ports opened and closed several times.

What was going on was that TJ and the others were getting ready for a life and death battle. They knew that they either won the battle or would die. There was no in-between.

Captain Fanger knew that this was going to come down to close combat unless they could drive off or kill the majority of attackers before they crossed the open beach by the ship. He had the crew position two canons facing out each side of the ship that would be

loaded with grap-shot. He aimed the canons so that they would cover most of the beach with the deadly shrapnel.

While Fanger was working on the heavy artillery, Sah was showing the others how she made her hand-grenades and the L'Esprit Libre crew were showing her how to make them deadlier. Soon there was an assembly line producing the deadly devices. At the same time muskets and hand guns were being cleaned and readied for use. There would be no time for reloading.

Well after dark Columba and Buddy decided to make their move. They could see Amanda on watch and figured that the young girl would give them the least resistance. They were wrong. Amanda's home schooling included martial arts.

Amanda was carrying a jo. It looks like a short walking stick but is quite effective in the right hands. Amanda's were the right hands.

She became aware of the two men as they were climbing the ladder. "Intruder!" Amanda screamed as she gave Columba a smart blow to the side of his head causing him to fall backwards. Buddy didn't look down. He had to decide whether or not to continue the attack. A painful blow to his left side caused him to come to an immediate decision run.

Buddy took a moment to check on Columba. He was unconscious. Looking up at the gathering of armed defenders at the top of the ladder, Buddy decided that Columba would have to fend for himself and ran into the jungle.

Captain Fanger was the first one to Columba, followed closely by Brad and TJ.

"He's dead," said the Captain.

"I didn't hit him that hard," Amanda yelled from the deck. "I didn't mean to kill him."

"It wasn't your fault," the Captain called back to her. "He broke his neck when he fell."

"He sure doesn't look like the others," Brad commented.

"That's not a Kenniesa," Sah said matter-of-factly walking up and looking down at the dead man. "He's wearing funny clothes and doesn't have the Kenniesa tattoo."

"He's from our world," said TJ giving Capt. Fanger a worried look. "What the hell is he doing here?"

There were no replies . . . no comments. The group just stood and looked.



Captain Fanger and TJ talked quietly as the rest of the group slept restlessly. There was no doubt that they were each facing their own fears and demons as they attempted to sleep.

"You know what that dead guy means," Fanger whispered.

"Yea," replied TJ. "Someone has followed us and one or more is still out there."

"He didn't have a gun," the Captain paused. "If he was the first one up the ladder to attack us and they had any weapons, don't you think he would have been armed?"

"Good point," agreed TJ. "You don't think the other one has a weapon either."

"No," said Capt. Fanger. "I think they followed us through the anomaly and were trying to take advantage of the situation. I don't think they came prepared."

"Do you think we'd be better off gearing up and going back through the anomaly?"

"That would be one answer, but what do you do with Sah and Praveome? Would they leave even knowing that to stay meant certain death? How would we explain them to our world? How would they survive in our world?"

"Point!" TJ exclaimed. "But if we save them from this band of Kenniesa, who's going to save them from the next?"

"We can't live their lives for them."

Silent contemplation. Sometimes there just aren't any good answers.



The band of defenders on board the Cuchilla Noche had no trouble knowing when the Kenniesa had arrived. The noise and the chanting began when the invaders were well away from the oasis. Like similar groups throughout the history of both worlds, this type of chanting and singing helped the men

psychologically prepare for battle and possible death. They were trying to turn fear into strength and bravery. Generally it only lasted for moments when the battle began but by that time their survival instincts had engaged and they were either dead, running or had become a killing machine. There were no other choices. These barbaric men were driven by more than greed and power. They were now being driven by thirst and hunger to face the dragon they had so long feared. They knew that if they didn't face possible death in the battle they would face certain death by thirst and starvation. There was no choice.

TJ, Capt. Fanger and Brad manned the "long-9" bow canon. This canon, common to 17th century naval warfare, fired a 9 pound projectile. They began to send a hail of canon balls into the area of the approaching Kenniesa. At first they heard screams and sounds of confusion. Then there was silence. So much for the opening gambit. Capt. Fanger sent everyone to their stations as he watched carefully for signs of the invader's attack.

The captain quickly realized that the Kenniesa had no military tactics. They were a hoard and, as such, they were accustomed to merely running over people, villages and anything else they desired. They began to amass themselves on the south side of the ship, staying in the cover of the jungle. There were no signs of any attempt to attack from two sides.

The group on the Cuchilla waited. They could hear the Kenniesa chanting. They had obviously been frightened and somewhat demoralized by the long-9. Captain Fanger decided not to take any more preemptive action. He watched the north side of the ship carefully for any signs of the Kenniesa. There was none. He ordered the canon gallery ports open and had a third of the heavy canons

loaded with grape shot. Above the canon gallery the rest of the small band of defenders waited each with a line of muskets, a couple of pistols and a cutlass. The tension was tremendous.

Suddenly there was a blood curdling scream from Kenniesa line and a mass of half-naked men began running toward the Cuchilla Noche waving primitive weapons. In the lead was a man carrying a pole like a standard. On top of the pole was Buddy's head. Obviously meant to instill fear into the defenders.

Captain Fanger almost hated to give the order to fire. He knew that he had probably killed hundreds of enemy soldiers but he never had to see their faces. These men were scared. They were desperate for food and water. They had been brainwashed to believe in what they were doing. Fanger paused and wished that there was one leader responsible for these mens' condition whom he could shoot and bring this to an end, but he knew that wouldn't happen.

"I don't want to do this," he said to TJ with tears running down his cheek. "FIRE!"

The recoil of the three large guns rocked the Cuchilla and the deafening explosion muffled most of the screams. The scene before them was carnage beyond description. Those who survived were running back toward the jungle only to be cut down by their own men. That really made the captain angry.

"Shoot those bastards," he called to those standing by with rifles. Several volleys of rifle shot rang out while those in the canon galley reloaded one of the canons. The musket is notoriously inaccurate. Only a few of those who had been executing their own comrades for fleeing were hit, but they got the message and began running themselves.

"Is that canon ready?" Capt. Fanger called out to the canon gallery.
"Ay-ay, sir!" came the reply.

"Raise it slightly and drop some grape shot into the jungle." Shortly the large canon sounded again. Trees and plants were torn asunder and screams could be heard. Then there was silence. Death makes no noise.

The battle was short but it was the bloodiest thing any of them had ever witnessed. Even Sah, who had every reason to want to see these people dead, stood looking at the beach scattered with bodies and covered with blood with disbelief.

All those on the Cuchilla knew that they were fighting for their lives and the lives of their friends, but that didn't mean that they wanted to, nevertheless enjoyed killing.

The small band had little time to process what had just happened and how they felt about it. They were not safe yet.

Without warning the ground began to shake. They could see volcanic eruptions in the distance.

"The end is here," said Sah, holding her daughter and crying.

The lagoon began to fill with water. The group scrambled to get the scuba equipment together. They tried to explain that Sah and Praveome had no choice but to go with them into the anomaly and back into their world.

Before any arguments could be made or decisions reached the Cuchilla began to float and started moving backwards toward the anomaly.

Captain Fanger moved everyone to the main deck. "Get geared up and find something to hang on to," he barked. "We're going down with the ship."

"If you want your daughter to survive," he said to Sah, "you will do what I say. You have no choice. You are going wherever this boat takes you. Whether you and Praveome survive is up to you."

The captain gave them the fastest lesson on scuba diving in history and had them hanging onto the now rapidly moving ship. TJ and Mrs G held Sah between them. Over and over they reminded her, "whatever happens do not take that regulator out of your mouth while you're in water." Likewise Brad and Lyda held Pravome. The captain made one last check on his people and found something onto which to hold as current of the water flowing toward the anomaly grew faster and fast. The Cuchilla's stern began to be sucked backwards down into the lagoon toward the anomaly. The group could only hope that it was able to pass through the anomaly as it had done hundreds of years before. Capt Fanger felt the stern end of the hull hit the bottom. The bow was standing almost straight up. Amelia and Lillian had tied themselves to a capstan. Their feet were dangling. Brad and Lydia had wedged themselves between the binacle and ship's wheel. Pravome had a death grip on Brad and Lydia was holding her regulator in place. TJ and Mrs G had Sah sandwiched between them. The Captain was close enough to see the terror in her eyes. The muscles on her face showed that she was biting down on the regulator. He hoped the rubber would hold.

The Cuchilla seemed to stand on end forever when suddenly the group could feel the sand giveaway and the Cuchilla slid backwards at a terrifying speed. TJ tried to look around but everything was dark and it was everything he could do to keep his regulator in his mouth

and hold on to Mrs G and Sah. The last thing of which he was aware was the water rising around them.





Picture credit: Art by Alba Eldar

TJ was the first to regain consciousness. Mrs G and Sah appeared fine. They had their regulators in and he could see bubbles. The Cuchilla was lying on its port side on the ocean floor. The others were, like him, up against the port side rail. They had evidently been unconscious only a few moments and were all stirring. Brad and Lydia were having to calm Paveome but they had the situation well in hand. Everyone had come through alive.

Captain Fanger was looking up. They were on their own side of the anomaly which looked to have disappeared. The Cuchilla was lying exactly where the anomaly had been and it was lying on solid bottom.

The visibility was excellent and they could see the L'Esprit Libre above them. They could also see the go-boat tied to her. TJ and the

Captain exchanged looks. They knew they were both thinking the same thing . . . the men on the other side of the anomaly. Were there others waiting for them above? Soon everyone was looking up. They had no idea how much air they had left so they had to start ascending. The group slowly ascended. At the safety stop TJ and Amanda used sign language to plan the rest of the ascent. They were going to surface between the twin hulls of the catamaran. That would not only be a safe place but, if necessary they could disable the go-boat and use the dingy to escape.

Slowly the group ascended. Amanda, as usual, managed the ascent and called for the safety stop. A few minutes later the group surfaced between the twin hulls of L'Esprit Libre. The dingy was secured in a slide-in device that kept it stable and secure when L'Esprit Libre was under way, and there was a hatch in the hull that led into the dive locker.

Brad, TJ and the Captain were the first to get out of the water. They listened carefully at the hatch and opened it carefully. There were no sounds of people around. They returned to the dingy docking device and helped the others out of the water and into the dingy. They could not actually lower the dingy into the water for fear of arousing the suspicion of anyone on deck. TJ felt confident that the hijackers did not know of the hatch. You had to know the ship well to know where the dingy was secured and the existence of the hatch.

Once everyone was in the dingy and had removed their gear, TJ, Brad and the Captain made plans on how they were going to secure L'Esprit Libre.

They had no idea how many people remained on L'Esprit Libre, if any. The odds were that there weren't many since there's only so

much room on a go-boat. The bigger problem was their location and how heavily they were armed. The pistol and pepper-spray had been lost. The Captain had his service revolver in his cabin and there should be rifles hidden in the sail locker and port engine room.

Once they secured weapons the next problem would be to find out how many intruders were on board and where they were located. Brad suggested that, while they were in the sail locker, they might take a peek. They should be able to see the inner and outer salon as well as part of the fly deck. They could not imagine that at least one of the intruders would be on watch. After that it would have to be a room by room search.

As they gathered the weapons they discovered that the crew quarters were empty. As Brad had suggested, they took a peek from the hatch to the sail locker. They could see two men sitting in the grand salon. One was sitting quietly near the deck doors while the other moved drunkenly around the room.

"If those two assholes have screwed this up," the drunken man could be heard screaming, "I'll shoot the bastards!" The second man sat quietly keeping watch.

Unbeknown to the Captain, TJ and Brad, Caesar had been drunk for quite some time and Tinman was getting quite tired of him. It had been almost two days since his boss and Buddy had gone down. He knew there was no way that they were alive. He was getting tired of Caesar insisting upon waiting. They had been totally unable to figure out how to start the L'Esprit's engines. The entire navigation system had been somehow locked.

Finally Tinman said, "they're not coming back, man. They only had maybe an hour of air each."

Caesar's reply was a string of profanity and a delusional tirade about him being the rightful heir to the Cuchilla Nacho.

"Let's just take the go-boat and go home. It's better than ending up in prison," Tinman tried to be rational with the drunken, delusional Caesar.

Caesar got in the Tinman's face and screamed, "we're not going anywhere. That's my boat. That's my treasure. If you say that one more time I'll cut off your balls and stuff them in your mouth."

As the three men watched from the sail locker, Tinman casually and unobtrusively raised the pistol that was lying on his lap, put it against Caesar's chest and pulled the trigger.

"He wants to leave on the go-boat," TJ whispered to the Captain.

"Let's let him go." They agreed.

Tinman looked at the dead man at his feet without emotion. He stood up, unhurriedly gathered a few items and moved to the go-boat. Casually untying the lines, he climbed into the cockpit and started the engine. In a few moments he was moving quickly toward Florida.

TJ, Brad and the Captain scrambled onto the deck and watched the go-boat move rapidly away.

"We can call the Coast Guard," said Captain Fanger. "They'll pick him up."

On the go-boat Tinman was feeling pretty good about getting away. He may not have his share of hundreds of millions of dollars but he was still alive and he now had a go-boat. What he didn't realize is that Columba had a scuttle device on the boat. If it wasn't

deactivated shortly after the engine was engaged, the device would kill the engine.

As the three men on the L'Esprit Libre watched the Beatsurbutt sputter to a stop, Tinman was in a rage. He had driven the Beatsurbutt many times. There was no reason. As he raged and as those on the L'Esprit Libre watched, a shorted wire sparks and sets the engine compartment on fire. Before Tinman could get to the fire with a fire extinguisher fumes around the high-octane fuel tank exploded.

The percussion of the explosion could be felt on L'Esprit Libre followed by a large red and black fireball that went high into the sky.

"Do you think the Coast Guard will come this far to pick up the pieces?" Brad asked.



It took the most part of a day to clean up after Caesar and his gang. TJ took lots of pictures to give to the Coast Guard. Caesar's body was wrapped up and suspended by dive line in the water under L'Esprit Libre so that it didn't smell up the boat before the Coast Guard arrived. They all agreed not to mention the Cuchilla, Sah or Praveome around the Coast Guard. Before the Coast Guard arrived TJ radioed his attorney and had him stake their claim to salvage the Cuchilla.

The Coast Guard did respond since they didn't have to worry about jurisdiction and they were physically closest. Caesar was quickly identified. Captain Fanger explained how they found Caesar and

Tinman on their boat as they were returning from a dive. TJ, Brad and the Captain told how the three of them had watched Tinman shoot Caesar and leave with the go-boat which exploded shortly after he left. Since there wasn't a dive team on the cutter, TJ and Brad agreed to the gruesome task of retrieving what was left of Tinman from the sunken go-boat in order to expedite the investigation. It also kept government divers away from the Cuchilla and got the Coast Guard away as quickly as possible. The Coast Guard was going to have to take Tinman's remains back to port to get an identification.

Finally, it was over. There had been so much commotion that the L'Esprit Libre treasure hunters had not had the opportunity to either celebrate their survival or celebrate their treasure.

Sah and Praveome were overwhelmed by L'Esprit Libre, the ocean and everything around them. They had gone to TJ's cabin any time officials were on board. Amanda had spent the most time with them while they were sequestered. She enjoyed answering their questions and showing them pictures from her text books. It was a big and exciting new world for them.

Fortunately Captain Fanger's inventory had survived the trip back. It wasn't complete, but it was a good start and would help in the salvage process. They brought up a few items along with the ship's bell to prove their claim.

TJ called Charlie Blackman at Mel Fisher's.

"Good morning, Charlie," said TJ. "This is TJ Royer."

"Hey, TJ," came the cheery reply. "How's the treasure hunting going?"

"How would you like to make some more money?"

"Always," came the reply, "but what do I have to do for it?"

"Nothing illegal."

"Sounds great if the work isn't too hard."

"The work will be very hard," TJ laughed.

"Oh, well, then . . . "

TJ interrupted him. "I found the Cuchilla."

There was silence on the other end. Then an almost hysterical voice
"You're kidding me. No you're not. Where is it? Oh, my God, what do you want me to do?"

"First I want you to calm down. Secondly I want you to honestly tell me if you're up to doing some salvage."

"Oh, my God, yes!" Blackman almost screamed. "I can do the job. I have the boat, the equipment, I can get the manpower."

"That's great."

"If I weren't so greedy and so far in debt I'd do the job for free just to get to salvage her."

"How long before you can get started?"

"I can be there and start getting set up in a few days. It just depends on how long it takes to get my boat supplied and how far away you are."

"Just go by my attorney's office. I've already talked to him and we've already filed our claim. He'll write up a contract for you," TJ said.

"Get a really good crew you can trust. This could make the Nuestra Senora de Atocha look like chump change." There was a gasp at the

other end. "We'll be back before you set sail. I'll give you the coordinates in person. I don't want to take any chances that they're intercepted."

"You can count on me," said Charlie Blackman.



TJ had one last dive to take before they set sail for Key West. He and Mrs. G went to the Cuchilla. They were actually the last of the crew to go to the sunken brigantine and pay their respects. The three-hundred-year-old ship had finished off its existence in style. It had been home to Sah and Praveome, saved their lives and was going to make the entire team quite wealthy. Now it lay on its side, broken and quiet, in seventy feet of warm Caribbean water.

With Mrs G keeping an eye on him from outside, TJ went into the galley where Sah and Praveome had been living. He was looking for something specific and, after a short search, he found them. Up against the wall were two boxes. One box containing a steel gorget and the other two small chains. Giving Mrs. G the thumbs up, they returned to the L'Esprit Libre.

Sah was on the rear deck watching Amanda give Praveome swimming lessons. All three were laughing. TJ and Mrs. G sat down by Sah.

"I know that you literally lost your entire world," TJ started.

"So we thought that the least we could," Mrs. G continued, "was to save something from that world which meant something to you."

Sah sobbed with joy as she recognized the two boxes TJ and Mrs. G were holding out to her. She opened the first box and held up the two chains. "My sons, whom the Kenniesa killed, wore these." No one could doubt the pain she was feeling as she held the chains. Carefully and gently she put them back in their box and opened the second box. Taking out the gorget she said, "my mate, Missier, wore this."

"You have saved good memories from the past and you have given us a whole new world," said Sah through her tears. "I don't know how we can ever repay you."

"If you and Praveome find happiness here, that will be reward enough," said TJ.

Amanda had Sah and Praveome lying on the trampolines at the front of the boat when the anchor was raised and the mainsail raised. The L'Esprit Libre glided across the calm water toward Key West carrying nine exhausted yet excited adventurers with a story they could not tell. Who would believe it anyway?

TJ and Mrs. G stood on either side of Captain Fanger as he guided the big cat home. They were each lost in their own thoughts as they looked out over the ocean ahead of them.

"I wonder," Cecelia started to say. "Naw, that's ridiculous."

"What's ridiculous?" queried Captain Fanger.

"Has anyone ever raised a three-hundred-year-old brigantine?"

The captain and TJ just looked at each other.

"She's in good condition for her age," said the captain.

"That she is," agreed TJ.

They both turned to look at Mrs. G.

“What?!” she demanded. They just laughed.

“That woman is going to constantly keep me in trouble,” laughed TJ as he leaned toward the captain in a conspiratorial manner.

“You’re doomed,” replied the captain.

Cecelia just gave a sweet smile but she knew that another adventure was in the air.