

Excerpt from Part One, *Surfacing in En Mer (At Sea)*  
(1<sup>st</sup> novel in *Pinctada*, a *novel duo*)

It is very late for most visitors to Pape'ete, but not for him, a self-exiled American with arthritic knees and aching feet that should belong to a much older man, aches and pains that make his midnight stroll along the harbor-side streets of the provincial capital something of an annoying ordeal on this typical, warm and humid evening in 1956. A strong gust from the Pacific trades, unusual at this time of night, catches hold of the man's navy-banded boater and flips it off his head.

He watches the hat roll on its straw brim for several feet but seeing the hat will soon fetch up against a great banyan tree that borders the promenade, he preserves his dignity by refusing to chase it. His pace does not change as he walks to where the walkway is closest to the tree and takes a casual look about. Noting that he is the only pedestrian in sight, he steps onto the grass, retrieves the boater, and deposits it on his head as he returns to the promenade and resumes his amble.

Sauntering alone under a Pacific night sky on the deserted streets of an exotic port does not disquiet him because the darkness is attenuated by occasional street lights along the promenade and by the lit entrances of bars that are designed to lure denizens of the night—such as he is—toward the women and booze, and sometimes opium, that wait inside to treat the persistent affliction of loneliness that preys upon him when he is in port. His deeply-wrinkled, tanned face, the thin, white scar that begins at the bridge of his nose and runs across his left cheek, the what seems to be permanent sneer carved into his mouth, and the reptilian cold of his gray-blue eyes all suggest he has encountered worse in his life than whatever riff-raff might be out and about in search of easy pickings from visiting Aussies, Yanks, and Europeans.

His bowed legs sweep forward in a steady, rolling gait as though they are striding the bridge deck of the Picayune—the LSD<sup>1</sup> turned freighter that he has considered his wandering home for a bit less than ten years—as she slowly rolls up and over long Pacific swells. Unanchored as she is to any particular place or

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<sup>1</sup> A dock landing ship (also called landing ship, dock or LSD) is an amphibious warfare ship with a well deck to transport and launch landing craft and amphibious vehicles. A ship with a well deck can transfer cargo to landing craft in rougher seas than a ship that has to use cranes or a stern ramp. (Wikipedia)

nationality, he is in no hurry to return to her; rather, he—Captain Matthew Stump—is killing time before meeting the Englishman who has promised to be waiting for him inside the strangely-named La Lune Morte.<sup>2</sup>

The Englishman, Edward Carlyle—Teddy to his closest friends—has sent him a sealed note by way of a self-proclaimed, “*son homme préféré*,” [“his favorite man”] a young and very handsome, tall and fit envoy with extensive and complex geometric tattoos visible on both arms, which has suggested to Stump that the man is more likely Marquesan than Tahitian. In the small bar situated in a corner of the worn public room of L'Hôtel Parisien, the hotel Stump sometimes frequents when the Picayune docks in Pape'ete, the young man had offered two observations before relinquishing the note.

First, he had noted that his boss called him Hank, a name the young man claimed to hate because his actual name was Mahana, but he was mentioning the offensive “Hank,” he had told Stump, because it might be referred to in the note (it was not). Second, Mahana had declared he was the Englishman's favorite in a tone of voice that hinted, he, Mahana, was to be respected or there would be unpleasant consequences. Stump had reason to believe Mahana might be the *only* person in Carlyle's service at the moment, and Stump's response to the implied threat had been an expressionless glare that had resulted in the immediate transfer of the note to Stump, followed by Mahana's hasty retreat.

Stump had waited until Mahana had exited the public room before opening the note, which had been handwritten by Carlyle in a surprisingly illegible hand. The penmanship did not match Stump's recollection of the quintessential English snob that he had met a year before when Picayune's hook had been dropped in deep water opposite Atuona on the Marquesan island of Hiva Oa. The freighter had been offloading supplies for a small splinter group of archeologists on assignment from the recent Henriksen expedition, of which Carlyle—the man Stump expects to be waiting for him inside La Lune Morte—had been a member. Knowing that the Henriksen group had finished their analysis of stone tikis in the Puama'u Valley on Hiva Oa and had dispersed to their respective academic lairs some months before, it is the fact that Carlyle has remained behind that has piqued Stump's curiosity and is the only reason he has not ignored Carlyle's request to meet.

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<sup>2</sup> The Dead Moon

It is Stump's experience that once exposed to the heat, humidity, tropical diseases and parasites, and to his way of thinking, the decidedly non-Western lethargy of the remnants of a once complex and proud Polynesian culture, university-educated types like Carlyle are prone to depart as soon as they can, *unless* they have found some lucrative and usually illegal venture that grabs the black heart of greed that Stump is convinced lurks inside each of us. It is the "unless" that is pulling Stump toward La Lune Morte and has his own black heart palpitating. He knows better than to acknowledge this by appearing eager and has extended his stroll thirty minutes past the time Carlyle has requested they meet.

Stump, wearing a worn but serviceable seersucker jacket over an open-collared and yellowing, white dress shirt, wrinkled khaki slacks, and his boater, now pulled tighter and tilted slightly forward on his head, drops a half-finished cigarette onto the sidewalk outside La Lune Morte. He grinds the fag into the concrete with the toe of a black boot, pulls open the heavy wood door of the bar and enters a dimly lit space perhaps forty feet square.

He knows the bartender and proprietor, René, an expatriate sailor from Marseille who had discovered Tahiti would be a good place to wait out the war, after the freighter in which he had signed on as a novice seaman had been torpedoed and had sunk beneath him. René had decided to stay for good after "marrying" a fourteen-year-old, Hereiti, who, now haggard and plump and looking near twice her twenty-seven years, shuffles barefoot in a dirty pareo<sup>3</sup> among the small, round tables scattered in the space between La Lune Morte's entrance and a bar running half the length of the back wall as she wearily waits upon the half-dozen solitary expats in the establishment who are in the synergistic process of getting drunk and licking life-inflicted wounds.

René, squinting from the smoke of a cigarette held between his lips, nods a cool welcome to Stump and jerks his head toward a table in the darkest corner of the bar. A slightly balding, black-haired man in a wrinkled, white linen suit sits there with his back to the door; a sign in a place such as this of either stupidity or a lack of worldly experience, but possibly both, Stump concludes.

He approaches the man and inquires with a graveled voice honed by years of shouting commands into the wind from a bridge deck, "Carlyle?"

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<sup>3</sup> Tahitian word for a wraparound garment. In contemporary Tahitian, the correct word is *pareu*. It is not known where the variant *pareo* comes from, but it could be an old dialectic variant or an early explorers' misinterpretation. (Wikipedia)

It is the face of the man Stump knows that turns his way, and when the man recognizes Stump, he stands and extends his hand. Is it possible that Carlyle is ever so slightly unsteady on his legs, Stump wonders? He shakes Carlyle's hand, which, when Stump releases it, retrieves the half-consumed cigar that protrudes, Churchill-like, from the Englishman's face.

"Wasn't sure you were going to make it, old chap," Carlyle says in a low voice as he glances at his wristwatch and gestures toward the opposite chair.

Carlyle runs his hand over his thinning and slicked back hair as he waits for Stump to sit. When the captain does, Carlyle settles into his own chair, tips ashes in the ashtray positioned in the center of the small table, stares at the captain, and waits for his reply. Stump extracts a gold cigarette case from his pocket, takes out a cigarette, and while in the process of lighting it, prevaricates in a diminished voice that matches Carlyle's. "Held up on board," he claims.

After exhaling his first drag, Stump's second offering is more truthful: "If it's not one thing, it's another."

"In port long?"

"The usual," Stump replies as he shifts his chair and positions himself so that he can cross his legs.

"And then off to the Marquesas."

"The usual," Stump confirms as he watches Hereiti waddle toward the bar.

"And then the Gilbert's before heading on to Honolulu, I presume?"

The captain takes a long drag on the fag, turns, places the cigarette on the ashtray, and looks into Carlyle's eyes.

In a tone as emotionless as his ice-cold stare, Stump grumbles, "Why the fuck am I here, Teddy? More importantly, why are *you* here?"

"I've been waiting for *you*."

Stump leans forward with his forearms on the table, clasps his hands, stares at Carlyle, taps on the table with his right forefinger, and says, "Not *here*, Teddy. Pape'ete."

Carlyle glances at Hereiti, who is approaching the table. He looks at Stump and with a slight jerk of his head toward the serveuse, looks at the ashtray, and pulls on the cigar.

Stump sits back and stares at this presumptuous Englishman until Hereiti interrupts, "*Que puis-je vous obtenir capitaine?*" ["What can I get you, Captain?"]

"*Cognac, ma beauté.*"

Hereiti raises an eyebrow, sniffs a rebuttal, and with a sweep of her hand, she asks, “*Quel genre? Nous avons beaucoup!*” [“What kind? We have many!”]

Stump’s mouth approaches a smile but subsides into its usual sneer as he responds, “*Courvoisier, Chère.*”

Hereiti smiles but shakes her head as she turns to Carlyle: “*Et vous monsieur?*”

“*Amenez-nous deux,*” [“Bring us two”] Carlyle demands.

The two men watch Hereiti shuffle away, and when she reaches the bar, Stump reaches across the table and grips Carlyle’s forearm in his left hand.

“Why am I here?” Stump asks for the second time, the words low, drawn-out, and threatening.

Carlyle looks down at Stump’s hand for a beat and then yanks his arm free.

“I’m here to make you a proposition,” Carlyle says calmly before drawing on his cigar.

“Do it then,” Stump demands with a furtive glance about the room as he sizes up each of the other half dozen men in La Lune Morte.

He turns his gaze back to Carlyle, who looks at the ashtray, butts out the cigar, and leans slightly forward. From the inside pocket of his jacket, Carlyle extracts a slightly bulging and elongated, black leather wallet. It makes a light thump when Carlyle places it on the table suggesting the contents have some heft; he slides the wallet slowly toward Stump.

The captain looks at the wallet, again glances around the room, and then looks into Carlyle’s eyes. Carlyle returns the look with a nod and an expression that conveys, *go ahead; open it*. Stump does not lift the wallet from the table but opens it far enough with two fingers to look inside, allows it to close quickly, and slides it back to Carlyle. What Stump has seen, he surmises, is Carlyle’s “unless.”

With a tinge of sarcasm, Stump says, “I presume it’s not a present, but if it were, I’d have to decline it.”

Carlyle retrieves the wallet, and as he slips it back inside his jacket, his eyes gather a fiery intensity that his English reticence cannot restrain. He asks, “Did you *see* them?”

“You saw me look,” says Stump as he lights another cigarette.

Hereiti returns and deposits their Cognacs on the table. Carlyle says “*Merci*” and waits for her to walk away before turning back to Stump.

“Yes, but did you *see* them?”

What Stump is certain he sees is the extreme effort Carlyle is making to restrain an apparent sense of urgency. The captain takes a drag on the cigarette as he stares into the Englishman's eyes, taps an ash into the ashtray, and offers a slow nod that conveys, *Yes, I saw them.*

"Well?" Carlyle asks.

"Well, what?"

"There's four dozen of them in there," Carlyle whispers earnestly with a pat at a place on his jacket behind which the envelope rests.

"Four dozen?"

"Yes, *four dozen*, enough to make a forty-centimeter chain that would sell for twenty-five-hundred US dollars in San Francisco, and that's just a portion of the lot, the rest of which I've stashed at Atuona," Carlyle responds in an emphatic whisper, "each one perfect. Perfect! And their dimensions ..." Carlyle rolls his eyes to accentuate his reference to the size of what is in the envelope.

Stump raises his glass and says, "Congratulations," as though he sees such things every day, and then he downs the Cognac in a single swallow.

Carlyle hisses his whispered response: "I don't want your bloody congratulations."

Stump glares at Carlyle for a beat, then turns toward Hereiti, who is staring at their table, raises his empty glass and points at himself and Carlyle. Hereiti nods in response and steps toward the bar. Carlyle downs his Cognac and stares at Stump who sees frustration in the Englishman's eyes.

"What *do* you want?" Stump asks in an even, casual tone.

"I need a friend."

"A friend?" Stump replies with as close to a smile as he can muster.

He leans forward to continue but sees Hereiti approaching and waits until she has placed the Cognacs in front of them before continuing; his whispered reply is cold and challenging: "You don't want a *friend*, Carlyle. You want a fucking *conspirator*. Are you out of your mind wanting to meet me here to propose this? Half the yokels in this bar could be in the employ of the French. Hell, I think the only reason René stays in business is because the authorities subsidize this place as a spot they can use to monitor just the kind of business you're proposing."

"You don't know what I'm proposing," Carlyle protests.

"Oh, don't I?"

"No!"



“Enlighten me.”

Like a reflex that is a tell for an amateur about to commit his soul to the devil, Carlyle glances over his shoulder, then turns back to Stump and says, “Tikehau.”

“I know it. What about it?”

“Pristine. Untouched. Uninhabited.”

“Uninhabited? Since when?”

“When was the last time you were there?” Carlyle asks.

“I’ve never.”

“You said you know it.”

“I’ve sailed by it every time I go from here to Rangiroa, or if the Picayune is headed directly to the Marquesas. No need to stop,” Stump says. “There’s a bit of a village on the southernmost island in the ring, Tuherahera, or some such thing.”

“No more than a dozen people.”

“Not uninhabited,” says Stump.

“Quite right, but they’re only natives; two families that are destitute.”

“A few ‘natives’ living on an atoll with a robust population of fish in its lagoon and lots of coconut palms on its motus<sup>4</sup> are never destitute,” Stump counters.

“No authorities of any kind,” Carlyle offers, “Not since the end of the war.”

Stump makes a mental note of this and has already assumed that Carlyle has located an untouched bed of black-lipped pearl oysters, perhaps a substantial one, but he remains unsure as to what Carlyle needs from him. He *is* sure of the competence of the French authorities and their universal distrust of people like the captains of tramp freighters and visiting intellectuals, but he has seen the pearls in the wallet and knows if there is a way to get them to the world pearl market, there is money to be made. Still, he is wary of amateurs, especially rapacious amateurs of which Carlyle is likely one. They do not know what they do not know, he thinks. And yet ...

“I still don’t know what you want from me. The passé into the lagoon is too shallow even for the Picayune,” Stump says, “and a passing aircraft couldn’t fail to notice her standing-to off some isolated motus of a nearly deserted atoll.”

“Getting them out of Tikehau is my worry, not yours,” says Carlyle with another reflexive glance over his shoulder.

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<sup>4</sup> Motu: an islet formed by broken coral and sand that, along with others, comprises the visible outer ring of an atoll

“You’d be right about that,” Stump says as he finishes his Cognac and again raises it toward Hereiti who Stump knows has been watching him and Carlyle conspire. He sees Hereiti pass the order on to René and then turns his attention back to the Englishman.

“So, let me see if I’ve got an idea where this is going,” Stump begins, “Instead of putting those black beauties in your pocket, or at the bottom of a sock roll in your trunk, and finding yourself back in England with a nice little nest egg, you’re looking to ...”

Stump notices Hereiti approaching with their Cognacs and waits for her to drop them off and depart before he locks eyes with Carlyle and continues in the same conspiratorial tone that Hereiti has interrupted: “So instead of being smart, you’re thinking you’re brilliant and have a way to get some thousands of U.S. dollars’ worth of black pearls ...”

“*Tens* of thousands,” Carlyle interrupts.

“*Tens* of thousands,” Stump scoffs. He downs his Cognac and continues, “You think I’m gluttonous enough to get involved in this, this, whatever this is, which at the moment is nothing short of preposterous.”

“It’s not preposterous.”

“You’re going to have to explain,” Stump says. “Who’s going to work the bed if there are so few people on the island?”

Carlyle replies matter-of-factly, “My man has put together a team of three trusted boys from Rangiroa as we speak.”

“Telling them what?” Stump asks.

“Nothing. All they will know is, if they go with Hank to a destination that will remain unknown until after they’ve left Pape’ete, they will end up rich beyond their wildest dreams.”

“This Hank is the boy I’ve met?”

“The same.”

“He’s what, sixteen or seventeen?”

“Eighteen.”

“Oh, *eighteen*,” Stump chuckles.

“What does his age matter if he knows his craft, can stay down for three minutes, and owes me his freedom?”

Stump decides there is no need to proceed further on this line of fantasy and asks, “Let’s assume you have the divers you need; how do you move the pearls



and to where? You can't bring them here. Too many big ears, too many loose lips, too many authorities eager to get their own piece of confiscated contraband.”

Carlyle leans back in his chair, downs his Cognac, smiles like Carroll's famous cat, and responds by ticking off four things on his fingers: “Copra,<sup>5</sup> Hiva Oa, the Picayune, and the Holy Spirit.”

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<sup>5</sup> The dried meat or kernel of the coconut, which is the fruit of the coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*). Coconut oil is extracted from copra, making it an important agricultural commodity for many coconut-producing countries. It also yields de-fatted coconut cake after oil extraction, which is mainly used as feed for livestock. (Wikipedia)