

Erica walked over and sat on the floor in front of me. With tears welling in her eyes, she said, "I'm really sorry Nick. So was Dad."

I toked again. I looked at her and still didn't get it. So I toked again! I was still confused, but with each drag, I cared less and less.

"Nick, Mom couldn't have kids," Erica began. "They tried for years. They almost divorced when they found out Mom was infertile, but they loved each other too much to do that. Dad kidnapped me, Nick. When I was born."

That called for two more tokes. "Kidnapped? Wow. That's some serious shit, Erica." Puff Puff. "I can understand why you two wanted to keep it secret." Puff Puff. "But what's all that got to do with me?"

She took a deep breath and laid it all out. "Nick, you and I are fraternal twins."

I stared into her eyes as she told me this. In a flash, all the strange feelings I had, suddenly made sense. I could see our connection through her eyes, and for a second I felt like I was staring at myself. Laurie gasped. Dad lit up a Lady Jane and collapsed on the couch. I toked yet again. "That's not possible," I said, though I suddenly saw how it was possible. "Mom didn't have any more kids." I looked at Dad. Did she?"

He shook his head and said nothing.

"She did, Nick. Your dad was at sea when your mom went into labor. She was drugged and unconscious when she gave birth to us. She never knew she was having twins. No one did! Dad said it was the perfect setup. He gave you to your mom when she woke up, and he kept me as his own. Mom and Dad kept me a secret till after you and your parents left."

Dad finally spoke. "So...you're my daughter?" he asked, still very much confused.

Erica stood from the floor and sat next to him on the couch. "I'm sorry, Jerry. Dad fought with himself about it for years. He hated himself for what he did to you. But...he very much loved me. When Mom died, he was crushed. He said if it hadn't been for me, he would've died soon after just from being lonely and heartbroken. He had always been sorry, but he never regretted it. I hope in time you'll understand that."

The Jane fumes were finally starting to go to my head. "Well Dad, ya know what they told you when Laurie and I got married. 'You don't lose a son, you gain a daughter.' Well in this case...ya got two!"

For some reason this was funny as hell to me, and I fell over on the floor, laughing hysterically.

I stood and walked over to Laurie, still frozen in shock in the middle of the livingroom. "Hun, you've been standing here with your jaw dropped for..." I looked at my watch, "almost ten minutes now. You're scaring me."

She blinked twice and looked at me, then at the tranny bong. She ran back to it and toked some more. Yeah, she'll be fine.

Having my brain enveloped in a Jane-induced euphoria allowed everything to slip from my conscious thoughts. Jane's green haze seemed to wrap herself around my mind like a security blanket, and ease the tension from every nerve, every muscle, and every pore in my body. I realized then that one thought remained in my head.

Who the hell is Ralph Dunsworth, and what did Homeland Security want with me?

- - -

Silence came from the other end of the phone. "Nick, you're not getting into more trouble, are you?" he asked.

"No, Dad. No more than usual. By the way, I'm bringing someone back with me."

"Ah Nick, you're not bringing home another stray, are you?"

"Don't worry, Dad, she's house-broken. I promise," I said, and received a punch in the arm from Erica.

"So who is she?" Dad asked.

"She's Dr. Moore's daughter. Her name's Erica."

Silence, then: "Oh! I didn't know he had a daughter."

"Really? We're about the same age. Wouldn't Mom and Mrs. Moore have been pregnant at the same time?"

"Nope, she wasn't. She couldn't, I mean. Nick, Mrs. Moore couldn't have kids. She was infertile."

I looked over at Erica, but she was staring out the window, lost in thought.

"Maybe he cheated on his wife?" Dad offered. "But it doesn't matter. Dr. Moore was a great man. I'm really going to miss him."

"I didn't really know him, but yeah, me too."

"I'll see ya when you get home, Nick," and we hung up.

We landed at Detroit Metro Airport just after 9pm. It was still very much daylight, and thankfully not nearly as hot and humid as it was in Arabella. The skies were clear and we could see the beginning of a beautiful Michigan sunset.

We called Deluxe Cab, and got one of their station wagon cabs to accommodate the staggering amount of luggage we brought back with us. Erica, having never felt the effects of jet lag before, slept during the long ride back to Farmington Hills.

We pulled into the driveway just before 10pm. The cab driver and I unloaded the luggage into the garage. I over-tipped as usual, and we walked in the front door.

Dad was on the livingroom floor, toking away on a bong I'd made out of an old Chrysler transmission. He looked up at me, as if trying to decipher who I was, then looked at Erica. He took another puff from the transmission and slowly rose to his feet.

Laurie immediately lunged at the now-vacated transmission and wrapped her arms around it. "Baby, I've missed you!" she said, and took a deep draw from it.

"Dad, this's Erica," I said as he walked up to us.

He looked at me with glazed eyes. Then he turned to Erica, and back and forth between us with a look of puzzlement on his face.

"What the hell's going on, Nick?" he finally asked.

"Are you alright, Dad?" I asked with a sideways glance as he continued to shift his eyes between us. Clearly he was anything but alright.

He turned to Laurie. "C'mere! Look at this!"

With extreme reluctance to part with the tranny bong, she got to her feet and walked over next to my dad. Now she too stared at Erica and I as if we were a museum exhibit.

"What? I don't get it. What are we--" and Laurie froze mid-sentence, her eyes grew wide and her jaw dropped. "Ohhh, my God!" she said in amazement, as if the Virgin Mary had suddenly appeared in front of her.

"Damn, Dad! What's that stuff in the tranny bong laced with??"

He didn't answer. He and Laurie continued to stare.

I turned to Erica. "Do you know what they're talking about?"

Erica hung her head and stared at the floor. She gave an almost imperceptible nod. "Yeah Nick, I do."

Now I was frustrated. It felt like the whole world was in on a joke, and that joke was being played on me. I walked over and sat behind the tranny bong. I took a deep, relaxing pull from it. I just wanted to see what they saw!

Chapter Thirteen

Laurie and I stayed for another two weeks. The island held a beautiful memorial service for the late Dr. Julius Moore. Thirty-seven people took the podium and gave their own eulogy, including Erica, who choked and cried through her speech. It began at 9am and lasted well into the evening. Another service was held the next day for Mrs. Evelyn Emery, and both were laid to rest in the island's tiny cemetery behind Dr. Moore's clinic. Her husband's body, along with those of the terrorists, was loaded onto one of the many fishing trawlers, which were taken out to sea and scuttled.

I made a copy of the video tape we'd made - the entire thing - and express-mailed it to the CIA Director in Fairfax, Virginia. I'd added a brief note to explain what it was. I wondered what they would do with it. Air it on CNN (edited, of course) and take credit for Bin Laden's death? Doesn't matter. We know the truth, and the world is safer because of all of us.

"Thanks for the honeymoon, Nick," Laurie said, playfully sarcastic, on the flight from Hawaii back home.

"We can always try again," I said. "How 'bout the Bahamas?"

"Pfff. Hell no. We'd spend it flushing out Hezbollah, or taking down Honduran freedom fighters. No, next honeymoon will be just me and Jane."

"That's fine, I'll take Erica."

Erica eyeballed me from the window seat. "The HELL you will! I don't need any more trouble! I'll be with Laurie."

Two against one. I was being attacked from both sides now. "Good! More time to myself."

"But seriously, Nick," Erica began, "thanks for letting me stay with you guys. It'll just be till I settle in somewhere."

"You can stay as long as you want! You saved our lives," Laurie said, rubbing her own expanded stomach. "We owe you that much, and a lot more."

Erica had told us she didn't much like Arabella and she only stayed for her dad. She longed to see America in person, instead of on TV. Though she still heavily grieved the loss of her dad, she decided it was time to leave.

And I decided not to press her about the secret her and her dad shared. It obviously had nothing to do with the al-Qaeda conspiracy, and talking about it just seemed to upset her. I hadn't brought it up once since before Dr. Moore died.

I was glad Laurie and Erica were finally getting along. I don't know why it had been important to me that they did, but I'm glad for it just the same. The weird, creepy feeling I had toward Erica seemed to fade away, which left behind a mix of respect, a small amount of closeness, and something of a friendship. I was glad she was coming back with us, and relieved that Laurie felt the same way.

During the flight, I called Dad. They don't let us use cellphones on the plane, so I had to use the AirPhone built into the seat back, which cost me twice as much. I talked to him for over an hour. Don't worry, I can afford it. I told him all about al-Qaeda and the meeting with Bin Laden. As I was describing Osama's demise, the lady in front of me turned around to observe the conversation. She eyed me with scrutiny and disbelief when I finally told her to mind her own business.

"By the way," Dad started, "a Ralph Dunsworth called for you. He left his number and asked that you call him immediately. He said it was urgent."

"I don't know any Ralph Dunsworth."

"I didn't think so. I figured it was a prank call when he said he's the director of Homeland Security."

For just a second, my blood ran cold. Homeland Security?? I shook my head. "Yeah, it was probably a prank."

into a black hole in his head the size of a nickel. Before Khaled collapsed to the floor, Laurie had already turned and begun kicking him as his arms and legs twitched in death spasms.

I turned around to see who it was who had turned this bad situation around. Against the wall in the hallway, Erica was slumping to the floor crying, my .45 held tightly in her hand. Dean and Jack rushed over to her.

When my mind snapped back to reality, I looked around the livingroom. "Where's Bin Laden?" I asked, as I heard the Jeep outside start up and leave in a hurry. Dean, Jack and I hurried out the side door, but Osama and his Jeep had almost reached the plane.

Most of his henchmen had already boarded the plane, and a few waited at the cargo ramp for his Jeep to drive in. When he did, the ramp retracted and the nose closed, and the huge Antonov 124 turned and began a slow taxi to the far end of the runway.

"Hey! I just had a great idea," Jack said as he disappeared into the barn. Laurie came out holding up the video camera, still recording everything.

"Did you and Khaled have a nice chat?" I asked her.

"Yes we did!" she said congenially. "Once he stopped twitching, he started seeing things my way."

We continued to stare helpless as the plane taxied.

"Couldn't we just shoot it out of the sky as it passes over us?" I asked Dean, holding up the MP5.

"You could," he said, "but the Antonov holds five tons of jet fuel. The blast would wipe out most of the island."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "So we just let him leave with the nukes??"

He nodded. "We fight the wars we can win, Nick. We can always let the authorities know."

"Isn't that what they tried to do before September Eleventh?"

Dean didn't answer. Instead we watched as the Antonov turned around to face us and started its takeoff. The four monstrous D-18T engines throttled up and the plane came barreling toward us. The nose eventually lifted and the Antonov left the ground just as it ran out of runway, and thundered just 200 feet above our heads. Laurie caught it all on tape.

"C'mon Dean, let's go try and call Washington," I said in despair.

We started to walk away, but Laurie spoke up. "What in hell is that??" she asked, holding up the camcorder.

I looked to the west at the departing plane. A tiny white contrail of smoke snaked up into the sky, then turned and chased after the Antonov. A half mile out to sea, the white contrail caught up to the outer left-side engine and exploded.

This of course caused an instant chain reaction that exploded the left wing, then the fuselage blew up with a loud thunder of noise that felt like it hit us in the face. The right wing exploded last, and at a half mile over the ocean we could still feel the heat from the burning jet fuel. The twisted, burning metal of the former Antonov 124 dropped from a huge fireball that seemed to hang permanently in the sky. The debris dropped like a stone into the water and soon sunk, with bits and pieces left over to burn on the water's surface.

We all stared transfixed at the wondrous, awe-inspiring scene. It held our attention so well, none of us noticed Jack walking from that same direction until he had almost reached us. It was then that we noticed his clothes were wet.

We all stared at him, the shock from the explosion beginning to wear off.

He pointed back toward the debris still burning on the water's surface. "Tomahawk," he said. "Surface-to-Air missile. I brought a box from the bunker by mistake. Neat little things, they launch right from the conn tower of the Mirage."

After a stunned silence, Dean slapped Jack on the back. "Damn good job, Jack!"

I thought about this. Unarmed, we could tackle Osama. He looked all of maybe 90lbs. His assistant would take a bit longer.

"Very well, Bin Laden. Let's go," I said, hoping Laurie would be done by now.

The six of us walked into the house and into the livingroom and filled up two couches. I collected the MP5s and hid them under the kitchen sink. At least they won't be far.

I glanced out the kitchen window. The henchmen hadn't moved an inch. Two helicopters had been loaded into the plane. I rejoined the group in the livingroom, and sat down next to Laurie.

"So what is it you hope to accomplish here in Arabella?" I asked.

"I had originally sealed a deal with your Admiral James Emery, for six nuclear weapons, a nuclear submarine and hundreds of crates of machine guns, missiles, etc. I'm happy to say we've procured the nukes, and we need only the armament cache and the sub to complete the transaction. The deal was for 14 million American dollars upon delivery. For the sub and the weapons, I will gladly pay you instead."

"Is that the going rate for selling out one's country?" Laurie asked.

"Young lady, where I come from, the women are seen and seldom heard."

"You're officially in America now, dickhead. So get use to it," Laurie scoffed.

Bin Laden looked over to me. "Mr. Stone, you may want to consider refraining your lady friend from using such undiplomatic vulgarity."

"Hey dude, she's not my problem. She's yours." I changed the subject. "What is it you intend to do with these weapons?"

"Our military operations are of course, classified. But for this amount of money, I would think its intended use would be of no consequence to you."

I held back my growing anger. "So I'm supposed to just go count my money while you slaughter more innocent people than you did in 2001?"

I saw his assistant shaking his head in irritation. "This is a complete waste of fucking time," he said.

I didn't fail to notice his accent had completely disappeared.

Ignoring his assistant's comment, Bin Laden continued. "Please understand, Mr. Stone. We do what we do for self-preservation. Your U. S. government has hunted and killed our own innocent people for decades. Our *jihad* is not unjustified."

Laurie jumped up from the couch in a fit of rage. "Fuck you, O-slimy! Killing more innocent people is NOT justified! None of those people deserved to die! Maybe if you took that diaper off your head and let the shit fallout your ears, you'd see that!"

Khaled al Uhmar, Bin Laden's assistant, had had enough. He lunged from the sofa, grabbed Laurie and spun her to face me. He pulled a long knife from his boot and held it to her - not to her throat, but to our unborn child. I was already up.

"Enough, Stone. No more games. We want the key," he said in perfect English, without a trace of an accent.

For a few seconds, we locked eyes and passed an ice-cold stare between us. "Nice job with the accent." I paused. "My fiddend."

"Where is the key, Stone?" he asked louder.

I tried to stall for time. Why the hell did I agree to leave the MP5s behind? Stupid, Nick.

"They key is gone, and so are the weapons," I lied. "And your gunships sunk our sub. You got the nukes, isn't that enough?"

"Not for the size of the attack we have planned on the U.S. But that's not your concern. You should be more concerned with your wife and child."

Little did he know, but I was. Not concerned, but scared shitless. Not Laurie, though. She looked more pissed than anything else.

"Khaled!" Osama yelled. "What are you doing? This is not how we negotiate!"

"Stay the hell out of this, old man," he barked.

Old man? Just Which one of these guys was in charge? As I pondered this thought, a bright red dot appeared on Khaled's forehead, and jittered around a bit before the dot turned

Before a plan could be formed, a huge hulking green object appeared in the sky, just behind the mountain. Laurie was the first to see it.

"What in hell is that?" she asked in wonder.

"Oh, crap!" Dean yelled. "It's the Jolly Green Giant with wings!"

It was a plane, the likes of which I'd never seen. Even as it was still several miles out, I could see a massive fuselage and four huge turbine engines. It could have been bigger than a Boeing 747, but looked nothing like one.

Its huge conical nose was now pointed directly at us as it lined up for the naval base's only runway.

As the massive plane finally rolled to a stop at the end of the runway closest to us, Dean informed us it was a Russian Antonov AN-124, nicknamed the 'Ruslan' after a mythological Russian giant.

"They must've got a bulk discount at the Russian yard sale," Dean added.

As we stared in awe at the huge jet, the nose of the plane began tilting toward the sky, opening a huge hole in the front of the fuselage. With a faintly-heard grinding sound, a ramp slid out of the fuselage to the ground.

We watched as the tall terrorist I'd been talking to walk up the cargo ramp and disappear into the belly of the beast. Seconds later, a Jeep with a tow hook attached to its rear rolled out of the plane, toward the nearest helicopter, attached it to the hook and towed it up the ramp into the plane, where it would unhook and proceed to the next one.

The 35 terrorists stood sentry for the huge aircraft by forming a line between it and us, as if their human chain might repel an incoming missile.

Fifteen minutes later a similar Jeep rolled off the ramp with a White sheet tied to the antenna as a surrender flag (which, incidentally, didn't fool me) and was driving very slowly toward us.

The driver was the same tall terrorist, but it's passenger, from that distance, could be seen to have a long, grey beard and a turban on his head. I had a feeling we were about to meet a very unpopular celebrity.

"Good day...Mr. Stone," he said slowly, but with well-practiced English. I thought it had been the tall guy that spoke, but no, Osama Bin Laden addressed me personally. We met them next to the house. Dean, Jack, Laurie and myself were there, armed as usual.

Bin Laden translated the obvious shock on our faces.

"I wish not for the American government to know I speak fluent English. It may make interrogations much more...ah, brutal...should I be captured. A secret between friends, ah?" he said with a small chuckle.

Friends? Ha! Friends, my hairy, half-Spanish ass.

He continued. "This's my assistant, Khaled al Uhmar. I'm told you've met him twice, but he was not well-received."

I shrugged. "If he wasn't received, it's because he isn't wanted."

"I see, Mr. Stone. Might we all go in the house and have a civilized chat? Hmm? I promise you, nothing funny."

I thought about it. "Let me confer with the others."

The four of us huddled. "Dean? Whaddya say to Osama in your livingroom?" I asked with a smirk.

"I always wanted a celebrity in my house, but not this one," Dean said. "Have Laurie go in first and set up the camcorder and hide it in the livingroom. I need proof of this! No one would believe us."

Laurie agreed, and disappeared into the house.

"I have one request," Bin Laden said in unbidden English. "Please, no weapons. This must remain civilized, and as you see we are unarmed. My faith, my mercy and my life will be with you, Mr. Stone."

"He doesn't know the women and children are down there," Dean said. "Maybe he thinks they're all cowering in their houses."

Distant screams could now be heard as half of the remaining circle came charging across the field toward Dean's house and the rest of the community. I ran out the front door where the men of the island were awaiting instructions.

"The towelheads are coming! The towelheads are coming!" I said, giving myself a small chuckle in my head. Was I now the Paul Revere of the Pacific? "Hide anywhere you can, and cut the fuckers down!"

They scattered about the island rather quickly, hiding and firing from under bushes and behind trees or blasting their MP5s from windows of houses.

Dean and Jack ran out the side door, surprising a group of Bin Laden's army coming from behind the barn. They managed to squeeze off four rounds from their Berettas before Jack cut them down with his MP5. Dean ran behind the barn, surprising another three men with gunfire.

All over the island, the sounds of raging machine guns were drowning out the sounds of 9mm bullets. In minutes, the firefight died away and the last insurgent dropped.

In a matter of hours, the al-Qaeda army, estimated at 3,000 men, had been whittled down to a mere 35, who now formed a half circle around their helicopters. Being their fastest means of escape, they guarded them with their lives.

The tall terrorist held the bullhorn up as he realized the troops he sent out weren't coming back.

"Mr. Stone. Please, I would like to speak with you, my fiddend. I am walking over to you now and I am unarmed." He raised the 9mm in his hand to show it to me from 1000 feet off, and made a show of laying it and the bullhorn on the ground and started the long walk over to the barn alone.

Laurie and I met him at the barn, both of us holding MP5s.

The tall terrorist, now slightly out of breath, looked down at our machine guns as if seeing them for the first time.

"Why the arms, Mr. Stone?" he asked. "I am unarmed."

"That was your choice, not mine," I said. "We dumb cowboy Americans don't go anywhere without ours."

He flashed a self-deprecating smile. "I do admire your efforts to protect your country, but it is all in vain, my fiddend."

Laurie jumped in. "How could you say it's all in vain? Those nukes, if there ever were any, are at the bottom of the Pacific with your Destroyers and its crew."

I had my own theory about that, one I hadn't shared with anyone.

"I'm sorry my dear," he began, "the ships and my men are gone, yes. But the nuclear weapons are safe."

To Laurie, I said, "He shipped them out to Guam on the two helicopters. That's why we didn't see them before."

"He speaks the truth, my dear. Our beloved has taken every measure to ensure our success. We need only the key to your underground base to finish loading up the weapons cache."

"You'll never find it," I said, "and I'll never tell you where it is."

He nodded, as if this were the answer he desired. "Our beloved will be here soon. Nsha'allah, he will be merciful on you," and he walked back to his men.

"I thought we sunk his beloved's sorry ass?" Laurie asked.

"Guess not," I said, taking one more look at the half-circle of terrorists, then turning to walk into the house.

I told Dean and Jack of the conversation. "We need to do something before they get here."

"We can't just walk up and start shooting," Dean said. "That'd be a kamikaze mission."

"So then what do we have that can hit them from a thousand feet?"

Dean gave me a smirk. "How far can you throw a grenade?"

Chapter Twelve

We did 30 knots back to the island. The boats were making almost 40 knots and they had a huge head start. They'd almost definitely have made landfall at the same time the torpedoes struck the last ship. We surfaced when we reached the southern tip of the island and I opened the hatch. It was 5:30am now and the eastern sky was just beginning to brighten. I listened closely. I heard no gunfire, no yelling, and couldn't hear or see any helicopters in the air.

For only a moment the thought flitted my mind that the ships and helicopters never made it. But to be safe, we moved up the rocky western shore of Arabella. Dean stopped the Mirage twenty feet from the shore, which the four of us swam across.

On land, only a short walk brought the base into view. I was wrong. Al-Qaeda *did* make landfall. The six helicopters had landed and were surrounded by at least seventy terrorists. Most looked to be armed with handguns - 9mm Berettas, probably - but enough of them held massive M-16 machine guns that no one dared approach them.

Even with the morning sun daunting the horizon, we reached Dean's house unnoticed by the small army occupying the base. By this time many of the island's residents had made their way to Dean's house. In minutes they formed the 'front line', which was just behind Dean's barn.

The terrorists had formed a perfect circle around the helicopters. They stood rigid like statuesque sentries. They didn't move, they didn't speak to each other. They just stood there. Waiting for something?

That mystery was soon solved when a group of terrorists came into view, dragging with them a seemingly unnerved Dr. Moore. The group joined the others at the front of the circle. The same tall Arab I'd met yesterday morning stood with a bullhorn to his mouth.

"Mr. Stone. We do not wish to harm the doctor. Please, my fiddend, we just want the key."

Upon hearing this, Erica came to the window and saw her dad, an M-16 pointed to his chubby head. She slowly backed away from the window.

"Oh my God no. They'll kill him, Nick! He'll die before giving up the key!" she screamed, tears welling in her eyes.

She was right. Laurie, Dean, Jack and myself still stared out the window as the pudgy yet agile doctor kidney-punched the tall Arab and grabbed his M-16. Dr. Moore began running from the group towards Dean's house, and I thought he was trying to escape. Instead, he stopped ten feet from the group, turned to them and opened fire.

Some of the men dropped to the ground either in fear or death, others fired off rounds from their 9mm guns at the doctor, the bullets slamming into his chest. Dr. Moore still stood, however, and continued firing wildly at the terrorists.

Seventeen bad guys were cut down in the machine gun's angry blaze of bullets before another opened his M-16 on Dr. Moore. Its bullets cut a huge, gaping hole in Dr. Moore's chest, and he finally dropped to the ground, firing off a few post-mortem rounds.

The whole surreal scene had lasted only twelve seconds, and Dr. Moore died a hero.

The four of us continued to stare out the window, transfixed by the puddles of blood and piles of bodies over a thousand feet away, but still very clear and detailed.

I broke away from the window and turned to Erica, who sat against the kitchen wall on the floor, her eyes tearing but her face silent. She hadn't witnessed the bloody massacre, but she'd heard the gunfire. And she knew her dad was dead. She'd never been close to anyone in that kitchen, and I wouldn't doubt she felt alone and abandoned. With no shoulder to cry on, she sat on the floor and cried into her hands.

I turned back to the window at the sound of the tall terrorist's voice from the bullhorn. "A fool, Mr. Stone. The doctor gave his life for what, ah? To protect guns and ammo? Heed my warning, my fiddend. We will slaughter the people of this island to get what we want."

"Guns and ammo?" Laurie asked incredulously.

My mind quickly flashed back to the underground bunkers. "Oh God...I think I know where they were."

We took up a position a thousand yards east of the trio of ships and we now faced them broadside. At periscope depth, I could see the group of helicopters searching our previous position and still firing rounds into the empty water.

"Load the torpedo bays!" I yelled, "throw all four at 'em and wait till she starts sinking."

The four torpedoes were launched and four simultaneous bursts erupted from the water next to the ship. The six helicopters still had not been alerted to the newest strike, and were still circling the water a thousand yards astern of the ships.

"Same procedure, move us a thousand yards port. Let's hit the next one."

The Mirage once again dived to a thousand feet and skirted westerly around the ships. Sonar indicated the stricken ship was now riding lower in the water than the other two, and this was our only indication the torpedoes may have done their job.

When we reached the new position, Jack wasted no time firing off another four missiles. At periscope depth I watched again as the water exploded in front of the next ship.

As the water spray cleared I took notice to the frantic activity taking place on the deck of the ship. My stomach lurched when I saw what they were doing.

I picked up the microphone for the encrypted radio. "Erica!" I yelled with obvious urgency.

"Right here, Nick. What's wrong?"

"There are six heavily armed helicopters and eleven boats loaded with terrorists headed for the island. Let's set up a welcoming party for them."

"I'm on it," she said. "Anything else?"

After careful thought: "Yeah. Tell me what you and your dad are keeping from me."

"Dammit Nick, I'm serious!"

"Okay. Just save me some bad guys for when I get back."

"Will do, Nick."

I felt strange. Heart was racing. Head was clear. *Too* clear. "Laurie!" I yelled, not knowing she was behind me.

"Yes, Commander?" she said with a smirk.

"Ahh, cut the crap and light me a Lady."

"Aye, Commander," she said giggling as she handed me one.

"Laurie," I said with a sigh, "this stuff's gone to your head."

Now with a serious face: "But Nick. That's where it's *supposed* to go!"

Sonar now showed two ships riding low in the water; one ready to capsize. Though we couldn't see it, the remaining occupants of the two sinking ships were climbing onto the middle ship, which as of yet was still afloat. Meanwhile, a flotilla of old fishing trawlers full of lightly-armed terrorists were streaking out across the water toward Arabella, guarded by heavily-armed air support. I'd considered surfacing next to one of the boats, open the hatch and start blasting the bastards with an MP5, but I knew the Sikorski gunships above them would tear the Mirage to pieces. I made a decision instead to stay with the remaining Sovremenny Destroyer.

Once more we repositioned ourselves starboard of the last ship, careful to skirt around the two that were capsizing.

"Okay, Jack," I said when we were in position, "hit her with our last salvo."

This time Laurie held the camcorder to the periscope and recorded the explosions of water. Trying to keep her giggling under control, she said with an Arabic accent: "You sunk my battleship! Ah, my fiddend?"

"Dean, as much as I'd love to watch these rats drown, get us back to the island before they rip the place apart."

"Aye, Commander Stone," he said with a grin.

Ah, I could get use to that name. Just one more thing to swell my already-inflated ego.

Fearing the worst, I looked. What I saw brought a new sense of urgency to the situation. In the spot I'd earlier seen a Sovremenny Destroyer, I now saw THREE Destroyers, lined up side-to-side with their bows pointed at us. The ship with the mangled conn tower sat in the middle.

"I guess that's what he meant when he said more were on the way," I said.

Jack took his first look at the new set of targets. "At this angle, if a torpedo hit at all, it would hit at an angle and just bounce right off the hull. We could hit it broadside, but we could only take one out. Before we can maneuver for another hit, they'd be full-steam toward the island."

I thought about this for a minute, and an idea popped into my brain. "Can we pass under them undetected?"

"Sure," Jack said, "if we go slower."

"Do it. Put us a thousand yards astern of the ships."

"Aye Commander."

I turned to look at Dean. "Say what?"

"Ah, sorry Nick, I got carried away. You sounded just like your dad."

"Really! Dad commanded the Mirage? He never mentioned that. He said he drank and partied a lot."

"Yep, he did a lot of that too, but between parties, he commanded the Mirage, just before he left."

The Mirage stopped and turned 180 degrees to the north, facing the sterns of the three ships. We raised to periscope depth and I took another look.

"How many propellers does the Sovremenny have?" I asked.

"Screws, Nick. They're called screws," Dean said. "She has two."

As he answered, his face lit up, realizing my idea. "That could work. Might have to run 'em at her twice."

He relayed the idea to Jack, who loaded up all four torpedo bays. "Locked on...firing one," then a swishing sound came from the bow as the torpedo was launched, "firing two...and three."

The three torpedoes cruised just a foot under the water's surface at 40 knots, as I stared with great anticipation at the ships through the periscope. Within twenty seconds a huge burst of water exploded from the rear of the first ship, followed immediately by bursts of water from the rear of the other two.

"Reload and hit them again," I said.

Three more torpedoes were again launched at the ships. All six torpedoes had effectively broken the screw shafts and mangled the rudders into twisted steel. Though they stayed afloat, the ships could no longer move or even steer. Now we had time to work on them.

Still looking through the periscope, I saw a series of tiny lights rise up from the ships and grow brighter as they moved toward us. By now I could see them clearly for what they were: six Sikorski attack helicopters.

"Shit! Dive! Fucking dive now!" I screamed.

Without so much as a delay, the ballast tanks were flooded and we began plummeting into the ocean.

"What did you see?" Dean asked, shock on his face.

"Shh!" I said, pointing upward. "Listen."

Within seconds, a cacophony of whumping rotor blades hovered over the mirage, followed by tink! tink tink! as the gunships' bullets bounced harmlessly off the hull during our descent to 1,000 feet.

After catching my breath, I said, "Take us a thousand yards off the ships' starboard. Let's sink the bastards."

The sub moved with the speed and grace of a shark hunting its prey.

"There were six of them!" I yelled. "Two from each ship, right?"

"Yep, but the video you shot of your attack on the ship showed empty helipads. So where were they when you were attacking the ship?"

Chapter Eleven

By nightfall, the men (and two women) of the island were armed, the women and children had been herded into the underground bunkers. Dean and Jack had spent the past few hours preparing the USS Mirage for her first launch in over twenty years. The submarine's systems came online slowly, the sonar had to be fixed, batteries were charged and an encrypted radio was installed to communicate with Erica, who would relay messages from Dean's house to others on the island.

The armed natives were warned of the possibility that al-Qaeda could make landfall while the Mirage was still at sea. They were given very simple instructions: stay in groups, and shoot to kill. They guarded the neighborhoods, the police station and main roads, and a larger group watched the harbor and were armed with M16s and hand grenades to disintegrate anything that shouldn't be there. Another group, the same size and similarly armed, were guarding the entrance to the underground complex from the outside of the huge steel door. None of them held the key to the door -- in fact, the key was hidden inside a bail of hay in Dean's barn. At his insistence, Dr. Moore was among the men who guarded the entrance.

The unofficial crew of the USS Mirage consisted of Dean, Jack, Laurie and myself. Dean would be the navigator, Jack ran the combat systems, and with simple instructions I would monitor the sonar. Laurie, camcorder in hand, was the film crew. This would make for one hell of a home video!

At midnight, with a nearly full moon illuminating a cloudless sky, the four of us climbed into the hull of the Mirage. Before I shut the hatch, I took another look at the moon. God willing, we would all see it again. With that thought, I closed and secured the hatch.

"Fifteen minutes," Jack said, "and she'll be ready to head out."

We used that time to discuss tactics. The hull of the Sovremenny was double-armored, and may withstand the impact of a single torpedo strike. Since the hull is compartmentalized, the torpedoes would need to be aimed at different sections.

The ship's three remaining trawlers hanging over the sides would likely be manned and deployed. They would be difficult to hit with torpedoes and would be dealt with later.

With a light swishing sound, the Mirage could be felt reversing, pulling away from the dock. She turned, paused, and commenced forward at a heading of 180°, out to sea.

"Sonar, how much water under her keel?" Dean called out from the navigation room.

Watching the sonar screen I said, "30 feet." As we passed the southern tip of the island I called out, "40 feet...60 feet...100 feet...500...2000. We've cleared the shelf."

"Diving to 500 feet," Dean called out, "changing course to one nine five, speed thirty knots."

At this speed we would be in visual range of the ship in 45 minutes. For the most part, we weren't talking much. Not for fear of being heard by the Sovremenny - the Mirage was lined with sound-snuffing acoustic tiles - but because we all knew the seriousness of the task, and we were all aware of the possibility that we may not return. Far more tragic fates had befallen much more experienced crews, but we had luck on our side. Barely.

Laurie, in a drug-induced euphoria, wandered from room to room, camera held to her face, occasionally bumping into walls, recording our somber faces waiting for action.

At 12:53am the sonar screen beeped, indicating the target was now 3,000 yards away.

"All stop," Dean called out, "raising to periscope depth."

The Mirage slowly slithered its way to within 20 feet of the surface. In the center of the control room, the periscope was a long tube that hung from the ceiling, almost to the floor. Dean pulled up on it and took a look at the Sovremenny.

"Oh, this can't be good," he said. "Nick, have a look."

Laurie remained silent toward the rear of the barn. She and Adrian were still assembling guns, but I knew she was listening.

"I don't know. Maybe it's one of those feelings of déjà vu? As corny as it sounds, I almost want to ask if we've met before."

She sat silently on a bail of hay, twirling a bullet between her fingers and staring at the ground. Finally she shrugged. "I don't know, Nick. Maybe we knew each other in a past life. Maybe there's some cosmic reasoning behind it. But is it really important?"

I thought about it. "No, probably not. It's just...it's one of those annoying little feelings that tickles the back of your brain. Like when you leave the house and you swear you've forgotten something. But no, it's not that important."

The third bunker contained fourteen cases of Hellfire missiles, twenty-two cases of LRSMs, sixteen cases of LRAMs, and twelve cases of machine gun ammo for the Mustang. When Dean came back we loaded up a few of each.

When Jack returned, the five of us opened the rest of the bunkers and did a cursory inventory. We found much more of the same: weaponry, missiles, ammo and torpedoes. What Emery agreed to sell to al-Qaeda was only a small percentage of what we'd found down here. What was to stop them from taking it all? Perhaps Emery didn't have a clue as to how much was down here.

I backtracked to each bunker again. I found Dean and Jack in the second bunker. "Which one has the nukes?" I asked.

"None of them," Dean said with a worried look.

"Either there never were any," Jack said, "or they already took them."

I nodded. "They're already on the ship. That must've been what they were loading each time they came out here."

"So we sink the fuckers," Jack said.

I took another look around the bunker, as if seeing it for the first time. We could start - maybe even win - a war on any country we chose.

"So where do you suppose all this stuff came from?" I asked.

"From years of saving and storing," Dean said. "Emery himself probably wrote it off as having been used during sea trials or destroyed when Vietnam ended. As for the nukes, I couldn't even begin to guess."

"Looks to me like this was Emery's retirement fund," Jack said.

Curiosity suddenly struck me. "Speaking of Satan, let's go check in on him."

We drove both vehicles back to the entrance. I got out, my .45 drawn, and unlocked the door. I opened it and noticed the light was off. Why would Emery turn the light off? I turned it on and saw Emery lying on the floor, eyes wide and unseeing, mouth agape, head surrounded in congealing blood.

Dean and Jack, who were close behind, took a good look at the scene. The back of Emery's skull had been crushed on the cement floor where he lay now. His neck had also been crushed, almost to the point of decapitation.

"How in hell could he have done that to himself?" Dean asked.

"There's no way," Jack said, "he couldn't have. Could there be another key?"

"Nope," Dean said, "this's the only one."

I studied the still-rotting corpse of Mrs. Emery. She maintained a huge, toothy grin after her lips had decayed away. She almost looked...I don't know, proud of herself?

"Do either of you believe in ghosts?" I asked with the slightest grin.

With that thought, we quickly closed and locked the door, and returned in both vehicles to Dean's barn.

Laurie, Adrian and I began the task of assembling and loading the MP5s, while Dean and Jack passed them out to every man on the island, with instructions to the women to get food and water ready. Dean and Jack would then round them all up and drop them off at the underground complex. This would provide the only safety for an island at war.

By mid-evening, Erica stopped by. "You don't really think I was really going to sit in a bunker while the men had all the fun, do you?"

"Then what did you have in mind?" I asked her, though I already knew the answer.

She smiled. "I intend to stay and fight, whether you let me or not."

"Somehow I figured you would," I said.

Laurie's animosity toward Erica had subsided, but Erica still gave off those weird vibes that would rattle my head. I decided to make it known.

"What is it about you that makes me feel so weird around you?" I asked.

She looked at me with a face of curiosity, and something else. Alarm, maybe?

"Weird? How do I make you feel weird?"

Chapter Ten

Today I was able to sleep in till noon. This was the most sleep we've had since we got here, and I for one very much appreciated it. However, it wasn't me that woke me up -- it was the dreaded, yet anticipated knock at the door. Again.

"Nick!" Adrian said. "Suit up and gear up. Those towelhead bastards are down at the harbor. They keep asking about a key."

I woke Laurie up, who didn't seem to appreciate it (because she gave me the finger and went back to sleep).

"Laurie! Wake up, suit up and gear up," I said, using Adrian's terminology. "Al-Qaeda's here."

At those words, she jumped out of bed already dressed. She grabbed her gun and we went out the door.

"Good afternoon, my friend," the tallest one said with a huge shit-eating grin and pronouncing it 'fiddend.' "We were told you might have our key. You give it back, ah?"

He was flanked by three middle-eastern guards, each holding a 9mm gun and a serious, determined look on their faces.

"Sorry, my fiddend," I said, mocking him, "I keep-a-dah key, you go eat pork. Ah, my fiddend?"

His grin slowly faded to match the sullen faces of his bodyguards. "You see, we do business with your Governor Emery. But we cannot find."

"He's attending his wife's funeral right now," I said. "So you'll be dealing with me instead. And I say, you can take those diapers off your head, and firmly insert them in your backside."

"We have money, ah? We do deal, we go home. No more insult, no more hostility."

I rubbed my chin, pretending to think about his offer. "Tell ya What. I want you to take a message for me back to your leader."

"Ah? What the message?"

At the end of his question Laurie fired off a round into the hearts of the three armed terrorists. Adrian came up from behind and quickly pocketed the three guns.

He looked down at his fallen habibis, then back to me, his grin returning. "We have more, fiddend. And even more on the way. You pay to Allah with your blood."

One at a time he dragged each of his dead bodyguards back to his boat, and left.

"Here that, Nick?" Laurie asked with alarm. "They're coming back, and more on the way. What's that mean?"

"Means we need to be ready to make the first move. Bin Laden has a ship full of men just waiting to commit suicide for their cause. That puts us at a really bad disadvantage."

We walked back to Dean's house and made a phone call. Minutes later, Jack showed up with Chief Mendez in tow, which somewhat surprised me. I had much doubt he would take me up on my offer, since there was actual danger involved.

"First, we go unlock some doors," I said, holding up the brass key. "Then we load up the Mirage with as much firepower as she'll hold."

We took the pickup and Dean's Jeep back to the underground complex. We drove to the opposite end, got out and unlocked the first door. The bunker was stacked with crates, six feet high. We pulled one down and opened it. MP5s. Lots of them! A quick check revealed three more boxes of MP5s, and two more of ammunition for the MP5. We loaded those and Dean drove back to his house to unload them in his barn. The rest of the stock in that bunker consisted of M16s with several crates of ammo, hand grenades and remote-detonated satchel charges.

The second bunker contained weaponry for the Mirage: Tomahawk and Harpoon missiles, which we wouldn't need, and several torpedoes. Those we loaded into the pickup -- eighteen of them total. I sent Jack with the pickup to load them into the submarine.

I opened the second cell. "Luis, go home. If you're willing to help fix this, see me tomorrow morning. Jack, I already know I'll be seeing you tomorrow."

"You couldn't stop me, Nick," he said with a grin.

"Your turn, Emery," I said, unlocking his cell. Laurie and I dragged him to the back of the pickup, leaving two tiny trails of blood from his feet.

We drove back to the base with our human cargo. Emery whined in pain, and at one point tried to stand up. A quick jerk of the steering wheel knocked him back to the bed of the truck.

We pulled into the underground complex and stopped at the first bunker door.

"I'll have you arrested for this, Stone," he said as I got out of the truck.

I smiled at his arrogance and dragged him from the truck. "Time for a family reunion, Emery." I stood him on his feet, causing him to give a sharp cry of pain. I hobbled him over to the door, opened it and turned the light on.

At first I heard only tiny squeaking sounds. I looked over and saw they were coming from Emery's mouth. As he stared in horror at the rotting corpse that used to be his wife, I also observed the front of his pants turn a dark color. A yellow puddle mixed with blood began to form at his feet.

"Is she how you remember her?" I asked him.

Of course she wasn't. She'd lost a lot of weight since then.

He remained speechless as he absently took a few steps forward into the bunker. I took advantage of this by closing and locking the door. Not a sound could be heard through the door as we left the complex.

It was 2am when we found our way back to Dr. Moore's house. It'd been a long day for both of us, but sleep doesn't come easy when an arsenal of Arabs is sitting right off shore waiting to attack. Dr. Moore stopped us to ask where we'd been, but I waved him off. No talk, need sleep. Zzzz...

Laurie grabbed me by the arm and pulled me down behind a Dumpster, putting far more urgency into the situation than I was. "Damn Nick, how'd you know they'd be back tonight?" she asked in a whisper.

"Because I attacked them today, remember? Figured after that, they'd pick up the pace a bit."

We ran the last few yards to the ramp leading underground, then hid in the shadows and waited.

"Take the first shot you get. Don't even let them raise their guns."

Laurie gave me an unexpected elbow to the ribs. "Honestly Nick, you act like I've never done this before."

The two men soon came into view. They were dressed head-to-toe in black clothing as Laurie and I were, but with one small difference. One carried a small machine gun. She and I raised our guns and fired.

What can I say? We goofed. It was really just a communicational error. Perhaps I should've said, *You take the one on the left*, like they do in the movies, because we both made the mistake of shooting the unarmed terrorist, leaving the one with the machine gun free to rain bullets on us.

He'd only squeezed off 20 or 30 rounds that bounced erratically off the steel door behind us, then ran behind the Dumpster where we had earlier been hiding.

"Smooth move, Nick," she said.

"I didn't do any worse than you, dear."

The lone terrorist hid silently behind the Dumpster while we hid inside the ramp.

I lifted my head and took a peek at the Dumpster, only ten feet away. As I did, another burst of gunfire erupted in my general direction, one whizzing past my ear.

"Any more ingenious insights, Einstein?"

As she asked, an idea materialized. "Maybe. Gimme your gun."

I removed the clip from Laurie's .45 and removed all but three bullets. I reinserted the clip and took another peek at the Dumpster, earning me another staccato of gunfire. I raised Laurie's gun, fired off the three bullets and clicked the trigger of the empty gun four more times. I threw the gun so it landed a few feet behind the Dumpster and ducked down.

"Fuck! I'm out!" I yelled to Laurie, a bit louder than necessary.

When she caught on to the plan, she too yelled, "What?! Damn you, Nick! How could you get us trapped here? This's suicide!"

We crouched down in the shadows and waited. The man dressed in black soon approached us, gun down to his side and showing no signs of apprehension. In one swift move I raised my gun and fired off two shots, the first hitting him in the neck, the other in the heart.

A cursory search of the two dead terrorists revealed a cell phone, a pack of Marlboros, another audio cassette and a huge brass key. Jackpot.

Laurie drove the pickup out and we loaded the two bodies into the back. We drove back to where we saw them climb over the sea wall. Against the wall was a fishing trawler, one of four I saw hanging off the side of their Destroyer. We unceremoniously dumped the bodies onto the trawler's deck, and I climbed down. The trawler was still running, and it took little effort to take some gas from the tank and soak the deck.

"Ready?" I asked Laurie, who was standing on the sea wall.

She drew her gun and aimed. "Hit it!"

I floored the throttle of the trawler, jumped off the stern and onto the wall. As the boat cleared us, she fired a round into the deck, which burst into flames. The flaming trawler made it almost an entire mile out to sea before it exploded in a bright fireball that lit up the night sky.

After driving the pickup back to the police station, I found Emery on the floor of his cell, moaning in pain. Uncle Luis was pacing his cell, smoking a cigarette and, needless to say, working up quite a sweat.

"Hate to say it Nick, but this's better than watching CNN," Jack said with a grin as he sat in a chair in front of the cells, gun in one hand, watching the two zoo exhibits.

Entering the police station, I directed Emery into one of the station's three jail cells and closed and locked the door behind him.

"I'm making a citizen's arrest," I said, "for the murder of Evelyn A. Emery."

He arrogantly chuckled to himself. "What, you gonna turn me in? You got no evidence, Stone. It would never even make it to court."

I smiled. "No, I plan to be the judge and jury on this case. But first things first. How 'bout you tell me about the deal you made with al-Qaeda?"

Silence befell him, as I figured it might, so I fired a shot into his left foot.

"Ahhh! Fuck you, Stone!" he seethed.

Then another shot into his right foot. This was better than skeet shooting!

"Aaaaahhhhh!! Okay! Enough!" he yelled as blood began to pool on the floor around his feet.

"So what was in your little yard sale?"

"The USS Mirage!" he yelled through clenched teeth. He took several deep breaths in an effort to thwart off the pain in his feet, then continued more calmly. "Sixteen Tomahawk missiles, sixteen Harpoon missiles, thirty torpedoes. Twenty crates of MP5s, M16s and .4S service pistols," he took a deep breath and continued. "and six 500-megaton nuclear warheads."

Instantly goosebumps raced up my arms. I looked again at Laurie. She was staring at Emery, face white as a ghost. Images ran through my mind in seconds: the cold, calculated attacks on September Eleventh, this time with nuclear weapons. And this slime was going to help them destroy our country while walking away with a profit.

"Where's the key?" I demanded, unable to hold back my anger.

"What key?"

"The one to the storage bunkers!" I screamed.

"They have it," he said. "It's the only one."

I fought back the desire to empty my clip into this piece of human excrement. Before I lost control, I called Jack, reprised him of the situation and had him come to the station to babysit Emery. Just in case, I put the chief in another cell. "I still don't trust you, Uncle Luis. Wait here till I do."

"Hey Emery. How much were you going to make from this deal?"

He looked up at me, his eyes filled with pain and hatred. "Fourteen million...upon delivery."

I shook my head. "Upon delivery... You moron! Did it ever occur to you that after handing over that much firepower, they might kill you instead of paying you?"

He stared down at the floor. Or maybe at his bleeding feet.

I turned back to Jack, who had just arrived, and handed him the chief's gun. "If Emery moves, pick another body part to shoot. C'mon Laurie."

As she and I walked to the base, a thought occurred to me. "How long you think those al-Qaeda fuckers have been at sea?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? Probably since the start of the Iraqi war."

I nodded. "Probably been sea-sick for quite a while. Bet they're dreaming of a nice piece of dry land by now."

Now she caught what I was thinking.

"You think they'll take the island?" she asked.

"A thousand men armed with M16s and MP5s, what's to stop them? And what better place to set up a training camp? This place has everything they'd need to plan another attack, and it's so isolated, no one would know they were here. Especially after killing everyone on the island."

"So what are we doing here?" she asked as we were halfway across the base.

"We're here for them," I said, pointing to the two shadowy figures climbing over the sea wall on the east side of the base.

"Dammit Nick, he could ruin my marriage!" he said, stabbing out his cigarette in an ashtray.

"I can ruin your head," I said, tapping him on the head with my .45. "I already know she was having an affair. Sounds like it was with you. How 'bout you take it from there?"

He lit another cigarette, and stared at the wall. "Evelyn and I were only together a few times," the chief began. "My wife and I were having trouble. And Evelyn...I guess she was just lonely."

"And then what? Emery found out and killed her?"

He shook his head. "Shit, James knew. He didn't much care! Apparently she found some... documents or something. Had something to do with James and something he was doing. She confronted him about it, threatened to tell. So he killed her."

"How did you find out about all this?"

"James called me...ya know, right after. When I got there, I found Evelyn on the kitchen floor with a hole in her forehead. Christ, her eyes were still open when I got there and her right arm was still twitching! Madre de Dios, I'll never forget that." He took a deep breath. "James swore if I told anyone he'd ruin my marriage, maybe even find a way to pin the murder on me."

"Who got rid of the body?" I asked.

"I did. I told James I'd dumped her out at sea. But I didn't. I kept her body in case he did try to frame me, because she's still got the slug from his gun in her skull."

I nodded. "I'll bet he was furious when I showed up with Evelyn's driver's license. What'd he say to that?"

"Told me to get rid of you or he'll get rid of me."

I smiled. "No, I don't think he'll be doing that. So what was Emery doing? Anything to do with that ship out there?"

"He said he was selling them stuff. Some leftover stuff from the base."

"Selling what stuff?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. All I saw out there were a few Navy patrol boats. I'm sure that's not what these guys are after."

"What guys, Luis? Who are they?"

"Aw God, Nick. Haven't I told you enough?"

I answered his question in the form of a bullet whizzing past his left ear.

"Jesus Christ, Nick! Are you fucking psycho??"

"No, Luis. Just impatient. Who are they?"

"Fucking al-Qaeda! Alright??"

"Really!" I said incredulously. It was hard to hide the surprise on my face. "Osama Bin Lyin' is on that ship?"

"That's the rumor, Nick. Suppose to be his Whole team. All the main players and over a thousand of his henchmen just waiting to go meet Allah."

"Okay, we need to get Emery back here. Call him, Luis. Tell him I got you hostage and I plan to tell the authorities about his wife. That'll get him here."

While he made the call, Laurie and I talked.

"What are you thinking, Nick?"

"We're going to find out what Emery knows, then take him out of the equation."

She raised an eyebrow. "You're not gonna kill him, are you?"

I smiled. "No, I have a much more fitting punishment for him."

"He's on his way, Nick," the chief said after hanging up the phone.

It was after midnight when Emery stepped off his yacht in the harbor. Leaving Laurie at the police station, I was able to meet Emery at the dock.

"Your little lapdog talked," I told him as he walked at gunpoint in front of me back to the police station.

"Go fuck yourself, Stone," he angrily retorted.

"I tried. It got lonely."

Chapter Nine

At Dr. Moore's house, Laurie played back the tape for Erica and Dr. Moore. They seemed confused until I told them it wasn't an old movie clip, but something I filmed just two hours ago.

"Emery won't be able to hurt you," I said. "In fact, I guarantee you'll never see him again."

He shook his head. "No, Nick. You don't understand. It's not him I fear. He...he knows things. About my past."

"Something that could hurt *me*, right?" I asked, remembering the conversation I'd overheard between Erica and her dad.

"Yes Nick. Might hurt Erica and myself as well."

"That can't be helped, Doc. What do you know about Mrs. Emery?"

He took a deep breath, as if to resign himself to the fact that I wasn't going to back down. "I saw her the night she disappeared. She came here, to the house."

"And what was said?" I persisted.

Dr. Moore sat down on the couch and pulled a nearly empty bottle of whiskey from between the cushions. The black label suggested it was Jack Daniels. He took a big pull from the bottle, put the cap back on and pretended to read the label."

Erica soon overcame her shock and snatched the bottle from his hand. "Dad?! When did you start drinking again??"

He gave her a sad smile. "Sorry, sweetheart. I never really stopped." He paused for a moment, staring at the floor, lost in a far off memory. "Evelyn was scared out of her mind," he finally said. "She just said 'James found out about us! I can't go back there!' Before you ask, no, she wasn't having an affair with me. I have no idea who she was talking about. Emery showed up here about an hour later and ordered her to go home with him. And being the good little soldier's wife, she did. That was the last anyone ever saw of her."

I took a deep breath. "It wasn't the last. I saw her last night."

Dr. Moore and Erica both looked at me like they'd seen a ghost. "You saw her? Where??" Then realization came over him and he seemed to sink back into the couch. "She's dead, isn't she?"

I nodded.

Dr. Moore grabbed the bottle from Erica's grasp and took the last pull from the now empty whiskey bottle. Staring at the floor he said, "I'd always hoped she was alive -- that maybe she *did* just run off. Well, if Emery killed her, then I'm sure your uncle knew about it. He may've even helped him cover it up."

Laurie and I entered the police station, once again finding the overweight chief at his desk, smoking a cigarette and sweating profusely.

"Hey Chief," I said as Laurie and I walked up and sat on his desk.

"Aw Christ, Nick, now what?"

"What?" I asked innocently. "Can't I drop in on family?"

"Sure...family, yeah Nick. What can I do for ya?"

"Have you ever played Truth or Dare, Uncle Luis?"

"Ehh... Truth or Dare? No, don't think so. What is it?"

"It's a game where you tell me the Truth," then Laurie and I both aimed our .45s' at his fat little head, "and I DARE you to lie to me."

Again, a notable and much longer fart emanated from the chief's wide ass. I think this one was wet.

"Need a minute to compose yourself, chief?"

"No. That's okay Nick."

"What happened to Mrs. Emery?"

Now filled with over-confidence, I turned toward the ship again, aligning myself with the conn tower. I badly wanted face-to-face contact with these people. As I neared, I briefly saw a brown-skinned face, with a long black beard hanging from his chin, and huge brown eyes, wide with fright. Of course, I only caught a fleeting glimpse, because at that very second I opened up the guns and fired six rounds, causing his head to explode in a crimson mess.

Declaring that to be my final kill, I climbed back up to 700 feet, skimming the ocean surface all the way back to Arabella. After a harsh, bumpy landing, I parked the Mustang behind the barn where Dean and Laurie were waiting. I grabbed the camcorder and jumped out, and Laurie gave me a kiss; one of those movie kisses, really, long and intense, that I'm sure most wives and girlfriends gave their Navy men after returning from Hell after a showdown with Satan.

I handed Dean the camcorder. "Should make a nice instructional video," I said with a smirk.

We went in the house and began pouring over the video, but still never found a flag.

"It's unusual," Dean began, "any country would proudly fly their colors on a \$400-million dollar ship." He paused the video before the conn tower blew up. "But that guy definitely looks Middle-Eastern."

"Damn, Nick! It's like watching an old war movie!" Laurie said, pressing rewind for the fifth time. "That dude's head blew up like one of Gallagher's watermelons!"

I turned back to Dean. "They had four boats hanging over the sides on winches. Think they might pay us a visit and return the favor?"

He thought about this. "I don't know. There are enough men on this island to outnumber four boatloads of guys, but I doubt that *they* know that."

I shook my head in irritation. "I'm getting sick of this, Dean. I need to find out who 'they' are. C'mon Laurie, let's go have another talk with the Doc."

missile. Dean shut the canopy lid as I hit the magneto switch and pressed the Start button. The massive four-blade propeller began to spin with a grinding sound, and the twelve-cylinder Pratt and Whitney engine coughed to life, throwing a cloud of smoke from the nose of the plane. I thought maybe the engine had blown up till the smoke cleared and the engine sound smoothed out to a low purr.

I put my hands on the wheel and felt a rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins. This was the same wheel a brave Navy pilot put his hands sixty years ago, to go off and tight to the death. It was reassuring to know that very pilot lived long enough to return to the base a hero.

Remembering the camcorder sitting in the seat next to me, I reached down, turned it on and hit the Record button. I placed it on top of the console, pointing out the window, and fastened it with several strips of duct tape. I suddenly felt like I was in the front seat of a cop car.

I tapped the throttle and the Mustang lurched far too quickly from its parking spot toward the grass runway. Tapping the brake, I reminded myself this wasn't a Cessna. The Mustang had ten times the horsepower, and its controls were very touchy.

At the end of the runway I set the flaps to full and set the brake, then brought the Mustang's engine to full throttle. For a few seconds the vibrations from the engine rattled my teeth, but that side-effect soon subsided. I released the brake, and the plane seemed to be catapulted across the brown grass. I gently pulled back on the yoke and the old warplane majestically rose into the air with enough force to make the Cessna feel like a glorified child's toy. At 700 feet I leveled off and banked to the south. The plane flipped over on its side - TOO far - in the blink of an eye. Okay. Too touchy. Too maneuverable. Calm down, self. Baby steps.

I climbed to 2,000 feet and got acquainted with the Mustang. I did some rolls, dives and a 450 stall -pointing her nose straight up till she stalled, hung suspended in the sky for a mere second, then flipped nose-down toward Earth. This's the kind of fun you just can't have in a Cessna!

I dove back down to 700 feet and made a bee-line due south. I was already at 180 knots and it didn't take long to spot the ship as it emerged through the haze that clung to the horizon. The Sovremenny still sat in its moorings, its bow pointing west and showing me its broadside. I backed the airspeed down to 120 knots and dropped to 500 feet as I approached.

I made the first flyby across the ship's stern. I couldn't see a flag, but I did notice the two SAM launchers protruding from the rear deck. I hoped like hell this little computer screen would tell me if they launched one at me.

I looped back for another pass over the middle of the ship. Still no flag, no gunfire, no missiles, no freakin' fun whatsoever! I could've done this in the Cessna.

I had 180'd around again for another pass over the bow, when out of the corner of my eye I saw a puff of white smoke emanate from one of the SAMs. At the same instant the digital display on the console lit up like a Christmas tree and showed me where the missile was. As I passed over the bow of the ship, I heard POWPOWPOWPOW from the AA guns, but thankfully the bullets missed.

Now flying away from the ship I could see on the screen the missile was tailing me and closing fast. Before it could find it's mark, I flipped the plane on it's side and made an extremely hard break to the right, one that would've surely snapped the wings off had I still been doing 180 knots. The missile momentarily continued straight, but slowly veered its course on a really wide turn toward me. Before it could complete its turn, the missile's fuel ran out and it dropped harmlessly into the ocean.

I continued away from the ship until it became a hazy blur behind me. I switched over to the LRSMs and turned back toward the ship. As soon as it came into view, the computer locked on to the two SAM launchers. I pressed the red Fire button on the screen which sent two simultaneous missiles toward the ship, leaving a long trail of White smoke in its wake. I hung back and turned slightly to begin a wide circle around the ship. The missiles must have found their target, because from this distance I could see two tiny balls of fire emerge from the ship's stern.

"They weren't too cooperative, but I presented enough of a case to make them back off."

"You didn't find anything out?"

"Just that he knew his wife was dead. But he honestly had no clue where we'd found her body, so someone else was responsible for getting rid of it - probably Uncle Luis. Don't know who pulled the trigger though. Emery went back to Guam, and I'll assume he left instructions with his lapdog not to screw with us."

"And the Russian warship?"

I shook my head. "Nope, nothing."

We went back in to Dean's house to figure out the next step. I had some worry about returning to Dr. Moore's house. I still had no idea if he was in on the conspiracy or not, but I knew he was hiding something. And that was enough to put my trust on hold.

"Ready to fly the Mustang?" Dean asked.

"To look for the flag? Sure, but...I thought you said it'd be too dangerous?"

He nodded. "It is, but like you said, it needs to be done."

"And if they start shooting at me?"

He shrugged. "Turn."

I looked over at Laurie, who sat on the couch, staring out the window. "What do you think, Laurie?"

Without looking at me she said, "It's dumb, Nick. I don't think you'll come back, and I think I'll go back to Detroit a widow. But it doesn't matter, does it? You're going to go anyway."

"I know this feels like a suicide run," Dean began, "but we need to know who we're dealing with. And if they shoot at you, we'll also know their intentions. But don't open fire on them first! That's how wars get started."

I was puzzled. "How the hell am I gonna open fire on them? Stick my .45 out the window?" I gave a slight chuckle. "Not that I haven't done that before."

"Course not! Use the twin machine guns."

"Really. You have ammo for that thing??"

"Sure. Two thousand rounds on each gun, plus four missiles. The plane's been retro-fitted with some modern technology. Two of the missiles are LRSMS -- Long-range Air-To-Surface missiles. If they start shooting, get as far away as you can. The Sovremenny has two Gadfly SAMS -- Surface-to-Air missiles. Their launchers can lock on to you at no more than 1200 yards. Your LRSMS can lock on at 3,000 yards."

"Sounds like I'll be armed to the teeth. What are the other two missiles?" I asked.

"Those are QRAMS -- Quick-Maneuver Air-To-Air missiles. The Sovremenny has two helipads with two Sikorsky Gunship helicopters, but they won't stand a chance against QRAMs. After that, they'll still have six Anti-Aircraft guns, but don't hang out long if they start shooting. Canceling their SAMs will be easy, but getting close enough to shoot out their AA guns would be suicide."

I sat back in Dean's Lazyboy and closed my eyes. This was the real thing. Real combat, real targets and real bullets. And a real chance of not coming back. I love it! The head rush! This was *nothing* like knocking over a bank or gunning down drugs dealers and Lear pilots. Those had been the very things Laurie and I both lived for. We were felony addicts. But this...was so much more! It wasn't fighting for money. It was fighting for the prosperity of the island. No chance in hell I'd pass this up.

"Laurie. Is the camcorder charged up?"

"Yep, why?"

"Put in a new cassette. Dean, got any duct tape? I have an idea."

The three of us walked out to the Mustang. Though Laurie still tried to talk me out of going, she finally put her arms around me and I gave her one of those nice, long kisses I was sure all Navy men gave their wives or girlfriends before going off to face their unknown fates.

I climbed into the cockpit and took my first look at the Mustang's controls. Everything looked old and dusty, except for the digital display mounted on the console. I took a few minutes to learn the computer's controls, which nearly caused me to accidentally launch a

"Oh, I dunno. Your dirty underwear was inventoried. A stapler was inventoried. Even a ham and cheese fucking sandwich from your fridge was inventoried! And you expect me to believe her purse was simply overlooked?"

The governor shifted uneasily in his chair. Chief Mendez lit his third cigarette. Neither said a word, so I moved in for the kill.

"I'll tell ya what I think. I think her purse wasn't inventoried because it simply wasn't there. Don't you think that's possible, Chief?"

"Sure Nick, I...anything's possible," the human smokestack said.

"How about you, Guv?"

"Alright !" he huffed. "Maybe her purse wasn't there. So??"

"So, it would've been a bad assumption to say she was absolutely abducted. Any moron would say there's reasonable doubt. With a missing purse, that's enough for any inadequate island cop to entertain, *and investigate*, the possibility she ran off."

The chief's cigarette was shaking. Emery simply rolled his eyes and said, "Fine! Maybe she ran off! Does that make you happy?? That still leaves the investigation at a dead-end. And now you won't have to worry about having to solve it, Detective Stone."

"That's true, Guv. I won't have to worry. I have my own lead."

"And what would that be, Stone?"

I played my trump card, and took the driver's license from my pocket and tossed it on the desk like the Ace of Spades at a poker tournament.

Both men stared at it, mouths agape. Emery's face turned red. The chief notably farted. I sat back and waited for the shock - and the smell - to clear the air.

Governor Emery finally broke the silence by asking, "Where in hell did you get this?" He looked as though he genuinely didn't know.

"From her purse," I said with a smirk.

He stared at me, eyes wide with horror. "And where the hell did you get her purse?"

"From Mrs. Emery."

After a long pause, he leaned back in his chair, arms folded, and a stern look on his face. "So. You found her body then." It wasn't a question.

"Hey, slow down, I never said 'body.' No one said she was dead. Good assumption though, but I'm guessing you already knew she was dead."

He just stared at me with ice-cold eyes and said nothing.

"Want to talk about it, Guv? No? How 'bout you, dear uncle?" Neither said a word. "Didn't think so."

I sat on the chief's desk and sparked up a Lady Jane. In a freakin' police station! How cool is Nick Stone??

"I don't suppose either of you could tell me who's on that Russian warship out there, could ya?"

More silence. "That's f1ne, I'll f1nd out. Hey Unk, what k1nda p1ece ya carry?"

Still shaking, he pulled his gun from his desk.

"Aww, isn't that cute! An adorable little 9mm Beretta. Lemmie see it."

He handed it to me. I pulled the clip and took out a bullet.

"That's a tiny little bullet. What size hole you think that would make in a human skull? Maybe a quarter-inch?"

They said nothing as I handed the Beretta and its clip back to my uncle. I kept the bullet. I don't know Why. Perhaps I'm a klepto at heart.

I took out my 45mm hand-cannon. "This here's what I carry," I said, trying to sound a little like Clint Eastwood. "Haven't fired it since I bought it in Guam. Sure would be nice if one of you tried to come after me when I leave the station."

They never did come after me. As I walked to Dean's house I saw Emery get into his car and drive back to the harbor where his boat awaited him.

"What'd they say?" Laurie asked from behind several bails of hay in Dean's barn.

Chapter Eight

Laurie and I managed a whole six hours sleep before the inevitable knock at the door awoke us.

"Nick, I'm sorry to wake you," Dr. Moore said, "but Governor Emery is here, and he wishes to speak with you. Be careful though, he's in a bad mood."

"So'm I, so this should be fun. Give me a minute," I said, and closed the door.

"What do you think he wants?" Laurie asked.

"Me."

"So what are we gonna do?"

I thought for a minute. "Give me Mrs. Emery's driver's license. Keep the credit cards. Take the camcorder and the gun, and go to Dean's house. Tell him to hide you, and if the bad guys show up, come out shooting."

"And what are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna ask him again what happened to his wife."

"Be careful, Nick."

"No one accomplishes anything by being careful," I said with a weak but hopefully reassuring smile.

I pocketed my own .45 and met Emery at the door.

"Good morning, Mr. Stone. It seems we have some matters to discuss. If you'll follow me," he said, turning to an old, rusted Lincoln Continental and getting in. I followed.

He didn't waste much time, and instantly launched into small-talk mode.

"I like what you've done with the place, Nick. Television, phone service, and enough electricity to light up Times Square on New Years Eve. I like it."

"Thanks. All it took was some desire to help the people. Perhaps I could teach you a thing or two about that."

"Perhaps, Mr. Stone," he said, then silence until we arrived at the police station and went inside.

We were met by my very own Uncle Luis sitting at his desk, still sweating bullets.

"I've heard you come here to make some inquiries about the disappearance of my wife," Emery said. "While I do thank you for being so kind, Chief Mendez here has already done an exemplary investigation. I assure you, all leads have been checked. Sadly, nothing has turned up. She simply vanished."

"Okay, so why bring me down here?" I asked.

Emery snapped his fingers at the chief, who jumped from his chair as if his ass were spring-loaded. He pulled a file from a nearby filing cabinet and handed it to me. The tab on the file read 'Emery, Evelyn A.' It was the investigation file.

"I wanted you to see for yourself, that everything that could've been done, indeed was."

I read over the file. The entire house had been dusted for prints. Illuminol was used to check for blood. Every single item in the house had been tagged, inventoried, removed and dusted for prints. The maid had been interviewed, though she hadn't been in the house at the time of Mrs. Emery's disappearance. The file was stamped Open-Unsolved. I continued reading through the file as I asked questions. "Why is it you're sure she'd been abducted, instead of the possibility she'd run off?"

"My wife would not have left me," Emery said. "Absolutely not. She and I had been inseparable since high school."

"Then why'd she take her purse?" I asked.

He blinked twice. "Excuse me?"

"It's not listed in the inventory here."

He shrugged. "Perhaps it was overlooked."

I took several steps closer to the body and noticed the single round hole in the forehead, about a quarter inch wide.

It amazed me how much this scene reminded me of several months ago When I'd seen the remains of Laurie's sister Andrea hauled away from the still-smoldering debris of my house. It also amazed me that this scene brought back the painful memory of when I thought Andrea's body was in fact Laurie. My eyes began to well up with tears right there in the almost empty bunker.

I fought back the tears and studied the scene from a more indifferent stance. I then realized the dearly-departed was wearing a long, dark blue sundress, and still had long, black hair attached to the skull. Female. Sitting in her lap was a purse, which I carefully picked up and searched. Inside was the answer to my immediate question: Credit cards and a driver's license, in the name of Mrs. Evelyn Emery.

I left the purse and pocketed the cards. I turned the light off, closed the door and went back to Laurie, standing next to the truck.

"Nick? What was in there?"

I handed her the cards, and her jaw slowly dropped as she read the name.

"Is...is she in there?" she asked, falling over her words.

I nodded and said, "Put the truck back in the same spot you found it, kill the radio and leave the keys. I don't want anyone to know we were here."

It was 4:30am by the time we reached Dr. Moore's house. The light in the kitchen was on, where Dr. Moore and Erica were waiting up for us. It was time for a little chat.

"My God! Where have you two been?" Dr. Moore asked when we walked in. "We've been worried sick!"

That kinda confused me. "Why?"

"Because you've been gone all day and night -- ever since you went to see Chief Mendez."

I thought about this. "Did you think something had happened to us? Piss off the chief and he'd locked us up? Or kidnapped and taken off to that Russian warship?"

"I don't know, Nick. Erica told me about the ship and thought anything could've happened."

He seemed to be sincere and telling the truth. "I don't mean to be rude, Dr. Moore, especially in your own house, but something's going on, right under our noses, and everyone on this island seems to have their own little secret. Someone knows what's going on and isn't talking. I'd like to think you're too good and kind to be part of this conspiracy, but I know you and Erica are keeping a secret too. I know because I overheard you and Erica talking in your bedroom."

Dr. Moore and Erica just stared at the floor, both looking like scolded children. I was feeling really guilty now, but I held my ground.

"Before this's all over, everyone's secrets will be out," I said. "So if you know something - about Emery's wife, the base, or that ship out there, you can make things easier for everyone by telling us. I'm here to help everyone! I'm not the enemy! And I'm damn sure not the one you should be keeping secrets from!"

Before they could say anything, Laurie and I went to our room. I didn't want the two of them to deny anything, because frankly, it would've just pissed me off.

Laurie and I slept as long as we could. There was no telling how much strength we'd need tomorrow.

assume led out to the ocean, because in this canal several Navy patrol boats were moored to the side. At least four of them that I could see.

"So where do we start?" Laurie asked.

"Let's start at the other end and work our way back. I could use the walk to dry off."

"You can walk, I'll drive," she said, pointing to a small pickup behind us. Geez, how did I miss that??

"You drive, I'll ride shotgun," I said.

"Ooh, just like the old days!"

We got in the truck and slowly drove the length of the road. On our way, I counted a total of six Navy patrol boats and twenty five steel doors.

At the end of the base, the road dead-ended at a concrete wall, and the canal ended at a huge steel door that extended from the ceiling to well below the waterline.

The last bunker door was next to us. We got out, and of course Laurie tried the handle first. This one indeed was locked. She knew it'd be a while, so she waited in the truck. The lock was identical to the one on the main door. Did they both use the same key? Probably not, if the outer door remained unlocked.

After a half hour, I gave up. It's not something I'm proud to admit, but we were really limited on time. I stood up at the same time Laurie got out of the truck.

"Nick, I got a really bad feeling about this," she said.

"About what?"

She reached into the truck and turned the radio on. Since there were no radio stations anywhere near here, I knew what I was hearing was a cassette. And it was very familiar music.

"What is this stuff, Nick? I checked the tape, and the writing kinda looked Hebrew."

I reached in and ejected the cassette. My heart sank when I saw the writing. "It's not Hebrew, it's Arabic." I then realized the weight of this discovery. No one on the island would listen to this music, and I doubt anyone from the Navy would.

"So the men that come in here after dark are Arabs," I said.

"Arabs?" Laurie asked. "Like, what kind of Arabs?"

"Iraqis, Iranians, Yemeni, Saudis, Chaldeans, Lebanese, Afghans, Pakistanis, take your pick. Could be any of them."

She sighed. "Any luck with the door?"

I looked back at the door, still very much closed. "Obviously not. Wait here, I'm going to check the next few doors."

All were locked until I came to the sixth door. I opened it and was greeted with darkness and a moldy smell. I felt the wall for a light switch, and when I found it and turned it on, I was faced with another mystery. It was empty. I tried the seventh door. Empty. And the eighth. Empty.

I walked back to the truck and told Laurie to turn the truck around and follow me as I tried the rest of the doors. I really had nothing better to do than walk the length of the base and try the remaining seventeen doors. Besides, I still needed to dry my clothes. My jeans were starting to chafe.

By 4am I'd tried every door, which turned out to be unlocked and empty. I reached for the handle of the last door next to the entrance and opened it nonchalantly as I had all the others. But this time, an unimaginably offensive odor slapped me in the face and I instinctively recoiled and turned away from the door, pulling my shirt up over my nose. Laurie noticed this and started to get out of the truck.

"What's wrong, Nick? What's in there?"

"Stay in the truck! I don't know."

I hit the lightswitch and was instantly taken aback by the sight. Sitting on the floor, propped against the wall, was a semi-skeletal structure of a human. The skin that had not fallen off had turned a brown-grey color, and was stretched tightly over the bones, particularly on the skull.

That's when it hit me. How could I have been so dumb? Laurie caught me cursing myself. "what's wrong?" she asked.

"I'm mentally kicking myself for not thinking outside the box."

She stared at me for a second. "Okay, and in English?"

I pulled out my cellphone and dialed. After a few clicks, he answered. "Morning, Dad."

"Nick? That you?"

"Yeah Dad, who else would it be?"

"Ah crap son, I thought you were the police!"

"What?? Dad, why would the – never mind, forget it. Hey listen, those underground storage bunkers you mentioned, where are they?"

"Is that where you're at? Geez Nick, you're gonna get shot."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. So where are they?"

After several seconds of silence he answered, "The northwest corner of the base. There's a ramp, made for cargo trucks. It's, blocked with a steel door; most likely locked, but I know locks only slow you down. Once you're past the door, there's an underground road that takes you past twenty or so bunkers. That road will take you east all the way to the water. Each bunker is locked. Good locks, too."

"Are there any security systems in place?"

"Not with the electricity cut off from the base. No, they use to have cameras down there, but they'd be gone now."

"Alright Dad, wish me luck."

"Wish me luck too, the cops are here."

"Dad...!"

Click.

Laurie and I walked the distance to the corner of the base. The truck ramp faced away from us, hidden from view. Dad was right about the lock. I'd never seen one like it before, and thus, I didn't know what the lock's guts looked like. Nevertheless, I tried anyway.

Minutes ticked away, as did an entire hour. I tried to "feel" my way around inside to visualize the tumbler's construction, but to no avail. I had light, but Laurie's arm was hurting from holding the flashlight.

I slumped to the ground next to Laurie. "Why don't we just wait for the guys in the boat to come back and unlock it for us?"

"Sure," Laurie said, "let me know when they come back. I'm going to bed." She stood and started to walk away.

Then she stopped, and I pictured a little lightbulb illuminating over her head.

She walked back to the door. "Hey Nick? Did you ever check to see if it was already unlocked?"

"Oh come on Laurie, what do you think this is, Fantasy Island??"

Ignoring my retort, she grabbed the door handle and gave it a good tug. The door clicked and swung open, and she walked inside.

"Dammit Laurie, wait for me!"

Inside, we saw absolutely nothing. I used the flashlight's beam to stab the darkness, but still saw nothing. I took a chance and took a step forward, and immediately found myself underwater. Now THAT was unexpected. I fought my way to the surface while struggling to keep my grip on my now lifeless flashlight.

My head broke the surface the same time Laurie found the lightswitch on the wall. Lights mounted on the side wall lit up the entire complex. Running on batteries, I assumed.

After climbing out of the water, I took a good look around. A road, wide enough for two vehicles side-by-side, ran straight through to the other end of the base. On the left side was a wall with a steel door and a light every fifteen feet, stretching on into oblivion. On the right, a man-made canal about 40 feet wide, stretched the entire length of the base as well, that I

Chapter Seven

We went back to Dr. Moore's house to collect some flashlights, my lockpicking gun, both our guns and extra clips. Oh, and plenty of Jane.

We walked back down the hallway to our room, when we heard voices from Dr. Moore's bedroom. It was Dr. Moore and Erica. Laurie and I listened in.

"I think we should tell him," Erica said.

"No dear you don't know how he'll react."

"Dad, he's an okay guy. He'll understand."

"And if he doesn't? What would happen to us?"

"Nothing, Dad. Nothing would change, I swear."

"Please don't tell him, sweetheart. It would hurt him too much. He might understand, but...it would just be unnecessary pain."

After a moment of silence I heard her let out a deep sigh. "Okay Dad, I won't say anything."

Laurie and I ran to our room and quietly shut the door, listening to Erica's footsteps leave the house.

"See Laurie? That's why she gives me the creeps!"

"What the hell could she have meant?" Laurie asked.

"I'm sure we'll find out eventually. I'll tell ya this though, I'm not leaving this island till All.. of Arabella's secrets are revealed."

"Hey Nick? Betcha we could force it out of her," she said grinning and chambering a round into her Desert Eagle.

After bagging up our equipment and changing into black clothes, we went out on foot for Dean's house, where we'd left the camcorder. If we found anything, I'd want proof. We had a long talk with Dean. We made plans to go to the base around midnight, and we had some time to kill. I told him of my conversation with Chief Mendez, and tonight's plans.

"I never liked Chief Mendez," Dean said. "He's the governor's lapdog. If Emery were involved in anything shady, the chief would be the first to cover it up."

"Has he always been like that?" I asked.

"Nope. He use to take pride in his job. He hated Emery along with the rest of us. Then Emery's wife came up missing and the chief turned into a Yessir."

"Then Uncle Luis's covering something up," I concluded.

"Nick, I've been going over that video," Dean said, changing the subject. "I tried to look for a flag. All warships will fly their own flag, but you didn't fly close enough to see it."

"Yeah, it'd be nice to know who we're dealing with. What if I did a flyby in the Mustang?"

Dean looked at me like I was nuts. "It'd be a suicide mission for sure. To see the flag, you'd be within range of their Surface-To-Air Missiles. Might even catch a shot from their AA-guns. It'd be like a machine gun shooting through tissue paper."

"But it needs to be done, doesn't it? We can go over it later. For tonight...we go treasure huntin'!"

Laurie and I set off on foot just after midnight, walking past Dean's barn, across the wide empty field of grass to the concrete tarmac. I felt uneasy being out in the open, having nowhere to hide should we become enshrouded in gunfire.

Looming ahead of us was one of several original buildings still standing. The closest one to us was a two-story building with few windows. As we approached I could see it had a thick steel door and a series of locks, none of which were engaged.

The inside was empty, save for trash on the floor and a few desks. The floor was mostly one big open space, with a few offices partitioned in the corners of the building. A cursory search yielded no stairs leading to a basement.

As I finished the sentence, Chief Mendez dropped from his chair to the floor like a drunk falls from a barstool. I thought I felt the floor shake. He took his time in getting up, and when he did, he walked over to us, causing Laurie to move instinctively behind me.

"A Russian Destroyer, Nick?" he asked, the fake politician grin returning. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Alright, ya know what? That was rude of me. We're family, right? Let's talk about family, Uncle Luis."

"Sure Nick," he said with a slight stutter. "Your family or mine?"

"Aren't they one and the same?" I asked with a smirk. "Actually, I wanted to talk about Governor Emery's family."

"His family? He ain't got one, Nick."

"Yeah, I heard about that. That was a sad thing. Heard you investigated it personally. Ever find out what happened?"

He kept touching his face -- rubbing his forehead, stroking his thin mustache. And his hands were shaking. "No, I mean...well yeah, she disappeared. Either she ran off or..."

"Or someone killed her?" I finished for him.

He went back to his desk and sat down, probably because his knees were getting weak. "I didn't find any evidence to suggest that. There wasn't any blood in the house," he said as he lit a cigarette and puffed heartily on it.

"Course not. The place was cleaned up all nice and neat."

"So what do you want from me, Nick?"

"Not much. Just a little honesty between family," I said, and Laurie and I walked out.

Outside, as we walked back down Main Street, Laurie asked, "Why didn't you ask him what's at the base?"

"The answer would've been the same diplomatic crap he gave me. Besides, I don't want him to know I suspect anything's there."

"And Why not?"

"Because I don't want him watching when you and I go check it out tonight."

"Great honeymoon, Nick," she said sarcastically.

"Fine, Jane can come with us."

"Ooh, you DO love me!"

"Nice landing, Nick," Dean said with a grin. It faded when he saw the look on our faces. "What's wrong?"

"Let's go inside, Dean. I got something to show you," I said as we headed for his house. I plugged the camcorder into his TV, rewound it and pressed Play.

"What the hell... ?" Dean said as the pixilated image of the battleship appeared on the screen. "Where is this??"

"About twenty miles south of the island. But *what* is it?"

Dean stared intently at the image on the screen. Finally after a minute, he said, "Sovremenny."

"A what?" I asked.

"It's a Sovremenny-class Russian Destroyer."

I turned to Laurie and Erica whose faces turned pale white. "What are the Russians doing out here?" I asked.

Dean shrugged. "Might not be the Russians. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, they've been having a yard sale on military equipment. This ship could be run by anyone in the world."

"Do we have reason to worry?" I asked.

"Not right now. They're moored out there doing absolutely nothing. For now."

"I think we need to have a talk with Emery," I said, letting anger slip out with my words.

"Good luck. He's back in Guam."

"Guam?? The hell's he doing there?"

"He lives there," Dean said. "He moved there after his wife disappeared. Says he doesn't like slumming it with us common folk. Pfff. Self-righteous prick."

"He's gotta know about this ship. Probably another one of Arabella's secrets," I said, glancing at Erica.

"Now what? Laurie asked.

"I'm going to open up the proverbial 'can of worms.' I need to know some of Arabella's secrets."

"Damn Nick," Erica interjected. "Why can't you just leave things alone?"

"Because somebody knows something. Something that endangers the island and everyone on it."

Laurie and I took off on foot to the police station. It was time to pay my uncle a visit. Erica had been against the idea, hence the reason we were on foot. I hadn't met my Uncle Luis yet, only because I hadn't seen him. He never showed up at Dr. Moore's house, and I'd never seen him elsewhere on the island. I could only assume he was holed up at the police station.

We walked in and found a chubby Spanish guy sitting at his desk, eyes glued to the TV, which showed some talking heads on CNN talking about securing U. S. borders. The chief hadn't heard us come in, so I cleared my throat to get his attention. He turned around and evidently recognized us.

"Hey Nick!" he said with the huge, fake grin of a politician.

I looked him up and down. "So I guess you're my Uncle Luis, huh?" I asked.

Did I say chubby? No, this guy was just plain fat.

"Yep! Hey, how's Marissa, err, your mom doing?"

I guess no one had told him. "She's doing very well. She had cervical cancer, but it's no longer causing her any pain." That's the standard answer I give everyone when I don't feel like talking about it.

The smile slowly faded from his face and he asked, "Ohh man. How long ago?"

Apparently he didn't get the hint. "About a year ago. So how are ya?"

"Doing great, Nick. Wife and three kids. Your Aunt Rosita, and your cousins, Juan, Richie and Luis Jr. Life's good, Nick."

"That's good to hear. Hey, I was wondering something."

"What's that?" the chief asked, leaning back in his chair.

"Who's out there on that Russian Destroyer?"

Chapter Six

After twelve hours of sleep and a huge breakfast I'd managed to talk Laurie into flying with me. "If you kill me and our daughter, I'll never forgive you," she'd assured me.

"Our *son* has nothing to worry about," I said, "and neither do you. Now go take your pills."

Erica had managed to catch wind of our plans and invited herself along. Over the past few days she'd thankfully stayed away from us, which kept Laurie in a good mood. But when we'd occasionally bump into her, Laurie turned bitchy and I got a creepy chill down my spine.

The three of us drove to Dean's house in Erica's '68 Volkswagen Beetle. Dean was behind the barn working on the Mustang.

"Laurie finally came around," I told him, "and this one's along for the ride," referring to Erica.

The cockpit of the Cessna was almost identical to the one I flew back in Detroit at the EagleOne Flight School. This one was a bit older, but the control panels were similar.

After a ten minute engine warm-up, I taxied to the end of Dean's makeshift runway, which was little more than a stretch of brown, flattened grass. I set the flaps, throttled up to 100% and released the parking brake. The tiny airplane began to roll across the grass, slowly at first, and then accelerated down the bumpy runway. I pulled up on the yoke at 80 knots and felt the cushion of air slide underneath the plane as we lifted into the air.

I banked west into the headwind and we flew across the island. Laurie turned on the camcorder and occasionally zoomed in on houses or people on the street. It worked as well as binoculars, but I had another use for it.

Erica was quiet for the trip, which continued Laurie's good mood, but when they saw the southern tip of the island pass underneath us as we headed out to sea, they both became visibly worried.

"Nick, where are we going?" Laurie asked with a twinge of fear in her voice.

"Erica," I said, turning to the rear seat, "What's out here? South of Arabella?"

With a face of confusion she said, "Nothing. Thousands of square miles of nothing."

"No place a small motorboat might come from?"

She rolled her eyes. "Are you deaf, Nick?" She made gestures with her hands and smirked. "Do I need to use sign language? There's nothing!"

I told them both what I'd learned from Adrian. Suspiciously missing wife, boats visiting the base, etc.

"What are you doing, Nick?" Erica asked defensively. "Are you digging up dirt from everyone's lives? Is that what you're here to do? Face it, Nick, there's a lot of us here, so Arabella's bound to have plenty of secrets."

For any number of lifetimes, I'll never forget the grim, determined look on her face when she said that.

As we talked, a shape loomed into view on the distant horizon. "Then what in hell is that?" I asked sarcastically.

They both stared in silence. Laurie finally used the camcorder to zoom in. "It's too hazy to tell, but it looks like a ship."

We flew on for another ten minutes, and Laurie tried again. As she zoomed in she muttered slowly, "Holy...God!" A minute or so passed till she spoke again, camera still zoomed. "It's a battleship, Nick! Turn around!"

I didn't need to be told twice. I banked into the turn immediately. I knew a battleship could turn this plane into tin confetti.

The return trip was much faster, pushing the little Cessna past it's red line of 160 knots. I slowed only to make the approach for the grass runway and touched down with a bone-shaking jolt. As the Cessna braked to a stop, the three of us leapt from the plane and ran to Dean.

around the steam pipe and erected a prefabricated sheet-metal building on top.

The following morning, the rest of the equipment had been unloaded from the second boat and was being put together in the huge steel shed. The finished product was a steam engine, like that of an old locomotive, and just as powerful.

Next, a massive electric turbine was built from four large pieces and connected to the steam engine. Four floodlights that had been mounted on the ceiling of the shed were first wired into the generator.

With everyone's fingers crossed, Laurie did the honors of slowly opening the steam valve. For several seconds nothing happened. Slowly, the turbine began to rotate, and Laurie continued opening the steam valve. The turbine spun faster and our attention was turned to the overhead lights as they glowed dimly at first, then began to shine brighter as the turbine reached its full speed.

What we now had was electricity generated by an undiminishable power source that costs absolutely nothing to maintain. It's called a Geothermal Tap, and it would provide enough power to run anything on the island, with plenty to spare.

During the rest of the day, Jack unplugged the cable from the submarine and wired it into the new generator while Dean distributed the TVs and phones to the 120 houses. The cable's satellite dish was installed on the roof of the government building, which also housed the new control system for the phones. By nightfall, the streets of Arabella were empty. Not a single soul could be seen. Instead, the windows of houses glowed the color of a cathode ray tube while the island's natives discovered the miraculous power of CNN, Fox and the Busy Signal.

Chapter Five

Laurie and I spent the next two weeks living our honeymoon. I promised myself I wouldn't talk about the island's ongoing soap opera, and certainly not the latest scoop I got from Adrian. It would all have to wait because dammit...we had some vacationing to do!

We spent most of the time swimming. That was a new experience for us, for in Michigan, the water is too polluted to swim in, thanks largely to Canada using us for a dumping ground.

Toward the end of the two weeks we went on a hike around the mountain. We argued about baby names, as we usually do, and I spent the rest of the time trying to convince her to fly in the Cessna with me.

We slept soundly that night for all of fourteen hours. By 10am the next morning, Jack was knocking at the front door.

"Hate to wake ya," he began, "but a geologist and an excavation team arrived by boat this morning. They said you hired them."

I went back to the bedroom and grabbed the still-sleeping Laurie out of bed. "C'mon, time to watch history being made."

We climbed into Jack's little Toyota Camry and headed toward the mountain.

"Nick, this car looks just like your Geo," she said.

"See? Told ya," I said with a smug grin.

The crew had already unloaded their equipment and set up, about 200 feet from the southern face of the mountain. A lady in khaki shorts and a dirty White t-shirt, probably mid-fifties with long blonde-grey hair walked up and greeted us.

"Good morning, Mr. Stone. I'm Michelle Waters. I run the geology department at UCLA. When these guys called and told me what you were doing to help this place, I volunteered for this."

"Well good! You're saving me money, which makes you my new best friend."

She shrugged. "It's not every day I get the chance to leave my lab for a tropical island. I'm making this trip double as my vacation."

I gave her a knowing smile. "Me too."

Twenty feet from Where we stood, a giant drill bit was twisting into the ground, creating a fissure in the dirt about a foot and a half wide.

"I ran a side-scanning ground radar When we got here. About 1200 feet down from Where we're standing is a cavern that'll work perfectly for this."

"I still don't get it," Laurie said. "How do you get electricity from 1200 feet underground?"

I turned to her and smiled. "Kinetic energy, my dear."

"The equipment you ordered landed in Guam just before we left. It should be here by the time we're done," Ms. Waters said and left to pack up her equipment.

All afternoon the machine pulled up dirt, then chunks of rock and clay. A yellow pickup was used to haul away the dirt, rock and clay to where I assumed it was dumped into the ocean.

At about 5pm that evening, the unexpected happened. With the large drill bit still down inside the man-made fissure, a large White cloud of steam shot out of the hole, over a hundred feet into the air. Though it scared many of us, Ms. Waters assured us this was what happens when the underground cavern is opened up. She explained the water from the ocean soaks into the ground and into the cavern, which is heated by the Earth's core up to a few thousand degrees, turning the water to pressurized steam.

"Now comes the second phase of the project," she said. "We drop a 1200 foot pipe into the hole, about 5 inches in diameter, then we fill the hole around the pipe with cement, leaving the steam to come up through the pipe. By then the pipe will have a shut-off valve."

We all stayed long enough to watch them fill the hole, and went home for the night. During the night, Dean, Jack and the excavation crew created a 25' by 25' cement foundation

"What kinda work ya got for me?" he asked.

"Some dirt work. Gossip," I said, handing him \$50.

He pocketed it with a grin. "Whaddya wanna know?"

"Ever go snooping around the base? Find anything interesting?"

He shook his head. "Me an' some guys go get drunk out there, but we never found anything worth like, taking and selling."

"Did you ever find any stairs that went underground?"

"Don't think so. Then again, we were drunk," he said with a smirk.

I decided to switch gears with him. "Do you know anything about Mrs. Emery's disappearance?"

"Just rumors -- that she ran off or he killed her. I think Chief Mendez knows something he's not sharing with anyone. He acts real weird around Emery."

"Why do you think Emery tries so hard to keep people away from the base?"

"I don't think he tries that hard. Me an' my friends get in there all the time. Once in a while some boats come in there in the middle of the night. No one tries to stop them either."

"Some boats? What were they doing there?" I asked.

"It was too far away, I couldn't tell. But the weird thing is, when they show up and leave, it's always from the south. There's nothing south of Arabella but thousands of miles of water. "

"That's strange. Okay Adrian, you're going to notice some changes around here, and it's real likely to piss the governor off. Keep an eye on him and let me know what he does."

He agreed, and kick-started his moped and sped off. I went into the house and found Laurie was already asleep, so I crawled into bed and did some thinking: What happened to Emery's wife? Why does Erica give me the creeps? Is my uncle an accomplice to murder? What's hidden on the base? Where did the boats come from? And what the hell am I doing playing Private Dickhead like some Columbo wannabe when Laurie and I are suppose to be having our honeymoon? And with that, I fell asleep.

Main Street hugs the eastern shore of Arabella. As we drove south, the beach to our left stretched along side the road. On our right, tiny shacks composed Arabella's business district. Only one shack was open for business, a tiny grocery store run by an elderly Spanish lady with long, silver hair. At the south end of the shack businesses stood the gas station, which of course was closed. Next to it were the police station and the governor's office, just before Main Street sharply curved to the right.

Around the bend, we entered the island's residential neighborhoods. Tiny gravel streets criss-crossed over the main road and were dotted with tiny clapboard houses that looked to be held together only by termites holding hands. On closer inspection, they seemed nearly identical to each other. A few were slightly larger, presumably occupied by larger families. Few driveways contained cars. In fact, fewer houses contained driveways. Each had either kids playing in the yard, or adults playing cards on the porch. A cacophony of music played from unseen cassette players.

I counted a total of 120 houses as we left the neighborhood. I picked up my cellphone and ordered 125 color TVs and phones from Guam.

Leaving the neighborhood, we passed what looked like a small church. The steeple on top was a dead giveaway. Turns out it doubles as the island's clinic, where Dr. Moore spends most of his time, and apparently where he was at now.

As our last stop, we arrived at Dean's house, which sits on the edge of the naval base. No walls, no fence, nothing but green grass all the way to the base's tarmac. What would stop us from snooping around?

The three of us got out and Dean led us to the back of the barn. "The real surprise is back here."

As we rounded the corner, he said, "Considered 'Abandoned in Place' by the U.S. Navy." It took a minute before I realized what I was looking at: A P-51 Mustang -- a single-engine war plane from WWII, infamous for its quick maneuverability in dogfights. The Ford Mustang logo was painted on the side.

Next to it sat a civilian Cessna 172, built sometime in the early seventies. Four passengers, fixed gear, looked to weigh maybe 800lbs. It looked like it still flew.

"Do they run?" I asked.

"Sure! Almost like new. Do you fly?"

"Well...I once flew a Lear Gulfstream IV after I shot its pilot."

When I saw Dean raise an eyebrow I added, "Oh, don't worry, he shot at me first."

He continued to stare at me, then asked, "Any crash landings?"

I thought about this. "Sure. Once, but I wasn't flying. Oh, and I flew a Gulfstream Five into a building, but technically it never landed. Not in one piece anyways."

He stared at me in disbelief. "How did you survive??"

"How did I...? Oh! I flew it by remote control."

He shook his head. "So I guess you don't have your license?"

"Me? Not have a license? Ya kidding?? Ahh, no. No I don't. I still have another 40 hours to put in yet."

Dean shrugged. "Well, FAA doesn't really monitor the skies up here. Wouldn't be a big deal if you took one up for a bit."

I looked at Laurie. "Well? Wanna fly with me?"

"Hell no! Twice in a plane with you at the helm is enough for me."

"I'll get back to ya, Dean. She just needs a little more convincing. I'd like to take Laurie up in the Cessna, but I'd *love* to take the Mustang up. Be even better if I had some target practice!"

"Say the word, Nick. Anytime you want," Dean said and we piled into his Jeep and drove up the steep hill to Dr. Moore's house.

It was 9pm now and I was looking forward to crawling into bed. That would have to wait, for when we pulled into the driveway, Adrian Ramsey was waiting for me on an old yellow moped. Dean left and Laurie went to bed, leaving us alone.

Chapter Four

A knock at the door and a glance at my watch informed me it was 5am. I opened the bedroom door and Erica told us breakfast was on the table. I woke Laurie up and we ate. By the time we'd finished, Dean was at the front door, ready to give us a tour of Arabella.

"I'll have to give you the quick tour. A problem with the sub's generator came up and they've asked me to take a look."

"That's perfect. I'd love to see the inside of the Mirage," I said as Laurie and I got into the Jeep.

"Then we'll go there first," he said as we made our way down the steep hill.

We pulled up at the harbor and Dean got out. He grabbed a large toolbox and without a word, he walked down the pier to the Mirage. Laurie and I followed him down the pier, across the gangway plank, and into the blow hole of the huge steel whale.

Dean rushed ahead to the sub's stern, leaving Laurie and I to our own tour.

"People use to live in this thing?" she asked.

I nodded. "For many months at a time."

She shrugged. "No wonder your dad smokes so much."

We walked through the main control room, through the sleeping quarters and to the engine room. I'd never seen a nuclear reactor, and I'd guess most people would go their Whole lives without seeing one. It was a massive block of steel, with hundreds of pipes leading to and from it. Although I could see the reactor's shaft turning the generator, it hardly made a sound.

"It fried the rectifier circuit," Jack Ramsey told Dean.

"Again??" Dean asked incredulously.

"The island's pulling too much power. I can fix the circuit, but it'll just blow again. This generator was made to run the sub, not an island."

"This kind've puts a thorn in the cable and phone idea, doesn't it?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

Jack nodded sadly, and began fixing the circuit.

"Have you ever considered another power source?" I asked.

"we can't afford the gas for a diesel generator," Dean said, "and we don't get enough wind for a wind farm. As it is, the fuel rods for the reactor...well, they're not incredibly expensive, but they're not free either."

Last night, before falling asleep, I'd recalled a magazine article I'd read, and I thought this might be the best time to bring it up. "How about a power source that costs absolutely nothing to run, and will produce power for all eternity?"

Dean and Jack looked at me stunned. "Where would its power source come from?"

"Right here on the island," I said with a grin, and walked back to the bow to make some phone calls.

"I see that look in your eyes, Nick," Laurie said when she caught up to me. "You had that same look last night. Playing Robin Hood again?"

"I'm just shinin' a little light on my people," I said.

I made phone calls that consisted mostly of being put on hold. It took four calls and 43 minutes to solve the island's power problem.

"Two weeks," I told Dean and Jack as they emerged from the engine room after fixing the circuit, "and you won't need this sub to power the island anymore."

"What would power it?" Jack asked. "It's not like we're sitting on some huge oil deposit."

"No, but you're getting warmer," I said. "Literally."

They shook their heads as we climbed the ladder to exit the sub.

"Jack, send your kid by soon," I said. "I got some work for him." He nodded and left, and Dean, Laurie and I returned to our tour.

After the dinner party broke up, Laurie and I went to our room for the night. "Nick, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Yes I do. I'm playing Robin Hood. I'm bringing my birth land out of the dark ages."

"Sure you can handle Emery?" she asked.

"I can handle him about as well as you did," I said, giving her a wink.

Laurie crawled into bed. "And what's with you gawking at Dr. Moore's daughter?"

"I wasn't gawking!" I said defensively. "But there's something strange about her, don't you think? It kind've creeps me out."

"She seemed a bit too cheerful," she said.

"That's an act. I could see right through it. It's what I saw underneath that freaked me out. Hang on, I'm gonna go see if that cellphone works."

I knew it was only 6am back in Detroit, but I also knew Dad would just now be going to bed.

"Hey, we made it," I said when the call connected.

"Good! Did you find Dr. Moore?"

"Yep, we're staying at his house. We met some of your Navy buddies too. Dean Frye and Jack Ramsey."

"They're still there? Yeah, they're some good guys. We all did sea trials on the USS Mirage together."

"You were on the Mirage? They still have it here. It's nuclear reactor is the island's power source."

"See if you can get a tour in it," Dad said. "I swear the Navy never built a better sub than her."

"Do you remember Admiral Emery?"

A slight pause. "Yeah. I remember the prick."

"He runs the island now."

He let out a deep sigh. "Oh, God help 'em."

"I get the idea he's intentionally oppressing the people here. He seems to go to great lengths to keep everyone out of contact with the rest of the world. Any idea Why he would do that?"

"Other than because he's a prick?" Dad asked. "Maybe the people know something about him he doesn't want the world to know. He's got a reason, I'm sure."

"He was also very adamant about keeping us away from the old base. Any idea why he wouldn't want us there?"

"He must be hiding something," Dad said.

"People have gone out there, but never found anything."

"Of course not. There's an entire underground complex of storage bunkers. Anything hidden would be down there, and everything would be locked up tight."

"Laurie and I may stick around longer. The mysteries are intriguing, and I'm doing my part to upgrade the island into the 21st century."

"Watch out for Emery. He's a miserable bastard."

"That seems to be a popular opinion."

"Hey Nick, the ambulance is here, I gotta go."

"Ambulance?? Dad, what the--"

Click.

I hung up and crawled into bed with Laurie. "Nickyyy..." she said, running a hand across my chest. It would be a good night indeed.

"Well, I guess it would take--"

"A lot of money!" Emery interrupted. "That we don't have."

"How much?" I asked Jack, intent on grinding Emery's gears.

"Probably \$10,000 in cable," Jack replied, "and of course I would install it all myself for free. And we'd need Governor Emery's permission as well."

"Which you don't have," Emery said between bites.

"Wow, you really *are* a dickhead," Laurie interrupted.

Dean snickered. "Ohh, let the games begin."

"And what if you didn't have to pay a dime?" I asked Emery. I was dying for him to challenge me.

After eating a couple more bites he asked, "Son, are you trying to stir up a hornet's nest?"

"I'm not your son," I said, holding back my anger. "Answer the question."

After a few more bites he said, "I guess I wouldn't have any choice, would I? Hell, you find someone to finance this dinky little island and you can do whatever you want. But I must remind you, not even our own government wants to put any money into this place." He ended with a smug look on his face.

"Have you bothered to *ask* them?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"That's not the point!" he said, pointing his fork at me. "I already know what they'd say."

For the next few minutes we ate in silence, till Laurie jumped in.

"So why'd your wife leave you?" she asked innocently.

Emery stopped in mid-swallow, giving Laurie an appraising look. He swallowed and answered, "Young lady, my wife didn't leave me. She disappeared in the middle of the night five months ago."

"Ohh, right, right," Laurie said, nodding to herself, then mumbled to herself just loud enough for Emery to hear, "I'm sure she *would* have left you had she had the chance."

Before he could reply, I interrupted, "So what's the old naval base used for? Has a nice long runway. Might make newspaper and mail delivery a lot faster."

"That base is private property!" Emery yelled a bit too loud. "You're not to go anywhere near it! Do you hear me?"

"Right, gotcha," I said, then in a lower voice, "White Anglo Oppressor."

"What was that?"

"Nothing," I said with a grin.

"Well, I think that about does it for me," Emery said as he hastily dropped his fork to his plate, then stood and walked out the front door. After he left, everyone broke out in laughter, not trying to hold it back this time.

"I haven't seen anyone piss him off like that since the Navy!" Dean said.

"He was stationed here too?" I asked. "What was he?"

Jack adopted a mockingly officious tone. "Admiral James Emery, Base Commander!" he said with an over-dramatized salute.

"And royal pain in everyone's ass," Dean added.

"Why's he so protective of the base?" I asked.

"No one knows," Erica said. "They don't guard the place. We go there all the time but we never find anything."

"At least he was nice enough to give us his permission for the phone and cable lines."

"Sure," Dr. Moore said, "if we had the money. But Emery's right, the U.S. won't help us."

I stood up. "We don't need the government's help. Jack, order everything you need to set this up and have them bill it to me. Find out about a satellite system to run it." I pointed a middle finger toward the front door. "Screw Emery."

Everyone's eyes were transfixed on me now, and it was making me a little self-conscious.

Dr. Moore spoke up. "Nick, are you sure you can afford this?"

I smiled. "I can afford that and much more."

Chapter Three

By 7pm, we were seated around a huge dining table: Laurie, myself, Dean and Dr. Moore.

"The others should be here soon," Dr. Moore said.

"Who would that be?" I asked.

"Governor Emery Jack Ramsey and my daughter Erica."

"Hope the table's big enough," Laurie said with a smirk.

He nodded. "There's always plenty of room. I've had many dinner parties at this table, thanks mostly to Erica's wonderful cooking. She's more than just my daughter and gourmet chef though. I'd be lost without her."

Dr. Moore fell into an awkward silence, and I saw the sadness in his blue eyes deepen. I figured it had something to do with his daughter, but I let it go for now.

"Good evening!" a cheerful voice said from behind me. I turned around to see a gorgeous, dark-skinned, dark-haired beauty wheeling a dinner cart toward us. I only vaguely noticed we were having spaghetti, garlic bread and raw vegetables, because I was paying too much attention to Erica. Laurie thought so too -- that's why she dug her fingernails into my thigh for the second time today.

"Erica dear, this's Nick and Laurie," Dr. Moore said. "They'll be staying with us for a while."

"Great!" Erica said with too much undue enthusiasm.

Something about her caught my attention and I found myself staring at her again. It wasn't attraction of any kind, though she really was quite beautiful. No, it was something else. She looked like a girl with a heavily-guarded secret, and the only emotion she allowed herself to project was obviously fake.

There was a knock at the door, and Erica brought Jack Ramsey to the dining room, who sat down and joined us.

"Laurie, Nick, this's Jack Ramsey, our island's utility man. He strung up the island with power lines when they hooked up that old submarine."

"Hi, nice to meet ya Nick and Laurie," Jack said. He had an athletic build like his son I'd met earlier, but with wavy blonde hair, a chiseled jawline and deep-set eyes.

"Jack is also the island's only home repairman. He's been a huge help to Arabella."

"How come there's no cable TV or phone lines?" Laurie asked. "Sounds like you have the ability."

"Yes we do," Jack said, "but not the money. As it is, the good doctor here paid for the power lines and the occasional fuel rods for the sub's nuclear reactor."

"Shouldn't the governor be paying for that?" I asked.

"Yes he should," Dean said, "but he doesn't. We were lucky enough just to get his permission. Told ya he's a miserable bastard."

Another knock at the door and Erica brought in Governor James Emery. He had the same silver circle of hair as Dr. Moore, but Emery had sharp and pointy bird-like facial features that seemed to make him as cold and mean as I'd heard he was.

He sat at the table and started eating without a word. He didn't stop, or even look up, until Dr. Moore introduced us. "Governor, this's Nick and Laurie Stone."

"Hi," Emery said in between bites. He stopped just long enough to glance under the table at Laurie. "You got a gut?"

Laurie wasn't shocked for long. She recovered gracefully and made me very proud.

"No, I'm pregnant," she said, looking under the table at him. "What's *your* excuse?"

The rest of the table tried diligently to contain their laughter, but to no avail. Laurie and I already didn't like the guy, but she had no problem showing it. Just one of the many reasons I married her!

Governor Emery ignored the insult and continued to eat, so I continued my conversation with Jack. "So what do you think it would take to string the island with phone and cable lines?"

according to Dean hasn't been a volcano for several thousand years, occupied the north end of the island. From the air, Arabella was overwhelmingly beautiful.

The harbor was at the north end of the beach, which was where Dean intended to land. He approached from the south end and splashed down, then taxied the Twin Beaver toward the dock. I stepped out of the plane and onto Arabella for the second time in my life.

Dean and I unloaded our immense baggage onto the dock while Laurie took in the scenery. The beach seemed to stretch on into oblivion. A long road followed the contour of the east side of the island, and ended right here at the harbor, where the old naval base sits. Several original buildings on the base still stood, though they were in a terrible state of disrepair. The control tower still stood as well, halfway down the base's concrete runway. None of it looks to have been used since it was shut down in 1987

On the other side of the dock on which we stood, a long, black, sleek object was submerged in the water, with a thick black cable snaking out of the water at it's nose and into a small building on shore. It was none other than the retired USS *Mirage*.

As Laurie and I started to pick up our luggage, a tall Spanish kid came running down the dock toward us. "Let me get those for you, sir!" the kid yelled with unexpected enthusiasm as he approached. He picked up two suitcases and introduced himself. "I'm Adrian Ramsey. Anything you need, you ask me and me only."

Up close I could tell he and I shared the same skin color. He looked to be 16 or 17 and well-built.

"Are you half Spanish, Adrian?" I asked.

"Yes sir, my dad's white. He's Lieutenant Jack Ramsey."

The four of us loaded everything into Dean's Jeep. I gave Adrian twenty bucks, and walked with him away from the others.

"So I take it you're the local street hustler?"

"Yes sir," he said with a sheepish grin.

"Stick close, Adrian. I may want some local dirt later."

I walked back to the Jeep and got in. Dean drove us up a rather steep hill that ran through the center of the island. Small houses lined the road on either side. Mothers hung clothes on lines while small children clung to their legs. Older kids rode bikes in the street while men sat on porches drinking beer. Unbeknownst to Paris Hilton, *this* is the simple life.

The road dead-ended at a Georgian-style house sitting on a vast piece of land. The house looked nothing like the tiny clapboard shacks on the rest of the island.

Before we got out of the Jeep, a tall, round man walked out of the house and started toward us. He was only slightly overweight, and had only a ring of silver hair around the back of his head. He carried a friendly smile, but held somewhat sad blue eyes.

"Nick!" he yelled, shaking my hand. "I'm Julius Moore. The radio operator told me you were coming."

"This's my wife Laurie," I said.

"Laurie! Never before has such a beautiful creature graced this island," he said, kissing her hand. "I have a room set up for you two, and I don't want any arguments about it."

Dean and I carried our luggage into the house and to the rear bedroom. I gave him the \$500 I'd promised, plus a \$50 tip. He promised to give Laurie and I the full tour tomorrow.

"Dean!" Dr. Moore said before Dean left. "Come over for dinner tonight. Around 7pm," to which Dean agreed.

the faint white line of waves. We were told the trip would only take thirty minutes, which raised an alarming question.

"If the trip only takes a half hour," I said, "why did it take you two hours to reach Guam?"

"Oh, see you caught me in the middle of an overhaul," he said with a chuckle while tapping the console. "I had to put her engine back together."

Laurie, who was sitting next to me, clutched my leg, digging her nails into the skin. I was pretty sure I was bleeding.

"So what brings you two to Arabella?" the pilot/mechanic asked.

"Honeymoon!" I proudly exclaimed, holding up Laurie's hand to show off the huge diamond ring.

He shrugged. "Strange place for a honeymoon," Dean said. "It's not really a tourist spot."

"I was also born there," I said. "Dad served in the Navy at the old base on Arabella. I just wanted to see my birthplace."

I didn't notice it because my eyes were on the sky, where Dean's should've been, but he was staring at me in disbelief. "You don't mean Lieutenant Jerry Stone, do you?"

"That's him. Do you know him?"

"Hell yeah I know him! We served together on the USS Mirage. Damn fine man. He never let his rank make him stuffy and uptight. Jerry knew how to party! How is he? Still breathin'?"

"Still breathing, smoking, drinking and partying," I said.

"Ahh, nothing's changed. What about his wife? Melissa? No, Marissa. Marissa Mendez. Would that be your mom?"

"She was. She died a year ago. She mentioned having parents here in Arabella."

"She did, but they died some years ago. You still have an uncle here though."

I nodded, vaguely remembering my mom talking about him more as if he were a nasty lesion than a brother.

Laurie jumped in to change the topic. "So who runs this dinky little island?"

"Oh, that'd be Governor James Emery. Miserable bastard, but don't tell him I said that."

"How about police?" she asked. "Is there any crime there?"

"Police chief runs the jails. That'd be your uncle, Luis Mendez. Not much for crime. Very few car accidents, and everyone gets along alright. I'd guess it's a relatively boring job. Only real excitement was five months ago when the governor's wife came up missing. Rumor has it she left him."

"I was under the impression everyone here was poor," Laurie said. "What does this governor do for the island?"

"Not a damn thing! We've asked for cable TV service, regular phone service, and newspapers on a regular basis. He rejected them all! It was like pulling teeth just for him to allow us to have electricity. Most of us don't know what a computer is, and very few have even heard of the Internet. It's like he's trying to keep everyone in the Dark Ages." "Where do they get their electricity from?" I asked.

"The Navy left behind one of their nuclear submarines, which happens to be the USS Mirage, the same one we all served on. Its nuclear core runs the onboard generator that powers the island. It's not much, but it beats reading by candlelight."

"Does Dr. Moore still live there?" I asked.

"Sure, he's still there. Most of us owe our lives to him in some way or another. He was head of the Navy's medical ward before they shut the base down. Like the rest of us, he liked Arabella so much, he made it his home."

As Dean talked, my attention turned to the mountain that materialized from the blue seas and hazy skies. As we approached it I could see it was sitting on a long, narrow piece of land shaped like a backwards comma. The hidden paradise called Arabella.

Dean circled the island before landing. Arabella is three miles wide and twelve miles long. The inside crescent of the comma on the east side is a seven-mile-long beach. Over a hundred houses stood toward the south end of the island, on the comma's point. The mountain, which

In the motel room, Laurie immediately flopped down on the bed. "Nicky... I need it. Now!"

I didn't need to be told twice. But when I went for my zipper she said, "Not that! Jaaaane!"

I'd heard it was relatively easy to score in Guam, but apparently they meant drugs, not sex. I needed only to walk two blocks in the rain before finding a fourteen-year-old drug dealer, and I bought his entire inventory: eight ounces.

When I returned to the motel, I threw the eight sandwich bags on the bed. "How's this?"

She gave me a disappointed look. "That's it? For the whole trip?"

"No, my little Chronic the Hemphog. For tonight."

"Ohhh. Okay!"

The next morning: shopping spree! I reminded Laurie they had no radio stations, so she grabbed eighteen CDs and a CD player and asked, "They do have electricity, right?" I bought a camcorder, a small color TV and portable satellite dish system, a DVD player and twelve movies I hadn't seen yet.

Next stop, gun shop! There seemed to be an abundance of these in Guam. We each bought Desert Eagle .45s to replace the ones we couldn't bring with us on the plane. We also bought silencers, extra clips and several cases of ammunition. You know, nothing extravagant, just enough for a honeymoon.

I found the kid I bought Jane from last night and had him contact his supplier. He later showed up at our motel and I bought a whopping 128 ounces. *Now it's a vacation!*

I called every air charter service in the phone book. They were-all booked solid, so I spent another hour calling Arabella. The operator put me through to Dean Frye, the only air charter service on the island. The promise of \$500 seemed to jolt him into action, and he promised to be in Guam in a couple hours.

Meanwhile, Laurie and I continued to shop. We bought two more suitcases from a thrift shop, and after a search for a cellphone store, we bought two cellphones with Guam phone numbers and were assured they would work in Arabella.

At ten minutes after 2pm we were standing on a floating dock where Dean Frye had instructed us to be. We were now encircled by three cardboard boxes and five suitcases, and I found myself wondering how big the plane would be.

Within fifteen minutes I heard the distant thrumming of engines in the clear blue sky. Seconds later a silver glint appeared in the sky to the south, and the engines idled down as the object flew closer to the water and touched down with a light splash. As it pulled up to the dock I could see it was a 1960s deHavilland Beaver, the color of stainless steel. One of the original 'Flying Boats' of the Pacific.

"It looks like a sardine can," Laurie remarked. "Is it safe?"

"Dear, this planer will probably outlive our son."

"*Daughter*," she corrected once again.

Dean Frye emerged from the float plane, wiping his grease-covered hands on his blue jeans and white t-shirt. I pray we didn't interrupt him on a repair job on this very plane.

"Afternoon!" he greeted us with a welcoming smile and shook our hands.

"Hi, Nick Stone, my wife Laurie," I said.

He looked down at our luggage. "Wow. Looks like you'll be staying a while. Nothing illegal in there, is there?"

"Yes. Yes there is," Laurie responded with a straight face.

Without missing a beat, Dean said, "Hell, what I don't know can't hurt me. C'mon, let's load this stuff up."

Twenty minutes later, after a nerve-jolting takeoff, we were in the air. It was a beautiful view. Nothing was in sight for as far as the naked eye could see but sparkling blue water behind

Chapter Two

Packing didn't take long. We would buy most of the necessities in Guam. Arabella has no department stores, so anything we needed when we got there could be ordered from Guam and shipped. Most of the \$340,000 was traded for AMEX Traveler's Checks, and the rest was cash. I could access the \$1.5 million in my bank account with my Visa and MasterCard. We were set for an extended vacation.

By that afternoon we'd packed everything we would need, and stuffed it all into a taxi bound for Detroit Metropolitan Airport. The flight left just after 3pm, and after a layover in Los Angeles, we switched planes and chased the sunset to Hawaii.

Arabella was originally discovered in 1643 by Emilio Cortez, an explorer from Spain. Upon its discovery, he named the island after his daughter. With him, he brought two boatloads of workers in an effort to colonize the island. They tried to grow sugar cane as their sole export. By the following year, the crops had died. In one self-serving act, Emilio Cortez pulled anchor, leaving the workers to die. But they didn't. The colonists survived the centuries on fish, and vegetation brought from Guam and planted in Arabella's fertile soil.

In 1939 the United States claimed Arabella as a U.S. Territory. President Roosevelt, while pacifying the natives with a little Western culture, set in motion his hidden agenda by building a naval base on the island just before the U.S. joined in World War II. Though the naval base was in the right place at the right time, it saw very little action due to being severely understaffed. Throughout World War II, the naval base was never once attacked simply because no one knew the base - or the island, for that matter - existed. By 1987 President Reagan decided keeping the base in operation was a waste of taxpayers' money (when has that ever stopped a politician before?) and ordered it to be shut down and its meager equipment shipped back to the mainland.

Despite the forty-seven-year presence of the U.S. Navy, Arabella remained technologically oppressed. The island's telephone system consists of one line shared by the entire island, and is tranceived via a radio system to and from Guam. Newspapers arrive only occasionally, and even then they're two weeks old at best. Very few residents own a television, and those that do, receive one fuzzy channel from Guam. The world could end, and the natives would never know it.

Several residents own ears; mostly Toyotas and Hondas, and a few mopeds, all shipped second-hand from Japan. The sole gas station in Arabella is open only once a week, and shipments of gasoline arrive once every three months. Thus, fuel is rationed. Very few residents have jobs, simply because so few are available. Some grow vegetables, others catch and sell fish. Some provide various services either from their home or from small shops built along Main St., running in front of the harbor. The rest live off of a welfare check delivered once a month from the United States, which is the only assistance the U.S. offers the residents of Arabella.

A very simple government is in place. The police chief, Luis Mendez, runs the police station by himself. The governor is a Caucasian American named James Emery. He runs everything on the island. Both men have more or less easy jobs, since Arabella's crime rate is almost nonexistent.

After a connecting flight on a small commuter plane from Hawaii, we touched down just after 7pm in a soaking wet Guam. Though it's early July, and with the rainy season supposedly over, it's apparent Mother Nature doesn't follow rules. For reasons unknown, Laurie, myself and twelve other passengers were forced to walk in the rain from the tarmac to the terminal. Behind me, I could hear cursing in at least three languages.

After picking up our luggage, we took a taxi to a nearby motel. We still had some shopping to do before the last leg of the trip.

His eyes seemed to glaze over as he recalled his memories of Arabella. "Ahh, Arabella." He turned to Laurie. "That's where I met Nick's mom, back when I was in the Navy. I was stationed at the naval base that use to be there. Nine months later, Nick showed up. Three months after that, I was honorably discharged and the three of us came back here to Detroit. That was 1983."

"Got any friends there?" I asked.

After a deep sigh, he said, "Dr. Julius Moore. He was the island's only physician. He delivered you. He and I talked alot, in fact, it was at his house where I first met your mom."

I looked at Laurie. "What do you think?"

"About what?"

"Honeymoon in Arabella?"

She smiled. "Can Jane go with us?"

rarely ever works. The Sweet Lady Jane never fails to calm her down, but I don't like her smoking that stuff while she's pregnant. Unlike her, I'm not pregnant, so I took it up!

"Laurie? Have you noticed you've been extra bitchy today?" I asked, ready to run at the first sign of her fist.

Surprisingly, she seemed to give this some serious thought. "I know I've been a little edge, I guess...but bitchy?"

"Yes! Bitchy. And your bitchiness almost botched the job."

"Ughh...Nick, you know why. I'm going craazy without smoking!"

"If I let you smoke as much as you use to, that kid'll come out with a bong in his hands!"

"*Her* hands," she corrected.

"Fine. You can smoke. A little!"

Before I'd even finished the sentence, she was digging through her purse and producing an already-rolled Lady Jane.

"Do you have to do that here?"

"Fine," she said, lighting it up, "if the old lady comes back...I'll share."

During the long drive home to Farmington Hills, neither of us talked much. Laurie was now sucking down her fourth Lady Jane, and my mind was on other things. We'd gotten married last month, just down the street from the motel we just left. There's a little wedding chapel there called the Little Wedding Chapel. It was a really quick service. Dad was there, along with Sadie, our Black Labrador. Laurie's grandmother attended as well, attached to my grandfather's arm. I hate weddings, especially my own, and I was relieved when it was over. Now two words haunted my mind: honey and moon. Or maybe that's one word. I dunno. Anyway, that's what the money was for.

The following morning, as Laurie and I sat on the couch smoking Lady Janes, we spread the freshly 'laundered' money out on the coffee table. It took us 43 seconds to count \$340,000. Not a bad haul, for a job we put together in a half hour.

We laid our heads back on the couch, eyes closed, letting Jane's Utopia envelope us. I picked that moment to surprise her with my plans. "Arabella," I simply said.

She turned to me. "Who's that? The bitch you're cheating on me with?" she asked with a smirk.

"Eh, no. Arabella is a small island in the South Pacific."

"Ohhh. Okay. So?"

"It's a beautiful place, I've heard. A seven-mile-long beach, crystal blue water, mostly Spanish natives, and not a single resort. It's not a tourist spot. In fact, most Americans don't even know it exists."

"Cool," she said, giving me a sarcastic thumbs-up. "So how do you know about it?"

"Because I've been there."

She looked at me with a raised eyebrow. "When?"

"When I was born."

Dad woke up and stumbled into the livingroom. He tripped over Sadie, who ultimately broke his fall. Still in a daze, he made his way to the kitchen and poured day-old coffee into a 44-ounce Slurpee cup. After banging his knee on the coffee table and spouting off random curse words, he sat down next to us.

"I take it your date went well?" I asked him.

"Date?" he asked with confusion. "Is that what I did last night? I thought I slept with a Singapore hooker."

"You did, but that was two weeks ago."

He shook his head. "Damn. Musta been some good Jane then." He looked down at the mountain of cash on the coffee table with indifference. He was use to this now. "Looks like you've got plans for the weekend."

"Maybe. I was telling Laurie about Arabella."

the opposite direction toward the bank. They never suspected the little Camry/Corolla/Civic/Whatever doing the speed limit in the other direction.

We pulled into the motel's lot and parked in front of the door to our room. Laurie grabbed the bag of cash and, the gentleman that I am, I opened the car door for her. She returned the gesture by giving me the finger.

I went to the bathroom and started filling the bathtub with cold water. I dumped four bags of ice into the water that heretofore had been melting on the floor. Lastly, I dumped a bottle of bleach into the water. When the tub was almost full, I shut the water off.

Laurie entered, bag in-hand. She knelt down beside me and submerged it into the concoction. After the contents of the bag were completely soaked, she began to remove the money from the bag. Each handful, as it was removed from the bag, was extracted from the water.

After the third handful, the dye-pack exploded.

"Dammit Nick! You were suppose to be watching her!"

"I had a distraction," I said, turning to her. "A big, Pregnant, DISTRACTION!"

It didn't matter. The purple dye flooded the bathtub, but the bleach in ice-cold water prevented it from staining the cotton paper. Laurie and I grabbed handfuls of money from the tub and dumped it in the sink, washing the purple bleach off with cold water. We piled the wet money back into the cloth bag and cleaned the bathroom, leaving no trace of purple dye. We grabbed up our few possessions: keys, wallet, purse, bong, and a box of tic-tacs, and we checked out.

We drove across the street to the Laundromat. This was Laurie's idea, and was another added precaution against purple money. After changing a five into quarters, we discreetly dumped the money into a washing machine with a little box of Tide we got in the mail.

Please don't get the wrong idea about us. I know what it must look like: staying in a motel, driving a Geo, you must think we were poor before this bank job. Well, you couldn't be wrong. Is that a word? Wronger? We may not be rich, but we're definitely living comfortably. You see, I have an addiction. My name is Nick Stone, and I'm a felony-holic. I, my wife Laurie and my dad live in a spacious, five-bedroom house in Farmington Hills, just outside of Detroit. Laurie and I had our own house, but my best friend burned it down while kidnapping Laurie. But that's a whole other story. The insurance claim on the house fire gave us just under a million dollars, and together with what we'd saved put us at a million and a half. Needless to say, we weren't exactly hurting for money. We didn't need to pull another job, and when Laurie tried to persuade me into doing a bank job, I was against it -- too much risk for too little payoff. But in the end, my addiction won over. For Laurie and I, there's no better feeling than committing a high-stakes felony. The head-rush is always worth more than the money, though dollar signs do make it more enticing! Besides, I needed the extra dough for what I had planned. Laurie still doesn't know. Shh!

The dryer posed more of a problem. Since discretion was key to this operation, the huge, round window on the dryer door stood in our way. Fuck it. We loaded the money into the dryer and sat atop the washing machines in front of it. Fuck the fabric softener.

Though it was eleven p.m., there were still a few people in the Laundromat, and the rolling, tumbling cash attracted the attention of a silver-haired lady in her seventies, dressed in a rather frumpy looking nightgown. She wandered over from folding her whites to gawk at the display. She then turned to Laurie, mouth agape.

"Money laundering," Laurie explained, giving her an ice-cold stare as she added, "Beat it, spinster."

The old lady walked away proclaiming, "Well I never!"

Laurie yelled back, "And dressed like that, you never will!"

I've had to endure this for four months. She's not mean to me, but she's mean to others while I'm around. It's embarrassing really, and I stopped apologizing for her rude behavior two months ago. Again, fuck it. The doctor prescribed something for her pregnancy hormones, but it

Arabella's Secrets

Chapter One

"Everybody on the floor!" Laurie yelled, firing a round from her Desert Eagle .45 into the bank's ceiling. "Any eyes I see looking my way gets lead between 'em!"

For being four months pregnant, she was doing her part quite well. Maybe too well. I don't like it when she gets mean and bitchy with the people we rob. I mean, it's bad enough walking into a bank to cash a check and find yourself suddenly kissing the floor...that's humiliation enough. Then scare them enough to leave a yellow puddle on the carpet? It's degrading and dehumanizing. I'd always done my part in a courteous and civilized manner - try to make them feel better about being robbed - and I thought I'd taught Laurie the same.

I blame it on our as-yet-to-be offspring.

While Laurie continued to taunt the floor dwellers, I walked up to the first teller window and tapped on the counter.

"Excuse me ma'am," I said to the lady on the floor behind the counter, "I believe my partner meant everyone but you."

The bank teller/floor dweller slowly got to her feet, seeing only, of course, a guy wearing a ski mask and holding a cloth bag, which I handed to her.

"If you wouldn't mind, please fill it with twenties, fifties and hundreds. You may want to exclude the dye-pack, as it may infuriate my already infuriated partner." I leaned slightly over the counter and said to her in an almost conspiratorial whisper, "Neither of us want that, I assure you."

As she filled the bag, Laurie came up behind me. "Why don't you just fuck her right in front of me?" she asked, turning and giving the teller the finger.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I asked Laurie in a whisper.

"What's with all that *please* and *if you don't mind* bullshit? You want her! 'Cause I'm fat and ugly!"

"No," I said, rubbing my forehead in a vain attempt to thwart off the oncoming migraine, "you are not fat *or* ugly, and this's the wrong time to discuss this! Have you been taking your pills?"

"Screw you Nick!" she yelled. Aw crap. She used my name. I had to think fast.

"Don't you DARE call me a dick!" I yelled loud enough for everyone to hear.

Meanwhile, the bank teller had long since filled the bag and was now staring at the happy couple in amusement. She might have hit the alarm button had she not been distracted by our post-marital bliss.

I took the bag of cash and turned back to the teller. "Thank you very much ma'am, and please don't let this stop you from having a wonderful day."

I turned away, only to receive a slap in the face from my loving wife. "Pig!" she declared as she grabbed the money and stormed out of the bank.

Outside, was my little black Geo. I may be open-minded to many things, but not my getaway car. The 1991 Geo Prizm, the ugliest, boxiest thing with four pistons, is the most nondescript vehicle anyone could ask for. While witnesses are saying 'It was a Camry! No, a Corolla! Or a Civic!' they'll never think of a Geo. Nobody ever does. That's why Geo was bought out by Chevrolet in 1994.

We jumped in the still running Geo and I hit the gas. Normally Laurie was the driver, but coming into her second trimester, her belly couldn't fit behind the wheel. But I'd never tell her that.

We drove away from the National City bank in Taylor Michigan, toward Telegraph Road. We'd already rented a room at a little no-tell motel. We saw several police cars speeding off in

Note from the author: If you like this story, please feel free to share it with your friends and family. If you would like to order this story in paperback from Amazon or would like to read more of my short novels, please visit my website at <http://www.TimothyBoling.com/>

Arabella's Secrets

27,500 Words

Military / Humor /Thriller / Regional (Pacific)

© 2009 Timothy A. Boling

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places or incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidence.

This novel is copyrighted material and all rights are reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted in any medium, in any form, without the author's consent.

Anyway, happy reading. ☺