

Coral Sea Affair

**By Drew Lindsay
Smashwords Edition**

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

For my Mother, Josephine Lindsay who never got the chance to read it, and for my Father, David Lindsay who doesn't like reading fiction anyway.

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ALSO BY DREW LINDSAY

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Coral Sea Affair

Ben Hood Thriller Number 1

Black Mountain Affair

Ben Hood Thriller Number 2

Flesh Traders

Ben Hood Thriller Number 3

The Dead Woman's House

Ben Hood Thriller Number 4

The Men's Club

Ben Hood Thriller Number 5

The Dark Affair

Ben Hood Thriller Number 6

An Explosive Affair

Ben Hood Thriller Number 7

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you Leonarda for the beautiful cover work.

<http://leonardaarmstrong.com>

Thank you to the people who took the time to point out that my spelling is lousy; that I can't always rely on spellchecker and it's about time I actually learned the difference between it's and its (hence a bit of a cleanup and the release of this revised edition)

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Chapter One

'You went too far this time Ben.'

'What?'

'You can't just run around shooting people. It doesn't make the department look good.'

'One of them had a carving knife Peter and the other was swinging a machete. I was going in. They were coming out. They had just stabbed a teller and grabbed money.'

'You didn't know that.'

'I knew they were in a damn hurry to get out of there and they looked fairly determined to carve me up in order to do so.'

'So you pulled out your gun and shot one in the throat and the other one in the stomach.'

'I shot the skinny one in the stomach. I couldn't afford to miss because he had the machete. I was actually aiming for his chest but I'm a bit out of practice.'

'Out of practice! You shot a gay 3 months ago for threatening his hairdresser.'

'He had a knife to the poor man's throat and fully intended to slice him.'

'What, over a bad streak? Are you crazy?'

'So I just stand there and watch the guy's artery sliced and then shoot?'

'Well the gay is dead. The hairdresser is still recovering from a heart attack, and the family of both are threatening to sue.'

'I didn't cause his heart attack. Be fair Pete.'

'You blew the gay's brains all over the hairdresser's face.'

'You're missing the point.'

'Well in the case of this latest alleged robbery, the suspects are both stone dead and their parents want your hide nailed and so does the Commissioner.'

'Suspects! Alleged robbery!'

Detective Sergeant Ben Hood slumped into a chair and breathed out a long sigh. The room he was in was on the 9th floor of Police Headquarters in Sydney. The air conditioning vent above his head rattled but at least for a change it was blowing cool air to combat the Australian summer heat rather than the hit and miss mixture of various temperatures that were normal for that building.

Detective Inspector Peter Dunn sat opposite him with a large fake timber laminated desk between them.

Ben looked out the window over thick summer foliage in Hyde Park. He watched as children with their mothers set picnics on the grass near the War Memorial. He looked back at his long time friend but Peter lowered his eyes to the file in front of him.

'They want you put out to pasture Ben. I can't help you this time.'

'Pasture?'

'Yeah, gone. Finished. Retired.'

'I won't go. I'm not even 50!'

'You're 50 next month you jerk and you keep shooting people.'

'They need bloody well shooting and you know that.'

'Haven't you ever heard of a taser?'

Ben sat back and laughed. 'You and I both know that I'm not authorised to carry a taser and even if I had one, you only get one shot and then the other guy slices you.'

'And you're not authorised to load up with high powered hollow points or whatever you are putting in that Glock and splatter people over the landscape.'

'Hit them with standard issue and they'll put their finger in the hole and keep coming.'

The two men stared at each other.

'It's likely you'll go down over this one Ben. The non issue loads will be reported to the Coroner this time.'

Ben looked out the window and fiddled with his watch.

Peter looked back at the papers on his desk. 'OK. This is the deal. You clear out for 3 months on full pay and get some counselling.'

'You are kidding!'

'Anger management.'

'ANGER MANAGEMENT!'

'And then we do an analysis of your progress and a decision will be made in relation to your ongoing relationship with the department.'

'And what do I do while I'm not working for 3 months?'

'Take a holiday. Book a romantic trip for you and Fay to the Maldives.'

'The Maldives! Me and Fay! She hates the sun and heat and she hates tropical places and she hates me! You know that!'

'Re kindle the relationship.'

'RE KINDLE! She would tie me to a coconut tree and re-kindle a fairly decent fire under my arse with anything she could find to burn.'

'Well you are the one that keeps a photo of Brenda Grant in your office.'

'And I've got one of her in my wallet too. So what? Brenda's a pin up girl after all. No harm done. A movie star for God's sake!'

'Yeah well Fay doesn't see it that way mate.'

'Yeah well Fay didn't seem to mind sleeping with a bloke who fixed our fence.'

'I'm not getting into this with you Ben. You are now officially on paid leave for 3 months. I want your stuff.'

Ben leaned forward in the chair, examining his friend's face for any sign that he may relent. Peter Dunn watched him carefully. Ben removed his issue handcuffs from the pouch on the back of his belt and placed them on the desk. He then unclipped the Glock 35 from his pancake holster, ejected the 15 round clip and put both on the desk in front of him. Inspector Dunn picked up the gun. 'How did you get one of these? They're not standard issue.'

'I'm in special ops.'

'Special ops my arse.'

'It's got NSW Police stamped on it, right?'

'Good Lord!' Peter thumbed one of the bullets out of the clip and examined it. 'These are standard load.'

'Yeah, so?'

'You weren't using these in the last shooting Ben.'

'I have mood swings....'

Peter Dunn sat back slowly in his chair. He placed both hands, palms down on the desk. 'That's why you have to go Ben. We don't do stuff like that in this

department any more. Bugged records. Non standard weapons and equipment. Cover ups. We have computers now that track everything.

‘Yeah and the crims are making a laughing stock of the Police Force. Gangs of drunken low life’s are out of control all over the place. Anyone in their way gets beaten up or killed. Two good uniformed cops at Fairfield got stabbed just last night because they tried to break up a drug deal. Did that ever happen when we worked Fairfield 25 years ago?’

‘That was 25 years ago. Things have changed Ben.’

‘Well you have changed; that’s for sure.’

‘You can’t just go around breaking arms and shooting people!’ Peter’s voice was rising in volume.

‘Worked in Fairfield 25 years ago.’

‘Not anymore!’

‘Remember when we used to get the dog guys to put their nasty German Shepherds in with a group of drug dealing zips at one of those Cabramatta night clubs? The shit was flying everywhere and I’m not just talking white powder.’

‘OK..... Enough. Badge.’

Ben took out his Police Badge and Identification wallet and laid it on the desk. ‘Satisfied?’

Peter Dunn slumped back in his chair. He pushed his right hand through thinning hair. ‘OK smart arse. You got anything else?’

‘Like what?’

‘Weapons?’

‘Na.’

‘Yeah, likely. You are going to get into deep shit if you’ve got other stuff you know.’

‘Nothing. OK?’

The two men looked at each other for several seconds. Inspector Dunn put the handcuffs, gun and identification badge in his desk drawer and locked it.

‘So what am I supposed to do now?’ asked Ben.

‘Take a holiday. Get back to the gym. Just look at yourself. You’ve put on weight and you are out of condition.’

‘That’s why I’ve got the gun.’

The two remained silent for several moments.

Peter Dunn stood and Ben stood slowly as well. The meeting was over. ‘Go and talk to that Jap guy again. He did you some good. He straightened you out last time.’

‘I don’t need straightening out.....and he’s Korean.’

‘Just do it. OK?’

Ben turned and walked out of the office.

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Chapter Two

The Australian summer had arrived on a Thursday this year. Spring had warmed up to its usual 'hit and miss' way with warm days followed by a plunge into cold. On the Thursday that Ben Hood walked out of Police Headquarters after handing over his badge, handcuffs and gun; summer had arrived with a vengeance.

Ben walked slowly back to the Criminal Investigation Branch, a short distance away in Liverpool Street. He knew the boys would already know what had happened. Juicy news travelled fast in the job. The bland façade of the CIB confronted him. His car was parked in the basement and he had stuff to collect. The plan was to be in and out quickly.

As the lift doors opened on the 11th floor, his worst fears were realised as he walked past the skull and crossbones hanging over the entrance to the Special Operations Team headquarters.

He had been walking with hunched shoulders. Defeated. Sad. He wasn't going to let them see him that way. Ben straightened up to his full height of six foot one, pulled in his slowly increasing middle aged girth and flexed his well developed arm muscles. At least he had retained his arm muscles. His blue eyes were piercing; a feature which had assisted with numerous Police interrogations and several out of hours encounters with the opposite sex. That had also probably contributed to the rather distant relationship he now shared with his wife. His short cropped brown hair was thinning on top but thick at the sides with just a hint of grey. He had forgotten to shave that morning so dark stubble was evident.

His suit had seen better days. Dark blue pin striped. The seam in his trousers had disappeared. He no longer had a large gun to hide so his coat hung over his shoulder from his right hand finger and the empty pancake holster was in plain view.

Ben walked into the squad room. Eight young male and two female faces swung towards him. Most were smiling. The two female faces were not. Ben scanned the room and walked confidently to his desk. He put his coat on the back of his chair and sat down. No-one spoke.

Ben looked at the framed photograph of movie star Brenda Grant on his desk. Someone had blackened out one of her front teeth with a Texta pen on glass. They were always doing that, or worse and he had always faithfully cleaned off the ink and restored her to her incredible beauty.

He put the photograph of Brenda Grant face down on the desk. He looked at one of the young Detectives. 'Brian. Could you get a box for my stuff?'

'Yes sir,' said a youthful Brian and he scurried to the break out room.

Ben scanned the 7 male faces and ignored the girls. 'Obviously you all know?' Several mumbled that they did.

'Looks like I'll be trying to start another life eh? Might even go to Hollywood and meet Brenda.'

Laughter rippled through the room.

'Well why not? I'm not that old.'

Detective Simon Bastock put his hand up to get Ben's full attention and said, 'Ben, you ARE that old and Brenda Grant is half your age. You are also married. Brenda is totally untouchable, way out of your league and lives in a bodyguarded

mansion on the other side of the planet. You have been pulling our legs with this Brenda Grant thing, right?’

Brian walked back into the room and dropped a cardboard carton on Ben’s desk. Ben looked back at Simon Bastock. ‘You’ve got to have dreams mate. We work one of the crap jobs of the world so you have to have dreams.....even if they are out of your reach.’

Simon said nothing. Ben emptied the contents of his desk drawers into the box and laid the framed photo of Brenda Grant on top. A phone rang on a distant desk and was answered by one of the girls. The Police radio squawked softly from a speaker in the ceiling. Ben threw his coat over the cardboard box and lifted it into his arms. ‘You guys take care and don’t forget to write.’

‘What are you really going to do Ben?’ asked Simon.

‘Get used to being washed up I suppose,’ said Ben and he walked out of the office. As he waited for the lift he became aware of someone beside him. Ben looked down at the young female Detective. He had forgotten her name. She placed a business card in the pocket of his shirt.

‘What’s this?’

‘A friend of mine. I used to date him. He’s in security.’

‘I hate security.’

‘This is different. It’s a very professional operation Ben. They need people like you.’

‘Not interested.’

‘Just in case.’

Ben looked into the pretty face and sparkling dark brown eyes. ‘OK, thanks. I’ll keep it in mind.’

The lift arrived and he stepped in. He did not look back at the girl as the doors closed.

Simon Bastock looked around the squad room at his colleagues. He glanced briefly at Detective Lisbet Fenton as she walked back into the room from the lift foyer and dropped into a chair at her desk. Bastock laughed loudly. ‘Tell you what guys. If I ever see any evidence that Hood gets Brenda Grant to even acknowledge that he’s alive, I’ll personally send the bugger a thousand bucks.’

Lisbet Fenton looked up from her desk. ‘Careful there Simon. You just never know.’

‘I’m not joking! A thousand bucks to Hood if I see any evidence from anywhere that can convince me baby eyes even knows Hood is alive. You’re all witnesses, right?’

‘Right,’ said Lisbet. ‘We’re all witnesses.’

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Chapter Three

The CIB basement was dark. It wasn't supposed to be dark but no-one seemed to bother about the fluorescent tubes which had expired long ago. On B2, eight tubes worked, 3 flickered and eighteen were dead. Ben manually unlocked his battered Commodore sedan. The remote control locking had never worked from the day he bought it. He opened a rear door and slid the box of possessions onto the seat. He slammed the door and the booming echo off cold painted concrete startled him for a second.

He knew he should head home. Fay would probably be out but she would be back later and things needed some straightening out. A car roared up a ramp, its tyres screeching on the painted concrete.

'Bugger it...' he whispered. Ben locked his car and walked to the lift. He wasn't going home. His mind was too stirred up and restless for that. He had to get somewhere cool and quiet and think for a while.

As he exited the building, a crowd of laughing teenagers ran past him heading for the Hyde Park subway. He walked towards the centre of Sydney, sweat rolling off his face and neck and soaking his shirt. The George Street cinema complex was cool and at least it would be relatively dark. Once again, teenagers milled around everywhere, sipping coke and laughing at nothing, or at least to Ben it seemed to be nothing. A group of elderly men and women were being ushered into a new released screening of *Gone with the Wind*. Cinema 4 was about to show 'Relative Humidity'; starring Brenda Grant and a cast of others unrecognisable to Ben. It didn't matter. He paid for a ticket and went to the Cinema doors.

A girl in her late 20's took his ticket. He noted her short jet black hair and very white face with bright mauve lipstick. He considered that she had not actually been exposed to any kind of sunlight for years. She wore a tight fitting, light grey business suit. She smiled at him. 'You're in luck. Brenda is out and Vampires are in.'

'Pardon me?'

'Vampires. Blood suckers. Brenda doesn't do that although she has potential.'

'I'm sorry. What are you talking about?'

'You'll see when you get inside.' She led Ben into the Cinema. It was almost empty. A middle aged couple sat in the third row back from the screen to the left. An elderly male sat in the centre of the cinema, 6 rows back from the screen. He was wearing a bright red baseball cap. Two young girls sat in the front row on the right. They were feeding each other popcorn from a very large yellow cardboard container. The lighting was dim. The screen was dark.

'Where you want to sit Mister, and why are you wearing an empty gun holster?' Ben looked back at the usher. He'd forgotten about the pancake holster. 'At the back. In the middle.'

'Figured.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Nothin.'

‘Look, I just got fired. I need somewhere dark and cool to chill out and I happen to think Brenda Grant is an amazing actress.’

‘Sure you do. You a cop?’

‘Was.’

Ben moved along the back row of seats and dropped into a cool leather chair. The usher came up behind him and bent down. He could smell perfume and knew instantly what it was. It reminded him of a very torrid affair almost 30 years ago.

‘What do you want lady?’

‘What do you need Mister?’

Ben turned and looked at the white face close to his. ‘You’re a lovely girl. Now leave me alone.’

The usher vanished into the darkness at the rear of the cinema.

The lights slowly dimmed. The screen burst alive with advertisements for mouth wash and the most affordable car in the world.

The curtains widened for cinemascope and the opening credits.

Brenda Grant dominated the opening scene. The camera panned up from the sparkling blue Caribbean ocean to a blindingly white yacht with Brenda standing at the prow. Her skin was tanned and glowing with oils. A brief white bikini clung tightly to her curves.

Ben looked around to see if the usher was watching him. She was gone.

Brenda’s long blond hair cascaded around her face, occasionally blown back by the ocean breeze. Ben let his eyes soak up everything about this woman. He was thrilled by her amazing beauty, larger than life on the big screen. He was saddened at the same time that he knew he could never even get close to someone like that. He listened to her soft deep voice as she gave instructions to the Captain as to their course home. She had such confidence about her. She addressed the yacht Captain with respect and authority. It was an amazing mix. There was magic in every move she made. Ben was spellbound.

The story unfolded.

Ben forgot about the Police Force. He forgot about Fay and their difficult domestic problems. He forgot about the death and misery he had experienced for years as a Detective on the streets of Sydney. He forgot about the white faced usher. He entered willingly into a world of make believe and hoped it would never end.

Ben resented the crowd as he walked onto George Street. He looked back at the Cinema complex and realised how depressing it appeared after basking in imagination and the larger than life impact of Brenda on the big screen. His large, empty pancake holster was attracting more attention than was comfortable so he moved quickly in the direction of the CIB.

Building shadows lengthened as the sun plunged towards the horizon. The air felt cooler as he caught the lift to the basement car park. His air conditioning hadn’t worked for years but he wound down all the windows and drove up the winding ramps onto the street.

It was just after 7 pm when he drove into his driveway. The old Roseville home had seen better days. White paint peeled from window shutters and he was going to get around to replacing that cracked glass panel in the front door. The garage door was closed and he didn’t know if Fay was home. He unlocked the front door and entered the cool, dark foyer. The place was silent. Fay couldn’t be home. She always had music blaring.

Ben had no idea where his wife might be. He pulled a mobile phone from his trouser pocket and realised that it had been switched off all day. He turned on the phone and put it on a side board while he poured a very stiff scotch.

A text message beeped on his phone. It was from Fay. WON'T BE HOME TONIGHT. OUT WITH ASHLEY. MIGHT SEE YOU TOMORROW. FAY.

Ben dropped the phone on the kitchen sideboard and opened the refrigerator. There was little on the shelves. Half a lettuce and a tomato together with a few opened bottles of jam, some olives and a small bowl of limes. One opened can of dry ginger ale. No milk or butter. The freezer wasn't much better. He found one small lamb chop, slightly shrivelled, half a loaf of frozen bread and an out of date packet of fish fingers.

Ben took out the chop, emptied the fish fingers from the packet and dropped the lot in a pan. He poured a smell of dry into the scotch, swallowed it in a few gulps and turned on the stove element. He put the pan on the heat.

Number two scotch and dry disappeared down his throat in a similar manner. He poured a third. This one was straight scotch as the can of dry was empty. The ice trays in the freezer were also empty.

Ben felt the warmth of the scotch spread quickly through his body, dulling the tension and relaxing the muscles of his face. He sat at the kitchen table and sipped the amber liquid. The house was deathly quiet. A clock ticked slowly in the lounge room.

A burning smell pervaded his nostrils and by the time he had jumped up and retrieved the pan from the stove top, one side of the chop and all the fish fingers were giving off grey smoke. He ran a little water over them and the hot pan sent plumes of steam upward. The smoke alarm began to scream. Ben dropped the pan back on the stove top and began to wave his hands at the smoke alarm. Finally it became silent. The chop and fish fingers bubbled in the water. They looked dreadful but he hadn't eaten lunch and was starving. Black and soggy, he laced the meal with tomato sauce and ate, washing it down with the remainder of the scotch.

'You're drunk Detective Hood.' He said to himself. 'I mean ex Detective Hood, that's what I mean, but what the hell. I've got one shot of scotch left and then some port in the lounge.' The sound of his voice seemed somehow comforting in the dark, quiet house. He emptied the last of the contents of the scotch bottle into his glass and sipped it as he walked somewhat unsteadily into the lounge room. He turned on a lamp at his desk in a corner. The study was currently being used by Fay as a 'design studio' where she painted and sewed and performed other acts of 'art' that Ben wasn't even remotely interested in. His desk and computer had been moved into the lounge area; not that he ever used it much.

He sipped more scotch and turned on the computer. It was an ancient thing; the subject of constant ridicule by Fay. In comparison, she had a tiny laptop which ran 20 times faster and presented in designer silver.

Internet access typically took around 3 minutes. Ben waited patiently. He had nothing else to do. He drained the scotch and searched for the port bottle. It was in a cabinet nearby and he poured the ruby liquid straight into his empty scotch glass. It tasted good. Smooth and sweet.

He had some trouble getting his eyes to focus on the computer screen and even more getting Google to load. Typing in 'Brenda Grant' took a mammoth effort but finally her web page appeared. She looked so amazingly beautiful, he was overwhelmed.

A tiny voice in the back of Ben's head told him to turn the computer off and go to bed. He ignored it. He clicked on 'contact Brenda'. The voice in his head got a bit louder but two mouthfuls of port silenced it.

Focusing on the keyboard presented yet another obstacle but once mastered to some extent, Ben slowly typed:-

Dear Mis Grant. My name is Ben Hood. You don't know me. I am a great fan and I watched one of your pictures today here in Sydney, Australia where I live. I used to work here as a cop but I sort of got sacked today because I shot some people. They needed shooting by the way because they were bad. I really enjoyed watching your picture. I've forgotten the name but you were beautiful and stunning. I'm married but Fay hates me. Jamaka Blue I think was the name of your film.....no Relative Heat or something. It's playing in Sydney just now but the vampires are in and you are out so I'm told, but you have potential. You don't have to convince me about your potent nail. I think you are wonderful. I had a photo of you in a frame on my desk at the Police Squad room but they kept doing stuff to your teeth with black texta. I'm just a little drunk right now so forgive me. I over boiled a chop and some fish fingers and the fire alarm went off. We will never meet of course but I wanted to write to you. There must be a side to you that we don't see in your pictures. Things people like me will never see. Perhaps sad things. There is lots of sad stuff happening with people.

Ben stopped typing and sipped more port.

I hope you have a happy life. You look very happy. You must have good people around you, taking care of you. Watching your movies is good for me but they only go for an hour or so and then you have to do other things. Now that I've got no job I've got to try and do something else because they don't like me shooting people. I don't mean to shoot people. It just happens.

Ben's focus was almost totally gone. He was going to type more but knew it was impossible. He hit the send button and the message disappeared.

That's when he fell off the chair and passed out on the deep pile carpet.

“*****”

Chapter Four

‘Michael. Would you mind just coming over here for a second?’

‘OK Mr. Shaw.’

Michael walked out of the range of the soft lighting and approached the elderly bald man sitting in a collapsible chair in the darkness, just off set. Michael was starting to tremble and with just cause.

‘And the rest of you,’ said Mr. Stewart Shaw, slowly, ‘take five.... especially you Brenda my dear. In your case, take ten. I want to speak with you later.’

Stewart Shaw had been directing films for almost 20 years. Some more recently, starring Brenda Grant, had done remarkably well and made him very wealthy. Others were a failure. His home was New York. He hated Los Angeles where he was forced to work. He hated the heat. He hated the people. He hated producers and he hated actors, especially those from California. He was in his early 50’s but looked more mid 60’s. His skin was reddened from accidental exposure to the sun. The cargo pants he wore were too big and his collection of Hawaiian shirts was the source of much amusement among the film crew.

‘Michael. You work the dolly, is that right?’

‘Yes sir. I pull the dolly.’

‘Are you an experienced dolly puller, as I was led to believe when we started this film?’

Michael hesitated for a moment. ‘Um...I can pull a dolly sir.’

‘OK, you can pull a dolly. Do you know what the dolly is for Michael?’

‘It runs on tracks and the camera sits on it.’

‘Yes, and do you know why the camera sits on a dolly that sits on tracks?’

‘Er... to move it?’

‘Not only move it Michael, but to move it smoothly and at the appropriate speed. We don’t want the cinema goers to know the camera is moving because we want them, in this case, to concentrate on Brenda.’

‘Well they won’t have trouble doing that boss. She’s not wearing much.’

‘Michael.’ Stewart Shaw sat back in his collapsible chair and locked his fingers behind his head. ‘Brenda is walking from her lover’s bedroom to his library.’

‘Yes, they told me that.’

‘Good. Now concentrate. It’s the middle of the night and she has exhausted him and now she is going to steal something from his library, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘And it’s very still and very quiet,’

‘Yes.’

‘And she is walking slowly and cautiously because she doesn’t want to wake him up, even though he is an old guy, right?’

‘I guess so.’

Stewart Shaw moved his head from side to side in an attempt to relieve the tension pain. ‘Then why in God’s name are you attempting to race her to the library?’

‘Race her?’

‘She had to run to keep up with you Mr. Dolly puller! She sets the pace, not you! Get out of my sight!’ Stewart Shaw was now yelling. Michael fled.

‘ELIZABETH....!’

The set was deserted.

‘ELIZABETH, get out here now!’ Mr. Shaw was sweating and rubbing his temples.

A tall, very well structured woman in her early 40’s emerged from the darkness and approached the Director. Elizabeth Rose had long black hair tied back in a pony tail. Her fringe wisped over her forehead, almost hiding deep blue eyes. She strode confidently across the darkened set and stood before Shaw. He looked up at her, suddenly unnerved. ‘Where’s Brenda?’

‘You told her to get off the set so she got off the set.’

‘I told her to hang around. I need to speak with her.’

‘She’s gone out somewhere.’

‘What!’

‘Out somewhere.’

‘Where the hell Elizabeth?’

‘I don’t know. She just took off.’

Stewart Shaw stood up and put his face as close to Elizabeth’s as he could. In this case it failed and he succeeded only in bringing his eyes level with her extremely large breasts barely contained in a cream coloured shirt with dragons embroidered on each side of the collar.

‘Where?’

‘How should I know? I’m not her keeper.’

‘Yes you damn well are. That’s what we pay you for.’

‘She’ll be back in the morning. You’ve got the crew in a bundle of nerves anyway so let’s just call it a day.’

The director slumped back into his chair and put his head in his hands. ‘This is turning into a nightmare. We haven’t even done the location shoot yet and the entire bloody project is falling apart.’

‘Perhaps you should tell us where this fabulous location shoot is and we’d be a bit more interested.’

‘No. I say no and the producers say no. We’re not leaking this project all over America.’

Elizabeth put her hands on her hips. ‘This is not that kind of film Stewart.’

‘And you would know right?’

Elizabeth was quiet for a while. She turned and walked a few paces away. ‘She’s not handling things all that well just now. Cut her some slack Stewart.’

‘I’ll cut her right out of the damn picture if she’s not on this set at 6 am tomorrow. You got that!’

‘Without her, you’ve got no picture. You got that?’

Elizabeth turned and the two stared at each other. ‘Tits and arse Elizabeth. That’s all.’

‘You’re a deadshit Stewart.’ Elizabeth walked out of the studio.

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Chapter Five

‘Good Lord, look at you?’

Ben lifted his head from the carpet and tried to sit up.

‘Dead drunk again last night. You’re disgusting.’

Ben turned over and sat up. He tried to focus his bloodshot eyes on Fay but it didn’t work so he shut them. ‘I got sort of fired.’

‘What do you mean, sort of fired? You’re either fired or not.’

Ben rubbed his eyes through closed eyelids. He felt pain throbbing through his temples. ‘I’m sort of suspended for a while over the last shooting.’

‘And who is going to pay the bills now?’

‘I’m on full pay I think.’

‘You’re hopeless Ben. Look what you’ve turned into?’

‘I haven’t turned into anything. I didn’t do anything wrong.’

‘You’re washed up as a cop and a husband. You must be doing everything wrong.’

‘And you’re Miss Perfect I suppose?’

Fay turned and stomped out of the lounge room. She took the stairs two at a time and slammed the master bedroom door. Ben pushed himself up from the floor and slumped into his desk chair. His mind was numb. His mouth tasted dry, salty and his tongue was sore where he had bitten it as he fell.

The morning sun streamed through the lace curtains. Heat was already building as yet another summer day formed. Ben was troubled. He couldn’t work out why but something was bothering him deep down. It wasn’t that he had fallen down drunk. He’d done that before, and recovered. It was something else. He looked around the room and his eyes stopped at the computer screen. The system had hibernated. That meant he hadn’t closed down in the normal manner.

A dread crept through his chest as recall tried to kick in. He had typed and sent an email. How many times had he warned himself never to send emails when he had been drinking? Same with text messages. Emails, text messages and alcohol were usually always a bad combination and last night he had consumed a great deal of alcohol.

He re booted the computer and opened Outlook. His worst fears were realised as a copy of his email to Brenda Grant’s web site appeared in the ‘sent’ tray. His hands trembled as he read the text. He deleted the email from the sent tray and also the deleted items tray. He turned the computer off and got to his feet. He felt sick and unsteady.

Ben looked at his watch. It was 8.34 am. He stumbled through the kitchen to the spare bathroom at the rear of the house, undressed and stood in front of the mirror. He was unshaven and smelt of alcohol and body odour. The warm blast of shower water felt amazing on his skin and he stood under the downpour for a long time.

Fay was gone as he entered the master bedroom. A towel was wrapped around his hips. He shaved, brushed his teeth and dressed casually. Now he felt more like facing the world but only marginally.

Fay hadn't left a message but she was obviously gone. He didn't care; in fact he wouldn't have cared if he never saw her again. That troubled him also because he had loved her so much.

Ben was hungry. The kitchen presented little hope of physical satisfaction but 'Maccas' was nearby. He retrieved his mobile phone and car keys from the kitchen sideboard, walked outside and locked the front door.

McDonald's was packed but he ordered a tray full of bacon and egg muffins with a large hot coffee and three orders of hash browns. An old man vacated a tiny corner table and Ben quickly took his place. He ate quickly and gratefully.

Later he took out the mobile phone and thumbed through the contacts list. Akira Misaki appeared and he pressed the call button.

'Yes.'

'Aka?'

'Ben?'

'You kept my number.'

'No, I forgot to delete it.'

'Nice.'

'What do you want Ben?'

'A talk.'

'About what?'

'I want to train again.'

Laughter rang in Ben's ear. 'Train to do what?'

'I need to get back into condition Aka.'

'You were one of the best I had and you pissed it away. What's your problem this time?'

'I got suspended yesterday. I need to get back into condition.'

'Go to Pete's gym. He'll take care of you.'

'I don't want Pete's gym. I need to get back the power.'

'The spiritual power?'

'Perhaps that too. Will you see me?'

'You only ever got half of it Ben. You learned the moves but you lacked the Zen.'

'I'm not a Buddhist.'

'You don't have to be a damn Buddhist you idiot. You never really got it, did you?'

'Look Aka. I need help!'

Silence.

'You there?'

'OK. Get over here at noon and I'll have a look at what a mess you've made of yourself since I last saw you.'

'Thanks Aka.'

'You been shooting people again I hear.'

'No choice.'

'You know Karate. You got a choice.'

'I guess I got a bit lazy, but Karate won't stop bullets and knives.'

'Perhaps not bullets unless you're close, but it will stop knives. You know that. See you at noon.'

The call was terminated. Ben put the phone back in his pocket and sipped his coffee.

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Chapter Six

‘OK people. Some quiet please.’ Stewart Shaw sat back in his chair and surveyed the set. ‘Welcome back Brenda.’

Brenda Grant stretched back on the huge circular bed and pulled the white satin sheet tighter around her breasts. She looked perfectly relaxed but her teeth were gritted. Her long blond hair cascaded around tanned shoulders in ringlets and her bright hazel eyes flashed a warning at the director which he obviously missed or chose to do so. She said nothing.

A large man with extremely bushy grey hair smothering his chest lay beside her. He was wearing only boxer shorts. Bright red with yellow smiley faces dotted throughout. He was in his late 70’s, almost bald with dark eyebrows and a prominent hook nose. His eyelids were closed but that was because he had been threatened with something akin to death by Stewart if he opened them.

‘Mr. Boom,’ said Stewart. ‘You put that mike into the shot once more and you are out of a job. Understand?’

‘Yes sir,’ mumbled the boom operator.

‘And Mr. Dolly puller. This is not a race between you and Brenda.’

‘No Mr. Shaw.’

‘Move in camera.’ Shaw watched the video screen as the large blimp shielded movie camera craned down towards Brenda. ‘Now I want action,’ said Shaw. ‘Drop that lighting to midnight interior.’

The studio lights dimmed.

‘Rolling,’ said the camera operator.

Brenda stretched out on the huge bed in a slow, sensual movement, her arms behind her on the pillows. All eyes were drawn to her. She rolled onto her side and faced the camera which was slowly craning down and moving in. She pushed herself into a sitting position with one arm, giving a glance back at the supposedly sleeping elderly man next to her. The satin sheet slipped away revealing large, perfectly formed naked breasts. The boom operator experienced a moment of weakness and the mike appeared in front of the camera.

Stewart Shaw sat forward with his head in his hands. The camera operator didn’t need to be ordered to stop filming. The set was deadly silent.

Shaw sat back and fixed his eyes on Brenda. She sat defiantly on the bed, making no effort to cover her nakedness. The boom operator moved the mike well out of shot and tensed himself for the onslaught. The elderly male actor kept his eyelids firmly closed but they were twitching slightly.

‘Brenda dear. You have read the script I gather?’

Brenda nodded slowly.

‘And you know what you had to do in this particular scene?’

Again Brenda nodded.

‘So the thing with the breasts. Where did that come from? Is that in the script?’

Brenda Grant pulled the sheet around her body and got off the bed. She fixed her stunning eyes on the director. ‘You got something against my tits Stewart? They’ve made you a lot of money in the past.’

Stewart Shaw flew out of his chair like a demented banshee and rushed onto the bedroom set. He looked up at Brenda and screamed, 'You follow the damn script! If I had wanted your boobs in this shot I would have put them in the shot. I run this bloody show, not you.'

Brenda's eyes flashed with anger and she moved close to the diminutive director. Shaw took a step back. 'You are a pathetic little man Stewart. I've worked my arse off for you on 3 pictures now. I've put up with your moods and your closet gay ranting.'

'Closet gay! What do you mean by that?' Stewart was screaming. 'I resent that remark you bitch.'

'Then go make the picture with someone else. I quit.'

'You can't quit. You've got a contract. Who do you think you are?'

Brenda moved closer to the director and he took a further step back. 'Someone who could whip your bony arse with one hand if I had to.' Brenda dropped the sheet and strode off the set totally naked. Mouths dropped open including Stewart's. The elderly man got off the bed and scurried off set.

Brenda walked to her dressing room. Elizabeth was waiting at the door with a dressing gown. Brenda slipped it on, moved to the bed and sat down. Elizabeth closed and locked the door.

The two women looked at each other for a second. Elizabeth said, 'I'll make you a coffee.'

'Like hell. I need a drink.'

'You shouldn't drink when you're angry babe.'

'Then I'll get it myself.'

'OK. OK.' Elizabeth walked to the bar fridge and dropped ice in a glass. She poured a healthy nip of very good scotch and put the bottle back on a shelf. 'You sip this slowly.'

'Don't Mother me Liz. Did you hear what that bastard said to me?'

Elizabeth handed the glass of scotch to Brenda. 'Everyone in the hangar heard it. He was out of line. You two were obviously not meant for each other.'

Brenda took a mouthful of scotch.

'Slow down damn you.'

'I'm not going back on. He can find someone else.'

Elizabeth twirled her black pony tail with a finger and sat down in a chair facing the bed. 'Think it over Brenda. It's worth money to keep going. They aren't exactly breaking the door down to get to you this year.'

'That will change. I've still got it.'

'I know you've still got it and so do millions of fans out there, mostly male.'

'Mostly creeps like Stewart.'

'I don't think so darling. You even got an email this morning from a cop in Sydney, Australia. I don't think he's a creep. Perhaps a bit drunk, but not creepy if you know what I mean.'

Brenda put her drink on the bedside table. 'What's he say?'

'I printed it out.' Elizabeth went to the computer desk and picked up a single page. She handed it to Brenda. She read Ben's email slowly, folded it neatly in half and put it on the bedside table.

'Cute. Touching. He's pissed.'

'He's telling you how he feels and he's not crude like most of the others.'

'True.'

‘So perhaps this is one you can reply to with a photo and a best wishes line. You can’t ignore them all.’

‘Wanna bet?’

‘OK. So let’s call it a day. I’ll take you to the beach and we’ll have ice cream and hot dogs.’

‘I think I should go see Joe.’

‘You don’t need a shrink. He charges too much anyway.’

‘He’s good for me.’

‘So is ice cream and hot dogs.’

Brenda laughed and drained the last of her scotch. ‘You’ve got a point. Let’s go.’

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Chapter Seven

At 3 minutes past noon, Ben Hood climbed old wooden stairs onto the shady verandah of a 1940's colonial style home in the leafy suburb of Eastwood, near Sydney. A white cat stretched out on a window ledge to the right of the huge knotted pine front door.

Wind chimes tinkled softly. Japanese symbols carved in black timber hung from the brick walls. Ben used to know what each of them meant but it was a long time since he had visited Akira Misaki's home. He couldn't remember what they meant any more.

Ben pushed the button beside the door and then settled in for a wait. He knew Aka and his household moved at a pace less hurried than the average Australian suburban family. A full minute later the huge timber door swung open slowly and a stunningly beautiful and extremely petite Japanese girl stood before him. He assumed it was a child but as she spoke and he had time to take in her body shape and facial features, he realised it was a woman.

'You are Ben?'

'Yes.'

'Mr. Misaki is expecting you sir.' She stood aside and Ben entered the cool, darkened foyer of the home. Familiar incense aromas instantly accosted his senses. He automatically took off his shoes and placed them in a rack with others neatly lined up, as he had done so many times in the past. The woman indicated slippers nearby with a slender hand. Ben put them on and followed the tiny woman down a darkened hallway into a huge open kitchen. Each wall was tiled from ceiling to floor, including the floor, in white porcelain. The cupboards and benches were dark walnut and the kitchen accessories were stainless steel.

Akira Misaki entered the room from a doorway opposite. Ben hadn't seen him in over 2 years but the Korean hadn't changed. He was now in his mid 60's, totally bald, solid build and looked extremely fit. He was shorter than Ben by a bare inch. His hands and knuckles were huge and battle scarred. The two men approached each other. Akira nodded slightly to Ben but kept his dark brown eyes fixed on him. 'Uh suh oh seh yoh.' (Welcome)

Ben bowed deeply as a sign of respect and looked downward. 'Ahn nyoung ha seh yoh.' (Formal greeting)

'You look like shit.'

Ben straightened up. 'You haven't changed Aka.'

'I work out. What the hell have you been doing?'

'I don't get time to work out. Cop work is busy stuff. The streets are a mess.'

'That's because you treat them with kid gloves.'

'I don't.'

Akira held out his right hand to Ben and the two men shook hands firmly. Ben knew that his friend could crush every bone in his hand should he choose. 'You shoot too many of them. Should use your hands and feet more like I taught you.'

'You can't do that all the time. These bastards carry guns.'

'And the guy with the machete I read about?'

'I'm not quick enough anymore. I don't like machetes. Too long and too sharp.'

'Not for me.'

'You practice in your sleep Aka.'

'No, I relax in my sleep. I'm at peace.'

'Good for you.'

'You want some green tea?'

'I hate that shit. You know that.'

'Good, then we'll have some. Bell...!'

The tiny Japanese woman glided into the room and stood beside Akira.

'I'd like you to meet Bell. Her full name in Japanese is Bluebell but we like to keep it short. Bell, this is Ben. You have heard me speak of him.'

Bell bowed and Ben automatically bowed as well. 'Nice to meet you,' said Ben.

'And you. I'll bring green tea. You two run along.'

Akira raised an eyebrow in Ben's direction and beckoned him to follow. The two walked through another short corridor and out onto a large sunlit patio. Akira waved Ben towards a padded chair and both sat opposite each other with a rough hewn handmade timber bench between them.

'Fay?'

'Don't ask. It's in the final stage of collapse.'

'Too bad.'

'Yeah, and the Japanese lady?'

'I'm multicultural.'

'I'll say. Last time I was here you were with a Pom and you'd just kicked out an American.'

'I met Bell in America on the last fight tour.'

'You win?'

Akira frowned and fixed his eyes on Ben.

'Sorry, dumb question.'

'OK, what do you want?'

'I need to get back into some sort of shape. I've been drinking too much and not exercising and I feel like shit.'

'Well that's obvious, but what do you intend to do with any level of fitness I can help you achieve?'

'What sort of a question is that?'

'Do you want to get fit just to get fit?'

'Uh Oh...I feel a lecture coming on.'

'I teach a special kind of Karate Mr. Hood and it's not just about breaking noses.'

'I know that.'

'Look at you, all bunched up and tense. Everything I taught you is down the drain. Where's the inner calming strength you used to have?'

'I'm not into that Aka. You meditate for hours. I couldn't do that to save my life.'

'Then you may not be able to save your life one day.'

Bell moved silently to the bench and laid down a tray with a white china teapot and two small bowls. She poured the tea, set down the pot and left the room without a word.

'You want a biscuit?'

Ben looked at his friend and burst out laughing. ‘You don’t eat biscuits.’

‘You’re the one who’s let things go.’

Ben set the small white bowl down on the bench and sat back. ‘OK, how do we start and what do you charge these days?’

Akira sipped slowly at his green tea with his eyes focused on Ben. ‘You still got your outfit?’

Ben shook his head. ‘Fay threw it out. She said I was never home because I was over here dancing around with you and your Karate mates.’

Akira smiled. ‘I’ll get you another one....with a white belt.’

‘Oh come on. You know I’m much better than that.’

‘We’ll see in time.’ Akira sipped his tea again. He placed the bowl on the timber bench, rose from the chair and walked to a wall cupboard near the door. He returned with a small grey box in his hand and resumed his chair. Considering the size of his fingers, he nimbly opened the box and took out a tiny, black, rectangular device with a belt clip. He opened the front of the device and tapped at it for some seconds. He snapped the lid closed and handed it across to Ben.

‘Step meter?’

‘Yep.’

‘I got heaps of them, mostly from you.’

‘Not like this one.’

‘What’s it cost?’

‘Wrong question.’

‘OK, what’s it do?’

‘Tells me the truth.’

‘Like?’

‘I didn’t need electronics to tell me if students sat at home and shook these things up and down. That showed in your performance. Now I don’t need to look at your performance. This gizmo tells me exactly how the steps were done. Walking, running, going up stairs, going down stairs, shaking the damn thing up and down by hand. You can’t re-set it. Only I do that. You try to touch anything and I’ll know and you fail and you’re out.’

‘Bloody hell.’

‘See what I’m dealing with these days? Can’t trust anyone.’

‘What’s the goal and timeframe?’

‘I’ve had to up it a bit. The students were getting lazy. Now it’s 10 k’s a day for 3 weeks. You want that in miles?’

‘10 k’s! That’s from here to Sydney!’

‘You got anything better to do just now?’

‘3 weeks!.’

‘Then we focus again....and meditate.’

‘Bloody hell.’

‘And then we look at your goals.’

Ben turned the step meter over in his hands and slowly clipped it to his belt. ‘I’ve kind of run out of goals.’

‘We’ll see my friend. See you in 3 weeks.’ Akira rose once again. The meeting was over.

“*****”

Chapter Eight

‘He’s not dead.’ Joy Mackay opened her tattered handbag and retrieved a photo of her husband. She handed it across to the Police Inspector. Roy Tanner took the photo and examined it briefly. The Queensland Police Inspector rose and walked to the window. He watched the Port Douglas traffic crawl past in the street below.

‘We’ve searched everywhere Joy. You know that.’

‘Not everywhere.’

Inspector Tanner turned to face the elderly woman. ‘It’s a big ocean out there. His boat turned up wrecked on Woody Island. We’ve searched the island with a fine tooth comb and all the other low islands. The sea claimed him somehow.’

‘What about Skull Island?’

‘It’s private and the owner jealously guards his privacy. We were allowed to search it in company with his people and found nothing.’

‘I don’t trust him. There is something wrong out there.’

‘Joy, we’ve done all we can. He’s been missing for over three months now and the evidence points to misadventure at sea. He shouldn’t have been out there on his own anyway.’

‘Will you keep his photo posted in the town for a bit longer? Someone might have seen him.’

‘Alright, I’ll have his photo circulated again but we can’t go on and on with this.’

‘Thanks Roy.’ The elderly woman stood and zipped her bag closed. ‘I’ve never given up hope. Winston knew the ocean well. He respected her. He could read her moods better than anyone.’

‘I know that, but if he was alive, we would have found him by now.’

Joy Mackay walked to the door and opened it. ‘You’ll call if you hear anything?’

‘You know I will. You going OK up at the Point?’

‘I’m fine. Thanks.’ She walked through the Police Station, out past the front desk and into the street. The Far North Queensland heat in comparison to the air conditioned Police Station, stopped her for a second. She waited for a break in the traffic and crossed the road, heading towards the Marina Mirage car park.

Joy drove her somewhat battered Holden FE sedan out of town and turned north on the Captain Cook Highway. She stopped at Mossman and bought fruit from a road stall. A large brown sedan pulled up on the other side of the road, opposite the fruit stall. The windows were darkly tinted, but that would not attract unnecessary attention in this part of Australia, as most of the vehicles had tinted windows for sun protection. Joy glanced at the large vehicle but then went back to her shopping. She drove further north onto the Mossman Daintree Road and to her home perched on the side of a heavily timbered hill, close to the Coral Sea at Rocky Point. She parked underneath the main deck of the house and gathered her bag and fruit.

Joy’s luxurious pole house had been built by her husband in the late 80’s. It commanded a stunning 120 degree view over the Coral Sea. As she climbed the stairs to the main deck area, she noticed the same large brown car drive slowly past, heading north. She could not make out the occupants because of the dark glass tint. She felt

the car was travelling much too slowly than usual for that stretch of road and suspected the occupants must have been looking at her home. The car rounded a bend and was out of sight.

Joy opened the unlocked door and entered the huge lounge room. She moved through to the kitchen. All the floors in the house were polished timber and the kitchen cupboards and bench tops were constructed entirely from various types of timber, sourced locally by her husband. She put the bag of fruit on a bench and walked back into the lounge room. The Coral Sea glistened as it reflected a clear blue sky.

The large brown sedan moved slowly back into sight on the coastal road. This time it had Joy's full attention. She tried to see the license plates but it drove out of sight behind a large palm grove. She waited. A full minute went by, then two, then three. The car did not appear again. She slumped back into one of the white leather lounge chairs.

'I am not going to pieces,' she said softly to herself. 'I just wish Winston was here. I don't want him to be dead.' She put her head in her hands and wept.

“*****”

Chapter Nine

Derek Disano was the producer of 'Miami Affair'. He had not personally chosen Stewart Shaw to direct; in fact he hated Stewart with a passion. The financial backers wanted Shaw to direct as he had worked with Brenda Grant on other occasions. The money men also wanted the name of the movie kept secret and had threatened to terminate Disano's contract if he revealed it to anyone. Of the film crew, only he and Shaw knew what this movie was about and where it was to be shot. He had no idea why all the secrecy but suspected it to be a publicity stunt.

It was no secret that the director and his star fought constantly. She had never walked out on him before. Now she had. Negotiations had failed miserably. Shooting with another star of Brenda's quality was a fairly remote option as the money people specifically wanted her.

Stewart Shaw was paid off and took a holiday in Europe. He was promised another film within a year. Nothing was put in writing.

Disano took the unprecedented gamble of appointing a female director, Sandra Quinn to continue with the film. The money men were well aware of this Japanese/American director, but wary of her independent style and aggressive attitude. They tried to convince Disano that Brenda would never work with her and that the two would fight more than in the previous relationship. Disano won.

He arranged a meeting between Sandra Quinn and Brenda Grant in his Santa Ana home.

Brenda wasn't happy. She sat sideways in the car seat and glared at Elizabeth, who was driving. 'You know this chick Liz?'

'I've seen her work. It's impressive.'

'They say the Mona Lisa is impressive but when I saw it I couldn't work out what all the fuss was about. It sucks!'

'You're uncouth Brenda. It's a masterpiece.'

'I've never worked with a woman director before. I think I'll hate it. I don't like what I've heard about her. Isn't she Japanese?'

'Japanese born and American bred. Aren't you Swiss born?'

'That's different.'

'And wasn't your Father's family German?'

'OK but it's not the same as Japanese.'

'You're a racist.'

'No I'm not. I hang around with you and you're half Mexican and lots of other things.'

'Alright, shut up. We're almost there.'

Brenda turned and sat back in her seat. The breeze through the open window pushed her hair in all directions. She touched a button and the window slid up.

'I don't feel good about this Liz.'

'Give her a chance girl. I need to make next month's payment on this car.'

Brenda laughed. 'You've got more money than me tucked away and you know it.'

'Crap.'

Elizabeth pulled into the kerb outside a large white weatherboard home set back from the street and partly shielded by manicured gardens. She checked a slip of paper on the console and swung across the road into the driveway of the house. The double gate was open and she drove onto crunching gravel, up to a parking bay left of the entrance. A dog barked at the rear of the house but didn't appear.

Elizabeth turned off the engine, removed the key and got out. Brenda didn't move.

'Come on you.'

'I hate dogs.'

'You hate everything.'

Derek Disano came onto the front verandah. 'It's alright.' He called. 'He's chained.'

Brenda blushed slightly and got out of the car. She walked with Elizabeth to the stone steps leading onto the verandah.

'Welcome girls. Brenda, you're looking stunning as ever.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

Elizabeth shot her a dark look.

'Come in and meet Sandra.'

Derek led the girls into a tastefully furnished parlour. Deep red curtains were pulled back from each window and tied with heavy cords. Sandra Quinn rose from a black leather lounge and smiled as they entered. She was indeed Japanese by appearance. Neither Brenda nor Elizabeth had seen this woman before. She was in her early 40's, very pretty and quite petite at 5'4". Her silky black hair was cut short and straight with a low fringe almost reaching saucer sized brown eyes and jet black eyebrows. She approached the girls and held out her hand to Brenda. 'I've seen one of your films. You are very beautiful and you act well.'

Brenda was taken aback. She slowly extended her right hand and Sandra Quinn shook it firmly.

'This is Elizabeth,' said Derek. 'She is Brenda's companion.'

Elizabeth towered over Sandra and smiled as she extended her hand. 'I'm sort of a bodyguard is what he means. I keep the unwanted men off her, and sometimes women.'

'I'm pleased to meet you.' She shook Elizabeth's hand.

'Why don't we all sit down?' said Derek. 'Sandra and I have something to discuss with you Brenda but I must insist that details of our conversation do not leave this room. Are we clear on that?'

Brenda nodded. They all sat down on the black leather lounges.

'Obviously that goes for you as well Elizabeth.'

'Naturally, although we're confused about all the secrecy. Brenda's face is known all over the world. How are you going to put her on location and someone not recognise her?'

'Exactly what I told the bankers,' said Derek, 'but they wouldn't listen so we've got to play this game their way until the cat is out of the bag so to speak.'

'Stewart is gone. I suppose you are aware of that?' said Derek.

'Thank God,' said Brenda.

'Sandra is taking over as Director and she has some ideas which the bankers have reluctantly agreed to but they will be watching like hawks.'

Sandra Quinn crossed her legs and smoothed out a wrinkle in her dress. 'This film was to move on location to Miami once the opening interiors were completed

here. The title of the film to date has been 'Miami Affair. That was Stewart's idea and the money men agreed with him.'

'I don't like Miami much,' said Brenda, wrinkling her nose.

'I don't either,' said Sandra. 'Nor does the writer.'

'We weren't even told who the writer is,' said Elizabeth.

Sandra uncrossed her legs and sat forward slightly on the lounge. 'He's not well known. His name is Tim Attard. He put a lot of time and effort in researching this story. He never meant it to be set in Miami. The love affair begins in LA and most of that is done. We need to tidy up the relationship with Brenda and her rich toy boy and also shoot the theft scene. Stewart didn't make it that far and the scene in the toy boy's library is vital.'

'We figured it was,' said Elizabeth, 'but Stewart wasn't saying much.'

Derek stood and walked to a large timber desk. He opened a drawer and took out a well worn manuscript. He flicked through about 40 pages and stopped. 'Brenda's character is after money, that's all. The old guy is loaded and keeps cash all over the place.'

'So she gets some cash, right?' said Brenda.

Yep, lots of it. He's got it stashed all over the library. In drawers, in cupboards, in books, under books.'

'Why hasn't he got a safe?' said Elizabeth.

Derek tapped the manuscript. 'He has.' He walked back to the lounge chair and sat down. 'It's an old safe, probably over 100 years old. Its key operated.'

'OK,' said Brenda impatiently. 'So where's the safe and what's in it?'

'Ha!' said Derek loudly. 'If it's got you in, it's got the audience in also and that is what Tim was trying to weave into the first couple of dozen pages of this script. Then the story gets really interesting.'

'Can I have the short version?' Brenda stretched her long slender arms behind her head and locked her fingers.

Sandra Quinn waved Derek to be quiet. She looked first at Elizabeth and then Brenda. 'You find a large old key. It wasn't an easy find but I won't go into details. You're very pretty and very blond and have a great body, but you're not dumb. The key fits something and you go looking. You find the safe. It is also extremely well hidden and you find it by accident. The key opens the safe. Inside are papers bound with string and some old black and white photographs. Strangely enough, there is no cash in the safe. You conclude that what is locked up in the safe is more valuable than the few hundred thousand in fifty and one hundred dollar bills you have found in various parts of the library. You gather up the lot and on the way out of the house get confronted by elderly lover boy. He's not happy. You are fit. He's not. He meets with a little accident but he doesn't die.

Even Elizabeth is sitting forward on the lounge at this point.

'The documents and photographs relate to the murder of several rather nasty drug people and their entombment together with several million dollars worth of heroin in a cave under a coral reef off the coast of a town called Port Douglas in Far North Queensland, Australia. That is where the exciting parts of the story unfold. That's where Tim Attard set the main location for the story. He called it 'Coral Sea Affair'.

'Far North Queensland!' Brenda put her arms in the air. 'Isn't it full of crocodiles and sting rays? What about that Steve Irwin guy. Didn't he die up there?'

'It's a movie Brenda. We're not going on safari.'

'We're doing most of the shooting around Port Douglas,' said Sandra.

‘It’s probably a stinky little fishing village with no hot water,’ said Brenda.
‘You have a suite at the Sheraton Mirage Port Douglas darling,’ said Derek.
‘We start shooting there in 2 months. Google it.’
Brenda looked at Elizabeth and back to Sandra. ‘I’ve never been to Australia. Will they like me?’
‘They will love you Brenda,’ said Sandra. ‘They already love you.’
Elizabeth smiled and poked Brenda in the arm. ‘We know a cop from Sydney that loves her.’
Brenda slapped Elizabeth’s arm away. ‘It was just an email and he was tanked.’
‘Port Douglas is a long way from Sydney,’ said Sandra, ‘although we have to fly into Sydney to connect with a flight to Cairns in Far North Queensland.’
‘OK guys,’ said Derek. ‘Are we together on this project? The location is stunning and Australia is hot movie property just now. Combine that with Brenda and our new Director and we have a winner.’
‘I want to fly first class with Liz,’ said Brenda.
‘Qantas has two first class seats with your names on them girls,’ said Derek. ‘Champagne and caviar all the way.’
‘I’m in,’ said Elizabeth. She looked at Brenda. ‘Let’s go get you an Aussie man with a big smile, sun tan, and who knows how to cook.’
‘What!’
‘And perhaps one for me too.’
‘You hate men.’
‘They breed them tough down there so I’ve heard. I might find one who can actually whip me!’
‘You’re nuts.’
‘I think we should call up that cop.’
‘I’m not saying another word to you. OK Derek. We’re in. Sandra....can I have a quick word with you in private?’
‘Sure.’ Sandra rose and walked into the hallway. Brenda followed. Derek and Elizabeth looked at each other but said nothing.
In the hallway, Brenda turned to Sandra. ‘I’ve never worked with a female Director.’
‘I’ve never worked with you. You going to make it tough for me?’
‘You know Stewart?’
‘Yep.’
‘You anything like him?’
‘No.’
‘Then I’m not going to make it tough for you. I want to make this work. I want to make a lot of money out of this. I’ve got a few personal issues but money smoothes them out.’
‘Then we’ll work together, OK?’
‘OK.’
The two women looked at each other for a few seconds. Sandra walked back into the lounge room. ‘Take her home Elizabeth, said Sandra. We’re resuming this project at 7 am tomorrow at the hangar. I want her fresh.’

“*****”

Chapter Ten

A week of walking and running had left Ben exhausted and aching. He had blown a shoe at Lane Cove on the third day and had to limp back to his home in Roseville, around two kilometres away, in socks. That incident prompted him to get a more expensive pair of joggers and made all the difference to his daily exercise routine.

He walked and jogged north east to Frenchs Forest one day and then North West to Pymble the next. He knew that was more than a 10 kilometre round trip but nothing was showing up on the trip meter and he wasn't inclined to mess with the 6 white buttons and blow 3 weeks of hard work when he handed the device back to Aka.

He jogged to North Sydney and back and then out to North Ryde and back. He took back streets and park tracks. He saw parts of the suburbs of Sydney he didn't know existed. He was chased by dogs and bombed by magpies. None of that worried him because he found that he was really enjoying himself. The pressure of police work was off his shoulders and he was slowly getting fit and also losing weight.

Fay had disappeared. He didn't know where she was and he didn't bother to call her mobile phone. He figured she was off with the boyfriend. The nights in the house were quiet. Ben was feeling isolated and rather lonely and sleep didn't come quickly. He tried to slow his drinking to aid with the weight loss but red wine made him sleepy so he felt he couldn't cut out alcohol altogether.

No-one from the Police Department had contacted him, not even from his unit at the CIB. That saddened him although he had never gone out of his way to make friends with other Police, or anyone else for that matter.

One evening he noticed the pile of unwashed clothing building up in a corner of the bedroom. He decided to put on a couple of loads and use the tumble dryer. As he sorted out the whites from the colours, he found the business card given to him by the young female detective, in the pocket of one of his shirts. He examined it.

'Security for Important People'

'How stupid,' said Ben softly but he thought about the statement some more and realised that it would be flattering for a customer to see, even if they weren't important.

'Rodney Reid'

'Managing Director'

'Never heard of him,' said Ben to himself. The only other detail included on the card was a mobile phone number. The back of the card was blank. Ben dropped the card on the kitchen table and continued with sorting out the washing.

By 11 pm two loads of washing were finished and dried. Ironing his business shirts would be a challenge. Fay used to do all the ironing. Nothing else needed ironing as far as he was concerned and he bundled T shirts, running shorts, socks and underpants, into his bedroom drawers.

He had accidentally washed one of his ties and noticed it was considerably shorter than before. He put that aside also for ironing. On his way to bed as he was about to turn off the kitchen light he noticed the business card on the table. He picked it up and slid it into his wallet.

The next two weeks went quickly for Ben. He put everything he had into the jogging and by the end of the third week was doing the ten kilometres with ease and in fact had begun to increase it to twelve.

Fay returned home in the middle of the third week and made comment as to how fit he looked and how much weight he had lost. Other than that she hardly spoke to him. Additionally she made it clear that they would not be sleeping together any longer and that she would use a spare bedroom.

Ben noticed that Fay seemed to have put weight on, but wisely, said nothing. She didn't tell him where she had been and he never asked.

Akira Misaki was impressed. He looked Ben over and nodded in appreciation. Ben handed over the trip meter. 'How much ground did I cover?'

'I wouldn't have a clue.'

'What do you mean? You set the thing last time I was here.'

'Doesn't do anything, but you didn't know that. I know if you've worked hard just by looking at you.'

'Bloody hell, you old bastard.'

'Not the proper way to address Hachidan.'

'When did you get to 8th Dan?'

'You don't 'get' to 8th Dan my friend. You are promoted to that high rank by your elders, with worldwide recognition, after you are proven worthy.'

'Congratulations Aka.' Ben bowed low to his friend and he returned the bow with a nod. 'You must be the only one in Australia.'

'Yes. Now let's have some green tea. You like green tea don't you?'

'You know I hate that.....'

'Yes I know. Let's have some anyway.'

Later, in the garden at the rear of Akira's home, Bell served green tea on a tiny glass table underneath an arbour of bright red bougainvillea. Ben and Akira relaxed in patio chairs. There wasn't a breath of wind but it was cool in the shade.

'What are you going to do?' asked Akira.

Ben sipped at the green tea and grimaced. 'Not much I can do. They've got me suspended and I'm being told nothing.'

'You might need a lawyer.'

'Like a hole in the head. You know what I think of Lawyers.'

'I know this young girl,' said Akira, placing his green tea bowl back on the table. 'She's a partner in one of the largest law firms in Australia. Brilliant mind. Great body. Black belt. I train her.'

'I'll keep it in mind.'

'I could arrange a date.'

'Me and a lawyer on a date....right.'

Akira smiled. 'You haven't seen this lawyer.'

'One of the detectives in my squad gave me the business card for a personal security firm. I might give them a call to pass the time.'

Akira frowned. He rubbed his bald head with the very large fingers of his right hand. 'You can do better.'

'I need you to assess my fighting skills again and I'll see. There's nothing else much to do until I get this departmental thing settled.'

'You should take a holiday and relax. Go away somewhere.'

'Yeah, I've been told that before.'

‘OK, we’ll do an hour each day for two weeks but we’re only going to assess *Uchi Waza, Geri Waza, Tsuki Waza* and *Hiji Waza*.’

‘I can’t remember what *Tsuki Waza* is.’

‘Punching. You need to know how to effectively punch, right?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You remember your weapons?’

‘Hands, feet, head.’

‘Let me see your hands?’

Ben held them out.

‘Soft as butter. You need to hit something occasionally, not blast away with your Glock. I’m not going to even ask to see your feet.’

‘They’re covered with blisters thanks to you.’

‘Good. That’s a good start. We’ll work on your hands next.’

‘What’s this going to cost me?’

‘A grand, and we’re only doing the basics again. You’ll have to practice like you did before. Remember...instinctively, automatically and if circumstances dictate, with utter ruthlessness and unbridled power. That’s how you must react.’

‘What about *Uke Waza*?’

‘You know how to block and you’ll get lots of practice at our sessions because I’m assigning you a partner.’

‘Anyone I know?’

‘Not yet, but you will on Monday evening. Oh by the way; did I tell you she’s a lawyer?’

‘Bastard.’

‘Respect Ben. Must keep respect.’

“****”

Chapter Eleven

Skull Island is 3 kilometres long and 1 kilometre wide, give or take a few hundred metres. It is a true coral atoll which had been growing steadily for millions of years. Captain Cook marked her in his maps but steered well clear as he moved slowly north, exploring the newly discovered Australia. He didn't officially name the island because it was one of many and of no particular significance. He included it on his maps as one of the 'low islands' in the Cape Tribulation area.

Cape Tribulation held more pressing challenges for Captain Cook, including a hole in the side of his ship during an encounter with a coral reef which required extensive repairs in a creek further north, now known as Cooktown.

Skull Island had initially been a large expanse of dead coral reef, long before white men had been anywhere near Australia. Shifting tides and floating debris had slowly raised the island out of the sea. Nesting birds deposited fertiliser and plant seeds. Coconuts washed ashore and grew into huge trees. Most of the other low islands in the Coral Sea had similar coconut growth but these had been cut down over generations by the indigenous inhabitants. Skull Island was left untouched by the indigenous population. Captain Cook kept away because of a large coral reef which ringed the island and threatened safe passage of his ship.

The indigenous people kept away for entirely different reasons. Stories varied but it was clear that more than 50 Aboriginal men, women and children had been brutally massacred on the island, long before Captain Cook sighted it. They had been herded there on rafts during a violent clash between warring groups within the longstanding tribal occupants of that area and bashed to death with clubs. It was strongly rumoured that the spirits of the slaughtered victims roamed the palm fringed beaches and that some visitors to the island had simply vanished.

The island lay 48 kilometres off the coast of Australia in a direct line east from Rocky Point and 2 kilometres east of Batt Reef and the drop-off into the abyss beyond.

The Queensland Government were the official owners of Skull Island until 2008. By the end of 2009, ownership of the island was transferred to a large Chinese corporation who immediately shipped in a bulldozer and other earth moving equipment and created a runway to accommodate light aircraft. A large house was constructed on the highest point of the island at its southern tip.

The locals were up in arms that Skull Island had been sold. The new owners maintained strict security and secrecy. This was questioned by many, investigated by some, but never satisfactorily resolved. No-one was allowed to sail within the lagoon encircling the island or land on its shores, not that it was generally possible for anything larger than a small dingy to navigate the shallow and treacherous reef entirely surrounding the island and then only at high tide.

Rumour spread that one of the richest men in the world had bought the island and was setting up his own personal paradise. In order to get the heavy earth moving equipment onto the island, a channel had been cut through the coral reef and a sturdy jetty constructed. The owner installed detection equipment throughout the channel and 'no trespassing' signs at its entrance. Visitors were very firmly turned away. The island had its own power plant and desalination equipment.

Joy Mackay could not see Skull Island, even from the elevated position of her home. She could recognise however, the boat operated by the employees of the island's owner as it made a regular trip into Port Douglas each Friday afternoon. They stayed in the Port for up to 2 hours, shopping for supplies she guessed, and headed back out to sea well prior to sun down.

This vessel and crew had apparently assisted in the search for her lost husband, so she was told by police. Joy also spent hours on a chartered boat looking for signs of her husband. She had not sighted the Skull Island boat once during that time.

Joy could recall her husband Winston referring on one occasion to friends, while a glass or two of wine had taken control of his tongue, that Skull Island was in an 'inconvenient location.' He had said no more about the matter and Joy had forgotten the statement until a few weeks ago. The statement troubled her for some reason but she had no idea why. Skull Island and its current inhabitants troubled her also but once again, she had nothing substantive to support her concerns. She knew that giving up all hope that her husband was alive was not an option. She clung to hope with every ounce of her slowly diminishing optimism. She also knew, as the police inspector had reminded her that Winston should never have ventured out into the sea alone in such a small vessel, on some vague impulse to fish. It wasn't like him. None of it made any sense. She speculated that he may have become mildly senile. He was 75 years old after all and had lived a very hard working life. Joy dismissed the thought immediately. Winston was strong, smart and intelligent. He may have lost things occasionally and was continually locking himself out of his car with the keys inside, but everyone did that.....

Exactly one week after she had watched the large brown sedan cruise slowly twice past her home, she spotted it again. This time it was mid afternoon and she had gone to the Marina Mirage to search for a birthday gift for her granddaughter in Brisbane. The car was parked close to the northern entrance to the shopping centre. Ordinarily she wouldn't have taken notice but this particular car had caught her attention a week before. There was no-one in the vehicle. She noted it was a Lincoln. She knew she was being stupid but wrote down the Far North Queensland number plate anyway, on the back of her hand.

“*****”

Chapter Twelve

‘That was a tricky bit of work people. I loved it.’ Sandra Quinn pressed a button on her console and the private cinema lighting came up. Brenda and Elizabeth sat in the front row. They turned to look at Derek and Sandra.

‘It was damn perfect,’ said Derek. ‘The library scene is terrific. I’m shouting that lighting guy lunch with all the trimmings. How did he make the fake moonlight shine in like that and the way he caught you Brenda darling. Good Lord, I felt myself getting very hot, and that’s not what women do to me as I’m sure you know.’

Brenda blushed. Elizabeth glared at Derek.

‘It’s a great start and the location work will blow them away,’ said Sandra.

‘I nearly shit myself when the old guy’s hand grabbed you around the throat.’ Derek put both his hands in the air. ‘I didn’t know you were going to work it that way.’

Sandra gathered up some papers and rose. ‘It was Tim’s idea.’

‘I didn’t even see him on the set.’

‘Since Stewart left, Tim has been sort of hiding in the wings. He rarely interferes. We can never do the film exactly the way he wrote it, but so far, and more particularly now, he loves the way it’s going.’

‘When do we move on location?’ asked Brenda.

‘Two months.’ Sandra walked to the cinema door. ‘It can be a bit wild in the Far North of Queensland just now because of their summer. Monsoon season.’

‘We have to shoot a fair bit of underwater stuff on the Barrier Reef,’ said Derek. ‘We don’t want a hurricane blowing the crew out of the water. By the way Brenda. Can you scuba dive?’

Brenda stood and put her hands on her hips. ‘Of course I can scuba dive. Can’t everyone?’

‘No darling,’ said Elizabeth. ‘You definitely move in the wrong circles honey.’

Brenda slid into the passenger seat of Elizabeth’s car and put on her seat belt. The bright red convertible moved back towards LA from the hills. Dusk was approaching and Elizabeth turned on the headlights.

‘So what do we do for the next two months?’

Elizabeth swung left onto a freeway. ‘I dunno. Party?’

‘I’ve had a gut full Liz. I swear I’ve lost all faith in men.’

Elizabeth roared with laughter. ‘Till the next one comes along and sweeps you off your feet.’

‘No I mean it. I’m done.’

‘What, you going gay like Derek?’

‘No way. Yuck.’

‘You looked pretty convincing in your last film with that Kim girl.’

‘That was acting. I got paid to do that.’

They drove in silence for several minutes. Brenda turned to her friend. ‘Perhaps we could go to Sydney early and have a look around before the location stuff happens?’

Elizabeth laughed again. She had a deep, throaty, infectious laugh.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Oh nothing. It’s just this sudden interest in Sydney. You what, 27? Never been to Australia before. Why the sudden interest?’

‘26 you bitch and you know it.’

‘Right, 26, but the sudden interest in Sydney?’

‘Nothing really. Just thought it might be nice to explore.’

‘Explore like hell. I know you Brenda.’

‘I want to see the Opera House.’

‘You hate opera!’

‘What about the Three Sisters?’

‘They’re nowhere near Sydney.’

‘Yes they are. Just out of Sydney a bit, and also, I’ve never cuddled a Koala bear.’

‘Good Lord, I’ve heard they scratch.’

Brenda turned her head away and looked out the window at the passing traffic.

‘You’re so negative.’

‘You’re thinking about that cop who got into trouble for shooting people.’

Brenda’s head swung back. ‘I am not!’

‘He was pissed when he wrote that email. Remember?’

Brenda was silent. Suddenly her eyes widened and she put her hand on Elizabeth’s shoulder. ‘I know, we could climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge. I’ve heard that is mind blowing!’

‘I’ve got a fair idea what you want to climb and it’s not a damn bridge.’

‘You’re disgusting.’

“*****”

Chapter Thirteen

‘Ben.’ Akira put a very large hand on his friend’s shoulder and pushed him gently towards the woman on the patio. ‘This is Yana.’

‘The lawyer,’ said Ben as he approached.

‘Akira tells me you hate lawyers.’ Yana stood and held out her hand. Ben shook it, squeezing hard. Her grip tightened and now Ben was in trouble. This woman was very strong, despite her extremely feminine appearance. Ben guessed she was in her mid 20’s. The top of her head reached his chin, which put her around 5’7”. She had shoulder length brown hair, tied back in a short pony tail. Her body was amazingly proportioned and fitness oozed from her every movement. She had large brown eyes with long eye lashes and high cheek bones. Her skin was white. This girl kept out of the sun. Ben noticed a small white scar on her left cheek. Otherwise she was unblemished.

‘I hate most lawyers. I’m a cop and lawyers delight in chewing me up.’

Yana Gibson stepped back and examined Ben closely. ‘Well I’m not going to chew you up. I may cause you some pain. I gather Akira has partnered us and you are in a bit of a hurry to get back into condition.’

Ben glanced at the girl’s pony tail. He thought to himself, ‘*dopey bitch. You’ve left a weakness to be exploited if I can get hold of that.*’

‘Yana is keen to lift her skill level Ben,’ said Akira, smiling. ‘There will be mutual respect for the safety of each other but as you know, sometimes things go wrong.’

‘I’ll try not to hurt her,’ said Ben. Yana stared back at him emotionless.

‘The training schedule will last five weeks and we do three evenings a week and one hour a session. Is that satisfactory?’

‘Yes,’ said Yana.

‘OK,’ said Ben.

‘Six thirty to seven thirty. I know Ben won’t have a problem with that. Yana. ‘Times suit you?’

‘Yes. I’ll adjust my diary. I often have to work late.’

‘Alright, so for the next 30 minutes we do a warm up so you can both get to know each other better. How does that sound?’

‘You got my suit?’ asked Ben.

‘Yep. Hanging in the change room.’ Akira walked left from the patio and into a passage way which led to a large gymnasium. Ben and Yana followed.

Ben entered the male change room and took the Karate suit off its hanger. He noted the white belt and cursed softly. He had been a black belt and had worked hard to earn it. He had been rated second *dan*. This was extremely embarrassing.

He dressed quickly and wrapped the white belt firmly around his waist, knotting it tight. The combat and training area remained unchanged from his last visit over a year before. The lighting was low. This was something Akira insisted on. In competition bouts, the lighting was almost blinding so the judges could see clearly what was happening. Akira’s training was for a totally different style of Karate. Personal protection fighting usually occurred in the darkness of night. That was when the gangs and hoodlums developed courage. Daylight exposed them to detection.

‘You got emotion Ben?’ said Akira.

‘What do you think? I’ve been screwed by the department and my wife.’

‘Not good. Not a good way to start. Yana. You got emotion?’

‘Some.’

‘The meditation?’ Akira folded his hands across his chest.

‘Sort of run out of time.’

‘Alright you two. We do some simple blocking and call it an evening. Ben, punch at her and I want you to mean it. Yana. Block.’

Yana tightened her black belt and bowed to Ben. He bowed back.

‘Ben,’ said Yana softly. ‘You even touch my pony tail and I’ll break your wrist. Got it?’

Akira laughed.

‘Are we using the three step style to start?’ asked Ben.

‘Of course,’ said Yana.

Ben swiftly launched a straight punch to Yana’s face; at least he felt it was swift. He hesitated slightly because of her amazing beauty and that was a bad error. Yana executed a perfect fore fist upper block with her left arm, revolving it in a well trained and perfect move. Ben’s punching arm felt as if it had collided with a brick wall. It went nowhere near her face. She then dropped onto her back and kicked him off his feet so quickly that he didn’t know his head had smacked the straw matting until he felt the pain.

Yana stepped back, her hands in a very defensive position. Her breathing was slow and steady. Ben stared up at the ceiling. Akira was chuckling as he stood over his friend and extended a hand. He pulled Ben to his feet. ‘What have I always taught you Benjamin?’

‘Don’t call me Benjamin. I hate that.’

‘OK Ben. The first rules of combat training.’

Ben looked at Yana. She smiled and relaxed her arms.

‘Never underestimate the opponent. Never trust the opponent.’

‘Good boy. I think that’s enough for today. You got a fair way to go to regain form eh?’

Ben moved close to his friend and whispered, ‘I hate lawyers.’ He then looked at Yana. ‘I thought we were supposed to be practicing blocking?’

‘You needed a lesson smart cop.’

Ben stormed into the change room.

For the next five weeks each Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings, Ben and Yana sparred, punched, thrusted, kicked, blocked and generally wore each other out for an hour under the watchful eye of Akira Misaki. Both scored some degree of injury on the other. Ben suffered a black eye in the first week and multiple bruises to his legs, arms and torso. Then he decided that she may be a beautiful woman but she was hurting him and that had to stop. In the second week he gave her a black eye and fractured one of the fingers on her left hand.

Yana’s respect for Ben grew as they fought together. She found herself attracted to him in a strange way. Ben considered her irresistible but there was no way he was going to let her use her femininity to pound him into the mat again.

Both developed lightning reflexes beyond their previous capabilities.

Akira insisted both practice striking techniques to break hard objects such as boards and tiles for 10 minutes prior to each sparring session. Initially pine slats were used. These were increased in size over time until in week three, a cement tile was

substituted. Ben found the board and tile breaking reasonably easy although painful. Yana struggled from the outset. Akira never pushed either to beyond what he felt was a safe practice.

He reminded them from time to time that the word 'Karate' meant fighting with empty hands, but did not just involve the hands but rather every part of the body. He reminded them that the art of Karate took years for a suitable person to master and only 'suitable' persons would ever be able to master Karate no matter how many years they trained.

On the last scheduled evening of their training, Akira summonsed them both to the patio. The summer heat had diminished but it was still warm. Bell served green tea in her silent, efficient manner. Akira watched her with pride.

When she had left them, Akira sipped his green tea and put the small white bowl back on the table. 'Ben. You have a great willingness to progress and you have.'

Ben bowed his head to Akira.

'Yana, you have earned advancement to third *dan*.'

Yana put her hands to her mouth and stared at Akira. 'I do not deserve....'

'Yes you do. You know what I expect from my students as they progress. Respect for each other is paramount. You have both the utmost respect for each other and yet when you started I don't think you liked each other very much.'

'You're a lawyer,' said Ben.

Yana beamed at him. 'And you're a copper.'

'And now,' said Akira, 'if I sent you both into an affray, you would move as one powerful force together. Unified. Your moves Yana, and disciplined approach to this project, notwithstanding being partnered with an opponent of dubious fighting fidelity, has earned you the honour of third *dan*.'

'What's this dubious fighting fidelity crap Aka?' Ben folded his arms.

Akira picked up his green tea bowl and sipped. Yana looked puzzled.

'When you came to me 4 years ago Ben, you had a goal. Karate was a means to an end for you, right?'

'I guess so.'

'And the end?'

'To subdue an enemy and get fit.'

'Exactly, and of most importance?'

'What?'

'Of most importance to you?'

'I've just told you.'

'Getting fit was an optional extra.'

Yana moved uncomfortably in her chair.

'What are you saying Aka?' said Ben.

Akira sipped more green tea. He was completely relaxed and his eyes almost twinkled with amusement and challenge. 'To a very large degree, Yana trains and fights according to strict rules.'

Yana nodded.

'Even with all the physical damage you did to each other in the last 5 weeks, there was always respect. No-one broke accepted rules. A bit of cheating here and there but always respect and that built into what you two now have as a special relationship.'

Ben sat forward on his chair. 'Well I wouldn't go exactly that far....'

‘No, he’s right,’ said Yana. ‘We do.’

Ben looked at her. He looked closely into her large brown eyes. They were glistening slightly. She held his gaze.

‘There’s a generally accepted psychological reason for this behaviour in opponents, particularly of the opposite sex, but I won’t go into that now,’ said Akira. ‘The point is that you two have formed a bond. Accept it and get over it.’

Ben and Yana were silent.

‘In your case Yana, you have to understand something about Ben that he won’t ever explain to you, but I need to.’

‘You back on those blood pressure pills Aka?’ Ben got up and walked to the edge of the patio. ‘And by the way, what rating have you given me?’

Akira sat back in his chair and clicked his huge, swollen knuckles one at a time. If he had suffered from arthritis, the exercise would have attracted only mild attention. In this case however, Akira’s knuckles were huge from breaking 20 tiles in one massive strike, or dropping an opponent in seconds with a blow to the head. At the same time he could also extinguish the flame of a candle with a lightning strike that was well ahead of the air flow that followed.

‘You don’t get a rating Ben. You got fit. That’s what you wanted. You’re not in this for Karate.’

Yana looked at both men. Confusion was written all over her face. She addressed Akira. ‘Would you mind telling me what this is about?’

Akira held out his huge right hand to Ben and Ben walked to him and put his right hand in the large, outstretched palm. ‘You go home now Ben. I’ve done all I can do. You’re a ship without a rudder. Go get a rudder.’

Ben bowed to his friend. Akira released the grip on his hand. Ben glanced awkwardly at Yana and left the house.

‘And?’ said Yana.

‘And the dish ran away with the spoon.’ Akira chuckled.

‘There is a bit of a cruel streak in you Akira.’

‘You don’t know that man at all.’

‘I know lots about him. I’ve done some research.’

‘Why?’

Yana hesitated for a moment, but it was that moment that left her as a very experienced lawyer, and a student of Akira, vulnerable to more intensive interrogation.

‘Nothing.’

Akira leaned back his chair and pushed his large fingers across his cheeks. ‘So you’re checking him out eh? Doesn’t matter really. Have some more tea.’

Yana sipped at her green tea.

‘I am going to tell you something about Ben that must remain confidential.’

‘OK Akira.’

Akira watched her closely for some time. ‘Ben came to me to learn how to quickly and totally immobilise an opponent, or kill him or her if the situation demanded.’

‘Oh?’

‘That is not what Karate is fundamentally about.’

Yana remained silent.

‘I taught Ben how to react with rather grim brutality when fighting. It’s ancient Japanese soldier fighting. It’s not conventional. It’s often fighting just to remain alive. It’s not like what you two have been doing for the past five weeks.’

Yana pushed a wisp of hair from her eyes. ‘What are you saying?’

‘Unlike what I have taught you, I taught Ben to kill with the thrust of a finger, a slice of his hand, a knuckle blow to just the right spot on the head or throat or a kick to a specific part of the body. He is extremely good when he trains, and he has been training. I was watching him very carefully as you sparred. If he had gone too far even once, I would have terminated your partnership.’

‘Why didn’t you grade him?’

‘He doesn’t need grades darling. His desire was to learn the ways of Shin Obi Ninjutsu. He has come a long way to achieving that and yet has no idea why. He’s a bit lost I’m afraid.’

Yana walked to her Volvo. Ben was sitting on the bonnet of his car staring at the tree lined street. The late summer breeze ruffled the leaves and blew scraps of paper along the gutter.

Yana approached him. ‘What are you doing sitting on your car?’

Ben looked up. ‘I have no idea.’

Yana moved to the front of the car and faced him. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Home I guess.’

She moved closer. ‘Where is home?’

Ben squirmed a little. ‘Roseville.’

‘And what’s there?’

‘You’re nosy.’

‘You married?’

‘Yes.’

‘Happy?’

‘Jesus, is this the Spanish inquisition?’

‘Happy?’

‘I want to go now. I’m not feeling well.’

‘You could have gone a while ago. I think you were waiting for me.’

‘You’re an idiot.’

‘Grab my pony tail.’

‘What!’

‘Grab it.’

‘You said you’d break my wrist if I ever.....’

‘I want you to grab it.’

‘And when I grab it, what is going to happen, other than my wrist being broken?’

‘Wait and see.’

Adrenalin surged through Ben’s body. He looked down at the amazingly beautiful face before him. He knew the hidden power this woman possessed.

He moved his right hand to the back of her head and gently grasped her pony tail. At the same time he was imagining himself lying on his back in the car park with a broken wrist. Instead, she pushed up close to him and kissed him openly on the mouth with such passion that he almost fainted. She moved her face back and looked into his eyes. ‘You want to pull it some more and see what happens?’

Ben was about to call her a sick bitch but she stopped him by pushing her tongue deep into his mouth.

Morning sun streamed through the curtains. Yana's arm was draped comfortably across his chest. Her breathing was slow and even. Her brown hair was dishevelled but she looked stunning. Ben concluded that their bedroom workout equalled anything that happened in Akira's training room. He was overwhelmed by her passion and stamina.

Ben suddenly realised that he was looking into her large brown eyes.

'Morning copper.'

'Morning lawyer.'

She propped herself up on one elbow. 'Wow is all I'm going to say.'

'Wow is hardly the word.' Ben smiled at her.

'It was all bottled up inside. Never thought a copper would bring it out of me.'

Ben looked around the huge bedroom. Now that it was daylight he could see they were in huge timber four poster bed with bright red sheets and matching pillows. The bed was a mess. The room was furnished with two large upholstered chairs and a timber writing desk. A large doll sat in a lopsided position in one of the chairs.

'I have to get to work.'

'In the city?'

'Downing Street Centre today.'

'Big case?'

'Workplace bullying. I love them. I love watching the smug cocky smile wiped off the bully's face when I get them out of their comfort zone and into my comfort zone.'

'Mostly men?'

'Yep, but some women too. I still don't get why some CEO's allow these inadequate individuals to get into positions of power where they are allowed to bully and intimidate those under them. It's at almost epidemic proportions in some parts of the business world.'

'Lots of wins for the victims?'

'Lots. I usually nail the companies as well. If they allowed the bullying culture to exist, I hit them where it hurts the most. In the pocket.'

'Where did you get the scar?'

Yana slipped out of bed and draped a kimono around her shoulders. 'I got too close to a prisoner with handcuffs at front.' She touched the scar on her cheek with slender fingers. 'Was a nasty cut. I thought I was safe in the court room. I got too close and he was very fast.'

'What happened?'

'He was in for AOABH, (Assault Occasioning Actual Bodily Harm) which wasn't all that serious. His attack on me got him bumped up to Grievous and the Judge gave him an additional 8 years. Best witness I've ever had!'

Ben laughed. 'And the Karate?'

'I went to see Akira after the wound healed. Started training. I'm never going to allow another man to hurt me like that ever again.'

'Fair enough,' said Ben.

'Now I'm really late. Can you run me into work? The bus would take forever.'

'Where are we?'

Yana smiled. 'You did get distracted last night.'

'Distracted is hardly the word.'

‘Leichhardt. I’m showering.’
Ben flew out of bed. ‘I better help now that we’re such a good team and all.’
Yana laughed and headed for the bathroom.

“*****”

Chapter Fourteen

Joy Mackay wasn't happy at all. She carefully examined the public notice boards in every shopping centre at Port Douglas and couldn't find one single police notice relating to her missing husband. The ones which had been prominently displayed in the Marina Mirage shopping centre and particularly at the Quicksilver wharf, were now gone. Inspector Tanner had promised to keep the photos up. He had broken his promise.

Joy found another recent photo of Winston and using her ancient computer, made up a large A4 missing persons notice in colour. She printed off 100 copies and began to stick them up all over the town. This time she included her own telephone number on the notice rather than the number for the Police Department.

A few days later an unmarked police vehicle moved slowly up the driveway to Joy's house. Inspector Tanner got out. Joy moved onto the deck and waved. 'Hi Roy. Want something cool to drink?'

'No thanks Joy. I came about the notices.'

'What about them?'

'Been some complaints. You'll have to take them down.'

'Like hell I will. Who complained?'

'Doesn't matter. They have to come down.'

'There are missing dog and cat notices up all over the bloody place Roy. No-one takes them down unless the pet is found.'

'This is different Joy.'

'So if Winston was a German Shepherd, I could leave them up?'

'You're making this difficult.'

'I'm not taking them down.'

'Then I'll have to authorise them to be taken down and you'll probably get a bill for the work.'

Joy laughed. 'There is no way on God's sweet earth I'd be paying that bill Roy. Rather go to gaol.'

Inspector Tanner mopped his brow with a handkerchief and walked back to his car. He turned to say something further, changed his mind, climbed into the air conditioned vehicle and drove away. Joy watched him until the car was lost from sight behind the coconut palm grove.

In anticipation of Inspector Tanner's advice, Joy printed up a further 100 missing person notices and took them into Port Douglas the following Friday evening. She found all her first lot of notices removed. She patiently replaced them with fresh ones.

As she walked back to her ancient Holden in the Marina Mirage parking lot the same brown Lincoln sedan she had seen before, pulled up beside her and the front passenger window moved half way down. 'Mrs. Mackay?'

Joy was startled. 'Yes. Who are you?'

'Doesn't matter who I am Mrs. Mackay.' Joy found it difficult to clearly see the male in the passenger seat as twilight was firmly established and the car park

lighting was poor. 'There have been complaints about your notices. I'd suggest you not put any more up.'

'How dare you!' Joy was furious. 'Who do you think you are?'

'You like living up at Rocky Point in that nice big house Mrs. Mackay? I'm sure you wouldn't want to see that lovely place burnt down.'

Joy was speechless. She was being threatened by a total stranger. The tinted window wound up and the Lincoln moved swiftly away.

'I don't have to put up with this,' said Joy to herself and she walked quickly back in the direction of the Police Station.

'I'd like to see Inspector Tanner if he's still around,' said Joy to the Station Sergeant.

'Just a mo.' The Sergeant picked up his phone and made a call. 'He'll be right down madam.'

Joy waited impatiently for several minutes. Roy Tanner opened the security door at the end of the charge counter and beckoned her through. In his office he indicated a chair and Joy sat down.

'I've been threatened about those posters,' she said indigently. 'They threatened to burn my house down if I keep putting them up.'

Inspector Tanner sat behind his desk. 'Who threatened you?'

'I don't know. Two blokes in a big brown Lincoln. They've been watching me.' Joy opened her bag and pulled out a small strip of paper. 'I wrote their number plate down on the back of my hand a while ago and transferred it to this bit of paper.' She pushed it across the desk to Inspector Tanner.

'Well I did tell you that there were complaints about the notices. You shouldn't have started putting up more.'

'How did you know I did?'

'I can see everything from up here.'

'Then you could have seen these ratbags in the Lincoln just now.'

'No, didn't see that.'

'And what about threatening to burn down my home? That's getting a bit serious don't you think. I want you to speak to them about that and give them a stern warning.'

'Any witnesses?'

'To what?'

'The alleged threats.'

'Alleged threats! What do you think I'm doing here?'

'OK Joy. I'll check out the number plate and see what we can do.'

'You'll let me know?'

'Yes, soon.'

Joy stood, walked out of the room and retraced the now familiar passage to the front door of the Police Station and across the road to the Marina Mirage parking lot. She looked for the Lincoln but it was gone.

“*****”

Chapter Fifteen

Chin Chian Qian, like Joy Mackay, was also not happy at all. He sat behind a huge steel and chrome desk and stared out through ceiling to floor panoramic glass windows at the hundreds of coconut trees lining the white sandy shore of Skull Island; his island and to the crystal clear blue waters of the lagoon beyond. This should have been a view to take one's breath away. Chin Qian was instead, seething with rage.

Mr. Do Tu Du stood uncertainly before him. His name in Chinese meant 'preventer – eradicator'. He apparently had not lived up to his name.

Chin Qian drummed the fat fingers of his right hand on the desktop. He was a very large man in girth but stood less than 5'5 in his bare feet. This had motivated him to have 2 inch heels added to his very expensive leather shoes, but made attempts at walking somewhat awkward and still did not give him the height he desired. He wanted to be taller so he could exercise more intimidating, physical power over those around him. Having failed in the height department and moved into the gross obese, he resorted to fostering his other main character trait as a total psychopath. This made him even more dangerous than being tall and power hungry. This made him totally uncaring of anyone around him, other than himself.

Qian was an extremely powerful Chinese business man. He was also obscenely wealthy and therefore wanted more. He was well respected in Mainland China for his business acumen and had spearheaded the Chinese 'Go Abroad Policy' which had returned billions of dollars in revenue from major investors outside China in a relatively short time. He had spent years living and working in Australia, America and Europe and spoke English fluently.

He turned his gaze to Mr. Du. 'I set you an agenda with a very strict time line.'

'Yes, I agree, but...'

Qian's look silenced the other. 'I will not accept 'buts' Mr. Du. I accept only results. This project is time critical and now I am informed that we may not be ready to move ten days from today because certain people are not cooperating.' Qian's voice was rising in pitch and volume. 'Do you know what this project is worth to us personally when completed Mr. Du?'

'Yes sir.'

'We're not talking millions of US and Australian dollars here Mr. Du. We're talking more than the Chinese State Bank holds so there is some motivation here to get things right, would you agree?'

'Yes sir.'

'So what's the problem?'

'The tunnelling is completed and from a physical perspective we're ready to go. It's a lack of cooperation from a technical perspective that is slowing us up.'

'Who?'

'The Australian.'

'Then kill him get someone else.'

'We're running out of time Mr. Qian.'

Qian jumped to his feet and screamed at the top of his quite capable lungs. 'THEN MOTIVATE HIM TO GET THIS PROJECT BACK ON TRACK. ARE YOU FOLLOWING ME MR. DU?'

Du took a step back and bowed. 'I understand.'

Qian slumped back in his padded chair. 'You are being paid a lot of money to manage all risks associated with this project, am I right Mr. Du?'

'Yes sir.'

'You have a degree in risk management so I understand?'

'I do.'

'And lots of experience?'

'Yes.'

'I've worked in lots of corporations and companies in my time Mr. Du and I've formed an opinion about most risk managers generally. Would you like me to share that opinion with you?'

Du nodded reluctantly.

'Many should be burnt at the stake for continuing to play guessing games instead of actually identifying and nailing problems before they get out of hand!'

Du said nothing.

Qian pointed out the window at the white sandy beach beyond the house. 'See that beach there Mr. Du?'

Du turned. 'Yes sir.'

'It's full of dead people. Did you know that?'

'No.'

'That's why it's called Skull Island.'

'I didn't know.'

'I promise you, that if this project does not successfully conclude ten days from today, I will have you tied to a stake on that beach; petrol will be poured over you and you will be set on fire. The dead people out there will welcome you. Is there any part of what I have said that you don't understand Mr. Du?'

'No sir, said Du quietly.'

'Then get out of my sight.'

Mr. Du turned and fled.

“*****”

Chapter Sixteen

‘Hello, this is Rod Reid.’ He clicked to speaker phone.

‘Hi Rod. My name is Ben Hood. A young Detective at Special Ops in the CIB gave me your card and recommended I call you.’

‘Yes, Lisbet has spoken of you Mr. Hood, or should I say Detective Sergeant Hood.’

‘Yeah, well I’m kind of not working at the moment and sorry, I had forgotten her name.’

‘Lisbet Fenton. Lovely girl. Can we catch up?’

‘Yes. Can I visit your office tomorrow?’

‘I’m free until 11. Can you get to Castle Hill by say 10?’

‘That’s fine. What’s the address?’

Ben wrote down the address of the Private Investigator and the call was concluded.

Rodney Reid’s home and office was set back well from the street in a leafy cul-de-sac in Castle Hill, an upper/middle class suburb northwest of Sydney. The house was double storied and clad in brilliant white weather board. All the homes in this cul-de-sac were immaculately maintained together with extensive gardens. The only feature placing Rodney Reid’s home apart from the others was the security cameras mounted on high metal poles in various parts of his garden and on the house itself.

Ben parked in the street outside and walked up a grey cobblestone path to the front door. Rodney Reid opened the door and welcomed him inside. Rodney used a crutch under his right arm. He had no right foot from below the ankle. The disability had no effect on his mobility and Ben had to walk quickly down the hallway to keep up with him. In an air conditioned sunroom at the rear of the house, Rodney waved his guest to a chair upholstered in the brightest frangipani print Ben had ever seen and he dropped onto a two seater lounge and leaned his crutch up against the wall.

‘Doesn’t look much like the hub of a moderately large security outfit eh?’

Rod smiled.

Ben liked him instantly. ‘I’m not sure what one is supposed to look like.’

Rodney stretched back on the lounge. He was in his mid to late 50’s and at least as tall as Ben. His build was solid and he obviously worked out. His face and arms were heavily suntanned. His short grey hair was thinning on top but thick on the sides.

‘I keep the company rather low key and I guess that is why I’m a bit worried about you.’

Ben was taken aback a little. ‘The shootings?’

‘We don’t encourage shooting people in our operation, although I had to shoot a mad idiot once because he lapped up the mace. That was a long time ago.’

Ben grinned. ‘I’ve only shot people that really needed shooting. I tend to be in the wrong place at the right time more than the average cop. I think I’m a bit jinxed.’

Rodney hooked his footless right leg over his left knee.

‘What happened to your foot?’ Ben asked the question with the same comfortable directness he would ask someone for a restaurant location. ‘Have you been in the army?’

‘Well I was in the army for a few years when I was young but that’s not where I lost my foot. A drunk in a truck ran over me.’

Ben was tempted to smile, but he didn’t.

‘I must admit, I was also drunk and the drunk that ran over me was my mate and I was trying to get into his truck.’

This time Ben smiled.

‘He thought I was in and I was only half way. He took off and I fell out and the back wheel got me. Always hated that big bloody heavy truck he drove. Little Honda and I’d have got up and walked home. Even a commodore and I’d have got reconstructed and limped for the rest of my life.’

‘At least he didn’t get your left foot as well.’

Rodney laughed loudly. ‘Now that’s what I like. A positive attitude. Now about a job.’

‘I’m not sure exactly what your company does,’ said Ben. ‘Security for Important People? Sounded a bit odd when I first read it.’

‘Yes, well... I have a fairly exclusive clientele. In fact some of my clientele are so exclusive that they often don’t want anyone to know that someone is close by actually protecting them. There are others however, that want the world to know they have protection and I could hire big muscle bound extras with dark sunglasses to do that and they’d be thrilled. I have to carefully judge what is required.’

‘Sounds interesting.’

‘Can be more interesting if I incorrectly decide what is actually required.’

‘You do some yourself?’

Yep; some. Not a lot now though. I have a plastic foot that clips on. Cost me a bomb but works OK. I limp a little but that gives me character. Walking wounded sort of thing.’

Ben smiled again.

‘I don’t wear it at home, especially in summer. I just do the show pony stuff. These people will never get assaulted or attacked but they want the public to think they might so we gather around them with grim looks and dark sunglasses and the media lap it up and the client laps it up and I bank a lot of money.’

‘And the other clients?’

Rodney locked his fingers together over his stomach. ‘Some clients are a bit of an unknown quantity, especially the new ones. If I had a crystal ball it would be easy. I don’t have one of those so you have to plan for the worst and hope for the best.’

‘Sounds a bit like a Police operation.’

‘Spot on Ben. Difference is in my operation that you get paid a hell of a lot more and some of my operatives have landed quite legitimate bonuses well beyond the scope of their contract.’

‘Well I’m not sure what that means but I do want to work. The Police Department have put me off on full pay while they investigate my so called conduct, but I can’t just sit around.’

‘Are you in any departmental or legal trouble?’

‘Not that I’ve been told about...other than bumped up loads in my Glock...and using hollow points.’

‘Good Lord. Is it serious?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘You need a good lawyer?’

Ben laughed loudly and grinned.

‘What?’

‘I got a good lawyer. She’s very good.’

Rodney studied Ben’s face and smiled back at him. ‘Now I’m not sure what the hell you are talking about but I do have a job for you and I think you will find it extremely interesting. It’s with one of our best operatives. Do you like to travel?’

‘It’s not in Melbourne?’

‘No. You got something against Melbourne?’

‘I don’t like Melbourne. Too cold.’

‘It’s not always cold there.’

‘Point taken. I just don’t like Melbourne.’

‘You like the heat?’

‘Depends. It’s not Alice Springs or Arabia or anything?’

‘Port Douglas.’

‘North of Cairns.’

‘Yep. We have a large American movie crew locating there right now with others to follow and they need what we call ‘minimal protection’ for their stars in particular. It’s fairly low key stuff but this job slots into the ‘unknown category’ I spoke of before. Our operatives have to be fairly invisible, but quickly active if that is required.’

‘I’m interested.’

‘You will be based at the Sheraton Mirage Port Douglas, and this is a fairly swish place.’

‘I know. I stayed there once with my wife.’

‘You won’t be able to take anyone with you on this job Ben.’

‘It’s OK. We’re not an item just now.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Happens.’

‘Yeah, I know. If you can be here again at 7 pm this Friday, I’ll introduce you to your partner. It’s a woman and she is extremely capable. This is cash money; \$1,000 a week and it would be best if you told no-one about it, especially the Police Department.’

‘They aren’t talking to me anyway.’

Rodney grabbed his crutch and rose quickly. Ben stood. ‘Nice to meet you Rodney.’

‘Call me Rod. This will be just like a paid holiday in paradise, but you have to stay sharp.’

‘OK.’

‘Good. We’ll talk more on Friday.’

“*****”

Chapter Seventeen

Brenda pulled her eye shades off and looked across the aisle at Elizabeth. 'I can't sleep.'

'I told you to take a pill when we left LA.'

'I hate sleeping pills.'

'And I hate you waking me up every half hour telling me you can't sleep.'

Brenda pulled the Qantas blanket up over her face. 'Why can't they invent planes that fly faster, like put more engines on them or something?'

'Well they have but in those, you wouldn't be sitting in a huge luxury seat like yours, sipping champagne and eating three course meals with silver service.'

Brenda pulled the blanket down and stared at her companion. 'You making fun of me?'

'You want to fly faster, then join the air force and fly a combat jet. The pilot has a seat that straddles very big engines. No silver service. No toilet either come to think of it.'

Brenda pulled the blanket back over her face. 'How long to go?'

'You sound like a 12 year old.'

'How long?'

'I think we just passed Vanuatu, so about 3 hours into Sydney.'

Brenda groaned. 'What time is it?'

'Our time or Sydney time?'

'Sydney time. I have no idea what our time means any more. I can see light around the blind.'

'5 am or something. They'll be putting the lights up soon baby. Why don't you read a book or watch some video?'

Brenda was quiet for some time. Finally she slipped the blanket off her face again. 'How are we going to find him?'

Elizabeth dropped the book she was reading. 'I knew it.'

'What?'

'You are serious about trying to meet up with that damn Detective.'

'So?'

Elizabeth sat back and clasped her hands over the top of her head. 'How many emails, letters, gift boxes, courier deliveries and Lord knows what do you get each week Brenda?'

'I don't know.'

'Of course you don't know because we don't show you most of them. There are a lot of twisted people out there. I'm sorry I ever showed you that email.'

'Then why did you?'

Elizabeth was silent.

'Liz?'

'I don't know,' she snapped back.

Brenda stared across the aisle at her friend. Elizabeth avoided her gaze for a few moments and then turned to face her. 'What?'

'I'm asking the questions here. Why?'

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. 'He sounded a bit different to the others.'

‘Crap.’

‘What do you mean, crap? He sounded different.’

‘He got to you, didn’t he?’

‘NO!’

A passenger in the seat in front of Brenda, leaned out and looked back down the aisle.

‘He didn’t get to me at all,’ she whispered. ‘Now shut up.’

‘You told me you were off men for good. I even thought you might be turning.....you know?’

‘Turning?’ Elizabeth picked up her book and pretended to read.

‘You know....?’

Elizabeth dropped the book again and glared at Brenda. ‘Gay? You saying I’m gay!’

‘Shhhh.’

‘For your information Miss movie star; I’m not gay. Have I ever come onto you?’

‘You’re paid to protect me.’

‘Have I ever tried to come onto you?’

‘No.’

‘Then shut up. I wish I’d never seen that email.’

The two were silent for a while.

Brenda pulled the blanket over her face again. ‘How long before we land?’

‘I swear Brenda. I’m going to kill you.’

“*****”

Chapter Eighteen

The meeting on Friday evening at Rodney Reid's home did not go the way Ben had anticipated.

He was introduced to Susan Beck. She was a very pretty Australian born woman with a chequered history including 10 years as a Detective in the NSW Police Force and 8 years as a barmaid and SCUBA diving instructor on Hayman Island. She was in her mid 40's but extremely fit. Her blond hair was cut short to frame a slightly chubby face with brown eyes containing black flecks scattered throughout the colour. Ben had a propensity to study the eyes of people he had to confront and instantly knew this girl had amazingly interesting eyes but couldn't work out why until he had a chance to study her in more detail at a later time. She was barely 5'9" and solidly but proportionally built. She tended to brood a little when she thought no-one was watching, but was instantly animated with a beaming smile when brought into conversation.

Rodney explained that the Port Douglas project was a 'walk in the park' but they always had to expect the unexpected. Ben and Susan were to book into the Sheraton as any other couple and in public, act the part to perfection.

'How do we room?' asked Ben with a grin.

'We've booked you interconnecting suites,' replied Rodney. Susan looked disinterested. 'You both enter and leave through one door but you will be separate inside.'

'How long are we expected to be staying at the resort?' asked Ben.

'Minimum of a month. Probably longer. The weather dictates this with movie makers.'

'Should have a nice tan up by the time I get home,' said Ben. 'Sounds like a bit of fun actually. By the way, who are the stars of this movie? Anyone really famous?'

'Quite famous actually. They also have their own security operative who stays close to the female star at all times. The leading man, who plays a very bad person, is Simon Sutherland.'

'I've seen him in something a couple of months ago,' said Susan. 'He's hot.'

Rodney smiled. 'The starlet is Brenda Grant. You should know her and she is the one we have to watch out for in particular.'

'WHAT!

Rodney and Susan looked at Ben.

'Brenda Grant,' said Rodney again.

'God no!' exclaimed Ben in a voice higher than his normal tone.

'You got a problem with Brenda Grant?'

'Yes. I mean no.' Ben put the fingers of both hands to his temples.

'Perhaps you would like to share with us just what you mean?' said Susan, showing more interest in the meeting than when it began.

'Nothing.'

'Don't you like her?' asked Rodney.

'Of course I like her!' said Ben rather too quickly. 'I mean, not like that, but she is a very good movie star.'

‘What the hell are you saying?’ said Susan.

Ben ran his hands over the top of his head. ‘I can’t go on this job.’

Rodney looked concerned. ‘You sounded like you couldn’t wait to go.’

‘I....I’ve changed my mind.’

‘He’s hiding something,’ said Susan bluntly.

‘Is that true Ben?’ Rodney was sitting forward and looking directly at him.

‘No, of course not.’

‘Crap.’

Rodney turned to Susan. ‘Shhh darling.’ He looked back at Ben. ‘This must be a unified team effort. Something’s up here Ben or you wouldn’t want to back out so quickly.’

Ben squirmed uncomfortably.

‘You know this Brenda Grant woman?’

‘This is quite embarrassing Rodney. I’d rather just let it go and you get someone else to take my place.’

Susan Beck had now shifted her interest level into high alert. ‘Rod told us you were fearless.’

Ben stared at her but said nothing.

‘I guess if you want out Ben, for whatever reason....’ began Rodney.

‘Want out my arse,’ said Susan. ‘Where did you meet her?’

‘I’ve never met her,’ said Ben, trying to recover ground.

‘Then what’s your problem?’

Ben was quiet for a moment. ‘Alright. I sent her an email.’

‘What?’ Susan was obviously flabbergasted.

‘I was drunk and I told her I liked her and said some other stuff that in hindsight, I shouldn’t have.’

‘You are kidding, right?’

‘I’m not kidding. I was drunk and I sent this email to her website not all that long ago.’

Susan crossed her arms over her breasts. ‘And obviously she responded in kind and tried to set up a meeting with you, or at least continue to write to each other?’

‘Well, no.’

Susan leaned back and laughed hysterically. She had difficulty stopping. Ben looked decidedly uncomfortable.

‘Now Susan....,’ began Rodney.

She held up a hand to silence him and turned to Ben. ‘Detective Sergeant Hood. I have concluded from speaking with Rodney and also from my own knowledge of you, that you are not a complete idiot. Would that be a fair assessment?’

Ben was silent.

‘I’ll take that as a yes. Now; I assume you didn’t tell Ms. Grant your age in this email?’

Ben looked over at Rodney for help, but a slight upward shrug of Rodney’s shoulders told him he wasn’t getting any assistance there.

‘Not that age has anything to do with anything these days,’ continued Susan. So I’m assuming you didn’t mention your age to a famous movie star who is just about the right age to be your daughter.’

‘I didn’t think it was necessary....’

‘And of course, you were drunk as you said. Can I put something to you Ben?’

Ben started to feel as if he was an accused in the dock about to be castrated by the Police Prosecutor.

‘Do you have any idea how many emails, letters, postcards, gift wrapped boxes of chocolates and naughty underwear, Brenda Grant gets every single day?’

‘A lot I suppose.’

‘A damn lot. Hundreds. Thousands! Especially emails on her website. Do you think she actually reads all this stuff?’

‘I didn’t think much about that.’

‘She doesn’t read any of that shit. Other people do that for her and they bin most of it.’ Susan rolled her eyes.

‘You sure of this?’

‘Honey, as sure as I can be. Brenda Grant has no idea in her pretty head that you even exist. I can promise you that.’

Ben looked at Rodney. He nodded in agreement.

Ben was silent for a long moment. ‘I’m sorry. I may have overreacted. I guess I’m still in.’

Rodney visibly relaxed. ‘Alright, thank God we’ve settled that.’

Ben looked at the floor.

‘OK. Some of the movie people are already set up in Port Douglas, especially the underwater team. I gather the underwater filming is fairly pivotal to this story. Brenda Grant and her co-stars are arriving in Sydney just about now I would expect.’

Ben felt his chest tighten. He glanced at Susan and she was smiling at him. He looked away quickly.

‘They stay overnight and head off to Cairns Saturday. I have taken the liberty of including you on the flight with Ms. Grant and Mr. Sutherland and their immediate team. It’s a chartered jet. This will give you a chance to get informally acquainted with your clients. A chartered coach will transfer you from Cairns to the Sheraton Mirage at Port Douglas. There will be a short group briefing at the Sheraton when you arrive on Saturday evening.’

Ben was starting to feel quite ill. He kept his eyes well away from Susan but he knew she was enjoying this immensely.

‘Any questions?’ asked Rodney.

Ben had a thousand but he kept his mouth firmly shut.

‘Good, then get packing. We don’t need any bad situations up there so keep sharp. Your travelling and accommodation documents are on that side table. We’ll stay in touch Sue.’

She rose and moved to collect her envelope.

‘Ben, will you stay back a moment?’

Ben nodded. Sue said a brief goodbye and left.

‘I recommend you learn from Susan. She’s a good operative.’

‘She’s a bitch.’

‘Yes but a lovable bitch and you will see the soft side of her once you get to know her.’

‘I’m not sure that...’

Rodney held up his hand and Ben was quiet. ‘This is your first bodyguard assignment I gather?’

Ben nodded.

‘You will need to watch and learn to some extent Ben. I know you are all over crisis control and volatile situations but this is not a Police operation so you’ve got to switch thinking a bit.’

Ben said nothing.

‘Give her a chance and work with her. It’s my reputation on the line here with these clients.’

‘I appreciate that Rod.’

‘Like I said before, we can’t afford to have any bad situations, especially ones we could have anticipated and avoided.’

‘I understand.’

Rodney got up and tucked the crutch under his right arm. Ben stood. Rodney extended his right hand and Ben shook it firmly. ‘Don’t forget your tickets and most importantly, enjoy yourself. We have stacks more work like this and I’d like to have you on the team.’

‘Thanks. I appreciate that. My future is somewhat stuffed at the moment.’

As Ben walked out the front door, Rodney called after him. ‘And give my regards to Brenda.’

If Akira had said that to him he would have called him a Bastard at the top of his lungs. He didn’t know Rodney quite so well. He waved and kept walking.

“*****”

Chapter Nineteen

‘He’s not with the Police Department anymore!’

‘What!’

‘They wouldn’t tell me anything other than he has taken an indefinite leave of absence.’

‘So where does he live?’

‘Yeah, right. They are going to tell me that, especially over the phone. Wake up Brenda.’

‘Well let’s send him an email. We have his email address, right?’

‘We almost never send back emails to fans, other than the generic ones.’

Brenda ran long slender fingers through her hair and slumped back onto a very luxurious leather chair in the Park Hyatt Hotel overlooking Sydney Harbour. She watched hundreds of sailing boats moving back and forth. The tiled sails of the Opera House were brilliantly white. Ferries and charter cruise boats competed with each other for landing space at Circular Quay to the right of her panoramic view. People were everywhere; walking, jogging, watching the view, eating, playing with kids, taking photographs.

Elizabeth walked to the window and looked out over the sparkling harbour. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a beautiful city,’ she said softly.

‘It’s amazing,’ returned Brenda. ‘I’m sorry we had just one day here.’

‘We fly on a private jet to Cairns in Far North Queensland tomorrow and then by coach to Port Douglas. You’re going to be working your ring off from then baby.’

‘Yeah, I know. From the photos the place looks amazing.’

‘The security team are flying with us tomorrow so we can get acquainted.’

Brenda threw her legs over the upholstered side of the huge chair.

‘Everywhere we go we have this security thing. I’ve got you. Isn’t that enough?’

‘Not enough for Derek and Sandra. They run this show darling. This is location shooting so the extra muscle is not such a bad idea, as long as they don’t get in the way.’

‘Are they Americans?’

‘I have no idea who they are. We meet them tomorrow at the airport but we aren’t at the main terminal so it shouldn’t be a repeat of the media fiasco we walked into this morning.’

Brenda was quiet for a few minutes but she was fidgeting with a magazine on her lap; turning pages but absorbing nothing.

Elizabeth dropped into a chair beside her companion. ‘You want to watch the news? You will be all over it.’

‘Na. I looked like shit.’

‘You couldn’t look like shit if you tried honey,’ said Elizabeth, laughing. ‘I, on the other hand, looked like shit.’

‘You looked hot,’ said Brenda. ‘You always look hot.’

‘OK enough about me. Where would you like to eat tonight?’

Brenda frowned. ‘You know we’re locked up here.’

‘Just teasing. They have a private room downstairs but photographers will be around as we move into that area.’

‘Can’t we order room service?’
‘Certainly not. I want to strut my hot stuff.’
‘Then I may have to leave you behind tonight.’
‘Like hell you will. I have my orders. You’re not getting out of my sight.’
‘And the Detective?’
Elizabeth was quiet.
‘Liz?’
‘He was a bad idea from the start. Forget him.’
‘Yeah, he was drunk.’
‘Yes he was. Let’s forget him, OK?’
‘You sure?’
‘I’m sure Brenda.’ Elizabeth’s tone was firm.
‘OK.’

Ben, on the other hand, was glued to the evening TV news. There she was in living colour on his HD flat screen, sweeping into Sydney airport on those amazingly long slender legs. He could not believe that Brenda Grant was in his own city, less than a 20 minute drive from his home.

A familiar tightness clutched at his chest as he watched her and the entourage move to the fleet of hire cars.

His attention was drawn to an older woman with long black hair, pulled back in a pony tail, walking closely behind Brenda. This woman missed nothing with her deep blue eyes, scanning the crowd constantly. Ben noted long black eye lashes, unblemished skin and strikingly large breasts, complimented by a narrow waist. She was fit...very fit. Obviously a personal bodyguard. She moved like a big cat, ready to strike should the occasion arise.

Ben turned off the TV. This was getting too much. He could only hope that Susan Beck was right. Brenda Grant would never have seen that ridiculous email and would never find out that he had kept a photo of her in a frame on his desk at the CIB, and another in his wallet, and suffered a fair degree of humiliation at the hands of his colleagues as a result.

He knew he would be extremely nervous at meeting her in the morning at Sydney airport, but logic, and taunting by Sue Beck gave him some comfort that she would glance at him, but never really see him because to her, he was a bodyguard. A nobody.

‘It’s got to be change of life,’ said Ben to himself. ‘Male menopause. We get it more than the damn women.’

Detective Lisbet Fenton did not turn off the evening news so quickly. She watched it very attentively. She watched Brenda Grant and the movie entourage sweep through Sydney airport and absorbed details of their block buster film on the Great Barrier Reef. Then she hit a speed dial number on her mobile phone.

Rodney Reid answered. ‘My sweet darling. Haven’t heard from you for ages.’

‘How are you doing Rod?’
‘All guns blazing girl. Want to meet up?’
‘Thanks Rod but I’m sort of committed at the moment.’
‘Good for you. Good for you.’
Silence.

‘Obviously you called me for a reason Lisbet?’

‘Yes I did. I just watched Brenda Grant landing in Sydney.’

Silence again.

‘You there Rod?’

‘Yes. So you watched a movie star land in Sydney this morning. So?’

‘You involved?’

‘Not telling.’

‘You have to be involved. You’re the best here.’

‘Not telling.’

‘You met Ben yet?’

‘Ben who?’

‘Ben Hood. I recommended him to you.’

‘Might have.’

‘Might have not, maybe or have?’

‘Where is this going Lisbet?’

‘I need to know if Ben is going to have even the remotest possibility of contact with Brenda Grant?’

‘Good Lord! Are you drinking again?’

‘I never stopped.’

‘OK, there is a possibility that Ben and Brenda might have some contact with each other.’

The screech of delight almost deafened Rodney.

‘What the hell are you on about Lis?’

‘I think Ben just became \$1,000 richer!’ She hung up.

Lisbet punched another number into her mobile phone. She was on her feet now, almost jumping up and down.

‘Simon here.’

‘Detective Simon Bastock?’

‘I know it’s you Lisbet. I know your voice.’

‘You better start saving up.’

‘Pardon?’

‘You got a thousand bucks?’

‘What!’

‘You’re going to have to honour a bet fairly soon I expect.’ Lisbet terminated the call. She turned off her mobile phone, jumped backwards onto her bed and looked up at the plastic, luminous stars on the ceiling. ‘I’m starting to believe there is a God in heaven,’ she said quietly.

“*****”

Chapter Twenty

Ben knew fear. He had experienced it many times and to varying degrees. Storming a house where an armed offender was holed up was always gut wrenching. High speed pursuits of dangerous suspects were often frightening, especially if you were a passenger and not the driver. Infiltration of crime gangs and fear of detection and reprisal was very real. The fear which gripped Ben's heart as he arrived by taxi at the Executive Jet area at Sydney airport was as alarming as any fear he had previously experienced, but very different.

He was sweating profusely as he lugged his suitcase towards the Executive Jet building. He was 'lugging' his bag because one of the wheels was missing and the pull along handle had snapped off years ago. He was not sweating because of the heat as there was no heat. The dawn had brought overcast conditions with a stiff breeze from the west and a relatively cool 24 degrees C.

Over 30 photographers and reporters milled around the glass entrance doors together with a small crowd of 50 or so young male and female fans. Ben was eyed with obvious lack of interest as he pressed the door bell. A young woman in a bright blue uniform came to the door and smiled, showing lots of gleaming teeth. Two uniformed security guards stood with her. 'You with the movie group?' she called through the glass.

'Yes,' said Ben.

'Ticket?'

Ben fished his travel tickets from a small leather satchel and held them up for the girl to inspect. She opened the door and ushered him inside. Sue Beck had arrived ahead of him. The girl in the bright blue uniform moved to assist Ben with his luggage, until she saw its condition. She smiled. The gleaming teeth were almost hypnotic. She led him to a weigh in counter.

'It's not heavy. It's just broken a bit.'

'Thank you sir. Just leave your bag here and feel free to relax in the lounge. Would you like a coffee or tea?'

'Yes please.'

The girl looked up at his deep blue eyes and flashed her teeth again. 'Both?'

'Pardon?'

'Tea and coffee?'

Ben blushed. 'Oh, sorry. Coffee would be fine.'

'No need to be nervous about flying sir. Our company have one of the best safety records in the world.'

'I'm not worried about flying,' said Ben. He moved into the lounge area and sat opposite Susan.

'You OK?' she said with a smile.

'Yeah.'

'You look as tight as a drum.'

'I'm alright.'

Ben's mobile phone rang and he jumped. He fumbled it out of his shirt pocket and looked at the caller ID. It was a private number which he did not recognise. He accepted the call.

‘Hi copper.’
‘lawyer?’
‘Yep it’s me.’
‘How did you get my number?’
‘From a friend.’
‘Aka. Had to be.’
‘What you up to?’

Ben rose and walked to corner of the lounge area. ‘I’m just about to get on a flight actually.’

‘To where?’
‘I’m on a private job and it’s a bit confidential.’
‘Can’t you say where?’
‘Port Douglas actually.’
‘Lucky you. When you coming back?’
‘Not sure.’
‘Can I ring you there?’
‘I’ll be working but the mobile will be on most evenings.’
‘OK, have a good flight. I’ll call for a chat in a few days.’
‘That would be nice.’
‘Take care copper.’
‘You too lawyer.’

Susan was fiddling with a tiny two way radio. ‘We get the call they are on their way and we move outside with the airport security guys. You stick close to Brenda and her muscle and I’ll move wide. We don’t expect problems.’

‘What if they rush the stars or start pushing or anything?’ asked Ben.

‘It’s a small crowd. This location wasn’t advertised so I’m not sure how they even knew to be here. You’ve done crowd control Ben?’

‘Yeah but with batons and helmets.’
‘Na, this is gently, gently. Got it?’

Ben nodded.

The two way radio beeped and Susan listened for a few seconds. ‘Time to go,’ she said and moved to the front doors. She said something to the uniformed guards and they nodded. The girl in the bright blue uniform let them out. Ben was feeling extremely nervous but it had nothing to do with the crowd outside.

Four large black limousines pulled into the parking area and the crowd went wild. Ben moved quickly with the uniformed airport security guards to stand between the limousines and the crowd. The photographers began to activate their cameras and strobe lights.

The limo drivers opened doors and the movie people emerged. Brenda Grant was preceded by the very tall, black haired Elizabeth, who instantly made it clear from her stance that no-one was going to mess with her or Brenda. Brenda waved at the crowd and smiled for the photographs. They shouted at her. She moved towards a young girl with an autograph book. Elizabeth shadowed her closely.

Simon Sutherland was mobbed by young female teenagers and the security guards looked on nervously. He was encouraging the attention and there was little they could do to stop it.

Ben couldn’t take his eyes off Brenda. She was even more beautiful in real life. She was totally at ease with the shouting crowd and smiled warmly at everyone.

She wore a brilliantly coloured red T shirt with a Koala bear embroidered on the front and tight blue jeans. High heeled shoes added to her already impressive stature. Her long blond hair flew about in the wind and wisped around her face.

Film Producer Derek Disano and the stunning Japanese Director Sandra Quinn, emerged from a limousine and moved quickly with other members of the film crew towards the Executive Jet building. Susan caught Elizabeth's attention and signalled with her hands to keep moving. Elizabeth nodded and gently urged Brenda towards the entrance of the building.

Inside the sounds of the crowd diminished. Brenda and Elizabeth were ushered into the lounge area together with Simon Sutherland and the rest of the movie crew. Luggage arrived in other vehicles and was taken to a weigh in area via a side gate to the airport apron.

Everyone was chatting excitedly. Ben moved as far back in the room as he could, forgetting for a moment that he was 6'1" and now looking extremely fit and very distinctive with his short greying hair and deep blue eyes.

Brenda and Elizabeth sat together and were obviously relaxed. Susan spoke briefly with them. She looked around for Ben, frowning at his attempt to become invisible. She beckoned him forward with her right index finger. Ben reluctantly joined her. Derek Disano and Sandra Quinn also approached. Susan shook hands with them and introduced herself and advised her role. 'And this is Ben Hood, the newest member of our security team,' said Susan. Ben struggled to keep his eyes off Brenda, but she was only metres from him.

'Nice to meet you,' said Ben. He shook hands with Derek and Sandra.

'Ben who?' Brenda stood up and took a step towards him.

Ben faced her. He was trembling. Something was not going the way Susan had promised. 'Hood.' He had almost lost his voice.

'Ben Hood,' said Brenda softly and she took another step towards him. 'Don't I know you?'

Ben could smell her exotic perfume. 'No.' He was feeling sick.

Brenda turned to Elizabeth. She stood and moved alongside her companion. 'Do we know this guy Liz?'

'Ben Hood,' said Elizabeth with a wide smile. 'Why I'm sure we do, but looks like we're going to get to know him a whole lot better.' Elizabeth took a step towards Ben and held out her hand. Ben took it automatically and she shook his hand firmly. 'I'm Elizabeth Rose.....Brenda's security companion.'

Ben looked into her deep blue eyes. They were almost level with his but she was wearing heels. Brenda moved closer as well and held out her hand. Ben was about to shake it when she suddenly moved in and kissed him quickly on the cheek. Ben jumped back like a scalded cat. Brenda laughed. 'Thank you for the lovely email.'

'They told me you didn't read that stuff.'

'I don't. Liz showed it to me.'

Ben looked across at Elizabeth. Amusement beamed all over her face. 'Well, anyway, I've got to visit the gents.' Ben turned and walked quickly in the direction of the reception counter.

'Shy little thing ain't he?' said Elizabeth with a smile.

Brenda's infectious laughter rang through the lounge.

The large Challenger 850 Jet screamed and rolled slowly to its take off point. Brenda and Elizabeth sat opposite each other in luxuriously padded white leather

chairs. Behind them, Ben and Susan sat opposite each other. All of the 14 passenger seats were occupied. Susan hadn't stopped smiling from the time she saw Ben scurry to the toilet back in the private jet terminal. She tried so hard to keep a straight face but the more she tried, the more she smiled. Ben was silent.

'Captain here,' came a voice over the cabin speakers. 'Peter Walsh is my name and sitting with me in case I fall asleep is first officer Rhonda Wilks.'

Brenda smiled and leaned forward. 'I love that Australian accent.'

Elizabeth nodded.

'We'll be in the air soon,' continued the Captain. 'I'd like to welcome you all on board, especially Ms. Grant and Mr. Sutherland. I'm a big fan. The taxi to the take off point is quite long this morning but if we don't hit a pot hole or anything we should be in the air over Sydney in about 15 minutes and then we'll set course north to Cairns. This jet cruises at around 800 kilometres an hour, depending on the wind. That's about 500 miles per hour for our American guests. Cairns is around 1,954 kilometres from Sydney by air. That's around 1,214 miles. I feel like a travelling conversion programme up here.'

Everyone laughed.

'We'll climb to a flight level of 34,000 feet. I won't convert that. Flight time to Cairns today will be.....' There was silence from the cabin speakers for a few seconds. 'Look, you guys can work it out. I'm busy trying to take off here.'

Laughter again. Actually Ben hadn't laughed at all, although he thought the Captain was amusing. He leaned forward towards Susan who had not only cracked up at the Captain's jokes, but had tears rolling down her cheeks from the overall morning's entertainment.

'You said she wouldn't read any emails!'

That was all Susan needed to tip her over the edge and her laughter turned most of the heads on the jet, including Brenda's and Elizabeth's. 'Happy bunch aren't they,' said Brenda, smiling widely.

Elizabeth pointed at Ben, whose back was towards her. 'Not everyone seems happy.'

Now Brenda was giggling again.

'What's with you people,' said Ben, as he settled back in the plush leather seat and stared out the window.

The twin jet engines roared as the Captain applied power. The city of Sydney dropped quickly away. The gleaming white jet cut through the low cloud layer and out into the brilliant sunshine above.

Brenda leaned forward to Elizabeth again. 'What's the name of this movie again?'

'Coral Sea Affair.'

'Yes, that's right.'

Elizabeth flicked back her long black hair and cocked her head to one side.

'And?'

'Oh nothing.'

'You had better behave yourself Brenda.'

'And I'll be watching you too Liz.'

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and looked out the window. Brenda sat back in her chair and tried to keep the smile off her face.

“*****”

Chapter Twenty One

‘What do you mean, ‘a farmer in Rockhampton?’ Joy Mackay stared across the desk at Inspector Tanner. ‘This is not that kind of a car Roy. I’m sure these people are gangsters or something.’

Roy Tanner sat back and locked his hands behind his head. ‘I checked out the number plate like you said. The car is an out of Towner and if it’s here, the owner was only visiting and is probably gone by now.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Can’t tell you that Joy.’

‘They threatened me!’

‘I need witnesses Joy.’

‘You know I don’t have any.’

‘Then I can’t really do anything.’

Joy jumped up and walked to the window. ‘I don’t believe this. Surely you can do something. I was frightened to death.’

Roy Tanner rocked slightly in his chair and put his hands face down on the desk. ‘I’ll send off an email to the police in Rocky and they can have a chat with this guy; OK?’

Joy turned. ‘That’s all you can do?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Well I intend to put up more posters.’

‘Not a good idea Joy. Let us handle things, alright?’

Joy Mackay approached the desk and looked into the Police Inspector’s eyes. Roy Tanner was somewhat intimidated and that was an unfamiliar experience for him. ‘Now Joy...’

‘Don’t Joy me. I’ve lost my husband and now I’m being bullied by people over trying to find out what happened to him and you are going to send off an email? Why don’t you ring the Rockhampton police right now?’ I’m confused and frightened Mr. Tanner.’

‘Inspector Tanner actually....’

‘Whatever. Can I suggest that you try to live up to the ‘inspector’ part of your title?’

Roy Tanner was thinking of a response but Joy stormed out of his office and was gone. He stood and walked to the window. He watched Joy Mackay run across the street at the front of the Police Station and walk quickly to the Marina Mirage parking lot. He was worried and confused. He had never had to deal with a situation like this before.

‘Oh God I love it...I just love it.’ Brenda strode into the pink marble and granite foyer of the Sheraton Mirage Port Douglas. Elizabeth walked beside her. Ben and Susan followed closely. Hotel security staff had blocked off public access areas but curious crowds had gathered near the huge front doors to the resort and around the impressively large pool area between the expansive foyer and the Coral Sea. Many waved at Brenda and she waved back as excitedly as a 10 year old. Camera strobes flashed.

Hotel staff escorted the party to a private room on the first floor. The huge room was carpeted with deep plush pile, brilliantly coloured in bright blue, deep blue, turquoise, yellow and gold. The patterns were bold, sweeping and contained swirls, circles, leaf outline with spearhead shaped borders. Indoor fountains created a soft babble of water as it rushed over black river stones and dropped into deep ponds at two corners of the room. Large white and red mottled Koi swam among flowering lilies in each pond.

Waiters in crisp, white, short sleeved shirts served chilled vintage Moet champagne, freshly squeezed orange juice and chilled Perrier water. Others followed with small bowls of chilled, cooked king prawns and a variety of sauces, Beluga caviar with Melba toast and freshly shucked Sydney rock oysters.

Ben had never tasted food so fresh, tasty and immaculately presented. He attracted the attention of one of the female waiters. 'Do you have any beer?'

'Certainly sir. What would you like?'

'Crown Lager please.'

'Right away sir.'

Ben looked across at Brenda and Elizabeth, both talking excitedly and laughing. Brenda caught his eye and waved at him. He waved back, feeling like an idiot who had just landed on another planet. He was starting to like this assignment. He knew he was way out of his depth in a number of areas, but suddenly it didn't matter all that much. The waiter appeared at his side with a chilled Crown Lager on a silver tray. He sipped the beer and looked out over the huge expanses of crystal clear pools surrounding the resort buildings.

Susan came up beside him so silently that he jumped. 'What do you think?' she asked.

'About what?'

'This.' She gestured towards the pools.

'It's amazing. I haven't been here for many years but it's not changed a bit.'

'On holiday?'

'Yes, with my wife.'

'Oh.'

'Actually she doesn't even know I'm here. We sort of don't have much to do with each other anymore.'

'I'm sorry.' Susan sipped champagne.

'Nothing to be sorry for now I suppose,' said Ben. 'She wants out and I guess I can't blame her. It's no picnic being married to a copper and especially one in plain clothes.'

'I know. My time in the police broke my marriage apart too.'

'I'm sorry.' Ben sipped another mouthful of beer.

'Nothing to be sorry for. I've moved on. He moved in with his new boyfriend.'

Ben almost spluttered the mouthful of beer on the floor but he controlled the urge and swallowed it quickly.

Susan put her hand on his arm softly. 'Can never tell these days, can you?'

'What do you mean?'

She took her hand away and smiled up at him. Then she turned and walked towards Brenda and Elizabeth, leaving Ben to contemplate if he had just been insulted, or not.

An hour later, everyone had checked in and been shown to their rooms. Susan's suite was next door to Brenda's huge VIP accommodation with Ben's room interconnecting hers. Elizabeth's suite interconnected Brenda's on the other side. This took up an entire top floor wing at the eastern end of the resort. The views out over pools and carefully manicured gardens with hundreds of coconut palms were breath taking.

The security briefing was held in the VIP lounge area of Brenda's suite. Susan and Ben were present with Brenda, Elizabeth and Simon Sutherland. The film makers Derek Disano and Sandra Quinn also attended together with the Resort Manager and his Security Manager.

With total confidence and practiced skill, Susan outlined the role she and Ben would play in covertly protecting Brenda and Simon, should the need arise. She also acknowledged Elizabeth's presence for close up protection of Brenda and made it clear that in the main, Elizabeth would be making the call for action by any of the security staff, should the need arise.

Questions were asked and answered.

The following day was to be for relaxation while an area of the hotel was set up for filming. The underwater team were to complete arrangements for the above and below ocean work out on the Great Barrier Reef. Monday morning at 6 am sharp, location filming would commence.

As evening descended, a light breeze from the Coral Sea ruffled the tops of the palms. Citronella lanterns were fired up throughout the gardens, their flickering lights glistening across the still water of the pools. Music, talking and laughter drifted out from the huge ground floor restaurant. Couples walked hand in hand on timber boardwalks and concrete paths. The soft sound of water cascading over rocks came from hidden corners throughout the gardens. Magic cooking smells wafted from the kitchen into the evening air.

Ben sat by the open window with the panorama unfolding before him. He preferred the ocean breeze to the air conditioning and the heat of the day had gone. He sipped another beer. He was thinking of the time he and Fay had spent at this amazing place so many years ago when suddenly his mobile phone buzzed with a text message. Surprisingly, it was Fay. 'Think of the devil,' said Ben to himself. The message was short and gruffly. 'WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?' He texted back. 'NOT WITH YOU.'

She did not respond.

He gazed back over the torch lit gardens and glistening pools. They had been so happy here together. It was as if they had moved 180 degrees away from each other and for a moment, sadness crept over him.

There was a soft tap on the interconnecting door. 'It's unlocked,' he called.

Susan came in. She was dressed in designer jeans and a large brightly coloured floral top, low cut at the front. Ben looked her up and down. 'I thought we weren't supposed to be attracting attention? Where are the Christmas lights for your hair?'

'Ha Ha. We're going to dinner in a private room with the stars of this show and we're supposed to be blending in. I'm blending in.'

'I'd hate to see you trying to stand out.'

'OK, let me see your wardrobe. What are you wearing to compliment me?'

'Let me see.' Ben smiled, making no effort to move. 'I've got these lovely cashmere shorts and a bright green singlet. How's that sound?'

She ignored him. 'Have you got a nice bright shirt and some jeans like mine?'
'No I don't have a bright shirt and there is nothing wrong with the jeans I've got on. I also don't have jeans that someone has to spray onto me like yours.'
'They are firm fitting and clean. You've been in yours all day.'
'So?'
'So change and have them washed and let me see your shirts.'
'Bugger off. I'll choose my own shirt thank you.'
She glared at him and moved to the connecting door. 'It had better be nice.'
'What time do we meet?'
'7 pm sharp, outside Brenda's door. That gives you less than half an hour.'
'I'll leave the door unlocked. Just come through and get me.'
'Alright, and by the way, the girls and I are heading up to the Marina Mirage shopping centre tomorrow and having lunch in Port Douglas. We've decided you can have the day off. It's a girls only thing and we'll be OK.'
'You sure?'
'Yep. There seems to be no breath of any kind of threat here but keep your phone handy.'

'Will do. I'm heading for the shower.'

Susan closed the interconnecting door behind her.

Ben let the warm water pound onto his head and face. He lathered quickly and dried his body with huge, soft, fluffy white towels. He put his old jeans back on. There was nothing wrong with them. How could they get dirty in a private jet? He chose a white cotton, short sleeved shirt with a collar and got back into his brown leather boots. He did wipe the boots over with the wet face washer.

The evening ahead was to be filled with laughter and fun and although Ben didn't know it then, he was about to have the time of his life. He would get to know Brenda quite comfortably as the young, vivacious creature she was. She would flirt with him and joke with him and make him realise that she was not just an amazing movie actress, but a wonderful, warm human being.

He would tease Elizabeth for being so over protective of her charge. He would warm to this tall, very fit, black haired woman, and she to him.

Susan would glare at him from time to time and wish he would drop down a ten foot deep hole for a number of reasons, not the least being his choice of wardrobe.

If Ben had known what lay ahead over the next few days, the wide smile would have instantly been wiped from his suntanned face and his body would have been gripped in the deep, gut wrenching fear that only one fighting for their life and the lives of others, can experience.

“*****”

Chapter Twenty Two

A day to relax by the huge swimming pools of the Sheraton Mirage was just what the Doctor had ordered for Ben Hood. Brenda, Elizabeth and Susan hired a Mini Cooper S and headed for the shopping areas in the Port Douglas Village a few kilometres away.

The day was perfect with few clouds and a constant Coral Sea breeze. Faint sounds of hammering and sawing came from the eastern corner of the resort as carpenters and other tradesmen worked on a movie set. Ben read a newspaper and went to sleep in the sun. He was later thankful that he had thought to smother himself with 30+ sunscreen before venturing to the pool. His tan deepened.

The girls joined him in the mid afternoon. By this time Ben had dragged his deck chair into the shade of the palms. Brenda in a white bikini was mind blowing, but surprisingly, Elizabeth, whose body was remarkable and whose impressive breasts were accentuated by a dark blue push up bikini bra, held his attention most of all. He could hardly take his eyes off her and she knew it. The hotel guests respectfully kept their distance, but most eyes were on Brenda. Susan was stunning in a jet black one piece swimsuit. Ben was in heaven. Surrounded by three incredibly lovely women; one a famous movie star! Was this actually work? This was definitely not work.

‘I got you a lovely floral shirt to wear to dinner tonight.’ Susan winked at the others and they laughed.

‘It’s got dolphins on it,’ said Susan, ‘and sharks.’

‘I’m not wearing anything with dolphins and sharks,’ said Ben firmly.

‘I think you better do what we tell you,’ said Elizabeth. ‘We don’t want to be embarrassed at dinner.’

Ben pulled the newspaper over his head. ‘I’m going out for a run this evening. I’m getting soft with all this laying in the sun and sipping beer.’

‘Pity,’ said Elizabeth.

Ben pulled the newspaper off his face. ‘About what?’

‘Getting soft.’

Brenda and Susan laughed hysterically. Ben got to his feet, grabbed the beach towel and flopped off to his room in bright green thongs.

Joy Mackay had only intended on being in Port Douglas for half an hour that Sunday evening. She posted off some letters and bought a newspaper. Joy was well known in town however and she bumped into a few friends and they chatted. As twilight came and shadows deepened, she walked back to the Marina Mirage car park, approached her old Holden and fished around in her large leather handbag for her car keys. The car park lighting, as usual, was not good.

The rumbling of motor bikes was not uncommon in Port Douglas but their close proximity to Joy on this occasion, startled her. Three large black motor bikes turned into the car park and moved slowly towards Joy. She could only see the headlights. Semi darkness hid the riders. Fear gripped her heart and she fumbled faster to find the car keys. She didn’t know why she was afraid as she had done nothing to these people.

The bikes swung into a straight line facing Joy and her car. The riders left the motors idling. The three bright headlights blinded her.

One of the riders got off his bike and took something out of a bag attached to the side of the bike.

‘What do you want?’ Joy called out. Her voice was trembling.

A very gruff voice rumbled back. ‘I’m going to do some before and after shots Mrs. Mackay.’ An electronic flash went off and Joy was blinded even further.

‘That was the before shot. I’ll do the after one in a second.’

The very large and massively built man moved towards her and before Joy could react he pushed her hard in the chest. She fell back against her car and cried out in pain. Laughter came from one of the other males but they remained straddling their machines.

Ben had slowly jogged down to Port Douglas from the Sheraton Mirage. It was only a few kilometres and the evening was mild. He had hardly raised a sweat. He ran close to the harbour and up through the Marina Mirage car park towards the town. He heard the motor bikes first and then, rounding a clump of trees, saw the headlights illuminating Joy Mackay as she was pushed roughly backwards and fell against her car.

This situation registered instantly as definitely alarming. Severely alarming. Ben sprinted towards the group. His highly trained instincts kicked in and the adrenaline pumped. This was not a situation which called for conversation as to what was going on. The huge man confronting Joy Mackay had pulled back his right fist and was obviously going to strike her. Ben determined that a blow from such a big man could likely kill the elderly woman.

He came silently out of the darkness and caught the big man by surprise. The fingers of Ben’s right hand chopped savagely into the side of the big man’s neck. The punch intended for Joy’s face, never landed. Ben’s left hand instantly formed a one knuckled fist and he drove it hard into the big man’s temple. He crashed to the bitumen without a sound. Out cold. A digital camera clattered to the ground beside him.

Two bike stands clicked down and two more large men were on their feet. The one closest to Ben didn’t know what had hit him. Ben delivered a savage chop to his wind pipe and the man went down screaming and choking. The third man made the mistake of pulling a metal bar from the back of his bike. Ben took it off him as easily as taking candy from a kid and smashed it across his right collar bone. There was a loud ‘snap’, followed by a more sickening thud as he brought it down hard on the man’s head.

Two men down and silent. One thrashing about, screaming and trying to breathe.

‘They are supposed to wear helmets’, said Ben as he dropped the metal bar and approached Joy. ‘You OK lady?’

Joy was dazed and shocked but she was still on her feet. She looked up at Ben. ‘I just want to get out of here and go home.’

‘Then I better drive. You look a bit shaken. Where are your keys?’

Joy fumbled in her bag a bit more and handed the car keys over. Ben unlocked the car and opened the passenger door for Joy. He went back to the first man he had subdued and picked up the camera lying beside him. He then deliberately kicked each bike off their stands. They crashed heavily to the bitumen, motors still rumbling.

Ben slipped into the driver's seat and started the motor. 'Where to lady?'
Joy pulled her seatbelt on with a grimace of pain. 'To the highway and north.'
'I don't know where the highway is.'
'Head south and I'll point the way.'
'Is south that way,' said Ben pointing vaguely.
'Yes.'

The old Holden moved out of the car park and Ben drove south until he recognised the entrance to the Sheraton Mirage. He drove past. Joy directed him to the highway and they headed north.

'What on earth was all that about?' said Ben after a few minutes of silence.

'What's your name?'

'Ben Hood. I'm a Policeman from Sydney. I was out jogging and saw them trying to hurt you.'

Joy studied him for a moment. 'Mr. Ben Hood. I think you may have just saved my life.'

'Why were they trying to hurt you?'

'I have no idea in the world.'

'It's all rather confusing,' said Ben.

'I think those men may need medical assistance,' said Joy.

'Stuff that,' said Ben. 'Let them look after themselves.'

They drove in silence for the rest of the trip to Rocky Point. Joy gave directions until they pulled up underneath the large deck of her home. She led Ben up the stairs and into the lounge. She turned on the table lamps and he sank into one of the white leather chairs.

'Would you like a drink?'

'I think you should be the one having a drink. I don't know your name by the way.'

'Joy Mackay. I live here alone now. My husband disappeared at sea some months ago.'

Ben looked around the lavish room. There were many treasures on display; evidence of a couple who had been together a long time.

'OK, I'll have a drink if you will.'

'Scotch straight.'

'Done.'

Joy opened a cabinet and poured two fingers of scotch each, into two thick glasses. She handed one to Ben and sat down in a lounge chair opposite him. They sipped in silence for a long moment.

'I seriously think you may have killed one of those men,' said Joy.

'I think that's quite likely.'

Joy said nothing.

'There has to be a reason they attacked you Mrs. Mackay.'

'Joy, please.'

'Joy. What did you do to upset them?'

'Nothing! I put up a few damn posters of my missing husband. Perhaps that is what this is about. A man in a Lincoln also threatened me because I was putting up the posters.'

'A Lincoln?'

'You know those big American limos. He threatened to burn down my house.'

Ben put his drink on a glass table beside the chair. 'It's not making sense. Tell me about your husband's disappearance?'

Joy looked closely at Ben's face. This was the first time anyone who actually seemed interested, had wanted her to talk about Winston. 'He took the timber runabout across to the low isles one morning for some reason. That's the main thing that puzzles me. He never told me where he was going or why. Just up and left. That's not like Winston. That was almost 4 months ago and he just disappeared. His boat washed up on Woody Island about 20 k's straight out there,' she waved a hand in the direction of the ocean. 'Bashed about and holed on the coral they say.'

Ben was silent.

'It's just not like him Mr. Hood. Winston knew the Coral Sea and those reefs out there like the back of his hand. No way he's going to crash his boat into one of those reefs. The sea was like glass the day he disappeared.'

Ben cleared his throat and glanced at a framed photo sitting on the baby grand. He concluded it was Winston Mackay. 'I agree. It's not adding up. There's a lot more going on here. One of those guys had a camera. What was that for?'

'He took a photo of me and told me it was a 'before' shot. Then he was going to do an 'after' shot.'

'Leverage.'

'Pardon?'

'They were going to use the photos for pressure on someone.'

'Who in God's name?'

Ben looked at her and remained silent.

Joy rose and moved to the liquor cabinet. She returned with the Dimple scotch and topped up her glass. She was about to re-fill Ben's glass but he stopped her. 'I've got to make a phone call if that's OK?'

She waved in the direction of her phone. Ben unclipped his mobile phone from a belt underneath his T shirt. It was not operating. Ben assumed the recent violent altercation had somehow shut it down. He turned the phone on and hit a speed dial button.

'Where the hell are you?' Susan was not happy.

'I've had a bit of a problem.'

'Yeah well so have we.'

'Is everyone OK?' said Ben, confused.

'The platform for the underwater filming was hit this evening. One of the engineers was beaten up and an underwater cameraman is in Mossman hospital with a spear stuck in his leg.'

'What!'

'Our movie platform was targeted by someone who didn't want us filming there. They apparently came out of no-where in a Zodiac. Some hit the platform and one went after the divers.'

Ben ran the fingers of his left hand across his short cut hair. 'Did you call the Police?'

'Of course we called the Police. They have done nothing. They are telling us nothing.'

'OK. Are Brenda and Elizabeth OK?'

'They were here with me at the Sheraton when it happened. All the stars are OK. It's just the diving platform crew. They are not keen on going back.'

Ben was silent. His mind was in turmoil. 'Look, I've also run into a bit of trouble tonight but I'm on my way back. Sit tight. I'll be there soon.'

‘What trouble?’

‘I’ll tell you later.’ He pressed the hang up button.

Joy Mackay was carefully watching him.

‘I need to borrow your car Joy. Got to get back to Port Douglas fairly quickly.’

‘The bikies?’

‘No. Something else. I’m up here taking care of some movie people and something has gone wrong.’

‘That Grant woman?’

‘Yes, her.’

‘Is she alright?’

‘Yes. Something has happened out at sea where they were preparing to shoot some underwater scenes over the next few weeks.’

Joy stood and walked to the huge windows facing the Coral Sea. She could only see reflections of her table lamps and the darkness beyond. ‘Where were they going to film these underwater scenes Mr. Hood?’

‘I have no idea,’ said Ben. ‘Can I borrow your car please?’

‘Can you ride a motor bike?’

‘Yes.’

Then take my husband’s if you like. It’s yours for as long as you want. It’s in the garage with his helmet.’

Joy led the way to the garage underneath the house and pulled a white sheet off a large, gleaming Harley Davidson. Ben stood back. ‘I’ve never ridden something this big.’

Joy handed him keys. ‘Winston’s helmet should fit you although it may be tight.’

Ben slid the helmet on. It was tight but that had advantages.

‘It’s a kick start. He said electric was for sissies.’

Ben straddled the huge bike, flicked up the stand with his right foot and moved the kick starter into position. He turned on the petrol switch and ignition. The bike roared into life with the first kick. Joy stood back with hands to her mouth. There were tears in her eyes.

Ben held out his right hand. ‘You got a pen?’

Joy picked up a Texta pen from a nearby bench.

‘Write your phone number.’

Joy wrote her number on the back of Ben’s hand.

‘I’m going to ring you tonight when I get back to Port Douglas. OK?’

She nodded.

‘You lock up tight and stay put.’

Joy nodded again.

‘You OK?’ Ben shouted above the noise of the motor.

‘I owe you my life Mr. Hood.’

Ben took hold of her hand and squeezed. ‘You got a computer Joy?’

She nodded. She didn’t feel like competing verbally with the rumbling Harley motor.

‘The digital camera that guy dropped is in your car. Download anything on it if you know how.’

Joy nodded again.

‘I’ll come back tomorrow for a chat about this.’

Joy moved closer to Ben. 'You sure you don't know where the movie people were going to do their underwater scenes Mr. Hood?'

'I've got no idea,' said Ben. 'Out beyond one of those coral reefs I gather.'

'Which reef?'

Ben clicked the bike into first gear with his left foot. 'Don't know.'

'Was it Batt Reef?'

'Don't know Joy. Why?'

Joy gazed out into the blackness of the Coral Sea and then looked up at Ben, studying his face intently. 'I'd almost given up hope that my husband was still alive Mr. Hood. Everyone said he had perished at sea.'

'And now?'

'And now you have made me see that it's possible my husband is very much alive but there are lots of missing pieces that we have to put together.'

'You know I'll help you.'

Joy grasped Ben's arm. 'I do believe you will. You can start off by finding out exactly where that film crew were setting up out there and let me know.'

'OK.'

Ben let out the clutch and the huge bike moved down the driveway and out onto Mossman-Daintree Road. The big motor growled with a deep throated roar. The wind grabbed at his face and chest in a familiar, unforgettable and comforting embrace.

“****”

Chapter Twenty Three

‘What’s with the helmet?’

‘Long story. What’s with the attack on the diving platform?’

Susan flopped onto the lounge in Ben’s resort room and put her bare feet on the coffee table. ‘Yesterday these Chinese guys in a rubber boat pulled up at the platform and told our chief technical engineer to pack up and piss off. He told them to take a hike or he would call the Police. They have Government permission to film there. A bigger rubber boat turned up late this evening with more Chinese and divers and you know the rest.’

Ben perched on the wide window sill and looked out over the smoky, torch lit gardens. ‘So what’s going to happen now?’

‘Derek wants to do the underwater stuff at that location. He’s spent a fortune setting up there. He and Sandra are in a bit of a flap over this.’

‘Alright, so what have the Police done?’

‘They said they were making inquiries.’

‘That means they’ve probably done bugger all.’

‘So why do these guys want us out of that area? There’s nothing there but lots of coral reef and a few islands.’

Ben moved to the coffee table in front of the lounge. Susan shifted her feet and he sat down facing her. ‘Exactly where is our diving platform?’

‘I’m not sure. Why?’

‘I need to find out. Ring Derek.’

Susan picked up the house phone from the lamp table next to her and dialled a number. She had a brief conversation and hung the phone up.

‘Just off Batt Reef. It’s on the edge of a deep drop off and fairly close to a coral island called Skull. Derek wanted the island as a back drop for some of the Coral Sea shots.’

‘Batt Reef?’

‘Yep. That’s where Steve Irwin died from the stingray barb a few years ago.’

‘God, I remember that. I loved that guy.’

‘We all did.’

Ben took out his mobile phone and dialled the number written on the back of his hand. Joy answered almost immediately.

‘It’s Ben Hood. You OK?’

‘Yes, thanks to you Mr. Hood.’

‘They were setting up to film just off Batt Reef and fairly close to an island named Skull.’

Silence.

‘Joy...’

‘My God. He’s alive. I know it.’

‘What are you talking about Joy?’

‘Remember I said a puzzle with lots of pieces?’

‘You’ve got that right.’

‘Then I’ve just figured out more of the pieces Mr. Hood. Can we meet again soon?’

'I think so. Can I ring you first thing tomorrow morning?'

'Please.'

'OK. Goodnight Joy.'

'Goodnight Mr. Hood and thank you again for everything.'

'No problem.' Ben pushed the hang up button.

Susan sat up and pulled her feet off the coffee table. 'So what was that all about?'

'I met this lady tonight.'

'Ben! We're working here.'

'She's in her 70's and she was in deep trouble.'

Susan stared at him. 'How does a 70 year old woman get into deep trouble and how do you get involved?'

Ben put his head in his hands. 'When I was out jogging earlier, I went down to Port Douglas and in the big car park near the marina, found these thugs about to beat up this old lady.'

'To rob her?' Susan was shocked.

'Not to rob her. They had taken a photo of her and were going to work her over and then take another shot.'

'How the hell did you figure that out?'

'One of them took a photo of her before he started to push her around.'

'My God, what for?' Susan swung her long legs to the floor and sat up straight.

'Leverage I figure, but I'm not sure why. I'm going to talk to her again tomorrow if I can get away for a while.'

'Well we won't be doing the scheduled underwater stuff; that's for sure.'

'I think I've probably killed one of the bike thugs that were going to attack her. I know they are all going to be in pretty bad shape anyway.'

Susan stared at him. 'Killed him! How?'

Ben shifted uncomfortably on the lounge. 'I know a fair bit of stuff about fighting Sue.'

'Yeah I heard. Karate.'

'Not just Karate. Shin obi Ninjutsu.'

'Isn't that Ninja stuff?'

'Yes.'

'Where the hell did you learn that? No-one teaches that in Australia.'

'Wrong. We have a master of Ninjutsu living in Sydney. He trained in Japan for the better part of his life.'

Susan studied him for a long moment.

Ben got up and walked to the window again. 'This old lady lost her husband in an accident at sea months ago; at least that is what the police concluded. His boat washed up damaged on a small island out there but the body has never been found.'

'I've called Rodney. I've got a bad feeling about this and what happened with you tonight has made it worse.'

'What are the movie people going to do?'

'Derek and Sandra are at the hospital now with the diver who got shot. Derek will make the call.'

'Where is the technical engineer you mentioned?'

'Locked in his room I suppose.'

'Brenda and Liz?'

'Likewise, but they are not happy campers.'

‘Who have the police interviewed?’

‘Only the diver at this stage and I think they spoke with Derek at the hospital also.’

‘Have they been out here to speak with the rest of the crew?’

‘No. Claim to be very busy.’

Ben and Susan looked at each other for a moment. ‘Now I know why they got so busy,’ said Susan. ‘How many did you take down?’

‘Three.’

‘And kill at least one?’

‘Probably two.’

‘Would the bodies be found easily? Where did this happen?’

‘In the car park almost right outside the Police Station.’

‘That would do it. I’m ringing Rodney again. We’re getting out of our depth here.’

‘I need to talk to that engineer for a while. I need details of that attack. I better chat with Brenda and Elizabeth first.’

‘OK, I’ll ring them now and set it up.’

Ben walked to the bathroom and closed the door. His face looked somewhat drawn in the pink fluorescent lighting. He washed his face and hands and removed his jogging gear. The white cotton gown smelt clean and fresh. Susan was chatting on the phone as he walked into the robe closet. He quickly changed into a white casual shirt and blue jeans. He zipped up his dress boots and walked back into the lounge.

‘Brenda and Liz are ready now. The engineer will come here when we call him back.’

‘You want to come?’

‘Wouldn’t miss it for the world.’

Brenda was in her hotel gown and looked magnificent, stretched out on the huge white lounge, her long blond hair a tussled mess. She wore the resort’s white, embroidered slippers. Elizabeth was standing at the panoramic windows wearing black jeans, a tight fitting mauve T shirt, bare feet and a grumpy face.

‘OK we’ve got a situation here,’ said Ben, cutting straight to the point. ‘It seems someone doesn’t want us filming out at sea and they are fairly determined to get their point across.’

‘Fairly determined!’ Elizabeth flicked her hair back with both hands. ‘Put a damn spear through our underwater photographer’s leg.’

Ben dropped into a huge lounge chair opposite Brenda and smiled at her. Susan remained standing. ‘You OK pretty lady?’

Brenda beamed at him. ‘Seems to get better whenever you are around.’

Elizabeth began to pace. ‘Will you two stop cooing at each other?’

‘Yes,’ said Susan, unable to think of anything else to say.

‘OK.’ Ben had become serious. ‘We’ve got something going on here and it’s a tad more complex than someone not wanting us to film out on the Great Barrier Reef.’

Susan perched on the arm of the lounge chair beside him. ‘So fill us in?’

‘I can’t. I don’t have all the pieces of the puzzle yet.’

‘Are we doing something wrong by the environment or something?’ Brenda propped herself up on an arm. ‘We haven’t even started shooting yet.’

‘It’s got nothing to do with the environment, or the film you guys are making,’ said Ben. ‘It’s something else and I’ll need some time to find out what it is.’

The three girls looked at each other and back to Ben. No-one said anything.

‘So what’s the plan?’ said Elizabeth eventually. ‘You have a plan, right?’

‘Are we in any danger?’ asked Brenda softly.

‘I’m not sure,’ said Ben.

‘Oh great!’ said Elizabeth with a snort. ‘They assign us Australian bodyguards because you know the territory, but you have no idea if we are facing some danger here?’

‘You’re also a bodyguard,’ snapped Ben. ‘How often are you in possession of all the relevant information when you take Brenda into a situation?’

Elizabeth glared at him.

Brenda sat up and put her hands out towards Ben. He looked into her eyes for a few seconds and then took her slender fingers in his huge hands. ‘Nothing is going to happen to you.....any of you,’ he said, glancing at Elizabeth. ‘We continue as normal with this shoot, with Derek’s permission.’

‘Are you out of your bloody mind!’ said Susan loudly.

Elizabeth looked at Ben and back to Susan, obviously confused.

‘We’ll need a fair degree of tightening where security is concerned, but I think we should continue with this picture. The shooting schedule will change and I’ll discuss that with Derek and Sandra. Once I’ve spoken to the technical advisor and the underwater photographer, I’ll know more about handling the underwater site.’

‘So you’ve suddenly become a movie expert along with other things,’ said Susan.

Elizabeth sat down beside Brenda. Ben realised that he was still holding Brenda’s hands, and let them go. ‘There is no obvious threat to Brenda or the other actors at this point. We have no clear idea what happened out on the diving platform, or why. I need to talk to a few people and try to see where this is going. In the meantime, I need you both to lock down tight for at least a day or two and if the police show up, tell them nothing. Neither of you were out on that diving platform.’

‘You’re not the police up here Ben,’ said Susan. ‘Let them handle it.’

Ben turned to her. ‘I need you with me, not against me.’

‘He’s a cop,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Until the other lot show up we don’t have much option.’

‘What do you want us to do Ben,’ asked Brenda softly.

‘Just sit tight for a while. Susan will be here 24/7. I’ll try and get Derek to arrange shooting at the Sheraton while I figure out what happened on the reef platform.’

‘Room service?’ asked Brenda.

‘No, the private dining room as usual with all the trimmings. We want things to seem normal.’

‘Damn,’ said Brenda. ‘I love room service.’

Ben got up and walked towards the huge double doors. ‘Until I figure what is happening here, try to keep to the usual routine.’ He glanced back at Elizabeth. ‘Just keep twice as alert, OK?’

Elizabeth gave him a very false smile. ‘I’m stuffed. We’re having room service tonight.’

Ben shrugged and left the apartment. Susan reluctantly followed. Elizabeth clicked the dead lock on, attached the security chain and stomped back into the lounge room.

‘You like him.’ It was a statement from Brenda, not a question.

‘I hate him.’

Brenda stretched back on the lounge. ‘He’s getting to you babe.’

‘In all the wrong ways.’

‘He’s turning you on.’ Brenda was smiling.

Elizabeth pulled her T shirt off over her long hair. ‘I’m having a shower. You and Ben Hood can go to hell.’

‘So what’s for room service?’

‘Order your own bloody room service.’ Elizabeth tried to slam the bathroom door behind her but it was fitted with anti slamming hydraulics and all she got was a gentle hiss and a click. That made her even angrier.

‘I didn’t sign up for this kind of treatment.’

Ben nodded empathetically and indicated with a wave of his hand that the technician should sit down. They were in Ben’s resort room. The technician chose a chair. Ben sat opposite him. Susan stood back, watching. The technician had some sticking plaster over his left eyebrow.

‘We’re going to get to the bottom of this Stan. I’m sorry; I didn’t catch your last name?’

‘Café.’

‘Is that French?’

‘Way back it was. People now call my surname ‘cafe’ like where you sit to have a sandwich. I hate that.’

‘Alright Stan. Susan and I are security for the Australian sector of this movie, as you know.’

Stan rolled two brown eyes in a large, sunburned face.

‘Our job is primarily to protect Brenda and the other stars.’

‘Good for them,’ said Stan sarcastically. ‘And who protects us?’

‘I guess the rest of the crew weren’t considered predatory targets.’

‘Well I’ve got a news flash for you Mr. Hood. That is your name?’

‘Ben.’

‘Ben. WE seem to be the predatory targets as you so eloquently put it.’ He pointed to the sticking plaster over his eyebrow.

‘So it would seem.’

‘Andy Hayter, our lead underwater camera man, also seems to think that we may perhaps be ‘predatory targets’ as you put it. The stainless steel spear fired into his left leg from some sort of high powered pneumatic underwater gun, has influenced his thinking to some extent in this regard. Would you agree?’

Ben was quiet. The traumatic events of the day were starting to catch up and this conversation wasn’t helping. Susan was at his side instantly. She laid a hand on his shoulder.

‘Mr. Café,’ she said (pronouncing the surname correctly) ‘You and your team on the underwater diving platform were threatened recently?’

‘Yes Ma’am.’

‘When?’

‘Yesterday a couple of chinks turned up in a rubber boat and told us to pack up and go film somewhere else.’

Ben started to say something but Susan put one of her fingers to his lips. The effect electrified Ben but it also shut him up.

‘Did he say why he wanted you to go somewhere else Mr. Café?’

‘He said we were not allowed to be near Skull Island and that we should move across to Agincourt reef with the rest of the tourists.’

‘And what did you tell him?’

‘I said we weren’t tourists and that we had Government approval to set up an underwater studio off Batt Reef and was going to film there.’

Ben cut in. ‘I gather it wasn’t the first time a film crew had been working in the Batt Reef area. Isn’t that where Steve Irwin was killed by the stingray?’

‘I understand they were on the other side of the reef, totally out of sight of Skull Island.’

Ben nodded.

‘I gather these ‘chinks’ were not happy with your response,’ said Susan. ‘Can I first ask you what nationality you believe these people were?’

‘Chinese. Japanese. Vietnamese. Aren’t they all the same?’

Susan glanced at Ben. ‘Well no actually. All extremely different, but go on. Did they all talk at once or was there a leader?’

‘Only one spoke.’

‘And how was he dressed?’

‘Pardon?’

‘What was he wearing?’

‘Black.’

‘Black what?’

‘Black everything. Long sleeved shirt. Black pants. Black shoes. Black head scarf. Thick black belt. Sword.’

‘Sword?’

‘I think it was a long curved sword, with a carved, black and white handle.’

Ben couldn’t contain himself. ‘Did any of them take out their swords?’

Stan Café turned to Ben. ‘No.’

‘What about the second time they visited. Did they draw their swords?’

‘No.’

‘But they assaulted you the second time from what I hear, and sent a diver down and shot your underwater camera man with a spear gun.’

‘Yeah, through the leg.’

‘Not through the chest?’ Ben looked at Susan and back to Stan Café.

‘No. Good Lord. Through the chest and he’d be dead.’

‘So they didn’t want to kill your underwater photographer,’ said Ben. ‘Just frighten him...and you?’

Stan Café scratched his balding head. ‘Hell of a way to frighten us.’

‘I agree,’ said Ben. ‘Can you tell me something else? Did the diver who shot Mr. Hayter, leave his spear gun behind?’

Stan Café stared at Ben. ‘What kind of question is that?’

Susan looked at Ben with confusion on her face, but she supported him. ‘Can you recall this detail Mr. Café?’

‘Now that you mention it, the spear gun was attached to the spear with a long nylon cord. I think the gun, cord and spear were all loaded onto the police launch that took Andy to the mainland.’

Ben leaned forward. ‘Did the spear have large movable barbs at the point, you know, the ones what make it very difficult to pull the spear out?’

‘Yes, that’s why we couldn’t pull it out. I really don’t see the point of this line of questioning.’

‘You’ve been very patient Mr. Café,’ said Ben. ‘I need to speak with Derek and Sandra first, but I want you to understand that I feel the movie should go ahead with the underwater scenes right where you are located.’

‘Are you crazy?’ Stan jumped to his feet. ‘I’m not going back out there.’

‘You will be heavily guarded the next time,’ said Ben. ‘There will not be a repeat performance of recent events.’

Stan looked at Susan. ‘What; you two going to stand on the platform and protect us?’

‘Armed, uniformed guards,’ said Ben. ‘I’ll arrange it.’

Susan squeezed her long fingernails into Ben’s shoulder. He ignored her. ‘None of you guys will work on that platform again without at least 2 armed, uniformed guards, standing by.’

‘That’s very reassuring Mr. Hood, but it’s not going to help Andy Hayter very much.’

‘We’ll take care of that. I’m sure Derek will be doing everything possible to support and compensate Mr. Hayter. This project is more than adequately insured.’

Stan Café looked at Susan. She nodded.

‘How many underwater photographers were assigned to this film Mr. Café?’
Asked Ben.

‘Only two. We also have two divers doing lighting.’

‘And where were the lighting guys when Mr. Hayter got shot in the leg?’

‘Here at the resort. We only need them for the underwater night action. That was scheduled in 3 days time if the weather holds.’

Ben got up. ‘Mr. Café. I have no idea exactly how this movie is going to progress from this point, but it has to progress.’

‘I’m not following you.’

‘The underwater parts of this film will proceed. You and your men will be very well protected.’

‘Tell that to Andy Hayter?’

‘He’s out of this. Assure the rest of the crew that we’re going ahead safely. I’ll be there to support you and answer any questions.’

Stan appeared somewhat deflated. He pulled his nose a couple of times.

Susan kept a straight face. Her mind was in turmoil.

‘And what about the Police?’ asked Stan.

‘What about them?’ said Ben.

‘Don’t we have to do what they tell us to do?’

‘And what have they told you to do Mr. Café?’

‘I’m very confused about all of this Mr. Hood. The Police haven’t spoken to me yet.’

‘Then perhaps you should work with me for a while.’ Ben glanced at Susan. Her face remained blank. Stan Café was obviously uncomfortable.

Ben walked to an open window and gazed at the flickering torches and extensive, shimmering pools below. The resort staff were setting up a huge bar- b- q on an outside deck. Light blue smoke rose and swirled in the ocean breeze. Exotic smells of steak, lamb, prawns, lobster and fish, invaded his nostrils.

‘I don’t have all the answers to what has happened here Mr. Café, but it appears to me that we’re not getting a full picture.’

Stan Café said nothing.

‘I intend speaking with the Police myself and making a few other inquiries but in the meantime, we’ll see what Derek intends to do about the film and work out a plan from there.’

‘Sounds fair.’

‘He may just move the underwater location or perhaps call the entire show off and send us home. I don’t personally think that would be a good idea.’

Stan Café rubbed his chin thoughtfully. ‘We’ve put a damn lot of money into this project so far Mr. Hood. A damn lot. I just can’t figure the reaction from the chinks on that island. We’re not hurting them. We’re no-where near that island.’

‘You’re obviously close enough to be seen. They can see you and you can also see them. It would seem that the fact you can see them is what triggered the incident today.’

‘Armed guards you say?’

‘At least two of them, with Derek’s permission.’

‘OK, I’ll wait until I’ve heard from you before I speak to the rest of the crew.’

‘Sounds fair.’ The two shook hands and Stan Café left.

“*****”

Chapter Twenty Four

‘And would you mind filling me in now?’ Susan sprawled on the lounge. Ben paced slowly. ‘Let’s start with the swords.’

‘You got him to describe the attackers. What was your conclusion from their dress?’

‘Ninja?’

‘Fair assumption. All armed with one of the primary weapons of the Ninja but none of them used it. One of them entered the water with an improvised weapon.’

‘The spear gun? How was that improvised?’

‘Ninja use tried and tested skills and weapons. A spear gun is not something they would normally carry; not one with a cord attached to a spear with floppers or barbs. That’s a gun for shooting fish. They grabbed that from somewhere on the way to their boat along with any diving gear used.’

‘I’m not following you Ben.’

‘Resident Ninja; those staying long term on Skull Island, would have adapted weapons more suitable to their style of fighting in that particular environment. The spear gun would not have been attached to the spear by a cord and the spear wouldn’t have needed barbs. In fact their dress and entire style would have been different. Ninjutsu are unconventional. They adapt quickly to their surroundings and blend in.’

‘The point you are making is?’

‘They were very recent imports to Skull Island. They aren’t residents. The residents brought them in for a specific purpose but someone ordered them to act quickly; before they had time to obtain alternative clothing. They were also ordered not to kill anyone. Ninja’s kill. They don’t shoot people in the leg.’

‘I still don’t follow.’

‘I’m not sure I do either Sue, but something fairly major is happening or about to happen out on Skull Island and I think our film crew may have gotten in the way. I also have a weird feeling that Mrs. Joy Mackay may have also gotten in the way. I need to talk to her again first thing in the morning.’

‘I’ve asked Rodney for some back up. He’s sending up two more operatives.’

Ben flexed his shoulders. They were sore from the sudden surge of fighting energy in the Port Douglas car park. He knew he needed more exercise to keep the edge. ‘I don’t want any hot shots buying into this Sue. Keep them under control.’

‘I’ll tell them only what they need to know. I’m going to have them focus on the movie stars.’

‘Liz will love that.’

‘I think you need to be extremely careful Ben Hood. You can’t just kill or seriously injure people without the police getting involved.’

‘Well they haven’t contacted me yet, so the bikies are either not talking about Joy Mackay and the fight, or they can’t talk. Joy would call me instantly if the police started asking questions.’

The room phone rang softly. Ben picked up. ‘Hi Ben. It’s Brenda.’

‘What’s happening?’

‘I need to get out of this room for a while and go for a walk. Liz has chucked a grumpy fit. Can you go with me?’

Ben glanced at Susan. 'We'll have to clear it with Elizabeth.'

'Can you drop by please?'

'OK, give me 5 minutes.'

'Thanks Ben.'

He hung up the phone. 'Brenda wants me to take her for a walk. She feels cooped up.'

'What, in that apartment. It's five times bigger than my flat.'

'It will do us both good I think. I'll check with Elizabeth first and we'll be gone around an hour. I'll have the phone with me.'

Sue got off the lounge and walked to the interconnecting door. 'You thinking of playing with fire Ben?'

'No,' he said rather too quickly.

'You're working here. Don't forget that.' Sue closed the interconnecting door rather loudly.

'Have her back by 10.30 Mr. Hood.'

'Yes Ma'am.' Ben grinned. 'We're not going parking or anything. I don't have a car.'

Elizabeth didn't smile. 'I still think this is a bad idea.'

'We're just going for a walk Liz. Ben will look after me. I need to get out for a little while.'

'We'll have some room service together when we get back,' said Ben.

Liz glared at him. They left quickly.

'Thank you.'

Ben shrugged. Brenda tucked her arm through his and moved close. She was wearing a firm fitting, white chiffon Collette Dinnigan dress with a short embroidered hemline and an extremely low scoop neck, revealing perhaps too much of her breasts. The dress also showed to maximum advantage, the body which drew admiration from males and females worldwide. Only the females were envious. The males were just blown away. Her white high heeled Jimmy Choo shoes put the top of her head almost level with Ben's.

She was wearing Chanel No.5. Ben didn't have a clue what perfume she had on. He did know it was driving him wild.

He led her down the plush carpeted staircase to the huge glass doors which opened into a tropical wonderland with flickering lanterns, huge glistening pools and hundreds of slowly swaying palm trees. Resort guests stopped to watch the couple. Men glanced at their wives and girlfriends and limited their viewing time to what they hoped was acceptable. Some kids were less reserved and the more adventurous approached Brenda and said hello. Brenda was enchanted. She smiled and held hands with some of the children. She also kept a tight hold of Ben's arm. Ben felt somewhat uncomfortable but he smiled and resisted the urge to make the children go away. 'I saw you in the suntan cream ad,' said one boy. 'Mum said you should put more clothes on.'

Brenda giggled. 'Perhaps she's right.'

Ben guided her away from the quickly forming crowd. People snapped photographs and flashes went off. One of the camera flashes was extremely bright and quite close. Two uniformed security guards employed by the hotel intervened.

Ben whisked Brenda across the boardwalk towards the northern section of the resort and the growing crowd was lost as palm gardens closed behind them. He led

her down a manicured jungle path which became increasingly dark as the resort lights distanced. Suddenly the path ahead was bathed in brilliant white light. The light penetrated far ahead but also lit the swaying palm branches overhead and to each side of the jungle and the ground almost at their feet. Brenda froze and clung to Ben.

‘It’s OK. It’s mine.’

Brenda realised that Ben was holding a small torch in his right hand. ‘It’s so bright!’

‘Latest thing. Cree LED. Doesn’t have a globe. 380 lumens.’

Brenda laughed. ‘What are you talking about, and what is a lumen?’

‘Sorry. I’ve got a torch fetish I’m afraid.’

‘That the only one?’

‘Torch?’

‘Fetish.’

Ben walked with his stunning companion out onto the white sandy beach which fronted the Sheraton Mirage. He turned off the pocket sized flood light, squatted down and gently removed her high heeled shoes, hooking them into his belt. He took off his boots and socks and tucked them under his free arm. They walked down to the softly rolling Coral Sea. Brenda moved her arm down and held his hand. Ben was tempted to resist. He didn’t.

A three quarter moon hung over the ocean. They slowly walked south on the wet sand. Tiny waves of warm, salt water rippled over their feet. Coconut trees in their tens of thousands leaned towards them on the right hand side, with palm fronds swaying and sighing gently in the onshore breeze. The fronds moved back and forth in an almost hypnotic dance.

Ben’s mind was in turmoil. ‘It’s called four mile beach,’ he said.

‘Why?’

Ben pushed her away slightly with his shoulder, but she gripped his hand tightly and moved in close to him again.

‘You’re older than we thought you’d be.’

‘What?’

‘You never gave your age in the email.’

‘I didn’t mean to be deceptive.’

‘You were pretty drunk I think.’

‘Yeah. It was a bad day. I got suspended for shooting someone.’

‘You feel comfortable with that Ben?’

‘I’m comfortable with the shooting. I didn’t deserve to be suspended.’

Brenda was quiet for a long time.

‘You had a photo of me on your desk at work?’

Ben looked at the moon. ‘Yes.’

‘And your work mates blacked out some of my teeth?’

‘They were jealous.’

‘Of what?’

Ben looked down at Brenda’s amazingly beautiful face. ‘You.’

‘Or perhaps you,’ she said.

‘And why would they be jealous of me. I’d never met you. That was never going to happen in a million years.’

Brenda stood still. She put an arm around his neck, pulled his head down and kissed him on the lips. Ben felt faint. ‘Now, Mr. Hood; I think we’ve officially met.’

‘I think we should perhaps go back,’ said Ben.

‘We just got here silly. Keep walking. I won’t bite you.’

‘It’s not biting I’m worried about.’

They walked hand in hand and in silence for several minutes. Ben, who prided himself in always having something to say, felt as if he had been struck dumb. This had to be a dream and he would get hit by a large rock from outer space at any minute and wake up.

‘I guess it was a bit impulsive of me,’ said Brenda softly. ‘I’m sorry if I frightened you. Liz is always telling me I’m too impulsive.’

‘You mean the kiss?’

‘That and dragging you out onto the beach at night. Liz will be having kittens.’

‘She’s only trying to protect you and you don’t know me.’

Brenda stopped and looked up at him. The moonlight made her blond hair glisten silver white and the Coral Sea breeze made it wisp around as if it were touched by magic. ‘I know enough. I’m comfortable with you. I feel safe with you. Liz and I love teasing you and you blush like a bride.’

‘I do not.’

‘Yes you do. Your email showed the part of you that not too many see Ben Hood. Perhaps it was the alcohol. Perhaps something else.’

‘My crush on you was an impossible dream and having you here with me now would have to be the weirdest experience of my life. I’m star struck I guess. I’m waiting to wake up.’ They continued walking in the warm tropical water. ‘And I’m also old enough to be your Father. You have noted that I guess?’

‘I never worry much about age when I’m enjoying someone’s company. Haven’t you seen 10, with Dudley and Bo?’

‘That’s just a movie.’

‘It happens in real life all the time.’

‘Well it worries me a bit. I’m old fashioned.’

‘Then get a bit modern and forget all about age and enjoy the moments as they come along.’

‘There is an element of recklessness about you that frightens me lady.’

‘You...frightened? Anyway, call me darling.’

‘No I will not.’

Brenda laughed. ‘OK and now I want to know all about you. Start talking.’

‘I think we should go back.’

Brenda stopped and looked up at him again. ‘Are you worried about me or perhaps it’s Liz?’

‘What do you mean, Liz?’

‘She scares you a bit eh?’

‘No.’

‘Does too, but she’s hot for you.’

‘Will you stop that? I’m here to work Brenda.’

‘All work and....’

‘Yeah Yeah. OK Miss Nosy. Here is a shortened version of my life’s story which will unfold as we turn and walk back the other way. Then I want to hear yours. Every tiny detail.’

‘Deal.’ She swung him around by the hand and they started back along the moonlight beach towards the Sheraton Mirage.

“****”

Chapter Twenty Five

Ben had a feeling that the new day dawning was not going to be an easy one. He was right. It started with breakfast in the company of film director Derek Disano. They sat at a window in the luxurious dining room overlooking glistening expanses of turquoise water, fringed with coconut palms and myriad tropical plants. That should have been relaxing, but Ben was troubled.

‘So are the stars and starlets in any danger if we set up the protection you suggested?’

‘There’s always a risk but a show of armed muscle on the diving platform may minimise that.’

Derek sipped freshly brewed black coffee. ‘If that location wasn’t the best I’ve ever seen, I’d move somewhere else in a flash. It’s an underwater paradise Ben. You must see it for yourself. The boys did a wonderful job on the cave where most of the action is being filmed. Some of it is completely artificial and in 30 feet of water right in the middle of the reef. It looks like it’s been there forever. The water clarity is amazing compared with the other more popular diving spots. We do have some sharks about. Mostly just curious but they are always there.’

‘If you are in agreement with the new security arrangements, I’ll have Susan get the right people involved and perhaps tomorrow I’ll do an inspection with you and if things are OK, you can start shooting. The weather is perfect for now, but it can turn fairly quickly up here.’

‘I know. I can’t afford lost time on bad weather. We’re over budget as it is.’

‘My biggest concern is Skull Island,’ said Ben. ‘Their reaction to us being out there is gross over-reaction.’

‘I totally agree.’

‘I intend looking further into that situation today.’

‘I’d appreciate that. The police don’t appear interested. They say they are going to interview the owner today but I’m not confident. That Inspector Roy Tanner is a strange piece of work. He told me last night that a crime wave had hit Port Douglas, with a double murder thrown in for good measure.’

Ben almost choked on a piece of muffin but managed to get it down with a sip of orange juice. ‘Double murder?’

‘Yes. Two bike riders murdered in the car park right opposite the Police Station last night and a third in hospital in a coma and not expected to survive.’

‘Murdered!’

‘That’s what he said. He claimed they were three very nice guys, well known in the community and couldn’t figure why someone would want to murder them.’

‘Good Lord!’

‘Yes it’s very nasty, but I think he should be taking the attack on our diving platform a little more seriously.’

Ben finished off his fried eggs and bacon on thick buttered toast and sat back. ‘I think the attack on your diving platform is very serious Derek. I also think that there is a lot more behind it than just some eccentric island owner trying to protect his privacy.’

‘I don’t understand?’

‘Neither do I, but I intend to find out what’s going on. You have to trust me a bit on this one because the safety of your crew and your stars may depend on what I can discover. I’ll know more by tonight. Can we keep in touch regularly?’

‘Of course. I must admit, I am very impressed with the high level of security and discretion your company has provided.’

Elizabeth approached the table and pulled up a chair. She had a folded newspaper under one arm. ‘Derek. How are you?’

‘Fine Elizabeth. Are you taking good care of the money lady?’

Elizabeth laughed loudly. Several heads turned. ‘Oh yes, I’m taking good care of your money lady Derek. Unfortunately, I can’t keep up with the attention showered on our leading lady by our chief security officer.’

‘Pardon?’

Ben was now definitely uncomfortable. He knew it was going to be a bad day the second he woke up.

Elizabeth took the morning’s newspaper from under her arm and unfolded it. She placed it carefully in front of Derek, but in full view of Ben. The photo filled the front page. There was no mistaking Ben and Brenda together, her arm linked firmly through his. Brenda looked ravishing and elegant. She was so close to Ben that they almost melted into one item. She was smiling at him. He was looking tough, handsome, and totally in control.

The lead caption said it all. “BRENDA GRANT FALLS FOR AN AUSSIE COP ON MOVIE LOCATION. LOVE IS IN THE AIR AT PORT DOUGLAS.”

‘Local paper?’ said Ben, his voice reduced to a whisper.

‘National now. International by tonight.’ Elizabeth sat back. ‘Good idea that walk along the beach.’

Ben looked helplessly at Derek. Derek stared at the newspaper and then sat back. He took the large white napkin from his lap, folded it in half and half again and slowly lay in down beside his plate. Then he beamed at Ben. ‘I don’t think I’ve seen such wonderfully luscious and totally free publicity for a movie and its star for years. Well done Ben.’

Ben was flabbergasted. So was Elizabeth.

‘When is your next public appearance with her?’

Ben opened his mouth but no sound came out. Elizabeth was very vocal. ‘There is no next public appearance Derek. This isn’t a circus and there is no love in the air between Brenda and Ben.’

‘How do you know?’ asked Derek softly.

‘He’s twice her age for a start,’ said Elizabeth, ‘and she is just flirting with him. There is nothing in it. Brenda does that from time to time.’

Ben pushed his chair back and got to his feet. ‘I’ve got to go out for a while. Susan knows where I am and the mobile is on all the time. I’ll be back before noon.’

Derek put out his hand. Ben shook it. ‘Liz is just jealous. Don’t worry about the newspaper article.’

‘JEALOUS!’ Her outburst was loud and many heads turned. Ben walked quickly from the restaurant.

Detective Lisbet Fenton couldn’t wait to get to the 11th floor of the CIB in Liverpool Street, Sydney. She had the Daily Telegraph tucked under her arm and she almost ran through the foyer to the lifts. She repeatedly jabbed the 11th floor button, hoping it would make the lift reach her faster. She raced into the squad room. If Simon Bastock had not been there she would have screamed. He was there. She

composed herself, nodded at some of the other Detectives and walked with restraint to Simon's desk.

'Read the morning paper Simon?'

Detective Sergeant Bastock looked up. 'No. The papers haven't been delivered to the building yet.'

'Feel free to take a look at mine. I bought it at the railway station.' Lizbet unfolded the newspaper and dropped it face up onto Simon's desk. There was no mistaking Ben or Brenda. It was an extremely large, very clear, strobe lit shot. Simon opened his mouth. His eyes went wide. Lizbet felt he looked like a gold fish. Others gathered around and one of the Detectives said, 'My God. He did it. That lucky bastard actually did it.'

'Better get that cheque book ready eh Simon,' said Lizbet. 'Thousand bucks as I recall.'

Another face not far away in a law office on the 7th floor of a city building, also began to resemble a gold fish. Eyes wide and mouth open. Then the mouth closed into a tight line and the lovely brown eyes closed. Yana Gibson dropped the newspaper onto her polished timber desk and pushed her chair back. She rose and walked to the window. The view was straight into the side of another building. If you looked up, you could see a piece of sky. She didn't feel like looking up. She stared out at the brick wall opposite. 'Bastard,' she whispered.

Ben's mobile beeped as a text message was received. It was from Fay. "OBVIOUSLY ENJOYING YOURSELF. DIVORCE PAPERS WILL BE READY UPON YOUR RETURN."

“*****”

Chapter Twenty Six

The huge black Harley thundered along the Mossman-Daintree Road towards Joy Mackay's home. Ben kept his eye on the speed. He didn't want to attract police attention.

Joy ushered him into the lounge room and invited him to sit in a large white leather chair which faced the ocean. It was the chair Winston used. She poured two ice waters. Ben accepted one and she sat on a two seater at his left.

'Anything from the police yet?' she asked.

'They haven't spoken to me but they did tell our film Director that two very nice bike riders, pillars of the community if you will, were brutally murdered in the car park outside the police station last night. The third is in hospital not expected to live.'

'You have to be joking! They were going to beat me to a pulp!'

'Well the police don't know that. The one in hospital is in a coma so they have no idea what happened.'

'Are we going to tell them?'

No. Not yet anyway. It may just complicate things.'

'Those bikies were scum....blow-ins. I've never seen them around here before. What are the police talking about?'

Ben shrugged. 'I need to ask you a few questions Joy.'

'Fire away.'

'You said that you now had some hope that your husband was alive. It seemed to be connected with Batt Reef and Skull Island.'

Joy put her glass down on a table and folded her hands. 'My husband worked on a telecommunications project out there over 4 years ago. He retired once the project was finished.'

'What was his particular field?' asked Ben.

'Originally telecommunications generally but then he specialised in submarine communications cable. He was often away for months laying cables all over the place. The ocean bed is littered with them, did you know that?'

'No.'

Joy stood and walked to a small table in a corner. She flipped open a laptop and switched it on. A few seconds later she beckoned Ben to join her. He saw that she brought up a map of the world on the screen. Red lines ran in all directions across the oceans from almost every country. They bristled in thick masses around the USA, Japan and China. Only three red lines connected Australia to the rest of the world. They were at Sydney, Perth and Port Headland. 'There are more cables out there from Australia but not marked on this map. The submarine cable my husband worked on was highly classified. He shouldn't have told me anything about it, and what he did was vague.'

'I recall learning about a cable from Australia to Singapore and England from Broome in Western Australia,' said Ben.

'Not used any more. That was put down in the late 1800's so the mother of pearl industry in Broome could keep abreast of market trends for their product. They made buttons out of mother of pearl in those days. Then some smartie invented

plastic buttons and the mother of pearl industry went bust along with the communications cable.'

'So what went on out near Batt Reef? There is no indication of a cable leaving Australia in that area.'

'Oh there is one alright. Not at Batt Reef but just to the east of Skull Island. They actually had to take it around Skull Island and keep it well from the reef. Winston used to call Skull an "inconvenient island" because of the huge detour from Port Douglas it created.'

'So it terminates at Port Douglas?'

'Terminates and begins. Two way communication.'

'Where does the cable go?'

'Hawaii I think, and from there to LA and Lord knows where from there.'

'Why was it such a secret?'

'Not too sure about that Ben. I know they had to bury it much deeper in the sea bed than most cables. They didn't want this one damaged by shipping or vulnerable to attack.'

'Do you know what kind of information travelled in this cable?'

'No. The tiny bit I did learn was when Winston was drunk, and that wasn't every often.'

Ben walked back to the lounge chair and sat down. 'So why do you think your husband may still be alive?'

'The cable he worked on ran close by Skull Island. Foreigners now own Skull Island and are prepared to use force to keep people away from it. Otherwise, what's the big deal out there? It's an island in the middle of no-where. 360 degree view of the Coral Sea. It appears there are just men living there. I've never seen a woman on that boat of theirs. And why the airstrip and light planes?'

Ben nodded thoughtfully.

'And the threats from the men in the Lincoln for me to stop putting up photographs of my missing husband. Then the bikies about to beat me up and use a camera to show someone the results of their handiwork. I'm no detective, but I'd bet my last dollar that my husband somehow ended up on Skull Island. Her eyes glistened with tears.

'OK, two more things Joy. Did you write down the number plate of the Lincoln?'

'Sure did and gave it to the Police.'

'What did they say?'

'The Detective Inspector there; Roy Tanner, checked it out personally. Claims it belongs to a farmer from Rockhampton. That's over a thousand kilometres from here.'

'Can you get the number for me?'

'Sure.' Joy went to another room and returned a few seconds later with a small piece of paper. She handed it to Ben. 'I'll try and have this checked out myself and see if we can get a name. It might mean something.'

'I'm ever so grateful to you Ben. I was starting to feel as if no-one was prepared to help me.'

'I'll do what I can. The other thing is your husband's boat. Do you know where it is?'

'The Police have it. It's only a 15 foot runabout. I guess it's in their holding yard with the stolen cars and things.'

'Do you know where that is?'

‘It’s out along Wharf Street just south of town. Huge wire fence around it and video cameras. I wouldn’t go poking around there Mr. Hood.’

‘I’ll be careful.’

‘Can I ask why you want to look at Winston’s boat?’

‘They say it got holed on a coral reef. The way the hole is made should confirm that.’

‘Please be careful.’

‘I will. I need some heavy wire cutters. Did Winston keep anything like that?’

‘He’s got thousands of tools. You can take what you want as you leave.’

Joy was silent for a short while and then rose and walked to a large timber cabinet. She took some keys from her pocket and used one of them to unlock the cabinet doors. She then selected another key and unlocked a timber drawer. She removed a large cardboard box from the drawer and walked back to Ben, holding the box out for him to take. He put the box on his lap. It was quite heavy. A familiar smell came from inside. Oil; not just any oil. Gun oil.

‘It belonged to Winston. He was a collector of sorts. He shouldn’t have kept it but he couldn’t bear to give it up.’

The box was secured with thick string. Ben untied it and pulled off the lid. An oily cloth was wrapped around what was obviously a large hand gun. Ben took the cloth off. His pulse quickened as he took out the mint condition, model 500 Smith and Wesson Magnum revolver. ‘Good Lord!’ he said under his breath. ‘Where did he get this?’

‘Can’t say. He never told me.’

Ben also removed a box of 50 calibre hollow point cartridges. He removed one and turned it around in his fingers. It was a very big cartridge, so large in fact that the model 500 could only accommodate 5 of them. Ben lifted the huge weapon and opened the cylinder. It was empty.

‘You may need it,’ said Joy. ‘It’s not much good to me. Winston told me I wouldn’t be able to shoot it anyway. He said it would break my arm.’

‘He wasn’t kidding. This makes Dirty Harry’s .44 Magnum look like a water pistol.’

‘Just don’t tell anyone where you got it, OK?’

‘You had better hope the police don’t catch me with it,’ said Ben. ‘I’m not authorised to carry a gun in Queensland or anywhere just now, especially a monster like this. If you don’t mind, I’ll leave it here locked up tight. If I need it for any reason, I’ll come by and pick it up.’

‘That’s fine,’ said Joy.

Ben wrapped up the huge gun and placed it back in the box. He put the cartridge box alongside and replaced the lid. ‘I’m going to have to find a way to get onto Skull Island and take a look around.’

‘That’s not going to be easy. The police told me they have already searched it when Winston first went missing.’

‘I’d like to have a look for myself, and I won’t be asking permission from anyone.’

‘I would be very grateful to you Ben.’

‘Ring me if you need to, OK?’

‘Thank you.’

‘Now, show me the tool collection.’

Ben headed back towards Port Douglas, loving the smooth Harley ride and the wind in his face. A small pair of bolt cutters sat in a side pannier of the bike. He cruised slowly past a high wire fenced enclosure on the western side of Wharf Road. There was no-one around. He noted several damaged vehicles parked against the front fence together with a beaten up old tractor. A large shipping container stood against the rear fence, secured with a heavy padlock. Winston's timber boat lay on its side next to the container. It was the only boat in the yard.

Two security cameras were mounted on metal poles on each side of the high front fence. One faced the padlocked front gate on the northern end of the enclosure and the other was located on the front, southern corner and faced into the yard. The yard was obviously lit during the night. He would come back then.

Once in his room he called Susan to advise he was back. He then called Brenda's room. Elizabeth answered.

'It's Ben. I've just arrived back.'

'I'll alert the media, if you haven't already.'

'That's not fair. I didn't mean for any of that to happen.'

'We need to talk. Derek is planning to take a team out on the diving platform tomorrow with the security guards you had Susan hire. He wants us to go along to check it out.'

'What, all of us?'

'No just you and me. Susan will stay here with Brenda. If everything is OK, they will start the underwater shooting the day after.'

'OK. I've got some calls to make. I'll drop over in an hour.'

'No good. Derek and Sandra are about to do a scene with Brenda and the baddie in the resort set. Susan and I are keeping watch. Make it after 4.'

'Am I invited to the set?'

'You'll distract her.'

'She won't even notice me.'

'Want a bet.'

'You said she was just flirting.'

Elizabeth paused for a few seconds. 'I may have been wrong.'

'But I.....'

'Get some sun or something. Call us after 4.' She hung up.

Ben sat on the lounge and gazed through the open window at the large resort pool. His mind was in turmoil. He was used to being in the driver's seat; firmly in control. He was quickly getting out of his comfort zone.

He took the piece of paper Joy had given him from his shirt pocket and hit a speed dial number on the mobile phone.

'Yana Gibson.'

'Hi Lawyer.'

Silence.

'Yana.'

'What do you want?'

'Oh oh. It's in the Sydney paper too.'

'Front bloody page.'

'It's not what it looks and we're not having an affair.'

'Funny; didn't quite look that way to me.'

'We were just going for a walk. I'm her security.'

'Very close security from what I could tell.'

‘I promise. It’s not what the papers are making out. You know what the press does with stuff.’

‘I’m not jealous or angry or anything by the way.’

‘Of course not,’ said Ben, smiling.

‘I mean, why should I copper? We had one lousy night.’

‘Wasn’t lousy. It was great.’

‘You’re too old for me anyway.’

‘I’m hearing that a bit these days.’

‘I bet you are. Are you?’

‘What?’

‘Too old for her?’

‘Am I too old for you?’

Yana was quiet for a moment. ‘You’re moving this away from the main point.’

‘Listen. I’m too old for both of you....but I need some help.’

‘Why should I help you?’

‘Because you’re wild about me.’

‘But you’re too old for me.’

‘Will you let that go? I’m in a bit of trouble up here.’

‘I can see that. I’ll post up some Viagra if that will help.’

‘Yana!’

‘OK. I’m having my periods.’

‘Oh, sorry.’

‘Happens every month Ben. I’m not the only woman having them you know.’

‘Sorry.’

‘It’s OK. You want to tell me what trouble you’re in?’

‘I don’t know just yet. It’s not nice. I stopped three thugs attacking an old lady a couple of nights ago. Killed two of them and the third is in a coma.’

‘What....!’

‘It’s very complicated. I can’t explain over the phone.’

‘Ben. What the hell is going on up there? Are the police involved?’

‘They don’t know I’m involved yet.’

‘You silly bugger. Just can’t stay out of trouble, can you?’

‘I need a Queensland number plate checked.’

‘What....!’

‘You’re saying ‘what’ too much.

‘I could say a lot worse. How can I check a number plate?’

‘You’re a lawyer. You know you can do it. I don’t have any friends in the police who would do it.’

‘I’d be taking a huge risk.’

‘I need a name and address for this car Yana. It’s important. The police up here claim the car is owned by a farmer in Rockhampton, but I strongly feel otherwise.’

‘OK, give me the number, but I’m not promising anything.’

‘You are beautiful.’

‘And you are full of crap. Next time we train I’m going to whip your arse.’

‘In your dreams lawyer. Got a pen?’

Ben gave her the registration number.

‘I may get back to you or I may not.’

‘It’s urgent Yana.’

She hung up.

“****”

Chapter Twenty Seven

At 3 pm sharp, Ben's mobile phone rang. It was Yana.

'I'm going to get into huge trouble if anyone finds out about this.'

'I'll be totally discreet Yana.'

'You better be. The car is registered to a corporation, and they are in Port Douglas, not Rockhampton.'

'What!'

'Now you're doing it.'

'What?'

'Saying "what" you dope. Shut up and listen. The car is owned by a Chinese company named Lei Tou Zi Gong Si.'

'You have any idea what that means in English?'

'Yes, as a matter of fact. Lei in Chinese means lightning. Tou Zi means investment. Gong Si means Company. Lightning Investment Company. They are known by ASIC. The Director is a man named Chin Chian Qian. In Chinese his name means something to do with money. "The Treasurer". All Chinese names are quite revealing, unlike most modern English names.'

'You are a whiz baby. So the Inspector up here is telling lies about the ownership of the car.'

'Yep, would appear so.'

'I wonder why?'

'Oh, another thing. Lei Tou Zi Gong Si owns an island up that way.'

'Skull Island.'

'How did you know? It took me hours to discover that'

'Just a lucky guess.'

'Yeah right. Something is going on Ben and you're in the middle of it as usual. You need help?'

'I'm not sure Yana. That island is now host to quite a few Ninjutsu.'

'Ninja? What would they be doing on an island up there?'

'Not sure yet but I'm going to find out.'

'You stay away from more trouble Ben. You're already in over your head by the sound of things, including movie stars hanging off you.'

'I'll be careful. Can I call you tomorrow?'

'You better.'

'And thanks again for the research. It puts me miles ahead on a few things.'

Derek, Ben, Sandra and Elizabeth sat in deep comfortable lounge chairs facing a circular, timber coffee table. The Lobby lounge at the Sheraton Mirage was massive and beautifully furnished. There was deep plush carpet throughout and a black grand piano in one corner. A lofty skylight allowed filtered sunlight into the area. Glasses sparkled at the bar. Couples whispered at intimate tables and small groups sipped champagne and ate nuts and treats on a lower mezzanine floor.

A waitress in casual crisp white attire brought their drinks and some nibbles on a tray. Sandra Quinn gulped at her ice smothered Malibu and smiled a little self consciously. 'I was thirsty,' she said. 'It's very hot out there.'

‘You did a marvellous job today Sandra,’ said Derek, sipping on a gin and tonic. ‘Marvellous.’

‘Directing Brenda is a joy,’ replied Sandra. ‘She is such a professional and so natural.’

‘She looks radiant at the moment,’ said Derek. ‘Quite stunning. The Australian climate and this charming place are doing wonders for her. I’ve never seen her look so.....’

‘Yeah, the climate is doing wonders for her,’ interrupted Elizabeth with a glance at Ben. ‘All that tropical heat and moonlit walks on the beach.’

‘Well I don’t care what it is,’ said Derek. ‘I like it and so will millions of movie goers, all paying lots of money to see her in the Coral Sea Affair.’

‘I must admit, she is glowing just now,’ said Sandra.

‘Can we drop this glowing and radiant and doing wonders stuff for a moment,’ snapped Elizabeth. ‘The underwater shoot has additional problems that we have to discuss.’

‘Quite true,’ said Derek. ‘We’ll be doing an inspection first thing in the morning if that’s OK.’

‘I’ve hired two uniformed guards,’ said Susan. Both will have side arms and both are very big men. They will accompany you to the diving platform and I understand Ben and Elizabeth are diving with a camera man to inspect the set. We’ve convinced Stan Café and some of his team to accompany you to the platform as well.’

Ben sat back in his comfortable lounge chair. ‘This is a test to see if we get any reaction from the people on Skull Island. We will all have to be very careful but I don’t expect too many problems with our armed guards present. The police don’t appear willing to assist so we’ll take care of things ourselves this time.’

‘How exciting,’ said Derek.

‘Could be dangerous,’ said Elizabeth.

‘I know,’ said Derek with a chuckle. ‘That and the murders last night.’

‘What murders?’ said Elizabeth.

‘Two motor cyclists were bashed to death last night right outside the Port Douglas police station and another was in Mossman hospital in a coma. My convalescing cameraman told me the third man died a couple of hours ago. Ben and I discussed it this morning.’

Elizabeth looked at Ben and back to Derek. ‘No-one told me about this. Why wasn’t I told?’

Derek shrugged. ‘We’ve not had a chance to chat until now.’

‘Ben?’ Elizabeth fixed her deep blue eyes on him.

‘They weren’t bashed to death....’ It was too late to take back what he had blurted out. They were all looking at him.

‘The police said they were,’ said Derek. ‘Do you know something more about this?’

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes and sat forward in Ben’s direction. ‘You and I need to talk buster.’

‘I don’t understand any of this,’ said Derek.

‘What happened with the bikies won’t affect this film,’ said Ben. ‘It’s another issue.’

Elizabeth jumped to her feet. ‘OK, now it’s our turn for a walk on the beach Ben Hood. Get moving and start talking. Derek; I’ll come and chat with you and Sandra when I’ve found out what our security expert here is up to.’

Elizabeth strode to the carpeted stairway leading down to the boardwalks and the beach beyond. Her long black hair swirled around her shoulders with the rhythm of her walk. Ben put down his orange juice, smiled weakly at Derek and Sandra, and followed Elizabeth down the stairway.

He told her everything. This was no leisurely stroll along the beach. Ben was walking quickly to keep up with her long legged stride. There was no holding of hands and they both kept their shoes on. The afternoon sun threw long palm tree silhouettes on the sand. When he had finished Elizabeth stopped abruptly and turned to face him. 'You have no idea what danger you have placed all of us in, do you? What were you thinking Ben?'

'I didn't pick this damn location to shoot a movie. We've stumbled over something else here and I'm doing the best I can to contain it.'

'By killing people!'

'I was protecting an old lady.'

'You could have just made them run away or something.'

'These guys just don't run away Liz. They were obviously paid to do a very nasty job and I had to stop them quickly and protect myself at the same time.'

'Well obviously you can fight. I've had a few punch up's in my time but I've never killed anybody.'

'I'm trained.'

'In what?'

'Karate....sort of.'

'Oh I see. Sort of. And don't call me Liz. That's for my friends.'

'Sorry.'

'What sort of Karate?'

'Shinobi Ninjutsu.'

She looked into his eyes. She was almost as tall as Ben. 'That's not a very nice style of fighting.'

'No, it's not.'

'So why did you learn it?'

'I didn't want anyone to hurt me. Not anyone.'

'Hmm. You're a piece of work Ben Hood.'

Ben didn't know what to say to that, so he said nothing. Elizabeth turned and began walking back towards the Sheraton Mirage. Ben caught up with her. 'So there are three tasks for me to complete over the next couple of days as well as ensure that nothing bad happens to Brenda and the rest of the film crew.'

'You got a superman suit hidden somewhere?'

Ben ignored her and continued. 'I'm going into that police holding yard tonight to take a look at Winston Mackay's boat.'

'You're nuts,' said Elizabeth softly.

'Then we've got to see if there is any reaction from the mob on Skull Island when we visit the diving platform tomorrow morning.'

'You don't have to tell me the third task,' said Elizabeth. 'You're going to try and get onto Skull Island and see what's going on.'

'Spot on.'

'You are out of your bloody mind.'

Ben walked beside her in silence for a while. 'I want you to meet Joy Mackay.'

'Why?'

‘Because then you will know why I’m going to do what I have to do. I’ll take you now if you’re free. We’ll only be gone an hour or so.’

Elizabeth stopped walking. Ben stood beside her. ‘She called you a white knight.’

‘Who did?’

‘Brenda. She feels totally comfortable and very secure with you.’

‘I’m no white knight Elizabeth. Far from it.’

‘Hmm....’ She began to walk again.

The big Harley purred with a deep, throaty rumble as they headed north. Ben had phoned Joy and she was expecting them. Elizabeth wore the helmet and Ben took a chance without one. The lush jungle rushed past and a cool ocean breeze pulled at their T shirts. Elizabeth felt extremely comfortable with her arms around Ben’s chest. She had little experience on a motor bike but felt wonderfully safe on the Harley with Ben in control. It bothered her that she had trusted him so quickly. Her experience with men had convinced her to never trust a man again.

Ben was having some difficulty concentrating on the road ahead. Elizabeth’s large, firm breasts were pressed against his back. They moved against him with the motion of the bike. Her arms encircled his chest. It was driving him crazy but he did not dare ask her to sit back a bit. He would have killed to know if she was doing it deliberately and she would have killed him for suggesting it. What a dilemma. He chose to say nothing and enjoy the feeling.

Joy was waiting for them on the outside deck. Ben parked the bike underneath and led Elizabeth up the stairway. He made introductions and Joy ushered them into the lounge room and waved vaguely towards the chairs. Ben sat on Winston’s favourite. Elizabeth sat on the two seater lounge. Joy brought iced green tea, passed them out and sat next to Elizabeth. Ben pulled a face at the iced tea and put it on the coffee table beside him. He hated any kind of green tea.

‘Ben has told me about you young lady.’

‘Has he now?’ Elizabeth smiled at the use of “young lady”. She was 41.

Then again, compared to Joy she was probably “young”. ‘I hope none of it was bad.’

‘No. You take care of Brenda Grant so I hear. A personal bodyguard.’

‘Yes, and I’m also her friend.’

Joy took an envelope from a coffee table next to her. She slid out 5 photographs and handed them to Elizabeth. Ben stood and walked behind the lounge to also view the photos. The first one was of Joy. An extremely frightened Joy with her back to her car; cowering.

‘The thug who was going to beat me up took this just before Ben arrived. He said it was to be the “before” shot.’

‘And the other shots?’ asked Ben.

Elizabeth fanned them out. They were taken on a brilliantly white beach fringed with hundreds of palm trees. A deep lagoon was partly in view.

‘It’s Skull Island,’ said Joy. ‘It has to be. There is nothing like that around here. The sand is too white.’

‘So the biker was on Skull beach at some stage,’ said Ben.

‘One day before he attacked me. They are digital photographs and the date taken is stored in the property section of the file.’

‘Smart lady,’ said Ben.

‘I’d have been a dead lady if it wasn’t for you.’ She turned to Elizabeth. ‘Did he tell you what happened?’

‘Some of it.’

‘Well let me tell you what happened in a bit more detail Ms. Rose.’

‘Liz will be fine.’ She looked at Ben.

‘OK Liz.’ I’ll just have another sip of this green tea. Lovely isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ said Liz, smiling.

‘You’ve not touched yours Ben,’ said Joy.

‘I’m not fond of green tea,’ said Ben.

‘I’ll get you some iced water.’ Before Ben could object, Joy had scurried out of the room and returned a few moments later with a huge glass of water, jingling at the top with ice cubes. She handed it to Ben.

‘You shouldn’t have bothered Joy.’

‘I owe you more than iced water young man. A lot more.’

Joy spent the next 15 minutes explaining in detail what had happened on the night she was approached by the three bike riders. There were tears in her eyes as she tried to explain how helpless and frightened she felt. There was no-one around. No-one to help. She knew it was likely they would kill her and there was nothing whatsoever she could do to protect herself. Then a total stranger appeared out of nowhere. He moved with lightning speed and within less than 30 seconds the three bikers were on the ground....two not moving and the third clutching his throat and trying to scream through broken vocal chords.

Elizabeth was also moved. She could feel the emotion in Joy’s voice as she outlined the details of her rescue. She could feel tears welling up but was forced to smile when Joy explained how Ben had kicked her attacker’s bikes over when he had finished dealing with them. Final adrenalin burst to conclude the situation. She knew the feeling.

Joy went on to explain her concerns for her missing husband. She left nothing out. It seemed to reassure her as she vocalised her opinions. When she finished she took a long sip of her iced tea.

Elizabeth handed the photos to Ben and he returned to Winston’s chair. Her eyes never left him. He slipped the photos back in the envelope and put them in his pocket.

‘There’s more now,’ said Ben.

Joy was instantly alert. ‘What more?’

‘You have to keep this to yourself. It’s getting rather messy.’

‘I’ll do whatever you want Ben.’

‘OK. Your Police Inspector is telling you lies.’

Joy looked astonished. ‘What sort of lies?’

‘The Lincoln is registered to a Chinese company based here at Port Douglas.’

Joy flew to her feet and planted her hands on her hips. ‘I knew it. I knew he was full of shit.’

‘The Chinese company own more than the Lincoln Joy.’

She walked towards him and held out her wrinkled hands. He took them in his own without hesitation. She studied his face carefully. ‘Skull Island?’

‘Yep.’

Joy began to weep. Ben stood and led her back to the two seater. Her knees buckled and she slumped onto the lounge. Elizabeth hugged her and Joy put her head against Elizabeth’s shoulder. Ben stood back.

It wasn't an awkward silence, but no-one spoke for some time. Joy pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and blew her nose. Elizabeth took her arms from Joy's shoulders and they both sat back on the lounge.

'So, it would appear I have two guardian angels taking care of me now,' said Joy.

Elizabeth looked embarrassed. She also felt very emotional and that frightened her.

'I need to get onto Skull Island and have a good close look,' said Ben. 'The movie will go ahead as planned but my inspection of that island seems to have taken priority. What do you think Elizabeth?'

'I agree,' she said without hesitation. 'And it's Liz.'

Ben watched her for a moment. Her blue eyes never left his. 'I need to get some equipment,' said Ben, 'but I'm planning on visiting that island very soon.'

'What sort of equipment?' asked Joy.

'SCUBA diving gear and a waterproof light. I'll have to approach the island underwater at night.'

'I'm going with you,' said Elizabeth.

'Like hell you are. You stay with Brenda.'

'You going to take the cannon?' asked Joy.

Elizabeth looked confused.

'Yes. I'll need it totally waterproofed and the cartridges as well.'

'I'll take care of that. It will be ready soon.'

'I'm not even going to imagine what you two are talking about,' said Elizabeth.

Ben stood up and headed for the sliding glass doors. 'Alright, I've got a boat to inspect tonight.'

'Winston's,' said Joy. 'If you get caught in that holding yard, you'll be in a lot of trouble.'

'I'm being careful Joy. That boat may be a big piece of the puzzle. The police say it was holed on a coral reef and your husband was subsequently lost at sea. A timber boat crashes into a coral reef and what would you expect to be left behind in the hole?'

'Bits of coral?' said Elizabeth.

'Coral is very brittle and breaks easily,' said Joy.

'And by the end of tonight, I'll know what caused the hole in your husband's boat; one way or another.'

Joy accompanied them down the timber stairs to the car port below. Elizabeth slipped on the helmet and climbed onto the huge bike, sliding her arms around Ben's chest. He kicked the starter lever and the motor roared into life. Joy laid a hand on Ben's shoulder. She had to shout over the noise of the motor. 'Let me know about the boat?'

Ben kissed her on the cheek. 'Stay by the phone.'

He moved the bike slowly down to the coast road and gunned it south towards Port Douglas. Twilight had settled across the ocean and jungle. Ben turned the headlight on. Elizabeth clung tightly to him. He tried again to ignore the thrust of her breasts against his back. The Coral Sea was now black. The air became cooler.

Ben turned the bike into the Sheraton Mirage car park and killed the motor. He kicked the stand down. Elizabeth pulled the helmet off and flicked out her long black hair with one hand. They walked together up stone steps illuminated by

flickering lanterns, through a jungle garden to the main entrance. An immaculately dressed doorman pulled a large glass door open and they entered the marbled foyer.

They walked towards their resort rooms. Ben took the helmet from her as they stopped outside the executive suite. 'Thank you for taking me to meet Joy.'

'Widens the view somewhat don't you think?'

'A whole lot.' Elizabeth fidgeted for her key. 'You want to have dinner with us tonight. It's a private room again and Sue will be there.'

'I've got a bit of work to do tonight.'

'Are you going to jump the fence?'

'Are you crazy? I stopped doing that when I turned 30. Now I cut my way through.'

'With what?'

'Secret contraption. Can't tell you.'

She slapped his arm playfully. 'You're so full of it.'

'I'll be back for dessert. Save a chair for me.'

'How much should I tell the others?'

'Nothing. Tell them I'm out for a jog. I'll bring Sue up to speed with all this later tonight when we discuss tomorrow's diving platform inspection.'

Elizabeth swiped her electronic door card. The lights flashed green and the door clicked open. 'You be damn careful.'

'My middle name is "careful",' said Ben.

'And now I know your other names as well, said Elizabeth softly.

'Pardon?'

'White Knight..... Like Brenda said and Joy Mackay knows.'

“*****”

Chapter Twenty Eight

Ben stopped the bike about 100 metres from the holding yard and turned onto a dirt track which ran towards a wide ocean inlet. He switched the motor off and kicked down the stand. Tucking the cutters into his belt he moved silently into the bush. The moon was partly covered by white fluffy clouds, but it lit his way sufficiently without using the torch.

An occasional car moved along the roadway. Ben kept close to the inlet, using the low scrub as cover. He reached a rear corner of the holding yard within minutes. As he moved, he had been searching for something at least 3 metres long that he could use to reach the southern mounted security camera. He was counting on the fact that no-one at the Police station would be concentrating on monitors fixed on a boring holding yard.

A clump of bamboo grew near the water close by. Some of the stems had been broken in a storm. Ben found what he was looking for. He dragged a 4 metre long bamboo stem across to the side of the security fence and dropped it. He was out of range of both cameras but anyone using Wharf Road would see him. The flood lighting inside the yard was not nearly as bright as he was expecting.

It was going to be a matter of swiftness and luck. He didn't have a problem with the swiftness. The luck was a three part unknown quantity. Part one involved no-one at the Police station noticing that one of the cameras was, or had been moved slightly. Part two was that no cars would come along while he was attempting to move the camera. Part three was that the camera housing was not welded to the metal pole, but rather attached with adjustable straps or similar.

No cars. No-one out walking. He grasped the bamboo pole firmly. Still no cars. He was about to make a run for the front left hand corner of the yard and target that camera, when car lights came around a bend in the road and approached. He froze. The car drove past, its headlights probing the darkness ahead.

'He who hesitates, is lost,' said Ben to himself. He sprinted to the southern corner and reached the first camera pole in seconds. He lifted the bamboo and swung it gently against the weatherproof camera housing. It didn't move. He hit it harder. Still nothing. He looked back at the roadway. No cars. He swung the bamboo harder and this time the camera housing moved slightly to the right. He hit it again and it moved a little more.

Ben dropped the bamboo down and dragged it into the scrub, well away from the enclosure. He moved back to the rear southern corner of the yard. More cars passed; their headlights bright.

He was about to move along the back of the fenced enclosure when another vehicle rounded the bend from the Port Douglas direction. This car slowed down as it approached the holding yard. It suddenly swung into the entrance and stopped at the locked front gates. There was no mistaking the police markings on the car although the police sign on the roof was not illuminated. Ben flattened himself against the ground. The headlights remained on and the driver's door opened.

Ben slowed his breathing. He was sure that someone at the Police station had noticed the security camera move. A lone uniformed policeman approached the gates and shone an extremely bright torch around inside the yard. Interestingly, he didn't

shine his torch at the security camera aimed into the yard. He didn't even look at it. The policeman walked back to his car and climbed inside. The door slammed. The car backed onto Wharf Street and moved slowly forward, away from the holding yard and eventually out of sight.

Ben's heart was pounding. He was tempted to call it quits for the night. The fact that the policeman didn't seem at all interested in the security cameras made him conclude that it was just a routine patrol; nothing more.

He studied the camera he had bumped. Now it pointed a little more to the right than before, still taking in most of the yard, but not all of it and hopefully not the section next to the steel shipping container where Winston Mackay's boat lay.

He moved silently behind the cover of the shipping container. Thankfully it was not pushed up hard against the wire mesh fence. He used the small bolt cutters to snip the wire in the fence at ground level, just large enough to crawl through. He left the cutters on the ground just outside the fence and reached the boat seconds later. The front of the timber boat faced away from the fence, which wasn't ideal. Ben could see broken timber damage to the right hand side of the vessel up towards the front. He crawled along the sandy soil, pressed up hard against the hull.

An occasional car roared past on Wharf Street, but none slowed down in the vicinity of the holding yard. He set his tiny LED torch on its lowest output and inspected the hull as he moved towards the front of the vessel. The paint was reasonably intact with no signs of scraping on coral or rocks.

As he reached the site of the alleged impact hole he was more careful to shield the light with his left hand. The surveillance camera may have been repositioned slightly but its lens still appeared menacingly focused in his direction. He also had no idea how wide an angle the camera lens was. Whatever the case, there was no turning back now. He reached the hole. He noticed that parts of the timber hull planking were missing altogether. He felt this odd and not consistent with the boat simply ramming into a coral reef. The most telling signs of inconsistency with the coral reef theory however, were what appeared to be sharp cuts to the timber on both sides of the hole, more consistent with the use of an axe. There were no signs of scraping and no residual coral embedded in either the paint or the broken timber. This was no accident. This hole had been deliberately cut into the boat's hull.

He took out his phone which had been turned to silent, and switched to camera mode. He took several close up photos of the hole in infra red mode and then once again risking detection, he turned the camera phone side on to the surveillance camera and took 3 flash photos in quick succession. He then scuttled back to the fence and out through the hole.

Ben felt extremely vulnerable as he sat on the ground outside the fence, but he had one smaller task to complete. He pulled soft wire from his trouser pocket and lifting up the mesh flap he had cut in the fence, wired it back into position. He then grabbed the bolt cutters and back tracked to the inlet. Keeping the scrub for cover, he used the light of the moon to locate the Harley parked just over 100 metres away.

He put the bolt cutters in the pannier and clipped it shut. He sat on the bike in silence for a long time. No cars passed. He clicked up the stand with his foot and kicked the starter lever. The bike roared into life and within seconds he was riding southbound on Port Douglas Road. He kept an eye out for the police vehicle but didn't see it. A wave of relief swept over him as he rolled into the entrance to the Sheraton Mirage and along the jungle path to the parking area.

He stopped the bike close to the resort entrance in its usual place and removed the small bolt cutters from the rear pannier, tucking them under his shirt. He moved

up the stairs surrounded by manicured jungle and through the reception area towards his room.

It had seemed to go extremely well; too well. In Ben's experience, he had probably now run out of luck and things could only get worse from this point. Pessimism was one of Ben's character flaws, although it did tend to make him well prepared to handle any sudden nasty situation which presented itself.

Seated next to Elizabeth, and after having made apologies for being late for dinner, Ben leaned close to her and whispered, 'the hole was deliberate. It's not a coral hit. I've got photographs.'

She stared at him. Susan was also watching them intently, as was Brenda. Brenda spoke first. 'You two seem to be getting on extremely well at the moment.' She smiled and winked at Elizabeth.

'It was just a security thing,' said Elizabeth, obviously embarrassed. 'Ben and Susan will be discussing it after dinner. It's just about the diving platform inspection tomorrow morning.'

'Oh...,' said Brenda, still smiling and playing with her fork. 'I gather it's just the two of you on that little excursion as well.'

'Brenda,' said Elizabeth, a slight edge to her voice.

'I'm only jealous,' purred Brenda.

'You have nothing to be jealous about,' snapped Elizabeth. 'Derek and some of the crew will be with us tomorrow as well as uniformed security guards. This is not a pleasure picnic darling.'

'Of course not,' said Brenda, but her eyes were twinkling mischievously. 'And I suppose the bike ride today was a security thing too?'

'Yes it was as a matter of fact.'

Ben busied himself with a rare steak and side salad. He sipped a soft red wine and tried not to look at Brenda.

'Then you must tell me all about it some time,' said Brenda. Elizabeth tried to kick her under the table, but missed and connected with Derek's shin. He sprang to his feet as if bitten and let out a cry of surprise.

'What's the matter?' asked Brenda, startled.

'Someone kicked me,' said Derek, regaining his seat.

'I'm sorry Derek,' said Elizabeth. 'My foot slipped.'

Brenda burst into infectious laughter.

'That's OK,' said Derek. 'I just got such a fright.'

Ben kept his eyes on the half eaten steak in front of him. Susan was now smiling as she watched Brenda in such obvious merriment.

Brenda rose and excused herself. 'I'm for a long hot spa bath,' she said. Susan stood and pushed her chair back. 'I'll walk you to the room. Ben, can you give me a call when you're ready for our briefing?'

'Almost finished,' said Ben.

'Don't hurry Liz,' said Brenda as she walked towards the double doors. 'I'm sure you and Ben have lots more to discuss.'

Elizabeth's blue eyes flashed. 'That girl can be a shit of a thing sometimes,' she mumbled to Ben.

'She's only teasing,' said Ben, pushing his plate back and laying his knife and fork neatly together in the centre. 'You do it a bit yourself from time to time.' Elizabeth was silent.

'What time do we meet tomorrow Ben?' asked Derek, rubbing his shin.

‘The security guards arrive here at 9 am. We’ll all meet in the foyer at 9.15 if that’s OK. Susan’s arranged a mini bus to the marina.’

‘Are we using the same boat and skipper?’ asked Derek. ‘He wasn’t too keen on taking another trip out with us after the last incident.’

‘We’ve calmed him down,’ said Ben. ‘The security guards have given him some confidence, as well as an additional hourly rate.’

‘Splendid,’ He gave a slight nod in Elizabeth’s direction. ‘See you in the morning and perhaps you might consider wearing softer shoes at our next meal together.’

Ben smiled and Elizabeth looked helpless. Derek left. Ben took out his mobile phone and switched to the photo gallery. Elizabeth moved in close to inspect the photos taken of the hole in Winston’s boat.

‘Looks like someone has gone at it with an axe,’ she exclaimed as he flicked through the gallery.

‘Spot on. What I can’t understand is how this type of evidence got past the Coroner. I would assume a suspected death by misfortune at sea would go before the Coroner, even up here.’

‘Perhaps the Coroner wasn’t shown any photos as close up as these. A hole in a boat is a hole in a boat if you stand back far enough to take the shots.’

‘I think this Police Inspector has some explaining to do. I may go and confront him and see what happens.’

‘That could be dangerous.’

‘I think he would be more afraid of me than me of him, especially if he’s up to his neck in something with the guys out on that island. One phone call to the Police Commissioner or the Feds and they would probably start crawling all over the place.’

‘Wouldn’t that achieve a result for Joy if her husband is being held out there?’

‘Or get him dead very quickly. Big police operations, especially up this way, have a nasty habit of stuffing up from what I’ve heard. My visit to that island requires stealth and the element of total surprise. That won’t happen with a full on police invasion.’

‘You’ve got guts Ben. I hope you have the brains to match.’

‘I’ll let you know what I plan to do, and when. I’ve still got to figure a way to actually get close to Skull Island at night and then approach it from the edge of the lagoon, underwater.’

‘And how do you get off the island later?’

‘Haven’t figured that one out either, but I will. Hopefully the same way I got on although I’m keeping everything crossed that I’ll have a passenger on the trip out. That may complicate things a bit.’

‘Some of you Australians are bloody mad,’ said Elizabeth.

Ben fixed her with his deep blue eyes. ‘Among other things, this is for Joy.’

She held his gaze. ‘I wish I could do more to help.’

‘You’ve been great Liz. It meant a lot for Joy to have you at her place today.’

Elizabeth nodded. ‘I couldn’t bear to imagine what that poor woman has gone through these past 4 months.’

‘OK. I’ll see you in the morning. I’m going to ring Joy and then bring Sue up to speed on all this.’

They left the dining room together.

‘An axe! What do you mean?’

‘Winston’s boat didn’t hit a coral reef Joy. Someone chopped a hole in it with an axe or something.’

‘But they found it on Woody Island. It had to get over the coral reef circling the island to get to the main beach where it washed up. It had to be coral damaged.’

‘Not if it was towed in through a gap in the reef and then deliberately damaged after being dumped on the beach. Is Woody Island all coral?’

‘No, most of it is sand and mangrove.’

‘There you go. I’ve taken close up photos to show you.’

Joy was silent for a while. ‘So he didn’t perish at sea.’

‘Not by crashing into a coral reef anyway,’ said Ben.

‘But why is Inspector Tanner lying about everything?’

‘Million dollar question Joy. I have a feeling we’re going to find out soon. In the meantime I’ll make preparations to visit Skull Island. I may need some help.’

‘I’ll do anything you need me to do Ben. You know that.’

‘Yes, I know that. I’ll be in touch soon.’

Susan sat on the huge lounge with her feet up on a coffee table. ‘Rodney’s 2 operatives came in this afternoon,’ she said. ‘I’ve filled them in as much as I can.’ Ben dropped onto the lounge beside her. ‘They will be back up only if needed. Otherwise they will keep out of the way. I’ll introduce you later. Now, bring me up to date and don’t keep anything from me Ben Hood.’

Ben showed Susan the photos he had taken of Winston’s boat and briefed her completely when he had finished; she sat back and folded her arms. ‘This is getting too big for us. This isn’t just guarding a movie princess and her team now.’

‘Well we can’t count on the Port Douglas police to help us. Their chief is up to no good and we don’t know how many other police are involved. I can’t have this place turned into a three ring circus while there is a possibility that Winston Mackay is alive out on Skull Island.’

‘You’re putting too many people at risk Ben.’

‘They want to go ahead with the movie and there is no reason they can’t. We’ll have good protection out there on the diving platform and as a side issue, I’ll check out Skull Island. I’m the only one taking the risk here.’

‘I’m not so sure. You can’t swim out to the damn island. You have to involve others.’

‘I’m working on that. I’ll be the only one going onto the island.’

‘I’m not convinced.’

‘OK, let’s see how tomorrow goes with the visit to the diving platform, and we’ll take it from there. OK?’

Susan nodded reluctantly.

Ben went to his room through the interconnecting doors. He didn’t lock his. He wasn’t sure if Susan locked hers, not that it mattered.

“*****”

Chapter Twenty Nine

The day didn't start quite the way Ben expected. His room phone rang at 7.30 am. He was awake anyway and had been since before 5 am.

'I'm sorry to disturb you so early Mr. Hood. This is the shift manager. I have Inspector Roy Tanner from the Port Douglas police here to speak with you. He won't say what it's about. What do you want me to tell him?'

'I'll be in the foyer in 5 minutes,' said Ben. 'Do you have a small meeting room we can use?'

'Yes Mr. Hood. I'll take care of it.'

Ben hung up. He contemplated asking Susan to accompany him, and then dismissed the idea. He quickly dressed and left the room quietly. He wasn't nervous. More curious.

Ben crossed the expansive foyer and approached the reception desk. Two men in suits stood patiently to one side. The older man was obviously the Inspector. Ben nodded to the shift manager and moved towards the police detectives.

'I'm Ben Hood.' He held out his hand towards the older man.

'Inspector Roy Tanner.' He shook Ben's hand firmly. 'This is Sergeant Adam Kennedy. We're from the Port Douglas police station.' Ben shook the Sergeant's hand.

'I've arranged a meeting room,' said Ben. He nodded again to the shift manager, who ushered them along a hallway to a lavishly furnished presentation room. The meeting table accommodated 20. Ben sat on one side, at the end closest the door. It was not his practice to sit at the head of a table. Inspector Tanner and his companion sat opposite him.

'So what's up?' said Ben in a light tone.

'Want to see identification?' asked Inspector Tanner.

'No, I've heard of you,' said Ben.

Roy Tanner looked quickly at his companion and continued. 'This is not an official meeting in the true sense of the word Mr. Hood, or should I say Detective Sergeant Hood.'

'So what is it?' asked Ben. They had been doing homework on him.

'It's just a fact finding meeting at this stage. We have a few questions.'

'Fire away.'

'We understand that you are currently working here as a security guard for Splendour Pictures,' said Inspector Tanner.

'That's true. I'm on a leave of absence from the NSW Police force.'

'Yes, we know about that,' said Tanner.

'And why your sudden interest in me?' asked Ben, holding the Inspectors gaze.

'We understand you are riding a Harley Davidson motor bike around Port Douglas?'

'Can't imagine that's a crime,' said Ben. 'You want to see my bike rider's license?'

‘No, we know you have one. It’s just the ownership of the bike we’re interested in for the moment. I understand it belongs to Winston Mackay of Rocky Point just north of here.’

‘That’s right,’ said Ben. ‘Joy Mackay, his wife, loaned me the bike while I’m in Port Douglas.’

Roy Tanner looked again at his partner and back to Ben, ‘You a friend of Mrs. Mackay?’

‘Yes I am.’

‘How did you get to know her?’

‘I can’t see that is any of your business Inspector Tanner,’ said Ben calmly. His eyes didn’t flinch from the Inspector’s.

‘I think it might be of interest to us,’ said Tanner. ‘It may also be connected with what is now a triple murder investigation we’re undertaking.’

‘Triple murder,’ said Ben. ‘Don’t see how that could be connected with a dear old lady like Joy Mackay.’

‘It may be connected with her missing husband,’

‘How so?’

Tanner looked uncomfortable. ‘I’m not at liberty to say.’

‘So where do I fit in?’ asked Ben.

Tanner looked at his partner again. Sergeant Kennedy took up the questioning. ‘Were you out on the bike last night Mr. Hood?’

‘Yep, for a while.’

‘Where did you go?’

‘Just around. It’s a beautiful bike to ride.’

‘You ride anywhere near the police holding yard?’

‘And where would that be?’

Adam Kennedy clasped his hands on the desk in front of him. ‘Don’t you know?’

‘Wouldn’t have a clue. I’m new here.’

‘Wharf Street. Runs parallel to the inlet and down into Port Douglas.’

‘Oh yeah, I’ve ridden along that street quite a few times.’

‘Last night?’

‘Yep, on my way back to the Sheraton. It’s more direct as you would know.’

‘Someone broke into our holding yard last night Mr. Hood,’ said Inspector Tanner. ‘Moved one of our surveillance cameras and cut a hole in the fence.’

‘What did they steal?’ asked Ben.

‘Nothing.’

‘Who breaks in not to steal?’ said Ben looking from one man to the other, totally unfazed.

‘Somewhat of a mystery,’ said Inspector Tanner.

‘This connected to your triple murder?’ asked Ben innocently.

Neither answered.

‘Look,’ said Ben getting to his feet. ‘I don’t think this fact finding meeting is going anywhere and I’ve got some diving to do on the reef this morning. If you will excuse me, perhaps we can chat another time.’

‘We’re not finished yet Mr. Hood,’ said Tanner firmly.

‘Well I am,’ said Ben, equally as firmly. ‘You can let yourselves out.’

‘I have more questions for you Mr. HOOD,’ snapped Tanner.

‘Well I’ve got one for you first Mr. Tanner. Why did you lie to Mrs. Mackay about the ownership of the Lincoln car after the occupants threatened to burn her house down?’

Tanner’s face went red. ‘I....I didn’t lie to her.’

‘You and I both know very well who owns that Lincoln Inspector Tanner and they don’t live on a farm anywhere near Rockhampton.’ Ben strode to the door. ‘Just a friendly warning Inspector. I’d be extremely careful about what you are either doing, or about to do. There’s more than your police career at stake here.’

Tanner jumped to his feet, his face red and puffed up with anger. ‘You can’t threaten me like that!’

‘Yes I can,’ said Ben, and left the room. The two detectives made no attempt to follow him.

Back in his room, Ben’s first task was to ring Joy Mackay. She answered immediately. He told her of the visit by Inspector Tanner and his police companion and of the conversation.

‘It’s all about beating the bush with sticks,’ he said. ‘It brings the snakes out into the open.’

‘Do you know what he’ll do?’ asked Joy.

‘Panic I think. He won’t know that I’ve told you about the Lincoln but he’ll be wondering. If he contacts you, act dumb.’

‘And what if he asks how we got to know each other?’

‘Tell him it’s none of his business. He’s on the back foot now, not us.’

‘You still going out on the reef today?’

‘Yep. Leaving soon. I’m going to need a small boat to get out to Skull Island the night after next. I’ll also need to get some equipment together. Got any ideas?’

‘There’s an old salt hangs around the marina. His name is Samuel but everyone calls him Sam. Winston and I know him well. He’s a drunk and a bit nutty. He’s got a boat stashed somewhere I think but I don’t know if it would be up to a trip that far out, especially if the sea got nasty.’

‘Would he loan it to me if you asked?’

‘In a flash. He used to maintain the motor on Winston’s.

‘The boat I need would have to be small enough to not be spotted if I anchored it close to the reef around Skull. I’d also have to know how to secure it so it won’t get bashed against the coral.’

‘Sam knows all that stuff. I’ll contact him today and arrange for you to meet him.’

Thanks Joy.’

‘No, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I’m still dreadfully frightened for your safety.’

‘I’ll be OK and oh, I’ll need that gun and ammo waterproofed and ready to go night after next.’

‘It’s already done.’

‘I’ll ring you when we get back from the reef this morning.’

“*****”

Chapter Thirty

The Coral Sea glistened as the 40 foot cruiser cut through the glass like surface. Ben stood with Elizabeth on the upper deck next to the captain. Derek and the rest of the movie crew sat below enjoying coffee. The two uniformed security guards sat on chairs at the rear of the open lower deck, hats off, enjoying the radical change from static bank work. The guards each carried Glock pistols, prominently displayed in thick black leather holsters. Large batons hung from their belts.

Elizabeth wore a stunning black bikini. Once again, Ben had to exercise extreme control as to where his eyes focused. Elizabeth knew this and enjoyed his discomfort immensely. She had a bright red sarong wrapped around her hips. Her long black hair streamed behind her with the rush of the wind.

They passed close to Woody Island. The Captain pointed it out as he had been requested to do. Ben noted the coral reef surrounding it entirely. Other islands appeared in the vicinity. The Captain called them 'low islands' for obvious reasons. They were just coral mounds once, now covered with sand, dirt, bird droppings and tree seeds which eventually grew into fairly uninteresting scrub. The mangrove trees were the most impressive. One of the more established low islands was covered with coconut trees and low jungle. A white, red topped lighthouse stood in the centre of the island.

The Captain explained that the low isles were close to the main shipping channel in that area, hence the lighthouse, originally constructed in 1878.

Their trip to the outer edge of Batt Reef had been extended in a northerly arc in order for Ben to see the low isles. Otherwise from Port Douglas, these islands would have passed unnoticed on a direct course to Batt Reef. Once past the low isles, the Captain turned the cruiser south east and applied full power. 30 minutes later he manoeuvred his vessel around the southern tip of Batt Reef and cut the motors to a crawl.

Derek and Sandra had exited the cabin and were standing at the railing. Stan Café, chief movie technician stood behind them.

'Where's the pontoon?' asked Ben.

The Captain didn't answer. He moved the cruiser forward at increased speed. A few moments later he pulled back on the throttle and scanned 360 degrees with his binoculars. 'Gone, I'm afraid.'

Derek looked up at the Captain and shouted, 'Where is it?'

'I was just telling your friend here. It's gone.'

Derek threw his hands in the air. 'We spent over twenty grand getting that thing out here and chained to the ocean bed. How could it be gone?'

'What was on it?' asked Ben.

'Thankfully, not too much. Dressing rooms, kitchen, a few tables, and showers.' Derek looked over at Sandra Quinn.

The Japanese Director shrugged. 'So they will have to rough it a bit on this luxury cruiser.'

Derek looked defeated.

'It will be fine,' said Sandra, encouragingly. 'Cramped, but fine.'

Ben pointed to an island barely kilometres away. White sand glistened on coconut fringed shores. Soft waves frothed over the outer coral reef. ‘Skull?’

‘Yep,’ said the Captain. ‘The locals call it the island of death.’

Ben looked at Elizabeth. She placed her hand gently on his arm. ‘I’ve got a bad feeling about this,’ she said.

‘Can we find the dive site?’ asked Ben.

‘I’m almost over it,’ said the Captain.

‘God knows what they’ve done to the underwater movie set,’ moaned Derek. ‘How could this have happened? ‘We have all the necessary approval to work here.’

The Captain manoeuvred the cruiser a short distance away from the coral reef into a sandy channel. Locals never put anchors down into the coral. Visitors often did, causing dreadful damage to the reef. The Captain nodded to his first mate and an anchor went over the bow. He killed the motors. A second anchor went over at the stern. The cruiser pulled up tight, strained against the heavy anchor ropes, then settled back reluctantly and swung to face the soft sea current.

Ben went backwards down the steel steps to the main deck and approached the security guards. ‘Can you guys go up there while we’re here? Hats on if that’s OK?’

‘Sure,’ replied the taller of the two.

‘You’ve been briefed about this trip?’

‘Yes sir,’

‘If anything including driftwood gets within 50 metres of this vessel, you shoot at it. Got that?’

‘Um, that wasn’t quite in the briefing we got from Ms. Beck.’

‘I don’t care what Susan Beck told you. Nothing gets even close to this boat. Do you understand me?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘If people approach, you warn them off. If they won’t go, you shoot them.’

‘Good Lord Mr. Hood. We can’t do that.’ The two security guards looked astonished.

Ben moved closer to the uniformed men. ‘If you don’t shoot anyone approaching who has been warned to keep away, they may cut your throats before you get a chance to un-holster your guns. Do you understand what I am saying?’

The two security guards looked at each other. The taller one spoke. ‘We were told that there was little likelihood of an attack on your movie crew like the one a few days ago.’

‘You both ex cops?’ asked Ben.

‘Yes,’ they both said together.

‘Then I should have briefed you. You need to expect the worst and hope for the best.’ Ben looked across to Skull Island. ‘Anything serious will come from the direction of that island. You both obviously know that a cameraman got shot with a spear gun during the last attack?’

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t think your uniforms will scare them off a second time. These people are well trained and quite ruthless.’

‘But what’s the point?’ The question from the taller security guard was simple and logical. ‘These people are just making a movie here. What’s the problem?’

Ben looked across at Skull Island. ‘Just unclip those Glocks.’

The security guards unclipped the straps on their Glock holsters and climbed up the ladder to the control bridge. Their faces were grim.

‘Boat approaching,’ called Elizabeth. Ben raced up the steps and stood beside her on the bridge. The two guards put their hands on their guns. A small rubber zodiac containing 4 persons, rode the gentle swell about 200 metres from the cruiser. Skull Island was in the background.

‘It’s stopped,’ said Ben. ‘Just out for a look I suppose. Mr. Café, can you break out the diving equipment please?’

‘Right away.’

‘You ready for this Liz?’ said Ben.

‘Yep.’ She moved down the ladder to the open main deck and slipped into a short sleeved, tight fitting wet suit. Ben kept his eye on the men in the zodiac. It didn’t move. ‘Where are your binoculars Captain?’

‘In the compartment to your left.’

Ben took out the large set of binoculars and focused on the Zodiac. 4 men sat motionless. All Chinese in appearance. All dressed in casual clothing, not black. They had adapted. One was looking back at him with an equally large set of binoculars.

‘They are going to watch us for a while,’ Ben said to the security guards. ‘I doubt they will risk another attack with you guys present, but like I said, if they try to come in close and ignore warnings to move away, start shooting or they will be over this boat like rats.’

The Captain looked nervous. The security guards looked nervous. Ben moved to the lower deck and slipped on a short sleeved wet suit. Derek paced anxiously. Stan Café was assisting another diver with his rig. Ben approached. ‘You’re the replacement underwater camera man for this movie?’ asked Ben. The tall, slim man looked up and smiled. ‘I’m not a replacement. I’m camera 2. With Andy in hospital I’m now camera 1. I’m Lloyd. I’ll show you through the set, if there is anything left of it.’

‘What depth?’

‘30 feet. Even that was a bit deep for me. The colour tends to wash out a bit at that depth but the reef there is magnificent. You’ll see. We’ll be using underwater lights for the actual shooting, especially in the cave area, although I need it to look like an underwater cave, not the foyer of the Hilton. Tricky lighting.’

‘So we don’t need to decompress,’ said Ben. The camera man shook his head. Ben walked across to where Liz was sitting, adjusting her aqualung tank straps and clipping the octopus rig to one of the straps. Her long black hair cascaded over her shoulders. Ben helped her with a weight belt and quickly slipped into his own rig. The aqualung tank sat comfortably against his back. Ben had done this many times before. He often told people that he was more at home under the water than above, but that was a long time ago when he and Fay went on diving holidays. Now he only occasionally ventured underwater.

‘Let’s do 30 minutes only,’ said Ben.

Liz nodded. Lloyd waved a hand as he stepped down onto the diving platform.

‘Do you have a warning device?’ Ben shouted to the Captain.

‘First mate has a bell rigged under the diving platform. Hear that and you better get up ASAP.’

‘Got it. Stay sharp with those guys,’ said Ben pointing to the zodiac bobbing in the distance. Lloyd stepped off the platform into the sea. Liz followed him, a stream of bubbles rising through her hair. Ben joined them. Air hissed through each regulator as they slowly descended along the rear anchor rope to the coral reef below.

Brightly coloured tropical fish darted through the magnificent, untouched coral growth. Some ventured up towards the divers, completely unafraid. A huge grouper lurked in the distant background, trying to disguise himself against a wall of rock. The trio settled onto a patch of white sand. Lloyd then led the way towards the edge of the reef. Ben was expecting to see damage everywhere, but that wasn't the case. He noted two large concrete blocks with heavy chain coiled in the sand beside them. Someone had obviously cut the chain from the diving pontoon at the surface level. He wondered where the diving set construction was. All he could see was coral reef, until Lloyd swam under a ledge in the coral and disappeared. Liz and Ben followed. Inside was a huge man made cavern with underwater lights mounted on brackets in the ceiling and at various places in the walls. This cavern adjoined the real coral reef at a point where a black hole opened up under a cluster of bright blue stag horn coral, each stem tipped with brilliant white.

Lloyd approached the darkness of the cave underneath the reef. He turned on a small, pressurised LED torch which was strapped to his forehead and the darkness fled in the path of brilliant white light. The three entered the cave. Fish lurked in dark corners. Some swam out to investigate the light then scuttled back to the protection of coral ledges. Long shadows flickered across the sandy bottom. An octopus advanced towards them and briefly stood its ground. Then it suddenly turned white to blend with the sand, and slunk away.

Lloyd stopped about 12 feet into the cavern and settled on the bottom. He shone his light around at the walls. The sight was breath taking. The water was cooler than outside, but crystal clear. He pointed to a ledge of black lace coral and Ben could see underwater lights rigged behind them. He could only imagine what this cave would look like when all the movie lights were on.

Lloyd swam further in and turned a slight bend in the cave. At this point the roof rose at least 20 feet from the floor and Ben could see lights twinkling above. The coral reef had fractured at one point centuries ago and a fissure remained, allowing tiny chinks of light from above to penetrate the darkness beneath. Their air bubbles cascaded upward through jagged ledges as they raced towards the surface through the labyrinth of cracks in the reef. Lloyd pointed to an area on their left and Ben froze as he saw a human skeleton chained against the wall. Liz gripped his arm. Lloyd's laughter rang in their ears, even through the water. He swam down to the skeleton and shook its hand. Ben and Liz looked at each other. Ben felt like an idiot. Of course. They were in a movie set.

Lloyd pointed further into the cave where boxes were stacked on top of each other and chained to the bottom. He then began to swim slowly back to the cave entrance. From inside it looked as if they were swimming out the mouth of a giant sea creature. Ben checked his watch.

They moved outside the movie set area and began to explore the reef. Ben could see the hull of the cruiser directly overhead. There was no other hull in sight. He relaxed. Giant clams with brilliant purple lips, snapped shut as they approached. A dazzling rainbow of colour stretched out before them in myriad coral shapes, complimented by thousands of fish, each displaying vibrant hues and colours, some swimming alone, others packed in tight formation with thousands of their own kind. Red and white clown fish darted at them aggressively from beds of swaying anemone. They turned abruptly within a few feet of the divers and swam away. It was just warning behaviour. Other beds of tall flowering anemone vanished with lightening speed into holes in the reef as they were approached.

Ben caught Lloyd's eye and tapped his watch. Lloyd nodded. Elizabeth had stayed close to Ben the entire time and signalled back an 'OK' to him with the thumb and forefinger of her right hand. Ben held both thumbs up and swam back to the rear anchor. They rose slowly, following the rope upwards, allowing their bubbles to race ahead of them to the surface.

Back on deck they shed their diving gear and were handed towels by the first mate. The zodiac was gone. The Captain explained that the zodiac had moved back in the direction of Skull Island within 15 minutes of them going underwater.

'Nothing touched down there,' said Lloyd. 'They obviously cut the chains on the pontoon topside and figured we'd not be back.'

'No damage to the set?' asked Derek in obvious astonishment.

'Nothing,' said Lloyd.

'We begin shooting tomorrow,' said Derek excitedly. 'I can hardly believe our luck. I don't think they are going to bother us again, do you Ben?'

'I hope not,' said Ben.

Elizabeth towelled her long black hair and flicked it back from her face. 'I don't think I've ever seen such amazing underwater scenery...and the fish! There were millions of them and the colours!'

'It's a beautiful spot Derek,' said Ben. 'Well chosen.'

'Sandra chose it actually,' said Derek, looking across at his Director. 'She has an eye for location. Poor thing spent hours underwater off Batt Reef looking for just the right place. She was ever so keen to have that island in the background for the surface shots.'

'Stuffed that one up didn't I,' said Sandra, pulling a bright green cap down further over her sunglasses.

'You weren't to know darling,' said Derek. 'It looks deserted from this far away.'

'I should have checked more thoroughly. I didn't realise how upset they would be to have us here.'

Ben put his T shirt on and slapped a battered baseball cap over his head. The words embroidered on the front of the cap were "Bad Boy" Fay had given it to him years ago. He thought that the words referred to him. He had no idea that it was a brand name. 'There is a bit more going on over there than meets the eye Sandra,' said Ben. 'We'll just have to be a tad more careful from now on.'

'What do you think is going on?' asked Derek.

'Not sure. You just get your picture made. I'll keep a close eye on them.'

Derek looked somewhat uncomfortable but he didn't say anything further.

Ben climbed up to the bridge, picked up the binoculars and studied Skull Island for a long time. He swept the powerful device slowly up and down the length of the island and out across the coral reef. Elizabeth watched him closely, a knot of fear twisting in her stomach. Ben put the field glasses back in the compartment and nodded to the Captain. The Captain gave a sharp whistle and the first mate began to pull up the stern anchor. The engines burred into life. The first mate gave a wave from the prow and the Captain engaged the twin propellers. They headed back to Port Douglas.

Elizabeth climbed onto the bridge and allowed the wind to dry her hair. She stood close to Ben. The two security guards had retreated to the cabin for refreshments.

‘It’s too dangerous,’ she said, her mouth close to his ear. ‘It’s too damn far out to sea. You’ll never get across that reef at night and they will catch you and kill you.’

‘OK that’s the negatives. Now give me some positives.’

She stared at him. ‘There are no positives you idiot.’

Ben looked ahead at the approaching mainland. ‘You just never know.’

“*****”

Chapter Thirty One

‘Thought I should show you something before we go down to Sam’s shack,’ said Joy as she dropped the Holden back a gear and slowed down. Ben realised that they were approaching the police holding yard.

‘I’m not going to stop. Just look at what is left of Winston’s boat.’

As Joy drove slowly past the holding yard, Ben could see a pile a smouldering ash where Winston’s boat had lay. ‘They’ve torched it.’

‘Yep. Looks like you’ve made them a tad nervous.’

They drove in silence for over a kilometre south of Port Douglas. Joy suddenly swung the car off into the scrub on the right hand side of the road. It was a track but barely so. It was also thick with mud in places. The back of the car began to slide. Tree branches lashed the windows and doors but she kept on.

‘I wouldn’t keep going this way if I was you Joy. It’s headed for the river.’

She ignored him. Thirty seconds later the car was bogged in thick black mud. She revved the engine of her aging Holden, spraying mud in all directions from the spinning tyres. The car sank deeper.

She finally turned off the motor and sat back. ‘Must have been the rain. Too much rain up here these days.’

Ben smiled but said nothing.

Joy put her head out the window and yelled at the top of her voice...’SAM.’

‘Where’s he live?’ asked Ben.

‘Down by the water. How the crocs haven’t taken him by now is a miracle. I think the smell of whisky drives them off.’

‘SAM. I’M STUCK IN THE MUD UP HERE!’ Joy settled back in the driver’s seat. There was little stitching left holding the fake leather seat covers together. ‘He won’t leave me stuck here.’

‘You been bogged here before?’

Joy stared ahead into the jungle. ‘Not really. OK, perhaps once, but Winston was driving then.’

‘And how does Sam get to and from his house with all this mud?’

‘You’ll see.’

It didn’t take long. They heard the grumbling of a huge motor first. Seconds later a battered jeep with no roof and massive, knobbly tyres, lurched out of the jungle and stopped directly in front of Joy’s sinking Holden. The driver stood up on his seat and laughed loudly. ‘Joy Mackay. You silly bitch! How many times have I told you to park back on the road?’

Ben suppressed a smile. The man standing on the driver’s seat of the towering jeep resembled something out of a horror movie. He was at least 60 or 70 or 80. Ben couldn’t tell. Deeply tanned, leathery skin stretched over a chest exposing his ribs. Sinewy arms and legs. Tattered grey shorts. A shock of long, silver hair stuck out in all directions. His face was deeply wrinkled and covered with sun cancer scars. He was grinning, but had few teeth. His left ear was missing.

‘Get me out of here Sam.’ Joy wasn’t amused.

‘This must be the guy you told me about?’

Ben waved. ‘I’m Ben.’

‘Get me out now!’ barked Joy.

Sam chuckled and clicked his mud crawling jeep into low gear. He moved it around Joy’s Holden and backed up. Ben was about to get out into the mud to help but within seconds a chain was around the tow ball on the rear of Joy’s car and they were being dragged backwards. Sam deposited the Holden onto firm ground and unhitched the chain.

‘Climb aboard,’ he said. ‘Might need to give that car of yours a bit of a wash Joy.’

‘Mind your tongue,’ said Joy as she scrambled up beside the grotesque little man. Ben climbed into the back seat. The jeep lurched back through the mud and jungle and finally came to a bone jarring stop alongside a large timber shack built high up on stilts. The stilts at the front of the shack were driven into the edge of a wide, scrub lined creek. An open timber boat, about 18 feet long, had been pulled up on ramps under the house.

‘Home sweet home,’ cackled Sam, leading them up a rickety set of steps.

‘It will fall down in the next flood and you know it,’ said Joy. She turned to Ben. ‘He keeps building this damn shed out over the water so he can fish from the front room without having to drag the boat out.’

‘Lies,’ said Sam. ‘I love the sound of Packers creek flowing in and out with the tide. Goes out to the Marina you know. Lots of fish.’

‘Lots of crocs too,’ said Joy, perching on an empty box.

‘They’re no harm,’ said Sam, indicating for Ben to pull up another empty box. He had no chairs in the one room shack. Just a single bed of indeterminable age and a large wooden table cluttered with a gas stove, pots and pans, dozens of cans of food, mostly baked beans and at least 10 whisky bottles, one half empty.

‘What do you mean, no harm you silly old bugger,’ said Joy. ‘One chased you up that damn set of steps last year and nearly took your leg off,’ Joy pointed out to the river. ‘He hasn’t got a shower or toilet here so he uses the river and then complains when the crocs come after him.’

‘Total exaggeration,’ said Sam with a wink at Ben. ‘I’ve only been bitten a few times.’

Ben pointed to the side of Sam’s head. ‘Croc do that?’

‘What, the ear? Na, my ex-wife did that. Nasty bitch came at me with a bread knife. After that I sent her packing. Lord knows what she would have cut off the next time.’

Ben laughed.

‘I understand you want to borrow my boat?’

‘I’ll rent it from you for a while,’ said Ben.

‘She’s called “the bitch”. Named her after my ex.’

‘I’ll only need the boat for 24 hours or so with some luck,’ said Ben.

‘Where you planning on taking her?’

Joy cut in. ‘Sam, I need to tell you some things and you must promise to keep them strictly to yourself.’

‘My lips will remain forever sealed,’ he answered, smiling a semi toothless grin.

‘It’s about Winston.’

The grin quickly vanished. ‘What about him?’

‘There is good reason that he may still be alive.’

‘Not drowned at sea?’

‘Perhaps being held captive on Skull Island.’

Sam rubbed his chin with a bony hand. 'I knew that tough old bastard couldn't have drowned out there. He knew the sea better than me. Why would he be captive on the foreigner's island?'

'Listen close to me Samuel because Winston's life, and Ben's, may depend on how you can help.'

Ben was not sure exactly what she meant but he did not interrupt her.

A full 30 minutes later she stopped talking. She had told Sam everything. He sat staring at her in silence. Ben noticed the old man's hands were shaking slightly.

Joy then continued. 'Ben here thinks that he can just hop in that little boat of yours and motor out to Skull, pull up at the reef, get onto the island, hopefully find Winston, or what's left of him, and then get back to your boat and take a leisurely ride back to Port Douglas...all at night.'

Sam looked intently at Ben. 'That's your plan?'

'I admit, it has some flaws...'

'You a seaman Ben?'

'Not really. I've done a lot of scuba diving.'

'Do you know the reefs out there?'

'No.' Even Ben doubted the credibility of his plan. 'I just don't know of any other way to get onto Skull Island for a look around.'

'What about the damn coppers?' said Sam. 'Surely they can't all be bent.'

'They claim to have searched the island and found nothing,' said Joy.

'Half of them couldn't find their way out of a wet paper bag,' snapped Sam.

'They're not locals. They get sent here from God knows where.'

'The point I was trying to make Samuel,' cut in Joy, 'is that Ben wouldn't stand a chance in hell of making it safely to and from that island and we both know it.'

'And you want me to take him?'

Ben was about to object but Joy held up both her hands. 'There is no other way.'

Sam got up from his timber box and walked to the table. He poured some whisky into a dirty glass tumbler. 'Of course I'll do it. You and Winston are my mates.'

'I can't ask you to risk your life,' said Ben.

'You'd be a dead man if you tried to make that trip on your own sonny.' Sam sipped his whisky. 'Bad enough during the daylight. Very tricky at night.'

Ben knew he was right.

'Then that's settled,' said Joy, getting to her feet.

'I'll get the outboard ready today,' said Sam. 'If tomorrow night is clear we will have just over half moon. If the weather turns nasty, we're in trouble but that doesn't rule out going.'

'Do you have GPS?' asked Ben.

'What's that?' asked Sam with a wink in Joy's direction.

'You know what it is,' said Joy. 'You just refuse to accept modern technology.'

'Like your car?'

'You leave my car out of this Sam.'

'I'd rather trust my old compass and my old brain,' said Sam, tapping his head with a bony finger.

'God help us,' said Joy.

‘I’d like to hit the island well after midnight,’ said Ben. ‘I want people asleep out there,’

‘I’m usually dead drunk and asleep by midnight,’ exclaimed Sam, gulping down more whisky.

‘Not tomorrow night you won’t,’ said Joy firmly. ‘Tomorrow you are sober, so you better quit drinking from now.’

‘Aw Joy. That’s not fair. You know I need a little drink.’

‘You stay sober for me and Winston and Ben. It’s just one day and one night,’ said Joy firmly.

Sam put down the tumbler. ‘You’re killing me Joy, but I’ll do it just this once.’

‘Good, now take us back to the car. Ben and I have some shopping to do. Rick Turner still got the best diving gear in town?’

‘Yep,’ said Sam. ‘Although now he’s selling poofy designer clothing as well. I swear he’s turned.’

‘As long as his diving gear is still the best, I don’t care what he does with his personal life,’ said Joy.

‘He and Winston were good mates. He’ll cut you a deal,’ said Sam.

‘We’re not telling Rick anything,’ said Joy. ‘Ben’s just hiring diving gear. He doesn’t want to borrow anything from the movie people for this expedition. Telling you everything was risky enough.’

Sam put on an injured look. ‘Joy Mackay.’

‘Don’t Joy Mackay me. Get us back to my car.’

Sam turned to Ben as they descended the rickety stairs to the ground level.

‘How are you getting out here tomorrow night?’

‘I’m driving him,’ said Joy. ‘He’ll have gear.’

‘Just two short toots on the horn and I’ll come pick him up from the track. Don’t be fool enough to try and drive down here through the mud again.’

Joy glared at him and climbed up into the cabin of the jeep.

“*****”

Chapter Thirty Two

Rick Turner's dive shop was tucked away in Davidson Street, just off the main Port Douglas shopping strip. It was originally an old weatherboard Queenslander, surrounded by banana trees and bougainvillea. The thick foliage remained, though well controlled. The weatherboard was painted brilliant white and the old sash windows at the front had been replaced by large sliding aluminium windows and door.

"Rick's Dive Shop" had been the original sign attached prominently over the entrance. The new sign read "Rick's Dive Shop and Boutique"

Joy and Ben walked up two timber steps to a short veranda and entered the shop. A loud beep sounded as they interrupted the photo electric cell at the door.

Inside was cool. Soft music played. To the right stood racks of colourful women's and men's clothing and shelves of shoes, belts and other apparel accompaniments. To the left stood a large glass and timber counter filled with every imaginable piece of diving equipment. Wet suits of all sizes, styles and colours were on racks to the rear of the shop. Dozens of scuba tanks stood against the wall behind the counter. Glass shelves were piled with regulators, dive computers, pressure and depth gauges. Fins and masks hung everywhere. Spear guns, knives and harpoons were displayed on the wall. Diving manuals, brochures and magazines, littered the top of the counter.

'Joy Mackay. What are you doing here?' came a melodious voice from somewhere at the back of the shop. A very large man with an even larger smile approached. He was around 30, had short cropped blond frizzy hair and a red chubby face. His shirt was splattered with a motif of bright yellow orchards on a background of blue. Pale pink cargo pants and bare feet completed the ensemble.

'Good Lord Rick. What's that getup you're wearing?'

'Isn't it just to die for?' purred Rick, quickly enveloping Joy in a bear hug and almost squeezing the life out of her. He looked Ben up and down. 'And who do we have here?'

'Ben Hood,' said Joy, regaining her breath. 'He's a friend of mine.'

'Then my friend also,' said Rick, pumping Ben's hand enthusiastically.

'I'd like to rent or buy some scuba diving gear,' said Ben.

'I do both. Where did you find this hunk Joy?'

'Ben's doing some security with the movie people up here just now.'

Rick put his hands to each side of his red cheeks. 'My God, not that Simon Sutherland masterpiece. What I wouldn't give to meet him for a quiet drink and a game of whatever.'

'Rick, we're here for diving gear.'

'Of course. Sorry my love. I've been meaning to call you. How are you coping? Such a dreadful loss.'

'I'm coping as best I can. Can't do much else.'

'I've seen your posters up around the town. Not giving up hope are you pet?'

'Never.'

Rick looked somewhat awkward. He turned to Ben. 'Now what would you like?'

‘The works. Short sleeved wet suit, mask and fins, weights, tank, regulator and an underwater light. I also need some kind of waterproof bag to carry some equipment.’

‘Sounds exciting. Night dive?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s connected with the movie Rick. Security clearance.’

‘I understand. Let me get some stuff out. I only stock the best quality.’

Ben examined a rather sophisticated diving rig standing in a rack by the side of the counter. Rick dropped some fins on the counter and joined him.

‘Rebreather?’ asked Ben.

‘Poseidon Discovery Mk V1. State of the art. You don’t want bubbles?’

‘I’d prefer not. I’m only going shallow and I may need more time than a tank can give me.’

‘You need to be certified to use this,’ said Rick. ‘This is specialised equipment, not to mention the huge rental price.’

‘I don’t have time to get certified,’ said Ben.

‘Then I really can’t rent it to you.’

‘Rick,’ said Joy in a determined tone. ‘Ben knows what he’s doing.’

Rick looked helpless.

‘Be a dear and get it ready for him.’

‘Joy...’

‘It can’t be that much different to SCUBA,’ said Ben.

Rick picked up the rebreather and laid it on the counter. ‘It’s very light compared to SCUBA. It has two fairly small tanks as you can see. One is pure oxygen and the other is compressed air. The compressed air cylinder was added to the rig to accommodate deeper dives where pure oxygen would be toxic.’

‘I understand,’ said Ben.

‘Its computer managed. Quite foolproof actually but the maintenance has to be spot on.’

‘We’ll take it,’ said Joy. ‘You just make sure it’s ready to go.’

‘What’s your certification Ben? Please tell me you have something?’

‘Divemaster. PADI.’

‘Recent?’

‘1980.’

‘My God! That’s before I was born!’

Joy flashed him an unmistakable look.

‘OK. OK. I’ll get the rig ready. It will take me about half an hour.’

Ben picked up a small diving torch from one of the shelves. It had straps to be head mounted. ‘LED?’

‘Yep. State of the art.’

‘Like everything else in here,’ said Joy.

‘I can see you are in one of your moods Joy.’ He turned back to Ben.

‘NuDive is the brand and it’s around 300 lumens, fully adjustable light mode with an SOS strobe setting.’

‘Impressive,’ said Ben. ‘I have a bit of a thing for torches.’

‘I can’t rent you this one.’

‘I’ll buy it,’ said Ben. How much?’

Rick looked at Joy. Joy held his gaze.

‘I normally sell it for \$160. It’s state of the art.’

Joy took a step towards him.

‘Fifty bucks cash.’

‘Done,’ said Ben, pulling the money from his wallet.

‘Would you like to take it with you now?’

‘Just put it with the other gear,’ said Joy. ‘We’ll be back in half an hour.’

‘The batteries are extra,’ said Rick.

‘I’ll take Lithium’s if you have them said Ben.

‘Of course I have them.’

‘And I’d also like to see if one of those colourful shirts over there fit me.’

Rick’s face lit up. ‘Certainly. I’ve just got in the orchard and hibiscus range. I know just the thing for you.’

Joy shook her head and busied herself with some magazines. Rick fitted Ben with a brilliant floral shirt. Ben paid in cash and the shirt was deposited in a pale blue ‘Rick’s Dive Shop and Boutique’ carry bag.

‘You’ve been very helpful Rick,’ said Ben. I appreciate your assistance.’

Rick shrugged. Joy approached him and kissed him gently on the cheek.

‘Thanks old friend. Winston would love you for this.’

Tears formed in Rick’s large hazel eyes. ‘I would do anything to bring him back Joy.’

She opened her mouth to say something, but closed it immediately. She left the shop quickly and Ben hurried to catch up.

They stowed the diving equipment in Joy’s cavernous garage underneath her house. In the process, Ben noticed a few old leather bags lying in a basket in a corner. They were covered with dust. He picked up one of the bags which had a thick shoulder strap and unbuckled the flap.

‘Winston picked those up at the Sunday markets about a year ago. Lord knows what he was going to do with them. He’d collect anything.’

‘I need something to sling over my back that will hold the revolver and a few tools. I want both hands free.’

‘Take anything you want,’ said Joy.

Ben dropped the leather bag on a nearby work bench. ‘Did Winston keep any knives?’

Joy opened a drawer at the bottom of a metal filing cabinet and stood back. Ben could see at least a dozen knives of various shapes and sizes. He selected a long bladed imitation bowie knife with a black leather bound handle. It was a nasty looking weapon and razor sharp. ‘No sheath for this one I guess,’ said Ben.

‘Leave it with me. I’ve got some leather upstairs and a heavy duty machine. I’ll put something together for you this afternoon. We used to make wallets and little leather bags and sell them at the markets. Stopped doing that years ago.’

Ben rummaged through Winston’s vast array of tools and accumulated junk. He picked a pair of insulated wire cutters, a half sized hacksaw and a roll of electrical tape. All these items went into the leather bag. ‘I’ll pick them up tomorrow night.’

‘When should I expect you?’

‘About 8 pm I’d say. I don’t want to be anywhere near Skull Island until after midnight.’

Joy stood silently for a while. When she finally spoke, it was in a whisper as she was close to tears. ‘You are my last hope Ben. My last shred of hope.’

Ben said nothing. He swung his leg over the bike seat, kicked up the stand and put the helmet on. ‘I’ll ring you just before I head this way.’

She nodded.

“****”

Chapter Thirty Three

‘The police were here looking for you this afternoon,’ said Susan. ‘Told them I had no idea where you were. That inspector guy wants you to call him.’

‘Yeah, when I’m good and ready,’ said Ben.

‘Derek has arranged a private bar b q by the pool this evening for the film crew and the stars. Obviously we’re invited. Will you please wear something appropriate?’

‘Will you lot get off my back about my dress sense,’ said Ben.

‘What dress sense is that?’

‘I’ll dress casually as I always do and it will be appropriate.’

‘Yeah sure. By the way, they are all excited about the underwater scenes being started tomorrow. Everyone feels a bit more relaxed with those two guards on deck.’

‘What time’s dinner?’

‘Seven. We’re out on the deck in front of the main restaurant. It’s cordoned off and I’ve asked Rodney’s guys along so you can get to meet them. The resort manager has also assigned his head of security to mingle with us tonight.’

‘OK, I’m heading for the spa. See you there.’

‘Love the shirt.’ Brenda threw her arms around Ben’s neck and kissed him. Ben stepped back and she let him go. ‘Are they hibiscus flowers?’

‘I have no idea. I just bought it today...in the local dive shop actually.’

‘I love it.’

‘I hate it,’ grumbled Elizabeth, joining them.

‘Well I think you both look amazingly beautiful,’ said Ben.

‘This little old thing,’ said Brenda with a laugh.

‘Cost a bomb,’ said Elizabeth. ‘And ‘little’ describes it to a tee. There’s not much of her you can’t see in that thing.’

‘Your top is not much better darling,’ said Brenda, slipping her arm through Elizabeth’s. ‘Busting out big time.’

‘I am not.’

‘Ben, is she busting out?’

Ben was starting to feel uncomfortable again. ‘Well not exactly busting, but there is plenty to see.’

‘Careful mister,’ said Elizabeth. ‘This is the latest, must have, party frock.’

Brenda flashed perfect white teeth. ‘Liz tells me that the diving was amazing this morning. I can’t wait to see the set for myself.’

‘It’s a beautiful part of the reef,’ said Ben. ‘Let’s hope the weather holds. The barometer has dropped a bit.’

‘I’m sure it will be fine.’ Brenda let Elizabeth’s arm go and took Ben’s instead. ‘Look, I may be just imagining this but is there something going on with you two that I don’t know about?’

Elizabeth shot a glance at Ben. Brenda picked it up instantly. ‘I thought so! Want to let me in on the secret?’

‘It’s just about security darling,’ said Elizabeth lightly. ‘Ben and I have to discuss every aspect of security on an outside location like this, especially with the nasty incident out on the diving platform the other day. That posed a serious threat to our entire team.’

‘And that’s all?’ said Brenda, tightening her grip on Ben’s arm.

‘You make this movie a smash hit lady and we’ll take care of the security. That’s our job,’ said Ben.

‘So there’s nothing else?’ asked Brenda, her eyes never leaving Elizabeth’s.

‘You are so suspicious of everything,’ said Elizabeth, rather too forcefully.

‘Why don’t you two get mingling,’ said Ben, trying to steer the conversation in another direction. ‘I’ve got to meet some people as well.’

Brenda unlocked her arm from Ben’s but she remained close, looking directly into his eyes. ‘I got a nose for secret stuff you know.’

‘And a very pretty nose if I may say,’ replied Ben.

She pushed him playfully in the chest with both hands. ‘I’m watching you two. Come on Liz. We need a drink. I think a few Aviation Gins on ice might loosen your tongue.’

‘I’m not touching that rocket fuel and neither are you,’ said Elizabeth. They walked arm in arm towards the pool bar.

Ben joined Susan and was introduced to the security operatives sent by Rodney. They discussed the attack on the diving pontoon. The two newcomers were obviously confused at the ferocity of the attack with motive being little more than securing the privacy of the owner of Skull Island. Ben quickly moved on to plans for the movie crew to start filming on the reef the next morning. It was agreed that the new operatives would accompany Susan and the two armed guards on the cruiser. Ben indicated vaguely that he may visit the wounded underwater cameraman later. In reality, he knew that he would be resting up for the covert visit to Skull Island. In his mind he had accepted that the mission was going to be extremely dangerous to say the least. It was unknown territory, occupied by people who were ruthless, and totally unafraid of reprisals from the law.

A small band of musicians began to play off to the side of the main outdoor entertainment area. Soft guitars and deep bongo drums. Curious onlookers stayed behind the cordons. Camera strobes flashed. The security people intervened, politely but firmly moving people away.

Dozens of flame torches lit the scene magically. Shadows danced across timber planked walkways. The Coral Sea breeze had freshened. Palm branches tossed gently and whispered as only palm branches do when touched by the wind.

Laughter rose from groups gathered informally here and there. Glasses clinked. Hazy smoke rose, twisted and twirled from the outside bar b q. Chef’s in crisp white jackets and starched white hats worked at blurring speed, turning prime beef steak on hickory flames. Lobsters broiled. Huge king prawns sizzled. Salads, pasta, sauces, herbed bread and side dishes were meticulously prepared by younger Chef’s, each cringing slightly when the Head Chef came close. Exquisite aromas from the Australian outdoor kitchen tempted the most resistant palate.

Brenda was the centre of attention. She chatted and laughed with everyone. Simon Sutherland tried to keep up, but realised quickly he was outclassed and moved closer to the bar in the company of two very adoring female fans who had apparently won the privilege of attending the party through a raffle held in the resort restaurant the night before.

The dinner plates were Royal Doulton. Ben vaguely knew the name, but a plastic plate would have suited him more than adequately. The food was the best he had ever tasted.

Susan told him the cutlery was by Jorg Jensen and very expensive. Ben asked her how much he might get if he put some of it on EBay. The look he received back was sufficient to broaden his smile.

‘And where the hell did you get that shirt?’

‘Rick’s Dive Shop and Boutique. It’s just off the main drag in Davidson Street.’

Susan studied his face carefully for a moment. ‘Dive shop and boutique, right?’

‘Rick is a nice guy. Mention my name and he’ll give you a discount.’

Susan sipped her orange juice. Ben sipped his apple juice. Both wished their drinks were more potent.

‘You wore it as a dare, right?’

‘No!’

‘I smell Brenda all over this. She put you up to this to annoy Elizabeth and me.’

‘Never! Rick says it’s the latest thing up here.’

‘Then Rick is an idiot, and so are you.’

They both grinned at each other, but only for a moment. ‘So you’re obviously about to move ahead with your visit to that island?’

‘Tomorrow night, if the weather holds.’

‘I’m not happy about this Ben. I’ve got a bad feeling.’

‘Well you’re not the only one who’s told me that today. I’d have more of a bad feeling if I didn’t go. I’m ready for this.’

Susan studied his face. ‘You properly equipped?’

‘Yep.’

Derek Disano approached them. He was holding a half empty martini glass in one hand. ‘Either of you seen Brenda? I can’t locate her.’

Ben deposited his empty glass on the side of a garden bed and strode through the mingling guests. He couldn’t see Brenda or Elizabeth. Both of them were too noticeable to suddenly become unnoticeable. His heart rate quickened. He caught Susan’s eye and pointed towards the resort building. ‘Room check, fast!’ he called. Susan ran. Ben approached the head of security. ‘Did you see where Brenda and her companion went?’

‘No sir. I didn’t notice them leave the party. There are over 50 guests here.’

Ben interrupted a conversation Sandra Quinn was having with a group of women. ‘Have you seen Brenda and Elizabeth?’

‘They were right here a moment ago,’ said Sandra.

‘How long since you’ve seen them?’

‘Not more than a few minutes.’

‘That’s too long,’ said Ben to himself as he pushed through the crowd and out onto the boardwalk beside the pool. He didn’t know which way to run, but he had to choose. He chose to head for the beach.

‘Ben!’ Sandra was leaning out an open window on the top floor. ‘Not here,’ she shouted.

Ben pulled out his tiny LED torch and ran past the wedding chapel towards the beach. He flicked on the brilliant white light. He saw Brenda immediately. She was sprawled, face down across the boardwalk at its junction with the sand. His heart

pounded. She was unconscious as he lifted and turned her gently and cradled her in his arms. She was bleeding profusely from an open wound on her head. Blood dripped through her blond hair and over her face. Ben pushed the palm of his right hand over the wound to stop the blood flow.

Susan reached his side with other security guards close behind. She let out a cry when she saw Brenda.

‘Ambulance. NOW,’ yelled Ben.

One of the men punched buttons on his mobile phone.

‘What happened?’ asked Susan, her voice shaking.

‘Take my torch and check the beach. Liz is missing. Hurry!’

Susan took the torch from his fingers and raced onto the beach. She ran several hundred metres to the right and stopped to speak with a young couple walking in the shallow surf. She then sprinted back to where Ben was gently holding the unconscious Brenda. ‘They’ve taken her!’

‘Who took her? Ben’s voice has risen sharply.

‘Don’t know. Small group of men. The young couple along the beach up there thought they were playing a game. They were carrying something and all got in a rubber boat and headed out to sea.’

Ben looked helpless. His hands were covered with blood and he was gently rocking Brenda in his arms. She was breathing slowly and was extremely pale.

‘Where’s that bloody ambulance!’

‘On its way sir,’ replied the head of security.

Others from the party were beginning to gather at the side of the chapel. The two remaining security guards kept them back. Everyone was trying to talk at once. Everyone was asking questions.

Ben looked at the Head of Security. ‘You know Inspector Tanner?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Then ring him and tell him to get his arse down here with a team of detectives NOW. This has gone too far.’

‘Yes Mr. Hood. I’ll ring him right away.’

A siren wailed in the distance. It quickly grew louder. Minutes later two paramedics were providing emergency care to Brenda. Ben stood back helplessly. Susan put her hand on his shoulder.

‘I got careless,’ said Ben. ‘I should have never let them out of my sight in an open situation like this.’

‘I’m equally responsible,’ said Susan quietly.

Brenda was stretchered through the astonished crowd to the foyer area and into the ambulance outside. Ben and Susan followed. Several camera flashes went off.

‘Mossman hospital?’ asked Ben.

‘Yep,’ the Ambulance driver said.

The ambulance sped away, sirens blaring.

‘Where are the damn police?’ demanded Ben as the Head of Security approached.’

‘Inspector Tanner is not available tonight. I think his partner Adam Kennedy is coming down.’

Ben swung to face Susan. ‘Change of plan.’ He strode through the foyer towards the resort wing which led to his room. Susan ran after him.

He threw his blood stained clothing in a laundry basket and quickly showered to clean the congealed blood from his skin. He dressed in black jeans, black T shirt

and laced up his Nike runners. Susan was sitting on the end of his bed as he came out of the robe area. He opened a drawer beside his bed, removed the small bolt cutters and laid them on the coffee table.

‘Why did they take Liz?’ asked Susan, breaking the silence.

‘They made a mistake,’ said Ben through gritted teeth. ‘These gooks are not up with things. They saw Liz on the cruiser during the dive this morning and assumed she was the movie star. They were watching us through binoculars.’

‘Why kidnap the star?’

‘No star, no movie shoot on the reef. Right?’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Go get her back. I’m going to the Mossman hospital first and then I’ll chase these sons of bitches down and teach them some manners.’

‘You’re very angry Ben. You’re confrontational. That’s not good for the Ninjutsu approach.’

He stared at her for a long moment. ‘Are you out of your mind? You know nothing about Ninjutsu. I’ll take care of this my way.’

Ben pushed buttons on his mobile phone. Joy answered immediately.

‘They’ve taken Liz and seriously injured Brenda,’ he blurted out.

‘What?’

‘I have to move tonight Joy. Do you think Sam will be ready?’

‘I’ll make him ready. Where’s Liz?’

‘Probably out on Skull Island. They took her right out of the middle of a damn bar b q party. No-one including me saw anything!’

‘And Brenda?’

‘Mossman hospital.’

‘It’s on the way here. Turn off to Mossman and follow the hospital signs. I’ll be waiting at home.’

Ben pushed the off button.

Susan held out his tiny torch. ‘You’ll need this.’

‘No. You keep it. I’ve got a much brighter one which works underwater as well.’ He picked up the bike helmet from a chair and tucked the bolt cutters inside it. ‘Wish me luck.’

Susan got off the bed and approached him. ‘Just you stay alive out there Ben Hood.’ She hugged him quickly and stepped back. ‘I’ll walk you to the bike. Cops should be here by now. I’ll talk to them. Where do we say you’ve gone?’

‘To the hospital.’

‘And then?’

‘None of their damn business.’

‘I’d like a word Mr. Hood.’ Detective Sergeant Kennedy was waiting for him in the foyer. Two uniformed police stood nearby.

‘I’m visiting at Mossman hospital. You can talk to my partner Susan. She knows as much as I do what happened tonight.’

‘I’d rather speak to you if you don’t mind.’

Ben approached the Sergeant. Ben was much taller and much larger than Adam Kennedy. There was no mistaking the look on Ben’s face. ‘I’ll come and speak with you when I’ve checked on Brenda Grant. She takes priority here. You just better hope that what happened here tonight has nothing whatsoever to do with you or Inspector Tanner. If I find out it has, I’ll personally crucify the pair of you.’

Kennedy took a step back. Ben walked around him, past the two uniformed policemen and through the main doors. No-one attempted to stop him. He threw the bolt cutters into a side pannier of the bike. Minutes later he was roaring along the highway towards Mossman.

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Chapter Thirty Four

‘She is a very lucky girl Mr. Hood. The compression over the wound with your palm probably saved her from bleeding to death. The paramedics told me about your actions.’ The Doctor pulled off his surgical mask and threw it in a bin. ‘Otherwise she didn’t sustain a fracture, which is a miracle considering the violence of the blow.’

‘She’s a tough lady,’ said Ben.

Doctor Powell slipped off surgical gloves and threw them in the bin. ‘We’ve sewn her up. Head wounds often look worse than they are. Lots of bleeders up there.’

‘Tell me about it. I was drenched in her blood.’

‘So she’s got some plasma and saline and a whack of antibiotics. She’s what we call ‘stabilised’, but she’s not going anywhere for a while. Luckily we have a Neurologist visiting tomorrow from Cairns and we’ve booked her in as his first patient.’

‘That’s amazing,’ said Ben. ‘I can’t thank you enough.’

‘She was saying your name as she came out of surgery just now. Are you the boyfriend?’

‘Hell no. I’m her security guard.’ Ben regretted his words immediately.

Doctor Powell pulled off his surgical gown. ‘Security guard eh?’

‘Don’t say it. I stuffed up very badly tonight.’

‘I’d say you probably saved her life with the action you took when you found her.’

‘Cold comfort Doctor.’

‘You want to see her?’

‘Yes please.’

‘She’s very groggy but at least conscious.’

‘Do you know who she is Doctor?’

‘Yes, Brenda Grant.’

‘But do you know who she actually is?’

‘Of course I do. Funny thing though. The rich, poor, famous and obscure all look the same on the operating table.’

‘There is no way this girl could ever look obscure.’

Doctor Powell nodded thoughtfully. ‘Your point is taken. She is extremely attractive.’ He walked down the brightly lit corridor. Ben followed. The Doctor stopped outside a set of double doors. Ben could see Brenda through large glass windows. She was propped up in an emergency ward bed surrounded by monitors. Her head was bound in white bandages. Her eyes were closed.

‘Before we go in Doctor, can I ask your permission to have some security personnel stationed here for a while?’

‘So she was attacked?’

‘Don’t you know?’

‘She comes in here with her head split open. No-one tells me anything. I’m just the Doctor here.’

‘Yes, she was assaulted and the people who did this are not model citizens.’

‘No doubt the police will investigate.’

‘Who knows? It’s not just that. Brenda is well known because of her movies. The press will be all over this. We can’t have people just bursting in asking questions.’

‘Understood. You can have one security person only. I can’t have this place cluttered up with male muscle.’

‘It’s a she and she won’t clutter up anything. Her name is Sue Beck.’

‘Deal.’ Doctor Powell pushed the double doors open. ‘You have to scrub first.’ He pointed to a small wash basin to the left.

Ben washed his hands thoroughly with surgical soap and dried them with paper towels. He approached Brenda. A heart monitor beeped slowly. Her oxygen mask had been removed. He sank into a chair beside the bed and gently touched one of her hands.

Brenda’s eyes flickered and partly opened. ‘Liz?’

Ben moved closer to her. ‘No it’s me.’

‘Ben...?’

‘Yes.’

Her eyes opened wider. ‘Ben?’

‘Yes baby. I’m right here.’

Her fingers grabbed his hand firmly. ‘They took her.’

‘I know.’

‘Why?’

‘They thought she was you.’

Brenda’s eyes flickered and then fixed firmly on Ben. ‘So they came after me?’

‘Yes.’

‘But took Liz instead?’

‘They made a mistake darling. They saw her on the diving boat with me this morning. They thought she was the movie star.’

Brenda closed her eyes. She tried to mouth words but nothing came out.

‘Better go I think,’ said Doctor Powell.

Ben looked back at him and nodded. ‘Just two more things?’

‘Make them quick.’

‘Brenda. Listen closely to me. Did you see who attacked you?’

Brenda pulled a face. Her eyes remained closed. ‘They just looked like tourists. The guy who hit me was Chinese. Liz punched one of them in the face but they hit her too.’

‘What kind of weapons did they use?’

Brenda remained silent.

‘Please baby.’

‘They were swinging sticks or something on a chain; very fast. I just walked over to talk to some kids. Liz came to make me go back and these men came out of the garden.’

‘Mr. Hood. Time to go,’ said the Doctor.

Brenda opened her eyes and grabbed Ben’s hand. ‘Where is she?’

‘I think I know where she is.’

‘What’s going to happen to her?’

‘I’m going to get her back.’

‘How?’

‘You leave that to me.’

Tears welled up in Brenda's eyes. She squeezed Ben's hand. Doctor Powell opened one of the double doors and beckoned for Ben to follow. He let go of Brenda's hand and walked to the doors. He turned and gave her a gentle wave.

'White Knight,' she said, and closed her eyes.

'What did she call you?' asked the Doctor.

'Not sure,' said Ben, letting the door swing shut behind him.

Outside in the hospital car park Ben hit another speed dial number on his mobile phone. It answered immediately.

'Copper?'

'Hi Yana.'

'You were going to ring me yesterday.'

'Sorry. Got tied up.'

'I'll bet you did.'

'The trouble I told you about has seriously escalated. Brenda is in hospital with a fairly serious head injury and the Ninjutsu on Skull Island have kidnapped her bodyguard.'

'What are you talking about? Why would they do that?'

'It's a damn long story but there is something heavy underway on Skull Island and it involves that Chin Chian Qian you told me about.'

'Why would they attack Brenda and kidnap her bodyguard?'

'Another way of stopping the film crew working on the reef near Skull Island. They took the bodyguard by mistake. They thought she was Brenda.'

'What can I do to help?'

'Perhaps have a chat with Akira. He knows all about these people and who is connected to whom. He might have some influence.'

'Why don't you call him?'

'I'm about to head for Skull Island. I'm going to try and get the bodyguard back. I think they are also holding the husband of the old lady I stopped from being attacked a few nights ago.'

'Why would they be holding him prisoner?'

'He is a submarine communications cable expert and a highly classified cable has been laid somewhere off the coast of that island. I think it's related to that.'

'It's messy. And of course you are going to trot right into the middle of it.'

'Someone has to do something. The coppers are sitting on their hands and I think the OIC of the Police Station here is somehow involved.'

'Oh great!'

'I don't think my mobile phone will work that far out to sea but I'm taking it with me anyway.'

'OK, I'll talk to Akira.'

'I'll ring you when I get back.'

'You had better get back.'

Ben hit the disconnect button and climbed onto the Harley.

“*****”

Chapter Thirty Five

Joy hit the car horn twice and waited. The jungle remained quiet. She waited a few minutes and let the horn sound twice again. They heard the sound of a large motor. Headlights leapt from the thick foliage and Sam's mud crawler pulled up beside them.

'Thought it was tomorrow night,' he yelled over the noise of the motor.

'Change of plan,' said Joy. She went around to the rear of her car and opened the boot. Ben hoisted the re-breather over his shoulder and took it to Sam's jeep. He deposited it on the back seat. Joy threw flippers and a mask in beside them.

'You going to sit there like a stunned mullet Sam? Get out here and help.'

Sam turned off the motor and climbed down. 'Why the sudden rush?'

'They attacked Brenda Grant during a party at the Sheraton tonight and kidnapped her bodyguard,' said Ben. 'I need to go to the island tonight.'

'Weather's blowing in,' said Sam as he lifted the leather bag out of Joy's boot.

'I can't see any weather blowing in,' said Joy.

'My bones can,' said Sam.

'To hell with your bones,' said Joy, slamming the boot of her car. 'You just get him out there in one piece, and bring him back in one piece or so help me Samuel....'

Sam threw the leather bag on the back seat and held up his hands in mock defence. 'I'll take good care of him Joy. You run along now and we'll be back by morning.' He turned to Ben. 'What's in the bag by the way? House bricks?'

'Bolt cutters and stuff.'

'What are you going to do with those?'

'Cut bolts.' Ben grinned.

Joy approached Ben and put a hand on his shoulder. 'I'm sick of having good men taken from my life. Don't be the second one.'

'I'll be OK. You pray or anything?'

'All the time,' said Joy.

'Spend a bit longer with your next prayer. I think I'll need all the help I can get.' Ben kissed her and climbed into the jeep beside Sam. The motor roared and they disappeared into the jungle, heading towards the river.

They left the mouth of Dickson's Inlet just after 9.30 pm. There were no lights on the 18 foot boat and Sam kept the motor just above idle. They slipped quietly past the huge Quicksilver diving vessels, past the marina and out to sea.

A half moon lit the vastness of the ocean. Sam's old compass was more impressive than Ben had anticipated. It had its own internal lighting and appeared totally weather proof. Sam tucked the control stick of the outboard motor under an arm and placed the compass on the wooden seat in front of him. He set a course due east and opened up the throttle. The old boat moved through the water with surprising speed.

Ben sat in the prow facing Sam. A stiff ocean breeze slapped at his back. He could feel the familiar cold hands of fear starting to clutch at his throat. He slowed his breathing and tried to relax. He flexed his fingers open, shut, open, shut. He

moved his head and neck slowly from side to side. Akira had taught him dozens of relaxation techniques but now he couldn't remember most of them.

Sam watched him silently. Billowing white clouds gathered on the horizon to the west. Sam could see them. Ben had his back to them. The swell picked up but the old boat rode it well.

'How long?' called Ben above the roar of the motor.

'All going well, under two hours.'

Ben nodded.

'I could do with a drink,' yelled Sam. 'Didn't bring any did you?'

'I've got water,' said Ben loudly.

'Good Lord, you can't drink that stuff!' said Sam. He turned his attention to the compass and made a slight adjustment to their heading.

Out on Skull Island, Chin Chian Qian was very displeased. The focus of his displeasure was on his Risk and Operations Manager, Mr. Do Tu Du. Both were in Mr. Qian's vast office. The blackness of night now obscured the ocean views.

Mr. Qian's voice had reached a high decibel level indeed. Three of the more recent employees to have arrived on the island, cringed in the corridor outside.

'And who thought up this grand scheme Mr. Du?'

'I did sir.'

'To kidnap a world famous movie star and bring her to my island?'

'I thought it would keep the rest of them from working on the movie just out there.'

Qian clasped his fingers together so forcefully that they began to turn blue. He was seething with rage. 'Why didn't you kidnap the Pope and bring him here as well? The attention and publicity would have been around the same!'

Du said nothing.

'And to top it off,' Qian was yelling again, 'you get the wrong girl. You get the star's bodyguard and from what those cretins outside tell me, they have probably killed the movie star!'

Du was shaking.

'On top of that Mr. Du, my Inspector friend at Port Douglas, tells me there is a Karate expert, bodyguard, ex police detective who seems to know more than he should, poking around and even killing some of your hired help?'

'I don't know about him Mr. Qian.'

Qian leapt to his feet. 'No of course you don't you moron. You are removed from your duties. You have totally compromised this project with your incompetent bungling. Go down to the foyer and wait. I'll deal with you in a moment.'

Du quickly left the room. Qian barked an order in Chinese. The three men who had been waiting in the corridor filed silently into his office. Qian walked up to each man and stared at him. Each looked at the floor. Qian began to speak softly in Chinese. He walked slowly up and down in front of the men as he spoke. When he had finished he returned to his desk and sat down. He pointed to the door. 'zou kai.' (Get out)

Ben checked each piece of equipment. He un-wrapped the Magnum revolver from its double skinned waterproof bag and ensured it was loaded. Sam's eyes went wide at the sight of the huge handgun but he said nothing. Ben secured the revolver and cartridges, along with his mobile phone, in the waterproof bag and zipped it closed. He secured the watertight seal.

The ocean swell was becoming larger. Ben swung around to face the breeze. It was swiftly turning into wind. He watched the billowing clouds approaching rapidly.

‘Me bones never lie,’ yelled Sam.

Ben faced him. ‘We’re not going back.’

‘We’re over the southern tip of Batt Reef now if my compass hasn’t led me astray. We should be able to see Skull in about 20 minutes. I hope they’ve left lights on.’

‘Get me to the northern end of the reef around the island,’ yelled Ben, and once we’re in that close, no noise.’

‘The wind is working with us tonight,’ said Sam loudly. ‘It’s blowing our sound away from them.’

Ben nodded. He pulled out the wet suit and wriggled into it without removing his clothes. He took off his runners and socks and stowed them in a waterproof bag along with the leather bag and tools. He also placed three compact inflatable life jackets in the bag. Rick had explained in detail how to operate the re-breather, also reminding him several times that the unit was worth over \$8,000 and he had better bring it back in one piece. Ben slipped into the straps. The device was amazingly light. He left the weight belt on the bottom of the boat. The weight of the tools and gun would keep him down sufficiently. He would improvise for the trip back to the boat as he was hoping to have company. By that time, the secrecy of his mission would probably not be an issue.

‘There’s a light out there,’ called Sam. He cut the motor slightly. ‘It’s got to be Skull Island.’

Ben swung around. He could make out a red glimmer in the distance. It disappeared each time the boat moved from the top of a swell, to a trough. Ben glanced at his watch. It was just after 11.30 pm. He secretly admired the skill of the old boatman. He would never have found his way to this island, especially in the increasingly stormy conditions.

Waves could now be seen breaking on the reef surrounding Skull Island. With one hand, Sam pulled a pair of binoculars from a canvas bag behind him and examined the island. Finally he took them away from his eyes. ‘They seem to have burned someone,’ he said. Ben moved aft and took the binoculars. He sat in the centre of the boat and focused on the light. It was a fire on the beach. It had died down but the remains of a human body; head, bones with some burning skin and tissue, was strung up on a post.

Ben handed the binoculars back to Sam. He then pointed to the north of the island and Sam turned the boat in that direction. The remainder of the island was in darkness. They slowly moved parallel with the outer reef and about 200 metres from the breaking waves. Occasionally, part of a wave continued past the reef, unbroken and on into the lagoon. Ben concluded they were the gaps in the coral. He would use one of these to swim underwater into the shelter of the lagoon.

Fifteen minutes later they rounded the tip of Skull Island to the north. Sam inched his way towards the reef. The swell had abated in this area but the wind was howling. Sam saw a tiny gap in the reef at the same time Ben did. They both pointed to it. Ben moved back and sat beside Sam. ‘You want to try to take it through?’

‘No bloody way mate. Too narrow and the waves are all over the place. You’ll do better on the bottom.’ Sam tossed an anchor over the side. It held fast to the sea bed. He cut the motor. The boat was around 100 metres away from the

breaking waves and in a relatively calm swell. It was now almost pitch dark. Heavy clouds swirled in and totally obliterated the moon.

Ben put on his mask and flippers. He attached the underwater light to his forehead with rubber straps. He turned on the cylinder valves and switched the rebreather into operation mode.

The waterproof carry bag was attached to a 40 foot rope. Ben hoped it would be long enough. He lowered the bag into the sea and played out the rope. The bag hit the bottom at around 30 feet. He tied off the rope. Ben gave Sam the thumbs up and went backwards over the side.

He went hand over hand down the rope into the inky blackness. The lack of the sound of bubbles initially alarmed Ben. He was used to the constant hiss of inward air and the roar of bubbles out through the regulator's exhaust. The rebreather delivered all the air he required but was extremely silent in operation. His hands touched the waterproof bag lying on the bottom. He clicked the underwater light onto its lowest setting. Even that was sufficient to illuminate the white sand and the walls of coral directly in his field of vision. He tipped the light downwards slightly and was about to pick up the bag when he realised he had company. It only flashed past for a second but there was no mistaking the grey torpedo shape and the dorsal fin. He clicked the light onto a higher setting.

The shark came back. It moved slowly towards him and veered off at the last moment and swam behind him. Being in the water with sharks during the daylight is one thing. At night it takes on a vastly more dangerous edge because for most of the time you have no idea where they are. The shark came back towards the light. Ben estimated it to be around 3 metres long and to his relief identified it as a grey nurse. It seemed more curious of the light than after a feed. It still had row upon row of razor sharp teeth. He also knew that where there was one shark, there were probably more.

He tried to ignore the shark and untied the rope from the bag. The weight of the bag gave him negative buoyancy but that suited him for the present. He glanced at his wrist compass and began to swim slowly towards the reef surrounding Skull Island.

Sam sat back on the timber seat and slipped his hand again into the canvas bag at his side. He pulled out a small bottle of whisky, opened the screw top lid and took a sip. 'It's going to be a long bloody night,' he said to himself. 'Man's got to have some sustenance.'

“*****”

Chapter Thirty Six

Ben kept close to the ocean floor, skirting around huge out crops of brilliantly coloured coral. Fish darted in and out of dark crevices, startled by the light. Sea urchins, normally tucked away safely in the reef during the day, browsed about on the sandy sea bed. Ben kept well clear of their long spines.

The shark lost interest and disappeared. Ben would still have liked to know what lurked behind him in the inky blackness. He concentrated on moving ahead. The wall of coral closed up in front of him. Ben moved along it to the right. He found an opening and moved through. It led him to another wall of coral and a dead end. He backed out and moved further along the wall to the right. He could hear the dull roar of the crashing waves above. The second opening led him through a narrow passage in the coral. It wound in for several metres and turned abruptly left. Ben was hoping this wasn't another dead end.

It wasn't. Minutes later he was on the sandy bottom of the lagoon and swimming towards the beach. The depth was now just less than 20 feet. Clusters of coral and bright green seaweed were scattered about. Shoals of tiny fish fled from the light. He switched the torch onto its lowest setting and swam on. At the 8 foot depth, Ben turned off the torch and moved carefully forward, touching the bottom as he went. The bottom suddenly rose steeply and within seconds his head breached the surface. Waves roared past him but they had little power. He pulled the torch and mask off and tucked them under his arm.

His head only was above water. Hundreds of coconut trees lined the shore but their presence was more evident from the roaring of the wind in the fronds, than visually. The blackness of the night was all encompassing. Ben looked back in the direction of waves crashing on the outer reef. Sam and his boat were not visible in the darkness.

He moved quickly up the beach and into the low jungle which grew right into the coconut groves. He flicked the torch to low light and placed it on the ground. Mask and flippers were pushed under a broad leafed bush, followed by the wet suit. He turned off the re-breather switches, closed the valves and laid it on top of the other diving gear.

The long bladed knife had been beautifully sheathed in leather by Joy. Ben undid his belt and slid it through the sheath. The knife nestled comfortably at his side. The heavy Magnum felt comforting in his hand as he pulled it from its waterproof bag. He slipped it with the box of cartridges, into the leather bag. Dry socks and wet feet have never mixed. He struggled into the socks, laced up his joggers and hoisted the leather bag across his back, tightening the strap at his chest. The torch was turned off and clipped by its straps through his belt.

The luminous hands of his watch read 20 minutes past midnight. He had 4 hours until a hint of dawn approached.

The waterproof bag covered all the diving gear and the low bush branches hid everything from sight. Ben moved silently along the edge of the coconut grove to the left, eventually bringing him to the uppermost northern tip of the island. The trees and jungle were suddenly gone. The moon appeared for a brief moment and he could

make out a wide open expanse stretching from the beach, inland. Then the moon was gone.

It started as a few splats of water, and then increased to a deluge of rain within seconds. The wind changed directions frequently and lightning flashed over the sea to the west.

‘Great,’ muttered Ben as he moved back into the relative shelter of the jungle. He realised that the cleared land was the end of the light aircraft runway. He remained in the cover of the wet jungle and followed the runway back into the interior of the island. Rain was driven in frenzied sheets by the wind. It drummed against the large leafed plants. Ben moved slowly, stopping at frequent intervals to listen for sounds. The rain drowned out any hope of hearing soft sounds but also gave Ben the same advantage as he moved forward.

He almost ran head first into the side of a huge metal wall. Ben slipped off the leather bag and laid it quietly on the ground. He followed the corrugated metal cladding back towards the open runway. Moving slowly and silently he inched along the front of the building, straining his eyes in the darkness. He used his fingers to aid his inspection of the building. His fingers touched the edge of a metal protrusion. He knelt down and felt a metal runner on a cement footing. He had reached sliding doors. He moved further along the high metal door, suddenly reaching an opening. The door was partly open on its tracks. He could smell a clove cigarette. Someone was inside and not too far away. Ben drew the large knife and stood with his back to the corrugated metal. He slowly sank to his knees and felt around on the ground until his fingers hit two small pebbles. Grasping them, he got to his feet and threw the stones up against the wall, high above his head. They made a soft clattering sound and fell back to the ground. Ben tensed his body. His eyes never left the deeper blackness of the open doorway for a second.

The man inside made the mistake of leaving the cigarette between his lips. It gave Ben the perfect target he needed when the head protruded slightly from the doorway. He used the metal end of the knife’s handle to strike a sickening blow to the side of his target’s head. The man crumpled to the floor without a sound, his cigarette tumbling away in a shower of sparks.

No other sounds came from within the building. The interior was in total darkness. Ben checked the downed man’s pulse. None. He moved inside and stood still. He waited at least two minutes and then clicked the torch strapped to his belt onto low. The darkness fled. He looked around for cameras. There were none visible. Two small planes were very visible. Both were Cessna’s. One, a 4 seat 175 and the other a 2 seat 152. Ben had flown a little when he was young and still held a completely worthless restricted pilots license. He hadn’t flown for almost 30 years. Didn’t want to and had forgotten how to.

He dragged the dead Chinese man against a side wall of what was obviously a hangar for the planes. His pockets produced a small bunch of keys, a half empty packet of cigarettes, cigarette lighter, a folding stiletto knife and a set of Chinese exercise balls. Ben took the keys and left the other items beside the body.

He moved outside, retrieved the leather bag, slipped the keys inside and swung it across his back. Once back in the jungle, he headed slowly south. The rain was easing. The lightning and thunder were moving away. The wind however, remained fierce at times. He spared a thought for Sam in the boat, and then pressed on through the darkness, occasionally stumbling into vines and bushes. The large house would not be far away. He moved more cautiously and veered towards the side of the island he had never seen, to his left. When he reached the coconut groves he knew the beach

was close by. The jungle provided cover as he crept noiselessly, parallel to the shore. Then he saw lights. Two very soft lights. They glimmered through the thinning vegetation to his right. It had to be the large house. Now the fear was back, clutching at his chest like the cold fingers of a corpse. The unknown lay ahead. Where were the guards? How many? Where were the prisoners? Were they still alive? Someone had just been burnt at the stake on the beach. Was it Elizabeth? Could it have been Winston Mackay? Where should he start searching? Should he bring out the large revolver?

Ben suddenly dropped to his knees. This was no way to proceed. He was allowing his mind to run away with distractions. Akira had taught him to relax before conflict. Ben had resisted going into the depths of Zen meditation but he accepted it was extremely important to Akira. The Master had attempted to drum into Ben's head again and again that when one rid the mind of unnecessary thoughts and emotions, it gave freedom to strike quickly, true and hard, in a way far deadlier than one whose mind was cluttered with unnecessary thoughts, speculation and fear.

He slowed his breathing and closed his eyes. He remained totally still for many minutes.

The house was now clearly visible against the skyline. The storm had moved away and the moon, although not visible, was gently illuminating white puffy clouds. The wind remained strong and gusty. Once again, advantage and disadvantage. The house was two storied and the lights he had seen were from windows on the top floor. It appeared that there were no guards patrolling the house. Ben initially felt this strange but then concluded that the remoteness of this island in a pitch black ocean, walled by coral reef, had probably given the inhabitants a sense of security. He would now take full advantage of that.

A smaller building stood about 100 metres to the left of the main house. The smaller structure was in total darkness. Acting on impulse he made his way in that direction. It was single storied, of lime block construction with a flat metal roof. It was surrounded by coconut palms and papaya trees. As Ben drew closer he noted the absence of windows on the two sides he could see although ventilation openings were at intervals along the walls, immediately under the roof line. He also noticed close to the building and just to his right, three concrete boxes. They were about chest height and partly covered by low scrub. He used these as cover to get close to the flat roofed building. Each of the concrete boxes had a metal grille on two sides. A faint humming came from within and movement of air was evident. Ventilation shafts leading somewhere underground.

He could now see a doorway into the building. A solid looking mass of steel blocked it. How could he get inside? Akira's words came to mind. "Stealth, endurance, perseverance, patience. Powerful Ninjutsu weapons"

"Well that's not going to get me into that building" thought Ben. "But this might."

He walked straight up to the door and tapped softly against it with the blade of the knife. There was muffled movement inside and a male on the other side of the door said something in Chinese. Ben only knew a few words of Chinese and he had learned them while dating a Chinese university student in Sydney when he was 21. He raised the pitch of his voice but kept it soft. 'Siang syr.'

The Chinese male was quiet for a moment and Ben heard a metallic click near the lock. The man said something else in Chinese. Ben answered back, 'Ching ren'

Another metallic click and the door opened fractionally inward. Ben sprung against it with all the fury his 120 kilogram body could muster. The door caught the

Chinese man in the face, hurling him back into a dimly lit foyer. Ben was on top of him in a flash and chopped hard into his throat with rock hard fingers. A gurgling cry rang out. Ben silenced him completely with a deep slash of the knife. Ben ran down a brick corridor and into a dimly lit room. There was an open door to the right and a metal door with steel bars in the top half to the left. As he reached the open door he ran face first into a young Chinese man. The startled look on the young man's face reflected his unpreparedness. Ben moved with lightening speed to take advantage. He used the butt of the knife to strike the man's forehead. He attempted to block but was a fraction too slow. The blow felled him quickly. Ben followed with a kick to the throat.

A heavy blow caught Ben on the shoulder and spun him around but he managed to block another incoming punch and lashed out at the second attacker with his knife. The Chinese man blocked swiftly and solidly. The knife flew out of Ben's hand and clattered to the cement floor. As he faced the new opponent he could hear footsteps approaching from behind. He made a knuckle fist with his right hand and quickly raised it high and to the right. It was a diversionary tactic trained many times over with Akira. The man glanced at the upraised fist for a fraction of a second and that is when Ben's left fingers jabbed hard into his throat. The man went down. Another opponent launched at him. This man's face had white sticking plaster over one eye and part of his mouth. Ben dropped to the floor and kicked up hard with his right foot. It caught the sticking plastered man in the crutch and spun him around. Ben sprang up, grabbed a fistful of shirt and hurled the man towards the opposite wall, slamming him against the metal door with the iron bars across the upper half.

The man on the floor was up again and swinging a set of twin sticks. Nunchaku. Ben hated this deadly weapon, especially in the hands of someone who knew how to use it. The Chinese man moved in quickly and struck Ben on the left shoulder. Ben's swift reactions partially deflected the blow but it was painful nevertheless. His right hand moved upward again in the diversionary tactic but the opponent was having none of it this time. He ignored the upraised fist and aimed a kick at Ben's solar plexus. Ben blocked the kick with his left hand and drove the knuckles of his right hand into the man's left temple. He went down again. Ben swung around to intercept the anticipated attack from the man he had hurled against the steel door. The man seemed stuck there. Not moving. His knees were bent slightly. He was hanging off the door.

Ben stomped heavily on the throat of the man with the Nunchaku. It was probably a fatal blow but he was beyond caring at that point. He moved cautiously to the man hanging against the metal door. Then he saw an arm protruding from the darkness of the room behind the steel bars, crooked around the man's neck, pulling back tightly. The Chinese man was dead; the life choked out of him.

Ben turned on his torch and shone it past the dead man, through the steel bars. Elizabeth's face beamed back at him, dirty and blood stained. Her black hair was dishevelled, bits torn out here and there, but it was Elizabeth and she was very much alive.

'Took your damn time getting here,' she said with a raspy voice.'

'Ran into some bad weather,' said Ben. 'You can let him go now. He's dead.'

Elizabeth slowly removed her arm from around the man's throat. He slid noiselessly to the floor. 'He's the one with the keys,' she said. 'He tried to rape me a while ago. Huge fight. I lost some hair and half my clothes but he copped a couple.'

'Looks like he lost all round,' said Ben, searching the dead man's pockets. He found keys on a brass ring. The larger of the keys opened the cell door. She was in

his arms in a flash and clung to him with a fierceness that took his breath away. ‘No-one other than you would have been crazy enough to attempt something like this and in a place like this. How did you get here?’

‘Long story. Now we just have to get out in one piece. You’ve got a bad cut on your head.’

‘Got whacked when they took me. It’s stopped bleeding now. What happened to Brenda?’

‘She took a nasty whack on the head too. A bit more serious than yours but she’s OK. She’s recovering at the Mossman hospital.’

‘Why did they take me?’

‘They saw you out at the dive site with me this morning. Thought you were the star is my guess.’

Elizabeth nodded thoughtfully. ‘I think there were just four of them in here,’ she said, attempting to cover her exposed breasts with her arms.’

‘Four down,’ said Ben. ‘They’re not going anywhere.’ He removed the leather bag and took off his T shirt. ‘I think you may need this more than me.’ He threw it at her.

She smiled and pulled it over her head. ‘That jerk kind of messed up my party dress.’

‘We’ll get you another one when we’re out of here.’ He slipped the leather bag over his shoulder. ‘Any idea where the rest of the bad guys are?’

‘They seem to be over at the big house. I saw about a dozen when they were dragging me here.’

‘What’s in there,’ said Ben, pointing to the open passageway.

‘Don’t know, but there is someone down there. I heard soft singing a few hours ago.’

Ben retrieved his knife and sheathed it. He led the way into the darkened passageway. Elizabeth followed, hand tucked into the back of his belt. Ben switched his torch to low. The stone passageway turned to the right and began to descend. They moved silently along the concrete floor. Elizabeth had no shoes. The passageway came out into a small, rectangular shaped room with concrete walls and floor. Ben concluded that they were well underground at this stage. Two metal doors were attached to the left wall. Each had a steel meshed opening in the top half. Ben shone his torch into the first. It was piled high with timber boxes and various bits of electronic equipment. When he reached the second, a white face and silver beard appeared. The eyes glistened and blinked in the light.

‘What’s all the damn commotion about you yellow skinned monkeys,’ came a shrill voice.

‘Mr. Mackay I presume,’ said Ben.

‘What...’

‘Winston Mackay?’

‘No-one’s called me that for a long time. Who the hell are you?’

‘Friend of Joy’s. I’ve come to take you home Mr. Mackay.’

Ben tried the keys in the lock. The third one opened it. Winston Mackay walked out into the dim light. ‘Joke, right?’

‘No joke,’ said Ben, holding out his hand.

Winston Mackay looked at Elizabeth and back to Ben. Both towered over him. ‘Well you’re obviously not Chinese.’ He reached out skinny white hands and clasped the fingers of both around Ben’s large outstretched hand. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Ben Hood. This is Liz.’

‘I have no idea by what miracle you got here Mr. Hood but for God’s sake, get me out of this hell hole.’

‘Right away Mr. Mackay. Just got to unpack something first. I’m sick of all this hand to hand fighting.’ Ben pulled the leather bag from his shoulder and laid it on the floor.

‘That’s mine,’ said Winston.

‘That and everything in it,’ said Ben. He pulled out the Magnum and cartridges.

‘Good girl Joy,’ Winston said quietly. ‘Always using her head that woman. Who’s in charge now?’ he chuckled. ‘The only weapons they seem to have around here are those Chinese ninja knives and metal spikes and things.’

‘I wouldn’t be too sure about that,’ said Ben. He handed the cartridges to Winston. ‘Keep them safe and hand them out when I need them.’

‘I’ll guard them with my life.’

‘Where’s that tunnel lead to?’ asked Ben.

‘It’s basically a wire transfer interception area.’

‘Pardon?’

‘Too much to explain now. I’ll give you details later if we get off this island alive.’

‘There’s a boat at the northern end.’ Ben removed the bolt and wire cutters from the bag and left them on the floor. He hoisted the much lighter bag over his bare shoulders and cradled the large revolver in his right hand.

‘Time to go.’

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Chapter Thirty Seven

‘They check in from the big house every two hours,’ said Winston as they moved quickly into the jungle and headed north. ‘That means they’ll know something’s up in less than half an hour by my calculations.’

‘We should be close to the boat by then,’ said Ben. He glanced at his watch. It was just after 3.30 am. The first hint of dawn would appear in the east within half an hour. They kept to the jungle, following Ben’s lead. He had given up stopping to listen. The wind continued to roar through the canopy overhead but the storm had passed.

They reached the aircraft hangar and stopped at the partly open doors. Ben shone his torch over the two light planes. ‘I should disable them, but I think we’re running out of time.’ He could now see the first greying light of dawn in the east through the palm trees. ‘We’ll keep to the edge of the runway. The boat is out past the reef to the left. I’ve got life vests for both of you.’

Again Ben led the way, keeping close to the edge of the runway and moving as fast as was comfortable for Winston to keep up. A gnawing feeling worked at Ben’s stomach. This was far too easy. Something had to go wrong. It always did. He must have been psychic. A dark shape moved in the jungle to his left. Ben stopped so abruptly that Liz collided with his back. He raised the Magnum. The first shot would be the one which alerted everyone on the island that they had visitors. Stealth and secrecy would vanish with a pull of the trigger.

The shape didn’t move. Ben stepped towards it.

A raspy voice came from the shape. ‘I’m hoping that’s Ben Hood, because if it’s not, I’m in deep shit.’

‘Sam?’

The shape materialised from the jungle. Sam walked slowly towards Ben. His chest and arms were badly cut, some of the blood had dried, other of the deeper cuts continued to slowly bleed. His white hair was wet and matted with blood. Winston reached Ben’s side and then stepped towards Sam. ‘What in God’s name are you doing here old man?’

‘Winston Mackay! It’s really you.’ Sam began to weep. Winston embraced his old friend, ignoring the blood.

‘The boat’s gone,’ wept Sam. ‘The waves just picked it up and snapped the anchor rope. The old bitch was thrown against the reef and broke up. The coral tore me up a bit too.’

‘You’re alive. That’s all that matters,’ said Winston. ‘How did Joy get you to agree to this fool mission?’

‘You know Joy.’

‘I think we’re in a spot of trouble,’ said Winston, turning to Ben. The light from the approaching dawn was now sufficient for each to more clearly see the other.

‘Did you bring your mobile?’ asked Elizabeth.

Ben pointed over his shoulder to the leather bag. ‘It’s there but there’s no range out here. I checked yesterday.’

‘Hello lady,’ said Sam. ‘I’m part of the rescue team.’

Elizabeth smiled. ‘Hello yourself and thank you for risking your life for me.’

‘Well looks like I stuffed the rescue,’ said Sam.

‘Not necessarily.’ Ben was about to say something else but the whisper of a sound stopped him. He knew he only had a split second to react. It was a slight swishing noise, approaching rapidly, too rapidly to move quickly enough. The metal star struck into Ben’s shoulder, partly through the strap of the leather bag and partly into his flesh. He spun around. A small black shadow leapt behind a broad leafed bush. Ben gripped the Magnum with both hands and pulled the trigger.

Several things happened. The savage recoil from the huge gun punched Ben backwards and he almost fell. The explosion from the cartridge was so enormous that Elizabeth and Sam screamed. The broad leafed bush about 30 metres away was partly shredded and the man behind it had his left arm pulped at the shoulder joint. He screamed and thrashed about on the ground, but not for long. A second shadow left the cover of trees and began to run. Ben was ready for the next recoil. The Magnum boomed. The runner was knocked off his feet with the impact of the projectile. He was dead before he hit the ground. Another shadow retreated rapidly towards the beach. Ben knew they wouldn’t attempt to approach him again. As Winston had said when he first saw the massive gun in Ben’s hands; “Who’s in charge now?”

‘Two more please,’ said Ben, holding his hand out to Winston. He handed over two cartridges. Ben pulled the spent shells out, burning his fingers in the process, and inserted the new cartridges. He closed the cylinder.

Elizabeth had recovered from the shock of the sudden unleashing of noise and violence. She reached Ben’s side and turned him around. ‘They’ve hit you with a metal star. It’s deep, but it’s gone through the bag strap first. That saved you I think.’

‘We can deal with that later,’ said Ben. ‘Everyone on this island heard that gun. We’re live targets now.’

‘Let me pull that thing out,’ said Elizabeth. ‘You’re bleeding.’

‘I’ll bleed worse if you pull it out.’ Ben looked back at Winston and Sam. They looked helpless. Winston looked defeated. Sam could hardly stand up.

Ben turned back to Elizabeth. ‘Sam and I didn’t go through this to fail now. Time for plan B. Follow me.’ He began walking back towards the aircraft hangar.

‘And what is plan B?’ asked Elizabeth, catching up with him. Sam and Winston straggled behind.

‘Can you fly a plane?’

‘No,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Can you?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Sort of? How do you ‘sort of’ fly a plane?’

‘I flew a bit when I was younger.’

‘Ben!’ called Sam. ‘Through the trees to the right.’

‘I’m watching him Sam. He’s scared of the gun. It’s big and dangerous and they know it.’

‘He’s underestimating the range as well,’ said Winston.

Ben stopped. He moved to a palm tree and steadied the Magnum against its trunk, holding tight with both hands. The boom of the gun was ear splitting. The projectile shredded leaves and bushes. A tiny black figure several hundred metres away went down with a scream. The screaming continued this time.

‘Wounded,’ said Winston. ‘Probably took a chunk out of him. I’m impressed with your shooting.’

‘I practice a lot,’ said Ben. ‘We need to keep moving.’

The hangar was now less than 100 metres away.

‘When did you last fly a plane?’ Elizabeth persisted.

‘About 30 years ago.’

‘You have to be kidding.’

‘Like riding a bike.’

‘Like hell it is.’

‘So you’ve seen the plane in there?’

‘There are two of them. Both Cessna’s.’

‘You know how to fly a Cessna?’

‘I’ve only flown the little one. 152. Two seater.’

‘There are four of us Ben.’

‘I know that. We can fit in the other plane. It’s a 172.’

‘You’ve flown one of those?’

‘No.’

Elizabeth remained silent. They reached the hangar doors and moved inside.

‘Your bleeding is worse,’ said Elizabeth. ‘I don’t want you to bleed to death on us.’

‘Alright.’ The pain from the imbedded metal star was becoming acute. At least it didn’t have poison tips or he would have been dead by now. Ben took the torch from his belt and handed it to Winston. ‘The lady is going to patch me.’

Winston shone the torch on his back. The star was embedded to the hilt ‘There is some electrical tape in the bag,’ said Ben.

Elizabeth unclipped the bag and removed the roll of electrical tape.

Ben looked at Sam. ‘Stay at the doors and yell if someone gets close.’ Sam nodded and stood by the hangar doors.

‘This has to be quick,’ said Ben. ‘They’re not sitting on their hands. They’ll be thinking of something.’

‘What do I do?’ said Elizabeth.

‘Get my knife and slice a strip off your shirt....my shirt actually.’

Elizabeth did this quickly.

‘Now pull the star out and I’ll get the bag off. Thumb in the wound. Sorry Liz.’

‘Not a problem.’

‘When the bag and strap are free, stuff the strip of shirt in the wound and plaster on the electrical tape so it won’t come out.’

The procedure took less than a minute. Ben gritted his teeth against the pain.

He picked up the old leather bag, removed the set of keys taken from the aircraft hangar guard and handed them both to Elizabeth. ‘Find the keys for that one,’ He pointed to the Cessna 172. ‘Don’t turn the key or touch anything.’

Ben pushed against the right hand hangar door. It slid open on well oiled tracks. Winston and Sam pushed the other door open. Ben pointed to the Cessna with Elizabeth in the front seat. ‘We’re taking that one. Do you think you can disable the other one Mr. Mackay?’

‘With pleasure. I don’t want that Qian Psychopath making any quick escape from here.’

Ben waved the magnum. ‘Got four shots left. I’m going to make them nervous.’

Winston grinned. ‘You’ll scare the shit out of them.’

Ben stepped outside and moved to the edge of the jungle. The first explosion shattered the silence and blew bits of jungle to his right into leafy julienne all the way to the lagoon beyond. The second and third projectiles headed directly inland, towards the main house. Ben knew they would reach all the way to the house and

well beyond if something large didn't get in the way. The fourth shot sliced across the runway and through the jungle to his left.

He loved this portable Elephant gun although fingers, hands, wrists and arms were aching from the violence of the recoil. He moved quickly back into the hangar. Elizabeth gave him a thumbs up from inside the larger Cessna. One of the keys fitted the ignition.

Fuel level?

Water in fuel test?

No time to check. Grossly negligent of him. He had few memories of flight training so many years ago and checking moisture in fuel before take-off was burned permanently into his mind. Not this time however.

'Anyone got a match?' asked Winston.

Ben pointed to the body against the wall. 'There's a cigarette lighter on the ground there. What are you up to Winston?'

'Nothing much. Might be best if we push our plane outside.'

Ben was feeling slightly dizzy but he tucked the large hot gun into his belt and got alongside Sam and Winston at the rear of the Cessna 172. Elizabeth joined them. The light plane rolled gently through the hangar doors and onto the firmly packed dirt runway.

Ben climbed into the pilot's seat on the left hand side. He tossed the revolver onto the floor behind him and clipped his seatbelt on. Sam scrambled into the back seat.

'You want to get this thing started?' said Winston. 'I'll be right out when you're ready to go.' He vanished back into the hangar.

Ben didn't have time to argue. He looked at the array of instruments before him. He couldn't remember seeing so many in a 152. He tried to remain calm and think.

Pre-flight inspection..... No time for that.

Doors, seat belts, circuit breakers.... Forget that.

Throttle. Open. How much? A bit. Not all the way in. That was for takeoff. Just a bit. He pushed the throttle knob in just a bit.

Mixture. Rich. Done.

Carb heat? Can't remember. Leave it alone.

Magnetos both on? Done. Master switch on? Ben turned it on.

Ignition. He turned the key.

The starter whirred into life and the propeller turned. The engine coughed and then roared. He pushed forward with both toes on the floor peddles. That kept the brakes on. Elizabeth was standing by the open passenger door. The wind from the propeller blew her hair in all directions.

Winston materialised beside her. The soft dawn light illuminated his wide smile. He climbed into the back seat next to Sam. 'I'd be moving as soon as possible Ben,' he said with urgency in his voice.

Elizabeth jumped into the front passenger's seat and slammed the door. Ben released the brakes and pushed the throttle in full. The motor roared loudly. The Cessna began to move forward, slowly at first but quickly gathering speed. Ben remembered to steer the plane in a straight line with gentle pressure left or right on the foot pedals. He remembered that he was supposed to set the trim control for takeoff but he didn't want to take his eyes off the runway.

The plane gathered more speed. He glanced at the air speed indicator. It had always been on the top left of the instrument panel and thankfully Cessna hadn't seen fit to move it in the last 30 years. They had reached 40 knots. Not nearly fast enough, not even in the 152.

The Perspex window next to Elizabeth suddenly shattered and part of the roof insulation rained down. 'They're shooting at us,' she screamed.

Ben pulled back a little on the control column. He felt he may have been putting too much pressure on the front wheel. The plane gathered more speed. Ben wondered if he should have put the flaps down but couldn't remember if they were needed for takeoff. This was a nightmare.

Another loud metallic bang came from behind the rear seats.

'I think they've hit us again,' yelled Elizabeth, over the roar of the engine.

Ben ignored her. 'Fly the plane'. It had been drummed into his head again and again by his youthful instructor. "Don't worry about what is happening around you....just fly the damn plane"

They were more than half way along the runway. The lagoon lay ahead with the reef beyond. Ben glanced at the air speed. 60 knots. Still not enough. It crawled to 65 knots and the beach drew rapidly nearer.

A dull 'boom' sounded behind them. Ben didn't look back. Winston and Sam did. 'The 152 is disabled,' yelled Winston. A huge orange fire ball rose into the air from where the hangar had once stood.

70 knots. Ben pulled back gently but firmly on the control column. The nose of the Cessna came up. The beach was less than 100 metres away. He resisted the urge to pull back sharply on the column. The rear wheels left the ground 50 metres from the sand. The plane was airborne. Ben kept it straight and steady as it rose over the lagoon and the outer reef and climbed above the Coral Sea.

Away from the protection of the palm trees the wind gave additional lift to the plane. It also challenged the Cessna's stability. Ben maintained a firm grip on the controls, correcting gently as required. Some of his long forgotten flying skills had returned. Top centre instrument showed level flight. Keep those wings level as you climb. Third instrument on the top left was altitude. They had reached 500 feet. Back to the top left dial....the most important in takeoff and landing....air speed. 75 knots. That seemed to be OK.

The horizon to his right was brilliant red with the approach of the sun. Elizabeth's hand touched his shoulder. It startled him at first but then reassured him that they were OK. He had done it. The most dangerous mission of his life had somehow succeeded. His optimism was short lived.

'So you got us in the air,' said Elizabeth, leaning close to his ear. 'Now...can you get us on the ground in one piece?'

'I've never been in a plane before,' said Sam excitedly from the back seat. 'I'm actually flying. This is mind blowing. I'm up where the birds belong.'

Ben was tempted to look at Elizabeth, but choose instead to scan the instruments in front of him. The altimeter was almost at 1000 feet. He was not sure if that was accurate because he hadn't calibrated it with barometric pressure before takeoff, and had forgotten how to do that anyway. They were however, a long way up.

Rate of climb was the instrument bottom right. He decided to ignore that and concentrate on the air speed indicator. That was his key to keeping in the air.

At 3000 feet he lowered the nose of the Cessna slightly and pulled the throttle lever slightly to decrease the power. The aircraft speed increased to 90 knots but the

control column was heavy. Ben located the trim control and dialled it forward until the column felt light. The speed moved to 100 knots. He decreased the engine power again watched the altimeter. It remained steady at 3100 feet.

‘So, where are we headed?’ asked Elizabeth. Her hand remained on his shoulder.

Ben ignored her. Fuel.... He hadn’t checked the fuel gauges. Both over half full. Thank God.

Winston’s head appeared between the two front seats. ‘Cairns airport is your only option. I gather you’re a bit rusty at this Mr. Hood.’

‘A bit,’ said Ben, not taking his eyes off the instruments.

‘Then turn right to the west and head for the coast. At the moment you are taking us to New Zealand.’

‘I’ve always wanted to visit New Zealand,’ said Sam, his eyes glued to the window and the panoramic view outside.

‘Might be a bit short on fuel for that one,’ said Winston.

Ben pushed the throttle slightly. The engine responded immediately. He gently turned the control wheel right. Aileron’s moved on each wing and the Cessna commenced a turn to the right. He watched the gyro compass. Middle lower instrument. As it approached due west he eased the wheel left and decreased power, pushing forward gently on the control column. Air speed had reached 110 knots and he had gained another 300 feet. That wasn’t supposed to happen but at least they were still in the air. Now he remembered why he had given up flying as a young man. Too damn complicated and too damn expensive.

‘You two don’t have your seat belts on,’ said Elizabeth, looking over her shoulder.

‘I have a feeling that may be the least of our problems,’ said Winston. ‘You OK with landing Ben?’

Ben said nothing.

Winston pulled the seat belt tightly across his lap and locked it. He helped Sam do the same.

‘Cairns you say?’ Ben said.

Winston leaned forward again. It’s the only airport around here. Hit the coast and turn left. Cairns has an impressive international runway. You could land a tractor there.’

Everyone stayed quiet. Even Sam began to appreciate that their airborne escape from Skull Island may have some further complications.

‘North south runway?’ asked Ben.

‘Yes,’ said Winston. ‘Can you work the radio?’

‘I’ve got my hands full at the moment,’ replied Ben. ‘I’ll let Liz handle the radio. He pointed to it and she switched it on. ‘See if you can find a frequency sheet in the side pocket there,’ said Ben.

Elizabeth rummaged about in her door pocket and finally produced a yellow laminated sheet. ‘This is for Cairns airport. There are dozens of frequencies. Which one do I try?’

‘Anything to do with emergencies?’

‘There is one here for International distress frequency. 121.5.’

‘Dial that in and let’s see if someone’s home.’

Winston leaned forward again. ‘Mr. Hood. If we are going to land at Cairns, can I suggest that we dispose of my gun before we have officials crawling all over us?’

‘Drop her out the window Winston. Cartridges too. There’s a lot of ocean down there.’

The large revolver and remaining cartridges were pushed through the partly open passenger window. Elizabeth pulled the window shut and locked it. Wind continued to whistle through the large bullet hole. She picked up the microphone. ‘Hello. Is anyone there?’

A lengthy silence followed but finally a youthful male voice crackled through the cabin speaker. ‘Who is calling?’

‘We’re in a light plane in an emergency situation and want to land at Cairns airport.’

‘Are you the pilot?’

‘No. I’m sitting next to him.’

‘What is your position?’

‘I haven’t got a clue!’ said Elizabeth, looking at Ben. He beckoned for her to put the microphone to his mouth. She did this and pushed the talk button.

‘My name is Ben Hood. I’m flying a Cessna 172 with 3 passengers on board. I’ve not flown one of these before but did fly a 152 many years ago. I may need some assistance to get down safely. We had to use this plane to escape a rather nasty situation which I’ll explain later.’

‘Just a moment Mr. Hood.’

There was silence for half a minute but then an older male voice came through the speaker. ‘Hello Ben. My name is Eric Holden. I’m the senior traffic controller at Cairns. You’re requesting some assistance to land here?’

‘Yes sir,’ said Ben.

‘And I gather you’ve not flown a Cessna 172 before?’

‘Just a 152 and that was around 30 years ago.’

‘I take it you have adequate control of the aircraft now?’

‘Yes. We’re straight and level.’

‘The 152 and 172 have similar controls Ben. I’m sure you have worked that out by now.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Can you tell me your position?’

‘I’m heading due west and not far off the coast from Port Douglas. I’m just over 3000 feet.’

‘How’s the visual there?’

‘Clear. I’m under the clouds. Actually I can see the coast now.’

‘Good. How about you make a gentle turn left and just follow the coast south for a while. I’ll get things ready down here. You don’t know how to work the transponder I suppose?’

‘No. Never used one.’

‘OK, we’ll spot you with the radar. I’ll get back to you in a minute.’

Ben commenced a slow bank left. He dropped the right wing as the compass approached due south. The coastline was now distinctly visible on the right hand side and getting closer. He turned a little more to the left and levelled out at 3000 feet, trying to ignore the icy fingers of fear going for his throat again.

‘OK Ben. What are your KIAS?’

‘Don’t understand that one?’

‘Knots. How fast are you going?’

‘100 knots.’

OK, I've got you now and everyone else is giving you a wide birth. I want you to power off a bit and start on descent. You're going to be here quite soon. I also want you to come another 10 degrees left. That will put you right on track for the international runway.'

Ben turned left 10 degrees and levelled out. He pulled the throttle control out a tiny bit and the motor slowed. The front of the plane dropped marginally and the rate of descent instrument moved off zero into the negative area.

'I want you to maintain that heading and rate of descent but don't go below 1000 feet. OK?'

'Copy', said Ben.

Elizabeth touched his shoulder. 'You can do this.'

He nodded and flashed her a smile. 'Yeah, I know.'

At the 2000 foot mark they could clearly make out the airport runway in the distance. Now he had a target to focus on.

'OK Ben,' said the controller's voice. 'Let's have your mixture to rich if you can see the control.'

'It's already at rich. I forgot to turn it off.'

'OK so let's have some carb heat on as well.'

Ben turned on the carburettor heat control. 'Done.'

'And can you give me 10% of flap please?'

Ben pulled back the flap control to the 10% mark. The plane slowed and the nose came up a bit. Ben gently pushed it down and set the trim forward to assist.

'OK, the flaps are at 10% and I've trimmed also.'

'Wonderful. You should be at 1,500 feet by now.'

'Yes,' replied Ben. The runway was approaching rapidly. Ben knew from his training many years ago that the way the runway looked visually on approach, was a major key to a successful landing. Now if he could just remember how the runway was supposed to look.'

'OK I'd like you to power back and maintain a descent speed of 65 knots. We've got a bit of a cross wind from the east happening so you may need to steer to the left from time to time. You've obviously got the runway?'

'Yes,' said Ben, easing the throttle out a little more.

'I don't think we'll worry too much about using the rudder. How's your speed?'

'70 knots.'

'You're doing great Ben. Don't get under 60 knots. We'll have you on the ground in a few minutes. You remember how to flare and steer and brake?'

'I'll do my best,' said Ben.

'Can you give me another 10% flap please?'

Ben set the flap control back another 10%. The plane slowed to 65 knots.

At 500 feet they were almost to the runway. Ben could see emergency vehicles with flashing lights moving on side roads. He tried to ignore them. "Fly the plane" his Instructor had nagged him.

Ben did this now. He kept the airspeed at 65 knots, making gentle corrections to the left from time to time in order to stay lined up with the centre of the runway. The runway looked good. It was much wider and longer than any runway Ben had used in his training days. They were over the keys and slightly left of the centre line. Ben now ignored the instruments and kept his eyes on the runway. It moved closer and closer. When he felt he was less than 20 feet from the ground he pulled the throttle fully out, cutting the power, and pulled back gently on the control column.

Initially the nose fought him and didn't want to rise. He pulled back harder as the plane began to sink to the bitumen. The main wheels hit the ground with a heavy impact but the plane did not bounce. Ben kept the nose up until the ground speed reduced but the nose came down gently by itself and the front wheel contacted the bitumen.

He applied gentle pressure with his toes and the plane braked and slowed further. He kept to the centre of the runway, steering with the foot pedals. The plane rolled to a stop. Only then did Ben look across to Elizabeth. She was looking at him but tears were rolling down her cheeks. She mouthed the words "thank you" to him. Ben just nodded.

The cabin speaker crackled. 'Welcome to Cairns Mr. Hood. Excellent landing by the way. Couldn't have done it better myself.'

Ben took the microphone off Elizabeth. 'Thanks for your assistance Eric. I'd have been struggling without you.'

'If you can just taxi off the runway to one of those left hand roads we might start taking the other planes out of their holding patterns.'

'Right away,' said Ben, 'and please thank them for their patience.'

'Will do.'

'I need to speak with your most senior Federal Police representative as soon as possible,' said Ben. 'You have one at Cairns?'

'Yes, and he'll be with you in a minute or so.'

'Thanks,' said Ben. He dropped the microphone and gently applied power to the engine. He stepped off the brakes and steered the plane off the main runway to a side road and a holding bay several hundred metres away. A marked Federal Police vehicle pulled up a short distance away as well as several airport emergency vehicles, an ambulance and two fire engines. Ben turned off the engine. The propeller slowed and stopped. The silence was overwhelming. He opened his door and stepped onto the ground. His knees buckled and he fell heavily. Two ambulance officers were at his side immediately. His back was covered with blood, as was the back of the pilot's seat. Elizabeth knelt beside him, her hands to each side of his head. She looked at the ambulance officers. 'He's lost blood. There's a deep wound in his back under all that black tape.'

One of the ambulance men gently pushed Ben into a sitting position. He was quite conscious. 'Bit silly of me to fall out of the plane like that,'

'We'll get you in the ambulance and take a look, OK?'

Ben nodded.

Winston approached as Ben was helped to his feet. 'I don't quite know how to thank you Ben,' he said with a tremor in his voice.

'Where's the leather bag?' asked Ben.

'I got it,' called Sam as he joined the battered group. He seemed more in need of first aid than the others and was an obvious candidate for the ambulance.

'My mobile phones in there. Can you get it Winston? Turn it on and hit speed dial 9,'

'Why?'

'Just do it.'

Winston switched the phone on and hit the speed dial button. Ben sat down in the open doorway of the ambulance with Elizabeth close beside him. Winston put the phone to his ear. His face lit up. 'Well hello my darling. Remember me?' he said, his eyes full of tears.

Everyone heard Joy scream with surprise, relief and delight.

“****”

Chapter Thirty Eight

It was deemed necessary to take Ben and his passengers to Cairns hospital as a matter of priority. On the way Elizabeth used his phone to ring Mossman hospital and was able to speak briefly with Susan, and then also Brenda. It was impossible to make out details of the conversation because of laughter and tears. Susan advised that she would get one of the security guards to cover for her, grab a car and be right down.

Ben required surgery and blood. The Doctors didn't know quite where to start on Sam. He was covered with coral lacerations. Elizabeth's head would require x-ray and sutures, but only local anaesthesia.

Winston was in conversation with a Federal Police Inspector when Joy burst into the casualty area. Winston approached her and she ran to him, burying her head against his shoulder. They wrapped their arms around each other.

'I knew you were alive. Just knew it.'

Winston gently stroked her hair.

'That Ben Hood is a damn miracle worker and nothing less,' she said. 'Where is he?'

'Having some surgery. One of the chinks hit him in the back with a sharp metal thing but he'll be OK.'

'And he flew you all off the island! What a radical change of plans. I didn't know he could fly a plane?'

Winston smiled. 'I don't think he did either for a while.'

'What happened to Sam and his boat?' asked Joy.

'You talking about me?' said Sam as he approached from a surgical room. He was wearing green surgical pants and top. 'And that crappy old bitch is in bits on the bottom of the sea where she belongs.'

Joy went to hug him but he held up both hands. 'I'm cut to shreds. Leave me alone woman.'

'Thank God you made it too Samuel. This rescue would never have worked without you. I can't wait to hear all about it in absolute detail.'

'And I can't wait to get a drink,' growled Sam. 'They only got orange juice and tea here. That stuff could kill ya.'

'What's going to happen out on Skull?' asked Joy.

'I'm just explaining to an Inspector with the Federal Police now. This is a National Security matter and I understand some army helicopters will head out that way very soon. It's a bit complicated Joy but I made sure they could never have succeeded in what they were up to; at least I think I did.'

'Ben is sure the Police Inspector from Port Douglas and perhaps others are involved with Qian and his mob.'

'I already knew that,' said Winston. 'I saw the Inspector on the island a couple of times. The Federal Police will be in touch with the Queensland Police Commissioner today.'

Joy looked into her husband's eyes. 'I was tempted so many times to just give up hope. The police had given you up for dead and you were gone....day after day; night after night.'

'They had me locked up pretty tight. I tried to get away once but didn't get far. I got whipped for doing that. I just kept hoping that the police would come, but when the Inspector did, I could see that Qian was giving the orders.'

Elizabeth came out of a small surgical room. Her face was now clean and she was also wearing green surgical pants and top. Her hair was tied back in a pony tail and the left hand side of her head was bandaged. She and Joy hugged. 'The creeps tore my clothes,' she said. 'Ben gave me his shirt to wear home.'

'I think he gave you more than his shirt,' said Joy, holding both her hands tight.

Ben was out of surgery an hour later. He had not required general anaesthesia but was confined to a wheel chair until the Doctor was prepared to release him around lunch time. Susan arrived with Derek. Everyone gathered around Ben's chair all trying to talk at once. Joy wouldn't let go of his hand. The Federal Police spoke with Winston again. A Queensland State Police Commander also arrived and spoke briefly with Ben and in more detail with Winston. They would both be interviewed again the next day at Port Douglas. Susan went to buy light clothing to replace the hospital outfits. Sam said he was keeping the surgical pants and top because they suited his casual lifestyle.

Derek booked a white stretch limo to take Ben, Elizabeth and Sam back to Port Douglas. Winston insisted on driving his old Holden with his wife close beside him. The others followed the limo in convoy.

On the way Ben attempted to contact Yana on her mobile phone. The call went to voice mail. The same happened on her business phone.

Derek had convinced Winston and Joy to have refreshments with them in the Sheraton lounge before they headed home. The convoy turned off the highway to Port Douglas.

Sam insisted that they drop him off at the side of the road adjacent the track which led down to his house. Ben thanked him again and they shook hands. Sam disappeared into the thick scrub, blending quickly with the undergrowth in his hospital greens.

The limo pulled into the grand entrance to the Sheraton Mirage. Porters rushed to open the doors. Winston & Joy pulled up behind them and the concierge took care of their vehicle also. Thanks to a fair degree of secrecy, the press hadn't learned of recent events and were no-where to be seen.

The Sheraton foyer was cool and inviting. The resort Manager and Head of Security welcomed them back. Neither had any idea what had transpired since the abduction of Elizabeth and the wounding of Brenda and Derek had sworn them both to absolute secrecy on what they did know. For the time being they had to be content with knowing very little, other than the fact that their 'family friendly' resort would remain so, notwithstanding a 'nasty incident' involving a world famous movie star. The press were not given any other details but the resort was now in worldwide headline news with its reputation intact and obtaining more publicity than their marketing team had achieved in the last 10 years.

Elizabeth had her arm tucked through Ben's as they walked across the foyer. Susan followed then Winston, Joy and Derek.

The first inkling that something was wrong was the hair standing up on the back of Ben's neck. He froze and Elizabeth stopped immediately beside him.

'What's wrong?'

'They are wrong.' Ben pointed towards two casually dressed Chinese men standing against the wall to their left. 'And them.' He looked right to another two Chinese men at the steps down to the cocktail bar.

'God no,' whispered Elizabeth.

'What's the matter?' asked Derek.

'We got the wrong kind of company,' Winston said.

'Go and sit down there,' said Ben, indicating a large lounge area in the centre of the foyer. Derek sensed the urgency in Ben's voice and obeyed instantly. Winston and Joy followed.

Susan moved up. 'You sure they are trouble?'

'Looks like it,' said Ben softly. 'Four at least. Don't turn around but I can only guess more back there.'

'Do you think they'll fight?' asked Elizabeth, tensing her body.

'Looks like it's payback time,' said Ben.

'You're in no condition to fight,' whispered Elizabeth.

'I'm not going to make this easy for them. You girls scam,'

'No way,' they both said in unison.

The four men approached slowly. The expressions on their faces were blank. They kept their eyes on Ben.

'There's more behind,' said Susan softly.

The Chinese men to their left and right suddenly stopped and stood motionless. Footsteps sounded from behind. Ben tensed, ready to spring into action with every ounce of fight left in him. Elizabeth let go his arm and assumed a defensive position.

'You need some help Copper?'

Ben turned slowly. Yana approached him from the entrance to the foyer. Two more Chinese men in casual clothing stood motionless to his rear left. They let Yana walk past them as if she didn't exist. Ben saw the reason why. The imposing figure of Akira Misaki strode a few metres behind her. He moved close to one of the younger Chinese men and said something very quietly. The young man nodded as did his companion. Both walked around Ben and joined the other four. Akira walked to Ben's side and put a massive hand on his shoulder. The six men stood still. Akira said something softly but firmly in Chinese. He looked at each man in turn. When he had finished the younger man took a step forward and made a low bow to Akira and Ben. The other men did the same. They straightened but kept their eyes on the ground. The Chinese man, who had stepped forward, said something to Akira in a soft, respectful tone. Akira nodded.

The six men left quickly via the front doors to the resort. The resort Manager and the Head of Security, watched in silence from where they were standing at the reception counter.

'Always in bloody trouble,' said Akira.

Yana approached Ben and kissed him firmly on the lips. 'I thought you might need help.' She looked at Elizabeth. 'I'm Yana,'

Elizabeth held out her hand. 'I think we owe you big time Yana.' The girls shook hands.

Susan waved at Yana. 'I'm Susan.'

‘OK,’ said Ben. ‘Would someone explain why we just walked out of a massive fight?’

‘I trained one of those little bastards in Japan,’ said Akira. ‘He knows me and he knows my rank. They are just mercenaries. They do what they are paid to do. They do not mess with Hachidan. Even they have respect for the rank.’

‘Did they mention their boss Chin Chian Qian?’

‘He apparently left instructions and has taken a boat ride somewhere. They were to metre out some retribution here and then go home any way they could.’

‘Do they know where he went?’

‘I didn’t ask.’

‘We came as soon as we felt you were in trouble,’ said Yana.

‘Well you did good Lawyer.’ He looked back at Akira. ‘Thank you old friend.’

‘Ah, it was nothing. Now who is this delightful creature?’ He approached Elizabeth and took one of her hands in his massive paw.

‘I’m Liz.’

Akira looked closely at her. ‘You and Ben have been fighting?’

‘She laughed. ‘Not each other, that’s for sure. He’s my hero actually.’

Yana’s eyes narrowed marginally.

Akira beamed and tucked Elizabeth’s arm through his. ‘How about we all go down to the lounge and have some nice green tea and Ben can introduce me to his friends.’

‘You know I hate that shi...’

Akira’s smile widened. His deep laughter turned every head in the huge expanse of the Sheraton foyer.

“*****”

Chapter Thirty Nine

Ben phoned Brenda at Mossman hospital that same afternoon. She was so excited to hear his voice and know he was alright that he could not shut her up. She told him that they were allowing her to return to the resort the following day and that Liz would be picking her up. She wasn't allowed to start acting again or do anything strenuous for at least 2 weeks. She told Ben that there was now a uniformed policeman standing outside her door. She thought the police didn't care.

Yana and Akira had open return flights to Sydney but decided to stay the night to catch up with recent events and meet Ben's friends. Derek promised to pay their expenses. Akira dismissed the offer with a wave of his hand.

Winston and Joy stayed for a cup of tea. Before they left Winston moved across to where Ben, Elizabeth and Yana were chatting. It was obvious he wanted to say something so they ceased talking.

'I've got many questions to ask you Mr. Hood, as no doubt you have of me. I gather we will get that chance tomorrow at the Port Douglas police station. There is a bit of a cleanup happening at the police station I hear.'

Ben smiled.

'I'm just intrigued to know how you got into the damn bunker on the island. It's locked up tighter than Fort Knox!'

'I just spoke to the guy and he let me in.'

'No way. They only let their own in. How did you do it?'

'I spoke to him in Chinese.'

'I didn't realise you spoke Chinese.'

Elizabeth said, 'Neither did I. Bit like flying that plane eh?'

'I learned a couple of words from a Chinese student I dated in another life.'

'What words?' asked Elizabeth.

Ben looked embarrassed. 'Look, it got me inside, OK. That's all you have to know.'

'No way buster,' said Elizabeth firmly. 'What did you say to him?'

Ben looked at Yana for help but wasn't getting any from that direction.

'I called him my lover and told him I missed him. That's all I know in Chinese.'

Elizabeth and Yana almost collapsed with laughter. Winston patted Ben on the arm. 'Well done young man. Well done.'

During dinner, Yana and Elizabeth chatted together like old friends. It made Ben nervous. Susan was enjoying his discomfort immensely. Derek got drunk and began hugging everyone and crying. He baulked at hugging Akira. The film's director, Sandra Quinn, had become friendly with a very rich, single, Japanese hotel guest and had been whisked away in a limo into town for dinner. Several of the film crew including Andy Hayter, the injured underwater cameraman and the chief technician, Stan Café, joined them. Champagne, beer and cocktails flowed. The mood was one of immense relief and excitement.

Later, Ben stood in the darkness of his room, looking out at the flickering lanterns and the swaying coconut palms. His back ached from the wound. His entire body ached. He was bone tired.

The mini bar held two tiny bottles of Scotch whisky. He downed one of them quickly. The huge double bed was amazingly comfortable and he lay back listening to the wind stirring palm tops through the open window.

He was thinking of Yana, regretting her youthfulness and resenting his age. Feeling selfish for taking advantage of her passion. He was also thinking of Liz. Tall and beautiful, closer to his age and a body to die for. He was thinking of Brenda. Fresh, youthful and full of life. Vivacious, flirtatious and wonderfully wholesome. His pin up girl. The dream girl he never imagined he would ever meet. Joy and Winston reunited. Sam back in his riverside shack with a bottle of whisky.

He suddenly sat upright. 'Shit.....Ricks re-breather. He'll be furious! I'm up for eight grand to replace that gadget.' Then he smiled and lay back. 'Minor problem Ben,' he said softly to himself. He was asleep within seconds.

“*****”

Epilogue

Brenda's arrival back at the Sheraton Mirage was leaked by chance to the media. Crowds gathered and cameras flashed. She swept through the foyer as if she had never been injured and flung herself into Ben's arms. Their kiss was long and passionate. The camera's missed nothing. The photo was front page nationally and internationally the following day with rumours of an impending wedding. Brenda felt the newspaper articles were hysterical and teased Elizabeth mercilessly about the wild speculation.

Detective Lisbet Fenton slapped the front page of the Daily Telegraph on Detective Sergeant Simon Bastock's desk and demanded he immediately write out a check for \$1,000 and have it ready for Ben.

Army helicopters landed on Skull Island the day after the miraculous escape. It was totally deserted. Specialist communication experts entered the 60 metre long undersea tunnel running from the bunker and made a thorough examination of what Winston had previously described as a 'wire transfer interception area. Here the submarine communications cable out of Port Douglas had been skilfully re-routed through sophisticated de-encrypting equipment, which when operational, would allow undetected interception of thousands of international money transfers. The equipment was designed to create known and acceptable identities at the receiving end and receipting protocol for each money transfer so as not to arouse suspicions at the sender's end. The money skimmed could have amounted to billions of dollars before anyone became suspicious. Winston had set self sabotage programmes in place but these would not have been shown to be effective until the interception process had commenced on schedule. Should these sabotage programmes have caused issues for Mr Qian, there is no doubt that Winston's execution would have followed immediately. The equipment was carefully dismantled by communications experts and Federal Police. It was later flown back to Canberra for further inspection. The submarine cable running beside Skull Island was repaired and re-positioned in the sea bed. The tunnel and bunker area were totally destroyed, as was Qian's large house, desalination plant and power generators. Winston had taken care of the aircraft hangar himself. The army recovered Rick's re-breather and other diving gear left behind by Ben, and returned it to a grateful owner.

Chin Chian Qian and three of his staff were arrested two days later as they attempted to disembark their boat at Port Moresby PNG. Authorities had been tracking his medium sized motor vessel since it left the tip of Australia. Qian was later extradited to Australia. Some days later, under tight security, he was charged in the Brisbane Magistrates court with a variety of state and federal matters including the murder of his former Head of Risk Management, Mr. Do Tu Du. He was refused bail awaiting investigations and formal prosecutions. His Australian based Lightning Investment Company was de-registered by ASIC. A brown Lincoln sedan was found burnt out at the edge of four mile beach south of Port Douglas. The ownership of Skull Island was returned by Court Order to the Queensland Government.

Inspector Roy Tanner and Sergeant Adam Kennedy, formally of the Port Douglas police station, were charged with numerous federal and state crimes. Tanner was refused bail due to the serious nature of charges against him. A long prison sentence was anticipated. Both were dishonourably dismissed from the Queensland Police Department.

The film 'Coral Sea Affair' was completed behind schedule and way over budget in October of that year. Brenda had pleaded with Ben to come to the premiere launch in Los Angeles, but he declined. His face was on far too many newspapers and magazines for his liking at the moment. The film made millions of dollars at the USA box office in its first week running. Derek was ecstatic. Brenda was swamped with offers from film makers, magazines and TV shows. Brenda and Elizabeth omitted to tell Ben that they were both heading for Sydney for the Australian release of the movie. He was threatened with death by Yana if he didn't attend that particular release. His shock at seeing Brenda and Liz alight from a stretch Hummer and walk along the red carpet was only deepened when he found himself dragged under the cordon rope by Elizabeth to complete the remainder of the walk to the Cinema complex with Brenda holding one of his hands, and Elizabeth the other. Once again, pictures appeared in newspapers and further speculation went wild as to the wedding date. Winston and Joy sat back in their lounge, watching the news coverage of the Sydney launch of 'Coral Sea Affair' on TV. Joy held her husband's hand tightly. 'Doesn't our Ben look fine?' Winston smiled and nodded. 'A little nervous but just fine.'

Ben got his \$1,000 from Simon Bastock. He gave it to Detective Lisbet Fenton. She immediately booked a trip to Bali. She had never been able to afford to travel overseas.

Ben resigned from the NSW Police Force. There was no further investigation or inquiry into the previous shootings. He continued working for Rodney Reid's specialised security service, with the additional burden of unwelcomed celebrity status. That status eased over time. He and Fay quietly divorced. She got the home and the car. He didn't care. He rented a modest apartment in Mosman, with water views. He continued Karate training with Akira and was partnered regularly with Yana. Ben decided that some Lawyers were not all that bad after all.

Sam was urinating into the river from the front window of his shack one morning when an impressive 25 foot cruiser complete with flying bridge approached. The driver cut the engine and nudged the bow into the mud beside Sam's house. Sam pulled his green hospital pants up. Rick Turner waved from the bridge. 'Sam you old bugger. I've got a present for you from Ben and those movie people!'

Sam spat in the water. 'Well where's the bloody present?' Rick waved his arms dramatically. 'I'm standing on it....!'

“****”

About the Author

Drew Lindsay is a dynamic Australian Novelist and Writer. Drew is a Sydney man. He hated school and almost flunked everything academically until he reached the Police Force. There he excelled academically, graduating Detective Training with honours. He later went on to complete Post Graduate achievements in Fraud Investigation at Charles Sturt University.

Drew has been a story teller and writer of short stories for many years. He was a Policeman, Detective and Fraud Investigation expert for almost three decades. Drew is an experienced SCUBA Diver and DiveMaster by qualification. He holds a private pilot's licence. He has travelled extensively throughout Australia and the world. He has a great love of entertaining others with his vivid imagination. His novels allow the reader to escape into worlds of romance, excitement, danger, humour and fast paced adventure.



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“*****”

SPECIAL PREVIEW

BLACK MOUNTAIN AFFAIR

**Is it possible that Ben Hood can get into more trouble than he did in
Coral Sea Affair?**

A whole lot more trouble actually.....

“***”**

Black Mountain Affair

**By Drew Lindsay
Smashwords Edition**

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

This book is dedicated to my children:-

**Karen
Adam
Joanne
Sandra
Alexandra
Lloyd**

With love from a proud Dad

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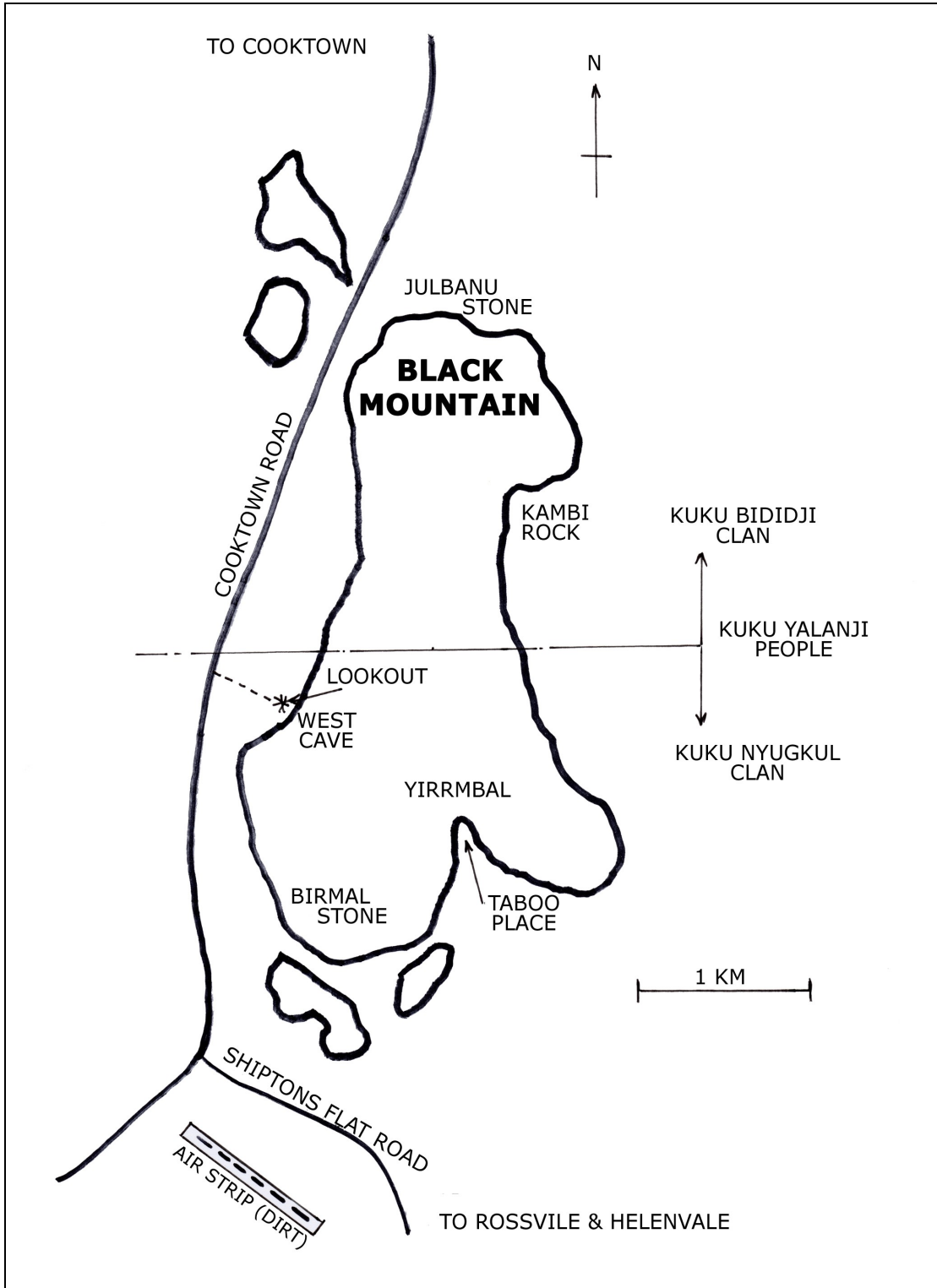
Thank you Leonarda for another great cover.

<http://leonardaarmstrong.com>

Thank you to the people, especially my Brother in Law, Dr. Andrew Godden, who took the time to point out that my spelling is lousy; that I can't always rely on spellchecker and it's about time I actually learned the difference between it's and its.

Thank you also to Michelle Lafferty for taking the time to make me aware that snakes don't have eyelids and therefore cannot blink...!

Black Mountain Map



Chapter One

‘You might think this is a beautiful place people, but don’t let the looks trick you. Those rocks are full of fear and death.’ Bobby Gumtree (fake surname) pushed a battered akubra back on his silver haired head and wiped sweat from his brow. Bobby ran “Bobby’s Aboriginal Tours” out of Cooktown in Australia’s Far North Queensland. He and his tour group, consisting of two families with sunburnt parents, bored teenagers and over adventurous 7 and 9 year olds, stood on a timber platform overlooking part of Black Mountain at its western base.

‘You don’t want to go climbing about on those huge boulders,’ Bobby continued. ‘There are crevasses and caves and holes all over the place that drop way down into the darkness of the earth where you’d never be found again. And if the fall didn’t kill you, the giant amethystine python would slide down through the blackness and crush the life out of what was left before devouring you, bones and all.’ The teenagers were now mildly interested.

‘Bobby! Really. I don’t think that’s quite appropriate.’ Margaret Quinn gathered her 7 year old daughter close.

‘Sorry lady. Just telling the truth. Then there’s the Queensland Tiger that people have seen around here on moonlight nights. Not a problem for us because it’s the middle of the day, but here at night he’d hunt you down and have you for dinner.’

Margaret Quinn looked desperately at her husband but he was enjoying the tales more than the teenagers.

‘And of course we have the ghost bats. Hundreds of them live down there in those rocks along with all kinds of other bats.’

‘So what’s special about the ghost bats?’ asked one of the teenage girls, shaking a lock of blond hair from her eyes.

‘Sharp teeth girly. Carnivorous. They fly on gossamer wings and strike lethally in the blackness.’

‘I hardly think such creatures exist,’ interjected Margaret.

‘Oh yes lady,’ said Bobby seriously. ‘They’re around here all right. You don’t go wandering off near Black Mountain in the day and especially at night. Full of evil spirits and the bones of the dead. Just listen for a moment.’

A warm sea breeze stirred the green and golden undergrowth surrounding the mountainous pile of dark grey rocks towering above them. Soft moaning sounds came from deep within the rubble. ‘Some say it’s just the wind,’ Bobby said. ‘Others say it’s the souls of the dead.’

Margaret’s husband, John, stepped to the edge of the timber railing which surrounded the viewing platform. He turned and faced Bobby. ‘We read all about these wild tales on the Internet at home. You guys have been telling whoppers about this place for years. It brings in the tourists.’

Bobby pulled the akubra down tight on his elderly head and glanced towards the sun. ‘Perhaps time to go. We’ve got lots more to see.’

John grinned at his wife and gave a knowing wink. ‘Let’s go kids,’ he called. ‘Bobby has other exciting stuff to show us.’

‘Where’s Beth?’ Janice Price, the other Mum, looked about frantically. ‘Beth!’ she called loudly. Her husband, Jordan, rushed to the platform railing. ‘BETH.... You answer us right now honey!’

Margaret and John did a quick head count on their children. All present.

‘Who saw her last?’ Bobby asked. The concern was obvious in his voice.

‘She was right beside me less than a minute ago,’ said Janice Price, her voice rising in pitch as hysteria rose within her.

Bobby made a quick inspection from all sides of the viewing platform. The little girl was no-where to be seen.

‘I’m going to search the rocks,’ said Jordan. ‘She can’t have gone far.’

‘No!’ Bobby’s voice was loud and firm. ‘I’ll search. You all stay here.’ He looked at Janice. ‘About 8 or 9 with short red hair?’

Janice gripped her husband’s arm. Jordan Price looked at Bobby and nodded. ‘She’s 9.’ Bobby ran back to the stairs leading onto the platform. He knew a little girl could not have climbed off the platform to the ground. She would have gone back to the stairs, giving her easy access to the ground beneath. To the right of the platform was thick scrub. Impassable. To the left was a tiny track worn by resident animals. Bobby moved quickly down the track. It skirted two massive granite boulders and went underneath another, into the semi darkness of a cavern. Shards of sunlight cut through holes between the rocks above. Blackness lay beyond. The rustling of leathery wings came from the blackness. The unmistakable stench of death lingered in the stale air.

The little girl stood motionless. Her eyes stared at Bobby, unblinking, full of fear. Bobby switched on his tiny key ring torch. ‘Beth?’

The girl nodded.

‘You OK missy?’

The girl remained silent.

‘Shouldn’t go wandering off like that missy. Scared the crap out Mum and Dad.’

Beth kept her eyes fixed on him.

Bobby shone his little torch over the girl. He sucked in his breath when he saw that her hands and arms were covered with blood. ‘Lord oh Lord! You hurt yourself?’

Beth shook her head. She slowly turned to the left but then quickly straightened and stared at Bobby. Her mouth opened but she couldn’t form words. Bobby’s eyes were now growing accustomed to the semi darkness. Two lumps were visible on the ground just behind the little girl.

‘OK Beth.... You head on out of here just the way you walked in. Your parents are waiting for you outside. You understand me darling?’

The red haired girl nodded again. She took hesitating steps towards Bobby, never taking her eyes off his. She froze as he laid a black, wrinkled hand on her shoulder, but then grasped it tightly with her tiny, blood stained hands.

‘It’s OK Beth. You just keep going my dear. Your parents are waiting outside. I’ll have a bit of a look around and be right behind you.’

The tiny fingers refused to release their grip on the large black hand. Bobby unclasped her fingers and pushed her gently towards the light. Beth walked unsteadily away from him. He swung the light back into the cavern. The stench of dead flesh was overpowering. As he moved closer he could see arms, two naked torsos, legs, two heads....one larger than the other.

Little Beth had tripped over two dead bodies. She had fallen into them, hence the blood on her hands and arms. Bobby wanted to vomit. He swallowed hard and looked back at the shards of light indicating the entrance to the cavern. Running from this sickening death hole would have been logical but he turned his torch back to the bodies on the ground. Both were female. Both were Aboriginal. There was no clothing on or near them. Both had suffered horrific physical injuries, probably by a swinging machete or axe. One was a woman of at least 30 although it was difficult to tell from the shocking wounds over her body. The other was in her early teens. The older woman's head was almost totally severed from her body. Neither had a right hand. Each right hand had been severed at the wrist. Bobby shone his torch around frantically. No hands.

Distressed parents were attempting to understand why their stone faced, blood covered daughter wasn't talking. Janice Price was hysterical. The teenagers had lost their detached demeanour and were looking decidedly alarmed. Margaret Quinn was clinging to her husband and their children had gone into a family huddle.

Bobby strode past the viewing platform without a word and jumped into the driver's seat of his four wheel drive tourist van. A mobile phone nestled in his pocket but was forgotten because of shock. He turned on the two way radio and put the microphone to his mouth. 'Lucy....'

A few moments later a bubbly female voice came back. 'Bobby. How did you get past the spiders living on that old radio? What happened to your phone?'

'Lucy. I'm at the Black Mountain lookout. I need help.'

'You fall down and hurt yourself again old man?'

'No. There are two bodies here. Two girls both hacked up bad.'

'God in heaven Bobby!'

'I need the coppers out here.'

'OK. OK. Don't panic. I'll ring them.'

Bobby dropped the microphone. He turned off his key ring torch and sat back with his eyes closed. The rest of today's tour would have to be cancelled. Yes..... cancelled. No question about that.

“*****”

Chapter Two

Inspector Peter Martin covered the 26 kilometre trip from Cooktown to Black Mountain in record time. He hammered the mud splattered four wheel drive Nissan Patrol down highway 81, ignoring the occasional warning by his companion, Senior Constable Binda Spencer, that he may kill them both at any moment. That said however, Binda, a distant descendent from the local Aboriginal tribe, Kuku Yalanji, was enjoying the speed and occasionally smiled widely, showing pearly white teeth in contrast with her dark olive skin.

They came to a sliding halt in a cloud of red dust at the turn off to the Black Mountain lookout. Minutes later their four wheel drive vehicle pulled up alongside Bobby Gumtree's tourist van. Inspector Martin pulled on his broad rimmed police hat and stepped down onto the dry grass. He approached Bobby and the two shook hands. Binda walked to the front of the police vehicle and stopped. She wasn't wearing a hat. She didn't really need one. Her long black hair was curled up into a bun and attached to the top of her head with a large brown plastic clip. She rested her right hand casually on the holstered butt of a Glock 22 pistol, not because she felt threatened at this time, but more from habit.

The Price and Quinn families remained huddled together under the shade of a tree near Bobby's tour vehicle. Little Beth had been washed. The front of her jeans and tee shirt were also soaked as frantic parents sought to remove all traces of blood. Beth was standing quite still and made no attempt to answer questions from her family or anyone else in the party.

'I think we should get her to the hospital,' Janice Price was saying to her husband. 'Something dreadful has happened to her. Look at her!'

'She's not injured from what I can see,' replied her husband.

'I don't care what you can or can't see Jordan. I want her taken to hospital as soon as possible!' Her voice was once again becoming hysterical.

'What's going on here Bobby?' asked Inspector Martin. 'Something happen to the little girl?'

'Just shock.'

'We heard you found bodies?'

'Little miss found them first. That's why she's like that.' Bobby waved vaguely at Beth Price. 'She wandered off into one of the caverns and tripped over them. Covered in their blood the poor little thing.'

'Better show us where they are eh?' said Peter Martin.

'I'll point you to the entrance but no way am I going back in that *Kalkajaka*,' Bobby replied.

Binda Spencer moved to Bobby's side and laid a soft hand on his leathery, black arm. She looked back at Peter Martin. '*Kalkajaka* is the Aboriginal name for Black Mountain. It's also called the mountain of death.'

Inspector Martin looked toward the group of tourists. 'I'll have a brief word with them first. You show us where the bodies are and then take your tourists back to town. No press Bobby. Not a word of this. You warn your group to say nothing.'

‘They don’t know nothing,’ said Bobby. ‘I didn’t tell them and the little girl hasn’t said a word since she came out of the cave. I think they better take her to the hospital.’

‘Alright, but I want Ruth to examine her.’ He turned to Binda ‘You got Ruth’s number?’

Binda nodded and searched her mobile phone contacts. She clicked on the contact which read: “Dr. Ruth Cruise. G.P. and Forensic Pathologist.” Ruth answered immediately. Binda moved away and spoke softly into the phone.

‘Bobby, you recognise the deadens?’ asked Inspector Martin.

‘Didn’t take close enough look boss. Too busy gettin out of there. One’s a woman and the other a little girl I think. They are both chopped up pretty bad. They both have lost their right hands.’

‘What?’

Bobby looked back at his group of sombre tourists. He lowered his voice. ‘Both had their right hands cut off boss. Oddest thing I’ve ever seen.’

‘How dark in that cave?’

‘Black as hell itself. Probably full of bats and lord knows where those snakes are hiding.’

‘I’ll get a torch.’ Peter Martin strode to his Nissan Patrol police vehicle and opened the rear hatch. He removed a large portable searchlight and indicated for Bobby to accompany him to the group of tourists. ‘I’m Inspector Peter Martin from Cooktown Police Station. I know your trip hasn’t turned out as expected today but please bear with us for a few more minutes. I’ll have Bobby drive you back to town soon.’

Janice Price was stroking her daughter’s hair. Her husband Jordan looked haggard and lost. Janice lifted her eyes to the policeman and gazed at him for a long moment. ‘Something in that mountain did this to my little girl. She needs help.’

‘I’m having a very experienced Doctor take a look at her at the hospital when you get back to Cooktown. Her name is Dr. Ruth Cruise. She is extremely good with children. My partner is arranging it now.’

‘You shouldn’t let people come out here if the mountain is dangerous,’ said Jordan Price. ‘You should put up signs and stop the blacks doing tours out here.’

Peter Martin took a step towards the diminutive and sunburned Jordan Price. Jordan took a step backwards. ‘I understand that you have all suffered a bit of a shock out here today and we are going to have this little girl examined by a Doctor very soon.’ He looked at the others in the group. ‘Bobby is going to show me where he found this little girl and I will investigate.’ He fixed his eyes on Jordan Price. ‘These “blacks” as you call them, were the custodians of this land long before we got here and this mountain is sacred. It’s also dangerous and that is why we have tour guides like Bobby, take you to safe viewing locations. He can’t however, be responsible for all your children as well. That’s your job as parents. Your little girl wandered off. That’s your responsibility. She’s your kid. I understand Bobby went into that damn dangerous mountain and got her out.’

‘Ruth’s on her way to the hospital,’ called Binda

Inspector Martin kept his eyes fixed on Jordan Price. ‘Now you all get into that tourist van and I’ll have Bobby start the motor and put the air conditioning on. I’ll need Bobby for a little while and when he comes back he’ll drive you to the hospital and your girl will be seen to. Do you understand me?’

Jordan Price nodded...defeated.

Peter Martin gestured to Bobby to open his van. The small group of visitors climbed inside without a word. Bobby started the motor and turned on the air conditioning. The sliding door closed and he headed for the animal track running beside the viewing platform. The uniformed policeman followed with his partner close behind.

Bobby stopped as they approached the gaping entrance to the cavern beneath massive grey boulders. The faint hum of the idling tourist van motor was initially the only sound they could hear, but this was suddenly replaced by dozens of clicking sounds which became a roar from the upward direction of thousands of boulders piled hundreds of metres above them to the mountain's peaks. The roar softened momentarily and then increased for several seconds. Suddenly, as if governed by the downward plunge of a conductor's wand, the noise ceased altogether.

'What the hell was that?' Peter Martin gazed upward, scanning the huge mass of granite rocks.

'Frogs,' said Bobby. 'Boulder frogs. Thousands of them up there. Must be a storm on the way.'

'Then you better get your tourists back to town. The deadens in there?'

Bobby pointed into the cavern with a shaking, outstretched hand. 'You smell em boss?'

Peter Martin looked back at Bobby and then to his partner Binda. He turned on the huge searchlight. Its beam penetrated the darkness beyond. 'Yeah, I can smell them. Get your people out of here Bobby...and don't call me boss.'

“*****”

Chapter Three

Inspector Martin entered the cavern with cautious steps. There was no mistaking the bodies on the ground towards the rear of the labyrinth of black lava rocks. Binda Spencer had seen dead bodies before, but only a few and never hacked up like these two. The dead people she had seen before looked asleep. As she moved closer to these butchered individuals, it was clear from the frozen looks on both faces that they had died in absolute terror.

Peter Martin slowly shone the searchlight over each body. He also noted they were both Aboriginal and from his own experience of dead bodies, had probably lain in the cave for a day or so.

The sound of Bobby's van retreated in the distance but was replaced with soft fluttering sounds in the darkness of the lofty ceiling. Peter shone his torch upward and thousands of leathery wings began to beat wildly as the bats were startled by the brilliant light. He moved the beam down to the cavern floor.

'We have ourselves a very sickening crime scene Binda. Do you know either of these girls?'

'Yes,' said Binda softly. Glistening tears rolled down her ebony cheeks. The little one is Koorine Burton. The other is her Mum, Oola. They live out near Hope Vale but work for Mrs. Jerome down Quarantine Road.'

Peter nodded slowly. 'They don't live near Hope Vale anymore I'm afraid. They've upset someone quite badly by the look of things.'

'I can't understand,' said Binda in a hushed voice. 'These two didn't cause trouble. They just cleaned for Mrs. Jerome and everyone loved them.'

'Apparently not everyone,' said Peter Martin grimly. 'We've compromised the crime scene to some extent, walking up close to the bodies, as well as that little girl falling over them, so our next move will be to exit exactly the same way we came in. Touch nothing. I want Ruth out here as soon as possible. We're going to need Harry up from Cairns on this one. Double homicide.'

'Scientific?'

'Yep. I'll call Wal. I want this place photographed top to bottom, especially the dirt on the floor around the bodies. Then Ruth can do her thing. Can you ring her again and I'll get on the mobile to Harry.'

Binda nodded and carefully backed away from the grim scene. Peter Martin followed, thankful to reach the cavern entrance and the embrace of sunlight and fresh air. Back at their police vehicle Binda used her mobile phone to call Ruth Cruise. Peter Martin used his mobile to call the Cairns Detectives office.

The man he wanted answered the phone. 'Detective Keller.'

'Harry. It's Peter Martin. We got two deadens up here at Black Mountain. Nasty double homicide mate. Very nasty.'

'Jesus Peter! Lousy timing. The bride's got stuff planned. She's going to spew.'

'Won't be the first time. Can you hop a flight today?'

'You got the offender?'

'No. We got nothing at the moment. No motive, no suspect, no witnesses and a little girl fell over the bodies so the crime scene is contaminated to some extent.'

‘Bloody hell Peter. You don’t need me. You need a damn miracle worker.’
‘Can you brief the Regional Crime Coordinator and I’ll get something on the system by this evening.’

‘Yeah Yeah. Are the deadens white?’

‘No.’

‘Oh perfect. Why couldn’t they have been white? Everyone will be going ape.’

‘Harry, I need you up here.’

‘OK. OK, but you can call Jolanta and explain why you’re dragging me out of the dinner party tonight and I’d be wearing bloody ear plugs during that conversation if I was you.’

‘Alright, I’ll text her.’

‘Like hell you will. You call her. She’s going to cane your arse Peter.’

‘This is a nasty one Harry. I need to move on this quickly.’

Detective Inspector Maurice Keller sucked hard on what was left of the hand rolled cigarette poking from the end of his cigarette holder. ‘Alright. I’ll get some stuff together and be right up. I’ll bring Sutcliffe with me. He loves homicides, the sick bastard.’

‘I’ll be setting up lights at the scene later and clearing out the bats before Wal and Ruth do their thing.’

‘What bats?’

‘The caverns are full of bats and I’m told some of them bite.’

‘I hate those bastards.’

‘You hate everything.’

‘I love the horses.’

‘Only if they win. If they don’t you hate them, their owners, trainers and especially their riders; with a passion.’

‘OK, I’ll get up there as soon as I can but we are both in huge trouble with the bride over this.’

‘You get caught betting on the nags in your office again by the Cairns OIC and I’d lay bets that Jolanta’s temper will be nothing compared to his.’

‘You obviously don’t know my wife as well as I thought you did.’

‘You should have stayed in Brisbane. She hates the heat up here.’

‘But she loves the extra money I earn.’

‘To do what with in Cairns?’

‘She knows everyone in Cairns! I swear I’ve never been to so many parties in my bloody life.’

‘Ring me when you’re about to take off.’

‘You ring Jolanta right now. OK?’

‘Alright Harry.’ The call was terminated.

‘Why do you call him Harry?’ Binda walked to the passenger side door of the police vehicle.

‘His family and close friends call him Harry. I have no idea why.’

‘I thought his name was Maurice?’

‘It is, but I would suggest you call him Detective Inspector Keller. He doesn’t know you all that well.’

‘I met him last year with that deceased in the rain tank. I don’t think he likes me.’

Peter pointed to the driver’s seat. ‘I need to make some calls. You take us home.’

Binda moved around the back of the police vehicle and slid behind the steering wheel. Peter climbed into the passenger seat and slammed the door. 'And why would you think he doesn't like you?'

Binda turned the key and the motor roared. She engaged first gear and eased off the clutch. A cloud of red dust rose as they headed for the highway.

'Something he said?' asked Peter.

'Never looked at me. Never spoke to me. Totally ignored me.'

'Probably just having one of his days.'

'Ignored me for 3 whole days.'

'He gets these moods....'

Binda turned right onto the highway towards Cooktown and stamped her foot hard on the accelerator pedal.

Bobby Gumtree was waiting outside the Cooktown Hospital. Peter Martin approached with Binda close behind. 'How things go here Bobby?' asked Peter.

'Dr. Cruise is with the girlie now. That poor kid's had a dreadful fright. Dreadful.'

'And the others?'

'They say it's my fault. Say I should have warned them. I did warn them boss. I couldn't keep my eyes on every one of them.'

'My name is Peter. You call me Peter from now on. Got that?'

'Yes Bo..... Yes Peter.'

'Take them back to their hotel and refund their money. I'll have the Police Department reimburse you tomorrow.'

Bobby nodded.

'This is going to blow up big time but I want to get the experts in before the media descend. If the little girl talks, then she talks. You say nothing, OK?'

Bobby nodded again.

'Alright, I'm going to have a chat with Ruth when she's free. Can you get the tourists out of here ASAP?'

Bobby looked confused. Binda made a quick hand signal which Peter Martin didn't see. 'Oh sure,' said Bobby. 'Like lightning out of here. I get it.'

Dr. Ruth Cruise was the town's senior resident GP for Cooktown Hospital. She was also the area Forensic Pathologist. Originally from Melbourne, she had moved to Cairns and thence to Cooktown following the painful and drawn out separation and ultimate divorce from a high society neurosurgeon. He claimed she didn't fulfil his 'needs'. She claimed he was a narcissist, obsessional, jerk. Fortunately they had no children. Ruth's parents were dead and her only brother lived somewhere in Europe. She was in her mid 50's, of medium build and extremely fit from hours of running on a home treadmill and maintaining a whirlwind work schedule. She had short cropped blond hair, fair complexion and a freckled covered nose. In her 30's and 40's she was considered stunning, other than by her husband. Now her beauty had matured into the warm elegance which only age produces. She should have looked haggard and worn, having spent hundreds of hours at horrific crime scenes and in air conditioned (and sometimes not air conditioned) morgues. Her demeanour and beauty defied the odds.

Peter Martin pulled off his hat as he entered the air conditioned hospital. The Quinn and Price families studied him silently from the waiting area. He glanced at them briefly and continued to the admissions desk.

‘Hi Peter,’ said the young Aboriginal receptionist.

‘Kirra...you’re looking lovely as usual.’

‘You are so full of it Mr. Martin silver tongue. Suppose you’re looking for Ruth?’

He nodded.

‘She’ll be out in a moment. In with the girlie from that mob over there.

Would you like a cup of tea while you’re waiting?’

‘You don’t serve tea. I swear I don’t know how you even got a job here.’

Kirra laughed loudly, drawing the attention of the waiting families. ‘You got me the job and stop trying to deny it. I know stuff about you Peter Martin.’

‘Inspector Martin to you. Show some respect for the badge.’

Kirra laughed again, her dark face wreathed with smiles. ‘You come on through here and wait out in the prep area. Ruth won’t be long.’

She buzzed him through a metal and glass security door. Peter winked at Kirra and walked down the linoleum hallway to the prep room. He saw Binda walk through the reception area and stop to chat with Kirra.

Ruth ushered a young girl, barely 10 years of age, to the waiting room and spoke with her parents for some time. Janice Price looked decidedly unhappy. She held her daughter close and stroked her hair. Bobby Gumtree stood to one side. He looked extremely uncomfortable. Finally, Ruth approached Bobby and had a brief conversation. He left the building quickly. She moved to the admissions counter, nodded at Binda and asked Kirra to arrange two taxis for transportation.

‘What was that about?’ asked Peter as Ruth entered the prep room and dropped heavily into a chair. ‘They didn’t want Bobby driving them anywhere. They wanted taxis.’

‘The little girl?’

‘In shock. Understandable. I’ve arranged a session with her and Roy first thing tomorrow. I’ve said we’ll pay. That OK?’

‘Yeah. Yeah.’

‘She said that she tripped over two sleeping people in the cave. She said that they were covered with sticky stuff and smelt horrible, like when her cat died under the house last year.’

‘We got two dead Aboriginal women,’ said Peter. ‘Binda knows them. Oola Burton and her daughter.’

‘God no,’ said Ruth softly. ‘How?’

‘Hacked up with an axe by the look of it. Both naked. Both on their backs in the dirt. Both missing their right hands.’

‘What?’

‘Sliced off at the wrist with something heavy and razor sharp. The bones don’t even look splintered.’

‘And dragged into a cave at Black Mountain. What’s the significance?’

‘No idea Ruth. We’ll have to dig bit by bit from square one. So much for a quiet start to the year. This is going to be a damn nightmare, especially when the press get wind of it.’

‘Who knows?’

‘The two families if that kid blurts stuff.’

‘I don’t think she will just yet. I’ve sedated her actually. The parents know she will be out of it for much of the next 8 hours. Tomorrow will be another story.’

‘I’ll be getting Wal to set up for crime scene examination this evening and Harry is also on his way.’

‘My day has just sunk into the bog,’ Ruth moaned.

‘He’s our chief homicide investigator. He has to be involved. He’s bringing Ian Sutcliffe.’

Ruth clapped both hands to her head. ‘Not the dynamic duo. Couldn’t you just give me a paper cut and pour lemon juice over it?’

‘Ruth...’

‘He’s an obnoxious bore and the only reason Sutcliffe loves a death scene is because he’s probably sussing out all the good ones so he can create a masterpiece of his own.’

‘That’s not fair. They have a tough gig up here in the far north. I still don’t know how you handle these situations so calmly.’

‘The outside doesn’t always reflect the inside Peter.’

‘Obviously not.’

The two said nothing for a while. Ruth squirmed in her chair. ‘You still bluing with the Missus?’

‘What’s that got to do with anything? Who told you that anyway?’

‘This is Cooktown Peter. We got less than 2,000 in this town. I even know what type of underdaks you wear.’

Peter sat up straight and fumbled with the hat on his knees. ‘That’s crap. Sandra and I are getting on just fine, and my underwear is none of your damn business.’

‘Don’t puff up your chest at me Mister. This is a tough part of Australia and our jobs are even tougher. No-one wants our jobs, as if you didn’t notice, but our jobs are important.’

Peter studied her blue eyes. ‘Where is this leading?’

‘We got two dead Aboriginal ladies out at Black Mountain. From what you say, someone hacked them to death. They don’t have a voice now. They can’t say who did this to them. They can’t cry for justice.’

‘Will you talk sense Ruth?’

‘Like all the other horrible crime scenes you and I have worked up here Peter, this one will rob us of just a bit more of ourselves. It will take over our lives. Those around us will also suffer because of what we go through.’

‘I think perhaps you should book a session with Roy tomorrow. He’s the best shrink north of Cairns so I hear.’

‘Why am I even talking to you? OK, I’m not going to talk to you any more, other than about these two dead girls. Any personal affect their murders have on you or me as we work this case will not be discussed. Are we clear?’

‘We’ve never discussed how we personally felt about deaths up here.’

‘That’s a damn lie! We’ve got drunk and cried all over each other....’

‘What’s gotten into you Ruth?’

She jumped to her feet and glared at him. ‘Nothing you dumb copper. Nothing!’

‘You’ve never called me that before....’

‘I’m sorry Peter. I didn’t mean that. It’s been a tough day.’

‘I’m afraid it’s going to get somewhat tougher. I need you at the crime scene this evening.’

Tears were forming in Ruth’s eyes. She turned her back to Peter and wiped them away with her hand. ‘Just give me an hour. I need to go home and get my overalls and stuff.’

He got up. He felt uneasy. This was not how he usually felt with Ruth. 'Are you going to be OK?'

'Yep. Sorry. You run along and I'll be at the Police Station in an hour.'

'Bugger,' exclaimed Peter. 'I forgot to ask you to get a DNA sample from that little girl. I'll need it for elimination.'

'Already done it,' said Ruth. 'I'm not just a pretty face you know.'

'I can see that,' said Peter and he walked down to the reception area.

Kirra buzzed him out. Binda joined him as he walked down the front steps of the Hospital and climbed into the driver's seat of the police vehicle.

Binda slipped into the passenger's side. She studied his face for a moment. 'Someone slap you Sir?'

'Pardon?'

'You look a bit shell shocked.'

Peter started the engine. 'Yeah, it's been a tough day so far.'

BLACK MOUNTAIN AFFAIR

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