

Queen Conch

By Eric Douglas

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Chapter 1

Jackson Pauley was working hard. The bubbles from his exhaled breaths were rising quickly in front of his face, making it difficult to see very far, in spite of the exceptional visibility. He could see more than 100 feet in every direction, but neither Jackson nor his friend, Randy Littlebear, were thinking about the scenery. Or at least not directly.

Jackson adjusted his own buoyancy as he swam forward pushing the load. Littlebear hovered about eight feet above him, controlling the lift bag's buoyancy. They wanted to get the large concrete block into place. It was to be the anchor for a new mooring ball they were installing. Rather than risk dropping an anchor on the coral bottom, Jackson would only take divers to sites that had a mooring ball. Now that he owned the dive shop and could make the decisions for himself, he had gotten permission from the Coast Guard to place several more mooring buoys so he would always have a good selection of dive sites.

Jackson and Littlebear had already placed two anchors, but they had gotten an early start so it was still just the middle of the morning. The concrete weight had to be heavy enough to hold a large dive boat in place against a moderate current. It was always possible the ocean conditions could change while divers were in the water but the boat still needed to be there when the divers surfaced.

Littlebear signaled to Jackson where they needed to go to set the concrete block in place. He could see better from his higher position. Both divers were careful to aim for a sandy area with plenty of room around it. They didn't want the anchor to be dragged up against the corals. They made slow progress, feeling the gentle wave action from above moving them back and forth.

Swimming forward, Jackson glanced up to check on his friend and saw exactly what he did not want to see. The strap connecting the weight to the lift bag was slipping. The bag itself was fully inflated, straining with its 500 pounds of lift. The concrete block weighed slightly more than 500 pounds, but the buoyancy from the water made it almost perfectly neutral.

The strap continued to slip and Jackson knew it was going to come loose. He looked up at Littlebear and realized his friend had a firm grip on one of the carry handles on the lift bag while he pushed it through the water. The problem was Littlebear hadn't noticed it slipping yet. He couldn't see underneath the bag from where he was swimming. If Littlebear still had a grip on the handle when the anchor and lift bag separated, he could be ripped straight to the surface, totally out of control.

This terrible realization rushed through Jackson's mind in less than a second. His buddy was just out of reach, but he had to do something to warn him. He tried shouting through his regulator. No luck. The strap continued to slip; it was just barely connected.

Jackson kicked with all his energy toward Littlebear. He couldn't get the man's attention in time so he had no other choice. He crashed into the larger man, hitting him in the mid-section, as the strap gave way. Littlebear's instinctive reaction was to cover up and protect himself, releasing his hand from the lift bag.

Startled by the assault from below, Littlebear had no clue what was going on. He rolled to one side, grabbing Jackson and pulling him with him. He yelled and frantically searched with his eyes to figure out what was wrong.

Jackson pulled back from his friend and signaled for him to stop and get himself under control. Littlebear floated backward with a look and a hand gesture asking “What was that for?” Jackson just pointed up, indicating the large yellow bag bobbing on the surface more than 40 feet over their heads. Littlebear gave his friend a confused look, still not grasping the situation. Then Jackson pointed down. Directly below them lay the mooring anchor. Recognition dawned in the man’s eyes.

Fortunately, the weight landed exactly where they hoped it would. It was squarely in the middle of a patch of sand, but within 30 feet of an attractive coral formation and the beginning of a new reef section.

Jackson and Littlebear hovered where they were and tried to slow their breathing for a moment. Then they started laughing. Giving the signal, the buddies began their ascent and headed back for the boat. Littlebear collected the now-deflated lift bag.

“OK, that’s a good sign that it’s time to take a break for the day,” Jackson said as he swam over and grabbed the swim ladder hanging from the side of his boat *Daydreamer*.

“You’re right. I think we’re done for the day,” Littlebear agreed.

Boarding the boat, the two men were still chuckling to themselves as they put away their gear and prepared to head in. Jackson turned his cell phone on to see if anyone was looking for him. It rang almost immediately.

“Wow, they don’t give you a break, do they?” Littlebear said, surprised.

“No, they don’t, but this isn’t the shop. Not sure who it is, but they have my private line,” Jackson replied.

“Hello,” he said a bit cautiously as he answered the phone, then he listened. “Well, sure, come on down. I’ve got plenty of room. See you in a bit.”

“What was that all about?” Littlebear asked.

“An old friend of mine is coming into town. He is driving down and will be here in a few minutes,” Jackson said as he started the boat and headed back to the dock.

“Just dropping in?”

“He’s a news photographer for a magazine. His schedule keeps him moving around a lot, he doesn’t get much of a chance to plan. I guess when he gets a chance to take a break, he takes it. His name is Mike Scott.”

Mike and Jackson met on the day the world changed for both of them, along with much of the rest of the world—9/11. Jackson was working as firefighter/paramedic in Manhattan when the two airliners crashed into the twin towers. Mike Scott was at the *Time* magazine office, just having returned from a trip abroad, and watched the tragedy from a front row seat. Mike grabbed his camera and rushed to the streets.

Mike ended up basing a lot of his coverage of the 9/11 attacks on Jackson’s engine company and the work they did, the struggles they went through and the aftermath. After Jackson retired from the department and moved south, he and Mike had stayed in touch.

Just outside the marina where Jackson docked his boat, he eased off on the throttles and entered the No Wake Zone. Littlebear’s phone rang and he wasn’t watching what was going on around them. Jackson was guiding the boat toward the marina and not looking out behind them. Littlebear looked up, but it was almost too late.

“Jackson, watch out!” Littlebear shouted.

Jackson looked around just in time to see a large fishing boat come around the sea wall, barreling down on them.

“What the hell?” Jackson said as he pushed Daydreamer’s throttles forward and dodged out of the way of the larger boat. “Hang on!” The fishing boat never slowed down or swerved to avoid them.

“What was that all about?” Jackson said as he slowed his boat back down and entered the marina. “Those guys know better than that.”

“Maybe one of them was late for a date or something,” Littlebear joked.

“If I run into them, I’ll probably let them know I’m not pleased,” Jackson agreed with a laugh. He pulled into his slip and began tying the boat off. Littlebear coiled up the lines on the dock.

“Hey Jackson, look up there,” Littlebear said with a nod of his head.

“Very nice,” Jackson agreed with a grin when he saw where Littlebear was looking. Walking along the upper dock area was a woman. Her curly brown hair was tied up in a pony tail. She was wearing a bikini top and a pair of shorts.

“Looks good from here,” Littlebear said with a nod. “I like the way she walks. OK, well, I’ve got to take off. The call earlier told me I needed to get to work.”

“Sure, pal. Talk to you soon,” Jackson said. “Maybe we’ll meet up later for a beer or something.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Littlebear said as he walked up the ramp to the parking lot.

“And stay away from the hottie on the dock,” Jackson said with a smirk.

Jackson had just walked inside his houseboat when he heard footsteps coming down the dock.

“Permission to come aboard, Captain,” Mike Scott said as he walked up. An imposing figure at 6’2” Mike’s dark hair and broad shoulders filled the doorway. Jackson pushed the lightweight door open with his foot and handed Mike a cold beer.

“Good to see you,” Jackson said as they shook hands.

“Good to see you, too. Looks like you’re doing pretty well for yourself,” Mike said as he looked around the lounge area of the 40-foot Pluckibaum aluminum house boat.

“So, where are you off to, or back from, this time?” Jackson asked, noticing that Mike was traveling light. He was only carrying his camera bag and a single soft duffle—like always.

“I’m on my way back home. I landed in Miami so I thought I would take a couple days before checking back in with the office,” Mike explained. His magazine was based in New York, but he was able to work out of his home on Roanoke Island in North Carolina. Not that he saw the place all that much. “That, and a buddy of mine asked me to try out a new underwater camera housing for him. The conditions are pretty bad up north so I figured I would have better luck down here.”

“Dive conditions are great around here right now. We’re running trips to all the local sites both morning and afternoon. What kind of diving do you want to do?” Jackson said, motioning his friend inside the houseboat and out of the glare of the sun.

“Nothing in particular, but to be honest, I’d like some quiet time, too. This last trip got pretty nasty. I need to decompress from the world a little bit, if you know what I mean? No phone, no newspapers, no deadlines,” Mike explained. “I was wondering if I could convince you to do a private charter for me for a couple days. Just you and me on the *Daydreamer* out there.”

Daydreamer was a 28-foot Boston Whaler Outrage with twin 250 horsepower Yamaha four-stroke engines. Jackson kept the boat outfitted for diving at all times, but didn't use it for paying customers through his dive shop. It was his personal boat. Jackson looked his friend in the eye for the first time. He could tell that Mike was uptight—not bad, but that he probably wouldn't be all that good around crowds at the moment.

“You can't do that,” came a strange voice through the screen door. Both men jumped and spun to look at the door. Even silhouetted by the sun, Jackson could tell it was the woman from the dock that Littlebear had noticed earlier. Her hair was still tied up, but she had slipped on a loose-fitting t-shirt.

“Friend of yours?” Mike asked with an amused grin.

“Not me. I thought she was with you,” Jackson replied with a laugh.

“I don't know either of you, but I need your help. It's got to be more important than whatever this rich playboy wants you to do,” the woman said, motioning toward Mike, but never taking her eyes off Jackson.

“Well since you've interrupted, come on in and explain yourself,” Jackson said with a grin. The Keys attracted all types so he was used to unusual approaches. This was probably the first time it had happened at his screen door though.

Both men watched the woman as she walked through the door. Jackson realized his opinion from earlier was confirmed. Her brown hair was unruly, but it seemed to fit her personality. Her blue-gray eyes, and the fire in them, caught Mike's attention. He simply watched her as she spoke to Jackson. He liked the way she moved and her shapely legs, but was even more impressed with her presence. Without saying a word or doing a thing, she commanded attention.

“Someone is smuggling Queen Conch out of here. I’ve got information that they are being shipped into Miami as clams,” she began. “Fishing for conch in Florida has been illegal for 20 years.”

“Talk to the fish and wildlife people. They have the boats you need,” Jackson asked, still curious, but growing skeptical, her physical appearance not swaying his senses. “Why would you need me?”

“I made a couple calls to Fish and Wildlife already, but they said that without any proof they don’t have the manpower to investigate. They’re too busy dealing with the flagrant stuff. I know something is going on down here and I need your help to check it out. I want to find the proof and make them take action,” she explained.

Jackson shot Mike a questioning look, but Mike simply smiled back. He was interested in her story—not sure he believed it, but interested. Jackson took that as a signal to play along.

“So, what exactly is it you need me to do, and why should that be more important to me than my playboy friend here?” Jackson asked with a laugh and a gesture toward Mike, which earned him a grimace in return. “Everyone on this island owns a boat. Ask someone else.”

Seeing the shared look between the two men, Sarah paused to look at Mike for the first time. He was sitting on the arm of a chair, just watching. His gaze was intense and the woman turned away after a moment.

“I know there’s something going on here and I need help to find out what. Everyone in town talked about you, saying you were the kind of man who would help me out. They said you were the kind of man who wouldn’t back down from a challenge,” she said, challenging him in the process. “I know conch poaching isn’t very sexy. They aren’t going to get the attention that

turtles or sharks do, but they're just as important. We can't let people take them and kill them off."

"What's your name?" Mike said, quietly.

"What?" she asked, completely thrown off. It was the first time Mike had spoken and she didn't expect him to ask that question.

"I asked what your name was. Where I live, normally people introduce themselves before berating strangers," Mike said.

"My name is Sarah. Sarah Monet. Like the painter. No relation that I know of, but I do like his work," Sarah explained.

"Thank you, Sarah. My name is Mike. I like Monet, too, by the way. I visited his home in Giverny, France on assignment once," Mike said calmly, smiling. "Why don't you start over and tell us what information you do have."

Mike was intrigued, both with the story and with woman who was telling it. He found her attractive, but that wasn't it. Her passion for an issue that wasn't "sexy" impressed him.

Mike sat back down and motioned to her to begin. Jackson eased back against the bar stool in his kitchen and listened as well, amused at Mike's interest.

"The organization I work for got this tip a few days ago about fishermen illegally harvesting conch. The person on the phone said he saw boxes and boxes of conch headed for Miami, but they were labeled as clams," she said. "We couldn't verify the story, but he gave some pretty remarkable details. He even gave us coordinates to the exact spot where the fishermen were taking the conch. He also told us about seeing piles of conch shells on a beach like you see in the Bahamas."

“Okay, fair enough,” Jackson said. “So, what do you need me to do? Shouldn’t you go watch the fishing marina on the other side of the island and see what you can see? Like a stake-out or something?”

“I tried that, but the fishermen are pretty tight-lipped to outsiders, so I couldn’t find much,” she explained. “I want to make a dive in the area where the tip said the fishermen were taking the conch. I need to get the proof that Queen Conch are even being taken at all. That’s why I need your help.”

“Well, it just so happens that we were talking about going diving, so maybe we could go where you want to go and check all this out for ourselves,” Mike answered before Jackson could say anything. Jackson was so surprised by his friend’s answer he nearly fell off his stool.

“You want her to come along with us and you want to go look at conchs?” he said when he collected his wits, looking at Mike and ignoring Sarah for a moment.

“Sure, why not? Could be interesting,” Mike said with a laugh. “Let’s play a hunch. Besides, conch move pretty slowly. Not a lot of stress there.”

“If you say so, Mike, but are you sure we can trust her,” Jackson asked. “She sort of blew in here a little out of control, don’t you think?”

“She is still in the room guys,” Sarah butted in. “Don’t talk about me like I can’t hear you.”

“I like her Jackson. Let’s give her a shot,” Mike said with a wink.

Chapter 2

About an hour later, the three of them were on board Jackson's cruiser *Daydreamer* heading for the location of the suspected conch poaching. The tip from the mystery caller had actually included precise GPS coordinates. That extra bit of information made Sarah believe the tip came from someone on the inside. On the other hand, it almost made it seem like the tip was too good to be true. She knew that fishermen are a tight community and for one of them to rat out the others was pretty unlikely. But she also knew she couldn't not investigate, just in case it was real. Jackson and Mike were still skeptical, but they were curious enough to take a look around. Mike's journalist sense was working overtime, but he wasn't sure if it was Sarah, the potential story, or the residual effects of his last one.

"So, what's your story?" Sarah asked Mike as they cruised toward the dive site. Jackson was at the boat's wheel, following the GPS navigator so Mike and Sarah were on the stern readying their gear.

"What do you mean? I'm just along for the ride on this one," Mike replied with a grin.

"I don't buy that for a second. Jackson sort of deferred to you back at the house boat," Sarah pressed.

"We're old friends. Worked together on a couple projects back a few years ago. He only deferred to me because I had already called him up about going diving," Mike said. "He wanted to see what I thought of your story and if I was willing to change our plans and come along."

"Oh. Sorry," Sarah said, hanging her head for a second. "Look, you probably think I'm a total wing-nut, and I don't blame you if you do, but the ocean is important to me. I think of it like a friend. And we abuse it so much, I get frustrated. When I feel like other people aren't paying

attention, I get a little worked up. You're both being very nice helping me out with this. Thank you."

Mike watched her for a minute before he answered. "You're all right. Too many people don't get worked up, or passionate, about anything. It's nice to meet someone who believes in something so much they'll go out on a limb to protect it."

Sarah beamed in response, but didn't say anything.

"Now, let's finish getting this gear together and get in the water," Mike finished.

Just then they felt the boat slow down as Jackson pulled back on the throttles of the big twin four-strokes. He was approaching the spot given to Sarah.

"We're here. I checked with a couple friends on the radio and they all said this area had quite a few queen conchs the last time they were out here, but that it had been a while," Jackson explained. "I guess you guys will know in a few minutes."

There was a gentle current running through the area, so Jackson planned to follow their bubbles and pick Mike and Sarah up wherever they surfaced. He didn't want to drop an anchor since that would tear up the coral bottom.

"That's a pretty interesting gear configuration you're wearing there," Mike commented as he scanned Sarah from head to toe.

"I like to keep things as simple as possible. The water is so warm, I don't need a wetsuit. I took the wings off my BC and just use it as a harness to hold the tank in place, not for lift. I used to swim competitively, so I don't need the help and I definitely don't need the extra drag," Sarah explained matter-of-factly. "I don't like to have anything more than a swim suit between me and my ocean."

"Very old school, but I like it," Mike agreed. "Come on, let's go for a swim."

Both divers moved into position on the opposite sides of the boat. They back rolled into the water, falling into the warm, clear water.

“You ready to go?” Mike asked Sarah as they bobbed to the surface and joined up behind the boat. She didn’t speak, but gave him a smile behind her reg and an OK hand signal with her right hand. She exhaled and began to descend. Mike laughed as he let the air from his BC and followed right behind her.

It had been several months since Mike had been diving. He had been on the road, covering several different assignments and hadn’t gotten a chance to get wet. As his head dropped below the surface, he remembered how much he missed it. The warm, clear water of the Gulf of Mexico surrounded his body; he was just wearing a swimsuit and a t-shirt.

Mike’s mind began drifting as he dropped toward the bottom, about 40 feet away. He wasn’t even paying attention to the coral below, although he could see it very clearly from the surface. Visibility was at least 70-80 feet in any direction.

He could see Sarah in front of him descending slightly faster. Mike’s attention quickly turned to the shapely legs in front of him. His eyes scanned her body, appreciating the confident kick and her skill in the water, along with the bikini she chose to wear underneath her minimal gear. He smiled as he realized it wasn’t just diving that he had missed.

His reverie stopped short, though, when Sarah whirled around to face him. For half a second he wondered if she knew where his thoughts were going. Then he realized she was upset, but not at him. She was spinning around near the bottom, pointing in frustration. When Mike looked down, he realized why. The bottom was littered with torn up coral heads. It was like a tornado had blown through. None of the familiar elkhorn or brain coral formations were

standing. They had all been knocked down or torn out. Mike immediately brought his Nikon D3 camera up to his eye and began shooting.

Mike did his best to capture images of the entire area. Sarah began swimming in front of him, pointing out things she saw and he dutifully followed—gone were the other thoughts on his mind. Something was definitely going on. No matter how much he needed a break, he was still a photojournalist and a story was a story. The devastation was clearly man-made.

After about 20 minutes of following the debris trail, it suddenly came to an end. Everything returned to normal. The coral actually looked healthy and alive. Sarah looked at Mike and they agreed to ascend.

“What the hell happened down there?” Sarah asked as soon as her head broke the surface. “It looks like a war zone.”

Mike was slightly behind her so he didn’t hear the first question, but he did hear the follow up comment. “It’s a mess down there,” Mike agreed as he signaled for Jackson to pick them up. “What could tear the bottom up like that?”

“It looked like someone ran a bulldozer over the reef,” Sarah said. “How could they do that? It’ll take decades for that coral to regrow.”

“I didn’t see any conchs down there, either,” Mike said as he handed his camera up to Jackson.

“What? What happened down there? What did you see?” Jackson asked, confused by what they were saying.

“The whole place had been flattened,” Mike said, knowing that Sarah was too upset to talk. “And all the conchs were gone. I don’t know how many would normally be in an area like this, but they were all gone.”

“That’s nuts! They took them all?” Jackson asked. “This area was actually part of a research project to restock them.”

“Yeah, the entire area was stripped clean and turned into rubble,” Mike said as he grabbed a towel to dry.

Sarah finished climbing on board the boat and dropped her gear into the slot Jackson had shown her. She was calmer, but still upset. “You don’t even harvest conch that way. It doesn’t make any sense. It looked like someone drug their fishing nets across the reef,” she explained. “You dive and pick the conch up by hand.”

“You’re right. That doesn’t make sense,” Jackson agreed, handing her a bottle of water. “So, who would do it that way? There’s no way to cover up all that damage, either.”

“I don’t know. This just has me completely confused,” Sarah said.

“Let’s think about this logically for a second. The technique doesn’t make sense, but who has the ability to do it anyway,” Mike asked and then he continued on to answer his own question. “Commercial fishing boats. Jackson, where is that commercial marina? I thought I saw the signs when I drove onto the island.”

“Its a couple miles that direction,” Jackson said, pointing to a heavily-wooded point jutting out into the water from the end of the island. “It’s around on the back side of the island a bit, not too far from here.”

“Let’s go over there and see if we can figure out what’s going on,” Sarah said, the fire back in her eyes. “I just can’t believe that mess back there. There has to be an answer around here somewhere.”

They were quiet as Jackson steered the boat past the end of the island and made his way toward the fishing vessels. They were approaching the mouth of the marina when Sarah suddenly broke the silence. “Stop the boat!” she shouted. “Look at that!”

Both men looked where she was pointing. From a distance they saw what looked like a rubble pile from a construction site.

“What is it, Sarah?” Mike asked.

“Looks like a pile of conch shells to me,” she explained. “Jackson, can you head in there?”

“Sure,” he said. “I can get you pretty close, actually.”

Jackson spun the wheel and eased the boat toward land, pulling the twin outboards to barely above an idle and trimming them up so the prop was just barely in the water, but keeping enough water flowing to keep the engines cool. He got them as close as he could but finally he had to stop. Sarah didn’t hesitate before jumping over the side of the boat so she could slog her way toward the pile on the beach. By that time, it was apparent that the pile was broken conch shells and torn up coral.

Mike had his camera out of the underwater housing and photographed the pile and Sarah while she looked at the rubble. He thought they might need the images for court, if it came to that.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Sarah yelled over her shoulder while she sorted through the shells.

“What is it, Sarah?” Jackson asked.

She turned around holding two huge shells up in her hands. “If they were going to go to all the trouble to do this, don’t you think they would hide the shells? Why just leave them out here on the shore?”

“Doesn’t make sense” Mike agreed. “Your tip described a huge smuggling operation. If they’re going to all that expense, why do something this careless. Something doesn’t smell right.”

Sarah waded back into the water holding up a couple prime shells. “You’re telling me,” she said. “These shells are really ripe, and I’ll tell you why. They haven’t even been holed. The conchs are still inside. Whoever did this didn’t even bother to take the meat to sell. They simply dredged the coral bottom, killed hundreds of conch and left them to rot on the beach.”

“Why would commercial fishermen do something stupid like that?” Mike asked.

“They wouldn’t,” Sarah replied.

Chapter 3

Jackson eased *Daydreamer* through the entrance to the commercial marina. As soon as they rounded the sea wall, they saw several Florida Fish and Wildlife boats on the water and police cars on the land. The marina was being raided.

“What in the world is going on here?” Sarah said. “Those guys said they wouldn’t come out here without proof and now they’re here full force.”

“Jackson, do you know any of these guys? Can you find out what’s going on?” Mike asked. He had his camera out and was surveying the scene through a long lens.

“I guess I should be happy the police are here,” Sarah said with a puzzled look on her face. “Why is it bothering me so much?”

“Nothing ever works this easy or this fast. Not in the Keys anyway,” Jackson said, shaking his head with a laugh. “Let me see if I can raise any of these guys on the radio. I know a couple of them.”

Jackson moved back to the wheel and picked up the radio microphone. He left Mike and Sarah leaning against the railing. After sliding *Daydreamer* into an open slip in the marina, Mike decided it was time to see what was going on. He grabbed his t-shirt and jumped out of the boat.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Sarah asked.

“Going to test my press credentials and see what I can find out,” Mike answered over his shoulder as he walked away.

Approaching the knot of police and FWS officers talking on the dock, Mike addressed an officer who appeared to be in charge.

“Afternoon, gentlemen. Mike Scott with *Time Magazine*. I’m working an investigation. Can you give me some details?” Mike asked, seeing if he could get the police to give anything up, without telling them anything. He had flipped his press credentials at them and then held his camera up in front of his face.

“I don’t know, Mr.? What did you say your name was again?” one of the officers asked. “And what did you say you were investigating again?”

“We’re looking into illegal conch harvesting in the area,” Sarah said, breaking in. She had followed Mike.

“Then it does look like we’re on the same investigation,” the officer said. “Mrs?”

“Sarah Monet from Ocean Watchers,” Sarah answered. “Can you tell me what you’ve found?”

“Well there, little lady, we haven’t found much, to be honest. Not a single conch in the place,” the officer continued, drawling out his answer. “We found some torn up nets, and that big pile of conch shells on property owned by the marina, but that’s about it.”

“That’s pretty circumstantial, don’t you think,” Mike asked.

“It’s enough for now,” the officer said posturing for Mike. “We’ve shut down this entire marina and have impounded most of the boats until we figure out who did all that damage. We are going to search this entire place until we find the proof. Shutting this place down for a few days should make someone want to talk. We’re going to set an example of these guys. We want to make sure everyone knows that if they break the law, we’ll make them pay.”

After a few more minutes of talking to the police, but without getting anywhere, Mike and Sarah returned to Jackson’s boat. Jackson had confirmed the story using his own sources. The three of them were quiet for most of the ride back to the Jackson’s dock.

“I don’t like it,” Jackson said as he tied *Daydreamer* off. “I don’t like it one bit.”

“Me either, but I’m not sure I know what to do about it,” Mike agreed. “It feels like a set up to me.”

“But what do we do about it?” Sarah asked. “The police are proud of themselves for moving so fast to get rid of environmental offenders. How do we ask them if they’re sure they got it right? And, if it’s a set up, are the cops involved?”

“Something tells me were all going to have to gnaw on this one for a while,” Mike said. “You guys want to get some food? Maybe we can work this out while we eat.”

The events of the day had brought them close together. They were already acting as if they had been together for years instead of hours.

“You two go ahead,” Jackson said. “I have to run by the dive shop for a little bit. I may’ve taken a couple days off, but that doesn’t mean I get to ignore all my responsibilities,” Jackson explained. He had recently become the owner of the dive shop he worked for and was suddenly a lot more responsible than he had expected to be.

“We’ll catch up later for a beer,” Mike said and then he turned to Sarah. “I guess that leaves you and me. You want to get a bite to eat? I travel a lot and eat alone a lot. Any chance I get to have some company, I take it.”

“Gee thanks, Mike. You make me feel so special,” Sarah said with a wink.

“Well, I, um, I didn’t mean,” Mike stammered, not really expecting the flirtatious reply. It made him take a second look at the woman in front of him, all while she shifted gears again.

“Sure. Give me an hour or so to take a shower. I’m salty and sweaty. Not exactly conducive to eating and thinking,” Sarah agreed. “Where can you eat around here?”

“Truth be told, there’s only one restaurant. It’s right over there, on the other side of the marina. It’s called Duffy’s Diner,” Jackson explained as he grabbed his gear to throw it into his houseboat. “Anything else is a half an hour drive from here.”

“All right, Mike, meet you there in an hour,” Sarah said, with a flip of her hair. She shouldered her dive gear and headed up the walkway without a look back.

“Sounds good,” Mike said, answering to her back. Then he turned and looked at Jackson with a puzzled look.

“Don’t ask me,” Jackson answered the unspoken question. “Looks like you’re in for an interesting evening.”

An hour and 15 minutes later, nearly a half hour after Mike had shown up at the little diner, Sarah came walking into the room. She was wearing an orange summer dress with her hair twisted up and held in place with a chopstick. She saw Mike and walked up to the table.

“Something wrong?” she asked with a wry smile.

“No, not at all. What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re sitting there with your mouth open. I just assumed you saw something that made you feel uncomfortable,” she replied.

“Oh, um, you look great. That’s all,” Mike said, stumbling to regain his composure. Sarah continued to catch him completely off-guard. It was the rare person who could do that. “So, are you hungry?”

They both ordered a beer to go with dinner. They decided to try a local favorite, Key West Sunset Ale, and began to chit-chat about their lives. Once they were finished with dinner, though, the conversation inevitably turned to the other thing on each of their minds. Mike was the first to bring it up.

“This whole thing is coming together too easily,” Mike said. “It’s so simple, it doesn’t make sense.”

It had gotten hot in the small diner as the bar patrons began replacing the dinner ones. “You want to go outside where it’s a little cooler?” Sarah asked.

“Yeah, it’s getting pretty noisy in here. Let’s go for a walk,” Mike agreed as they both stood to go. “So, we all think this thing is too easy. The fishermen would know better than to dump the shells like that. They would hide them. Or they would sell them, but they aren’t stupid enough to dump them right outside of their own marina.”

“That pretty much sums it up,” Sarah agreed.

“So, let’s think about this a different way,” Mike continued as they walked out onto a dock, just down from the restaurant and then down to the water’s edge. Sarah took her shoes off and walked in the water.

“Let’s assume this isn’t about the conch at all. It’s about the fishermen,” he said.

“How do you get that?” Sarah asked, listening and watching Mike.

“Well, it’s not like conch are exactly dangerous,” Mike said with a laugh. “There aren’t any killer attach conch that have to be stopped.”

“Well, that’s true,” Sarah agreed, laughing. “So, whoever is doing this is doing it to set up the fishermen themselves?”

“Exactly,” Mike said. “They’re the ones losing in this mess.”

“Any ideas on why?” Sarah asked. She turned to face Mike, not realizing he had walked closer behind her so he could hear her. She turned around right into Mike’s arms. They both stood and stared at each other in the moonlight for a long minute. Neither one knew what to expect next, but neither one seemed to want to move either.

“Hi,” Mike said with a smile.

“Hi yourself,” Sarah smiled back.

“This is kind of nice.”

“Not too bad. Is this why you asked me to take a walk?” Sarah asked, her eyes twinkling.

“It crossed my mind,” he said.

“You know we just met, right?” Sarah asked.

“True enough, but sometimes it goes that way,” Mike smiled.

“So, where does this go from here?”

“Well, we could take this the next step and see...”

“God lord, are you going to keep talking about it, or are you going to kiss me?”

Without answering Mike leaned in while pulling Sarah close. He was nine inches taller than she was, but it didn't matter. He felt her body rise into his when they kissed and they melted together. The kiss was slow and gentle at first, tentative, but then it slowly grew more intense. After a minute, they pulled away to breathe.

“Wow,” she said under her breath. “I guess you're right.”

“About what?”

“Sometimes it goes that way,” Sarah answered.

He simply laughed and then asked “Um, what's that noise?”

“What noi... Wait, sounds like a motorcycle to me,” Sarah said after a second. “And it's close.”

They looked around. First they scanned the road above them and then down the beach itself. A dirt bike was coming full speed along the water's edge toward them. It was coming right at them with its lights off.

“I think we need to get out of here,” Mike said as he began pushing Sarah up the beach.

“What’s wrong, Mike? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, but this doesn’t look good,” Mike yelled as they began running. As they moved from the sand to the rough pebble beach right above the tide line, Sarah fell twisting her ankle. Mike grabbed her under her arms and pulled her to her feet, moving her out of the way, just as the motorcycle careened by missing them by inches.

Running, with Mike half carrying Sarah, they took off again. The motorcycle turned around, slinging sand as the rider came at them. Mike shoved Sarah toward a pile of chairs on the beach. Intent on chasing them down, the rider nearly hit the chairs as well, but steered clear just in time. It took him a moment to recover his balance and he made his way further down the beach before he turned around to make another pass.

“What’s going on, Mike?” Sarah yelled.

“I don’t know for sure, but I think someone is trying to send us a message,” Mike answered back. “We’ve got to make it to those steps. Can you run?”

“Not very well. You go and get help,” she said. “Leave me here!”

“That’s not going to happen, now get up and run,” he barked as he wrapped an arm around her waist and half lifted her off the ground. He took off for a small set of stairs that would lead to the road above and to safety.

The motorcyclist had misjudged his path after that last near miss. He was out of position and too far away to stop them from getting to the steps. Halfway up, they turned to see the rider accelerating at full speed up the boat ramp off to their left. The motorcycle was going to get to the top of the steps at the same time they would.

Mike and Sarah kept running though, taking the steps two at a time. They didn't have time to stop and think, but they both hoped they would be able to find an escape route.

As they got to the street level with the motorcycle closing in an old truck skidded to a stop in front of them and the passenger door flew open. It was Jackson.

The motorcyclist barely controlled the bike and skidded sideways, bouncing off the truck bed, before righting the motorcycle and speeding off.

"Would you look at what he did to my truck?" Jackson said with fire in his eyes.

"Someone you know?"

"Not yet, but I think I'm going to try to get to know him better," Mike replied, with the same fire.

Jackson drove them back to his houseboat. They were all quiet, lost in their thoughts for the moment.

"I think our new friend was trying to send us a message," Mike said after he helped Sarah get settled and got her ankle iced down. "The message came through loud and clear."

"The only question I have at the moment is how we're going to answer that message?" Jackson asked.

"What are you two talking about?" Sarah interrupted from the couch. "You're not making any sense."

"Tonight, someone was telling us to butt out and stay away," Mike answered her. "You don't kill people by chasing them down with a motorcycle. Way too messy. On the other hand it's a great way to scare people and tell them to leave."

"OK. That makes sense," Sarah said. "I'm a scientist. I don't have a lot of experience with this sort of thing. I'm not used to killer dirt bikes and late night chases on the beach. What I

do know, though, is that it really pisses me off. I don't want to let them get away with all this, whatever the reason. They've torn up coral that will take 50 years to grow back. They needlessly wasted and killed hundreds of protected marine animals. And they scared the bejesus out of me and made me twist my ankle. I guess I have to ask the same question Jackson asked. How are we going to respond? Are you going to help me stop these guys, or are you going to pack up and run?"

Mike stared at Sarah for a minute, simply trying to gauge her. He didn't need help from someone who was angry and emotional. He needed clear thinking, preferably cold and calculating at this point because there was no question in his mind that he was going to stop whoever was behind all this.

As he stared, a plan began to form in his mind and a smile slowly spread across his face.

"I have an idea," Mike said turning to face Jackson, a devious grin on his face. "We may need a little help though. Anyone around here you can trust?"

"There is someone," Jackson said as he turned around to pick up the phone. "I'll give him a call."

"Do it," Mike answered.

"Care to clue me in?" Sarah asked.

"Think about it a second. This is same idea that was coming to me on the beach before we were interrupted."

"And which idea was that?" Sarah asked with an innocent smile.

"Ummm, the other one. Before that one," he said with a laugh. "Someone is trying to frame the fishermen."

“OK, that makes sense,” Sarah agreed. “They’ve gone to a lot of trouble to make it look like the fishermen are up to something. Why?”

“At this point, I have no idea,” Mike said as Jackson hung up the phone.

“My buddy is just a couple minutes away. He’s going to be here in a sec. I told him there was some trouble and he’s willing to help. So what do you have in mind?”

“As Sarah just said, someone went to a lot of trouble to frame the fishermen. It could be for personal revenge, but this seems different. Doesn’t seem like they are trying to frame one person as much as the whole group.”

“Ok, that makes sense,” Jackson agreed.

“We don’t know the who or the why, but it has something to do with the marina,” Mike continued. “It seems like they want the fishermen out of business.”

“I’m following you Mike, but I’m not sure how this gets us anywhere,” Sarah said, growing impatient.

“I could be completely wrong about this, but I don’t think so,” he answered. “I have an idea that might just bring the bad guys out of hiding and help us figure out what is going on here.”

They all looked up as they heard heavy footsteps coming down the boardwalk leading to the boats. A large silhouette of a man filled the doorway.

“Jackson, you in there?” a voice called out.

“The cavalry has arrived,” Jackson said with a smile.

Randy Littlebear was a federal officer with the Bureau of Indian Affairs—a cop. He worked on the Seminole reservation on the mainland, but he liked to spend his spare time in the Keys, diving and fishing. Littlebear and Jackson met when Littlebear was working undercover to

break up a drug smuggling ring. A Navy diver who had served with distinction in the first Gulf war, he was cool and focused.

Jackson invited Littlebear in and they began making plans.

Chapter 4

The next morning, Jackson and Littlebear took off in *Daydreamer* to get things ready. Mike and Sarah went back to the little diner for breakfast.

“I can’t believe how lucky we are that this all happened right in front of us,” Mike said loudly, making sure the other patrons could hear him.

“I agree, but you really need to keep your voice down,” Sarah replied.

“I mean how amazing is it that we came down here looking for a place to set up our new operation and the fishermen who own the commercial marina are arrested?” Mike asked, his volume barely abated. “It seems like it was made to happen like this. I have already talked to our attorney and he is going to get in contact with the owners. I’m sure they’ll need the money we will pay them just to defend themselves from the charges against them.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Mike,” Sarah said. “Now, please, keep your voice down a bit. We don’t want everyone around to know our plans.”

“You know, maybe we should just wait on things a bit. We can buy the land from the owners, but the government will probably end up seizing the property and then we can buy it from them,” Mike said. He stopped for a moment to order his breakfast from the waitress and listen to Sarah order hers.

“But if we do that, then we have to wait even longer for the process to shake out and who knows who else might step in to try and bid on it. No, we need to take it over immediately,” Sarah said. “As soon as we’re finished, let’s go on over there and check the place out. I want to take some pictures we can show to the architects. Let’s get this ball rolling!”

“You’re right, dear. Like always. Let’s get this moving so we don’t lose that marina. I want it now,” Mike said, loudly again. “We can swoop in and take it over almost immediately.”

The rest of their conversation was remarkably less animated, but so were the other patrons in the diner. Everyone stayed quiet and kept their eyes on Mike and Sarah. When the pair finished their breakfast, they went to Mike’s rental Jeep Wrangler and drove away. They didn’t see a man standing outside smoking a cigarette. As they drove away, he made a phone call.

Jackson and Littlebear tied *Daydreamer* up at the dock in the commercial marina, in between two fishing boats. The marina had an eerie feeling to it. Most of the work boats were there, tied up to their familiar slips, but no one was around. Nothing was moving. The Florida Fish and Wildlife officers had shut the marina and most of the boats down, pending the completion of the investigation. They didn’t know who was actually involved in the smuggling and poaching and who was innocent so they had decided to impound everything for the time being.

After making a few phone calls, Littlebear had found out that the brothers who owned the marina were there, though.

“Should we’ve called before we barge in there?” Littlebear asked just before he opened the door to little run down shack that served as the office. “I’m a cop. They aren’t exactly going to be in the mood to talk to me.”

“They’d probably be less likely to talk to either of us over the phone,” Jackson said with a laugh. “We’ll just have to make them listen. And fast.”

Littlebear opened the door and Jackson stepped through first. “Paul, Duke, come out here, we need to talk to you,” Jackson shouted.

“What do you want? Come to gloat?” Duke said as he entered the room, angry and challenging. Neither Jackson nor Littlebear was above average height or weight. Duke, on the other hand, stood six and a half feet tall and had the broad shoulders of a man who had worked the ocean all his life. They could see his rough hands were weathered as he placed them palm down on the wooden counter. They heard it groan under the force. “Maybe I should just throw you two out of here.”

“No, Duke, we’re here to help. We think you’ve been set up,” Littlebear said quickly.

“No kidding,” Duke’s younger brother Paul said from the other side of the room. He had just entered the room from a side door. Smaller than his brother by three inches and 30 pounds or so, he was still larger than Jackson or Littlebear. He was also quieter, but still angry. “Even if it weren’t illegal, we wouldn’t bother with conch. Too much work and not enough money in them. We need to catch fish.”

“Guys, listen, we’re convinced someone has set you up and we want to help,” Jackson said.

Duke started to shout an answer, but Paul held up his hand. The older brother stifled his retort.

“Jackson, you’re new here. I admit, you’ve been a solid guy for the island,” Paul said. “But you’re an outsider. Why would you and this reservation cop want to help us? What’s in it for you?”

“Nothing Paul,” Littlebear answered. “There’s nothing in it for any of us. I don’t like bullies and I don’t like to see anyone get pushed around. Jackson called me and asked me to help. He tells me he needs my help and it’s a good cause. That’s enough for me.”

“Littlebear and I, and a couple others, think you’ve been set up. We don’t know why or by who, but we want to figure that out,” Jackson said. “We’re offering you our help.”

The four men stared at each other for a moment. Then Paul and Duke deflated. They had been through too much in the last day to keep it up.

“What do you have in mind?” Paul asked, staring at his feet for a minute.

“Best we can figure out, someone is trying to take over the marina. That’s why they’ve set all this up,” Littlebear said. “Do you know anyone who would try to do that?”

“We get people coming in here all the time trying to buy the place out from under us,” Duke said. “We don’t pay them no mind. Couldn’t even tell you who they were.”

“Do you remember any of these buyers, Paul?” Jackson asked.

“No. Duke’s right. We just tell them no and show them the door,” Paul replied. “This place has been in our family since my granddaddy got started down here. Now we’re gonna lose it.”

“Hold on, Paul,” Jackson said. “That’s what we’re trying to stop.”

“You don’t get it, Jackson. Everyday we don’t work, we lose money. We have to have our boats out there every day to keep things going and we depend on the money from the other boats that use this marina too,” Paul said. “This couldn’t have happened at a worse time of year. We owe a big tax payment in three days. Money is so tight, and our taxes have gone up so high, we were just barely going to make it. With this....”

“Sounds like someone really knew when to pull this,” Jackson said. “I tell you what, though. This really plays right into the plan we came up with.”

“What plan is that?” Duke asked.

“We’re going to spread the word that we are going to buy the place from you,” Littlebear said.

“You’re what?” Duke shouted as he leaped over the counter. “You bastards. You’re the ones doing this to us.”

Littlebear stepped forward and caught the larger man’s arm as he jumped forward. With a deft twist, using the man’s momentum against him, Littlebear spun Duke around and pinned him to the ground, his arm twisted up against his shoulder blades. Duke let out a blast of air when he hit the floor.

“Paul, listen. He said we are going to tell everyone we are going to buy the place. We don’t want it, but we think it’ll bring whoever set all this up out into the open. And then can expose them,” Jackson said, watching the large man on the floor struggle in spite of Littlebear’s hold.

“Littlebear, let go of him,” Paul said, quietly.

“Not until he agrees not to break me in half,” Littlebear said.

“Duke, relax. Stop it,” Paul said. “I believe these guys. I think they’re here to help us.”

Littlebear felt Duke stop struggling and he immediately let go of the man’s wrist. As they stood, Duke stood, chafing his wrist and flexing his shoulder, but he didn’t make a move.

“So, what’s the plan? How are you two going to make everyone believe you’re going to buy us out?” Paul continued.

“Well, it isn’t just the two of us. We have two other friends in on this,” Jackson said. “And people will believe it because they are strangers and they’ll be convincing, or at least convincing enough.”

“Where are your other friends? When do you want to get this started?”

“We’ve already put it in motion. They were talking about buying this place out over breakfast this morning in the diner. If the word doesn’t get back to whoever set this up that way, we’ll go back to the bar later and spread the word around. We just want to get people talking about the sale so the word gets back to whoever is behind the take over,” Jackson continued.

“Then what?” Duke asked.

“We’re still working on that. We hope they will come in and try to scare us away or stop us,” Jackson said.

“Doesn’t sound like much of a plan,” Paul said dubiously.

“Unfortunately, it’s the best you’ve got for now,” Jackson said with a wry grin.

Jackson and Littlebear walked outside, just in time to see Mike and Sarah pull into the gravel parking lot in Littlebear’s car.

“How did things go?” Mike asked, as he got out of the car.

“About as well as can be expected. Paul and Duke aren’t happy about any of this, but they’ll play along,” Jackson replied. “How about you guys?”

“Sure seemed like a lot of people were listening in on our conversation,” Sarah answered. “The great actor here may’ve overplayed it a bit, but I’m sure the message got out.”

“Oh come on, give me my 15 minutes on the stage why don’t you,” Mike said with a laugh. “Everyone’s a critic!”

“As long as you got people talking about what you said, this will work,” Littlebear said. “It’s a small town. There are no secrets and word travels fast.”

“You don’t know how right you are,” Jackson said as he watched a car entering the road that led to the marina and saw a boat approaching the mouth of the marina. “Looks like we’ve already got company. Come on, Littlebear. Let’s make ourselves scarce for a little while.”

The two men made their way back to *Daydreamer* before anyone saw them. Doing so, they left Mike and Sarah standing on the dock outside to greet the new arrivals.

Mike and Sarah walked out onto the dock to wait. The car parked, but no one got out. They could tell there were at least two men inside. The boat pulled up to the fuel dock in front of the marina office and two men got off as the other two men got out of the car. The four men approached Mike and Sarah together.

“Can we help you gentlemen?” Mike asked as they got close.

“We’re looking for the owners of the marina,” one of the men from the car said. He was big and burly, with a bushy grey beard and eyebrows to match.

“I don’t think they’re here right now,” Sarah said. “But we’re planning to buy it from them, so if there is anything we can do for you, you can ask us.”

“Izzat so?” one of the men from the boat asked. “What makes you think they are going to want to sell it to you?”

“Well, it seems like the owners have come into some trouble and need some financial help,” Mike explained. “We’ve already spoken to them and they’re interested in working with us.”

“What do you see?” Jackson asked Littlebear from their vantage point on *Daydreamer*.

“Not much so far. They’re both playing it pretty cool,” Littlebear answered as he lowered his binoculars. “These guys look pretty tough, but no one is giving any ground.”

“Let me see the binoculars for a second. I’ve got a hunch,” Jackson said. Taking the high-powered lenses from his friend he scanned the newly arrived fishing boat.

“What do you see?” Littlebear asked after a minute.

“Remember I told you someone had dragged nets across the bottom and tore up all that coral, along with the conch?” Jackson said. “I’m betting that’s the boat they used.”

“Sounds like we need to get over there and take a look then, doesn’t it?” Littlebear said. “You wanna go for a little swim?”

“I hate to leave Mike and Sarah without any backup, but at least this way we can get closer,” Jackson said. “And if we can get some proof from the boat, we’ll be that much further along.”

“The sooner we get in the water, the sooner we’ll know,” Littlebear said.

Jackson always kept a couple of full scuba cylinders on board, just in case he needed to get in the water. He and Littlebear had both brought their dive gear along, so they quickly assembled their gear with the practiced ease of professionals and slipped into the water.

Mike and Sarah were still talking to their four men, but things were quickly growing tense.

“I think it’s time you two leave,” grey beard said.

“We’re not finished with our business here yet,” Mike said, looking the man in the eye.

“I’d hate for someone to get hurt,” grey beard continued. “I understand you had a little scare on the beach last night. You never know when something like that is going to happen again. The little lady here might not understand the trouble she could get in.”

“This little lady can take care of herself,” Sarah said, her hands on her hips, glaring at the man.

“Well, looky there,” grey beard said, laughing. “We got us an uppity little woman. We might just have to show her, her place.”

“Knock it off, Ham,” Paul barked, coming out of the office shack. “You’re not going to go threatening a woman on my property.”

The four men and Mike and Sarah turned to see the brothers coming outside.

“We’ve been listening to all of this,” Paul continued. “You guys are the ones who set us up. I’m going to take all of this to the cops.”

“Is that true, Duke? Is that the way you feel, too?” grey beard, that Paul had called Ham asked the older brother. “You gonna turn me into the cops, too?”

“Well, I don’t know, Ham. The way I see it, I’m not the one in trouble here. I’ve been out of town and just got back yesterday. Maybe it was my little brother who did all this stuff. And now you guys are just coming in to help me out. Isn’t that right?” Duke said with a laugh.

“Duke! What the hell are you saying?” Paul asked, turning on his brother. “Are you helping them?”

Littlebear and Jackson lowered themselves slowly into the water. They didn't want anyone to see them so they did their best not to make a splash. They had agreed that they would swim across the bottom of the marina, working along the wall, hoping it would break up their bubbles. No one seemed to be watching the water, but they wanted to make sure.

Both divers paused for a second on the surface, the tops of their heads barely above water, to check out their gear one more time and then they exhaled, descending into the greenish murk.

The bottom was only about 15 feet below the surface, but both men did their best to hug it anyway. They swam single file so their bubbles wouldn't rise to the surface together as well.

They made quick work of the 50 yards between *Daydreamer* and the fishing boat that had brought in the two men—its stern read *Misty Ocean*. Ditching their BCs and weights, the men watched their scuba units sink to the bottom.

Quietly, they climbed aboard the stern of the commercial fishing boat. The men had simply brought the boat straight in and tied up at the dock, leaving the stern facing away from the people on shore.

“We need to do this quickly. Looks like things are getting kind of tense over there,” Jackson said to his friend. He had just stolen a look at the dock and realized Duke and Paul had joined in the conversation. He knew that couldn't be good.

“What do you make of these concrete blocks?” Littlebear asked, pointing at four squarish blocks. Each had an eye hook set in the middle.

“Looks like they’re for weighting something down to me,” Jackson said, taking a photograph with the small digital camera he had brought along. “Open up that locker there. That should be where they store the nets.”

“Got it,” Littlebear whispered back. “Damn, these things are a mess. These nets are ripped to shreds. They’re full of broken coral and shells, too.”

“Let me get some pictures. Looks to me like we found what we’re looking for” Jackson said.

“I can’t believe you set me up,” Paul shouted at his brother. “Are you out of your mind?”

“I’m tired of working, Paul. You wouldn’t listen,” Duke said. “We’re sitting on a gold mine and you’re just interested in working your fingers to the bone, just like Dad did. I’m tired of it.”

“So, we’re going to lose this place so they can fish it? That doesn’t make sense, Duke.”

“Nah, this whole set-up is to get us out of the fishing business all together. Do you really think they would go to all this trouble just to fish? Land is gold. We’ve got a dock and a marina. All that land back there can hold condos. I’m gonna be rich. You? Sorry little brother, but someone has to take the fall,” Duke said with a sneer.

“I’m gonna kill you!” Paul shouted as he jumped on Duke. Duke was the larger and stronger of the two, but Paul had anger on his side. And youth. The two men fell to the ground and immediately began swinging.

“Now where do you two think you’re going?” Ham asked Mike and Sarah as they started to edge away. “I think you’re going to have to disappear for all this to work out. I hadn’t really planned on you hearing all that.”

Two of the men grabbed Mike and pinned his arms behind his back, while the other grabbed Sarah the same way.

“We’ll give Duke a minute to take care of his brother and then it will be your turn,” Ham said. “It’s pretty sad when brothers turn on each other, but it happens that way sometimes when the younger one starts bossing the older one around.”

Suddenly, Jackson and Littlebear came out of nowhere, surprising Ham and his men. Unable to separate friend from foe, Jackson and Littlebear tackled the men holding Mike and Sarah. Everyone hit the deck, but they were able to roll off and take out the other two men before anyone knew what was going on. Littlebear rolled to his feet and kept running for his car.

Jackson, Mike and Sarah stood up and faced their attackers. They were outnumbered, but at least they had surprise on their side. Rather than give them a chance to recover from the tackles, Mike and Jackson both swung punches at the men closest to them. Sarah realized she was well out of her weight class in this fight, but kicked the man closest to her, it happened to be Ham, and took out his knee. He dropped to the ground writhing in pain.

“Gotta watch out for us uppity women,” she said, without laughing.

Before anyone else could move, they all froze. The sound of a shotgun shell being wracked into place will quiet just about any riot. Littlebear had gone to his car to get a weapon.

“I figured this was going to be the quickest way to bring this little party to a halt,” Littlebear said with a smile. “Now, you three, on the ground. Paul, get off your brother and go get some tie wraps. I’d like to make sure no one tries anything stupid.”

He had also grabbed a radio and called the Monroe County Sheriff's Department for backup.

Two days later, things were beginning to settle down on Withrow Key. It would take a long time to get everything straight, but at least Paul had his family fishing marina back and the Fish and Wildlife officers had dropped all charges against him. His brother Duke and Ham and his cronies were facing a lot of charges on the other hand—everything from conspiracy, to attempted kidnapping to poaching charges, not to mention destruction of the coral reefs and ocean bottom. They were going to be in trouble for a long time.

Mike and Jackson were relaxing on the upper deck of Jackson's houseboat when Sarah came up the steps.

"Um, yeah, I think I hear my phone ringing," Jackson said as he stood up and quickly left, giving Mike and Sarah some privacy.

"He's really funny," Sarah said, watching him go.

"Good guy though. The best," Mike replied.

"You're a pretty good guy too. You didn't have to believe in me, but you did. I owe you," Sarah said.

"Well, maybe you will agree to join me for dinner in payment." Mike said with a smile.

"Mike," she said and then stopped. She tried again, but softer, "Mike. I really like you and enjoy being with you."

"I hear a 'but' coming," Mike said.

“But, I also know your type. You’re married to your job” she said with a smile. “And for what it’s worth, so am I. I just got a call from my office. They need me in California for a new project.”

“If you’re ever in North Carolina why don’t you drop in for a visit?” Mike asked, knowing the answer and knowing she was right.

“Mike, I like you a lot. I could easily fall for you,” she admitted. “But I know me. I have my career too. And I don’t share well. So, its time for me to go.”

“You can’t stay any longer?” Mike asked.

“I’ve already booked my flight. I have to leave right now or I’ll miss it,” she said as she stood and moved toward him. Without another word, she kissed him. They held each other for a minute. And then she turned and left.

A few minutes later, Jackson came back up the stairs, holding two cold beers.

“I thought you might want one,” he said.

“Yeah, thanks,” Mike said as he stared out over the water.

“No problem,” Jackson said.