

**Chapter One, in which we meet our heroine, some pot is smoked,
and people swim with the fishes, in more ways than one.**

It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents ... and there was no point in doing anything. The houseboat was safely at anchor, there was wine in the rack and purple kush on the coffee table. Our heroine sighed, picked up her grinder, and started to roll another one.

"Thank god ... or Al Gore ... for the internet, and who knows whom for satellites and wifi," she thought as she searched again for any information about Andy Anderson or his company, Sandy Developments Ltd. There was virtually no trace of him on the internet or on the island, and though she loathed him, she was nonetheless afraid he had come to an unpleasant end. It would have to wait until tomorrow.

"Sufficient unto the day are the evils thereof," she said to her dog, Taxi, as she finished her joint, and nestled into the large bed in the aft cabin, which he reluctantly shared with her.

Morning did indeed bring another day, and the sun quickly burned off the rain clouds promising a perfect Bahamian day. A quick cup of coffee, and a not so quick swim off the bow of the boat with Taxi to the nearby beach so he could perform his necessary morning ablutions, which she carefully buried. They swam back leisurely, and as she climbed back up the swim ladder, slightly more elegantly than Taxi, who needed a great deal of lifting and seemed to be made of nothing but paws, she unhooked the mesh bag full of yesterday's dishes, nibbled clean by the obliging neighbourhood fish.

"Nothing but work," Angie thought with a smile as she hung her wet bikini over the rail, weaving the life line through the openings, such as they were, so it couldn't blow away as the wind blew it dry.

"The houseboat should have advertised that it came with a dishwasher and dryer," she laughed as she put on her other bikini. She had a bag full of clothes but she could have almost just as easily brought only bathing suits ... however the occasional foray into town called for shorts at least, and one had to be prepared for whatever the weather might deliver, which

lately had been as varied and heart-stopping as Eddie Minnis' Bahamian buffet.

Today, however, had dawned with perfection and it seemed a pity to Angie not to greet it properly ... and really, she was on holiday, or unemployed if you were a stickler, and this was technically a free day as she liked to call them, when she had no real responsibilities. And it was fabulous pot. She walked through the boat to the back deck, after a quick look at the internet as she rolled a fatty. No signs of Andy. Ah well, he had made his bed, and would have to lie in it. She sat down in one of the crappy plastic chairs on the tiny deck, happy as a clam.

"But are clams really happy," she thought, as she smoked in the warm sun, "down there in the cold water or lightly fried in a seasoned batter?"

Angie looked out through the clear water at the sandy bottom only 4 feet from the bottom of the houseboat and wondered if she could tell a happy clam from a sad one. She could see sea cucumbers going about their business; they looked pretty content ... a starfish gamely if not particularly cheerfully hunting sea urchins, and a flip-flop, and a leg ... and she had found Andy Anderson, or at least what was left of him. "Even in death," she thought as she reached for the boathook, "he could really harsh your buzz."



Chapter Two in which Andy has to wait while our heroine goes for a paddle and Taxi gets a biscuit.

Oh why would she have to be the one to discover the body! They would never believe her at the police station, not after that episode with Taxi and the tourist from Morocco. Two bodies in one week ...

"It was surely over-kill," Angie laughed out loud, despite herself, as she pondered what to do.

She was becoming convinced that the local police chief was either very inept or extremely corrupt, and she could not decide which. Either way going to him seemed premature, at best, until she had a more coherent story for him, better than just seeming to have a propensity for finding corpses. And she really didn't want to have the police to the boat, not with the kush and all.

Angie poked at the bloated leg and wondered briefly about moving the body ... or the boat. Both such obviously bad ideas if and when the body was discovered. And you can hardly escape in a houseboat in the Caribbean ... just not a seaworthy craft unless the conditions are ideal. And where could you hide a houseboat? Think ...

"A few more hours under water couldn't hurt him now," Angie decided, "and no one knows I found him, yet." She looked around and shivered despite the hot sun, but there really seemed to be no one around. "I'll go to Fat Freddie's."

Angie pulled on a long-sleeved tee to protect her shoulders from the tropical sun, quickly stashed her stash in the hollow she had found behind the galley fridge, and walked over to the kayak bobbing in the water alongside the houseboat. The kayak had come with the rental, and was one of those plastic resort things which had once boasted a 'glass' bottom, now scratched from years of beachings.

Luckily it was a calm day, and the 2 kilometer kayak to Fat Freddie's would be both pleasant and quick, and take her away for the moment from Andy's troublesome remains. She dropped in her towel, and clambered aboard. Bracing the paddle across the gunnels, she prepared for Taxi's ungraceful arrival, and the two of them paddled off down the bay.

Fat Freddie's was run by Mickey Finn, and he would know what to do, or who to call ... same thing often. He knew everybody it seemed, and everybody knew him, despite or because the bar was so hard to get to. You could get there by road, but it was almost impossible especially when it rained, and while it was easier by water, only boats with truly shallow drafts could approach closely. The shoals and tides were such as well that one simply could not approach with speed. Once in, however, there was a very protected harbour, from both weather and surprises, making the risky entrance worth it, as long as one had the time to respect the sea. Nurse's Harbour, as it was known, had become a peculiar artist's enclave, of which Fat Freddie's was the focal point, acting as their point of contact with the outside world. A world one thought had passed right by, until you noticed the satellite dish and antennae, and realized that there was nowhere really isolated anymore. The big screen behind the bar was a give away too, thankfully off at this hour, with the bar deserted.

Angie walked under the thatched roof of the open air part of the bar, and sat down with an audible sigh. Mickey came out from behind a partition, wiping a beer mug that he carefully put down when he saw her face.

"Did you paddle past the new resort site?" he asked, assuming from her glum look that they had been grinding up the coral reef again to make a 'beach' and that she had seen the calcified remains on her way. "Or take the outside on such a pretty day?" Mickey had a bartender's knack of drawing people out, and asked seemingly inane questions, but they got the job done. He reached down and scratched Taxi's ear, pulling a biscuit from his apron.

Angie looked over at him and said, "I found Andy."



Chapter Three, in which we meet someone who is blinded by temptation, and takes the bait.

Dan Farley parked the rented Audi in front of the strip mall office of the First Bank of the Exumas, and briefly wondered if it had been worth the extra money to rent the Audi. He wanted to impress these guys ... he stood to make a cool ten million, at least, if he understood the offer, and had a chance to own a resort in the Bahamas as he had often dreamed. And quickly too.

On top of which, this resort had attracted some bad publicity when they **ground up a coral reef** on the back side of the harbour to make a wider entrance for deeper draft boats, and to build up their fake beach with the detritus. He had a chance to stop that action, and make the resort into an eco-retreat, something close to his heart having watched the unrelenting development that had transformed the playground of his youth, the Florida Keys. He craved a simpler time.

What great luck that they had contacted him, Dan thought. The fellow who had called him from the bank had said that he had remembered his name from, of all things, a protest organized the year before, and had said that he thought Dan might be interested in trying to save the development. The previous owners were trying to sell the resort half-finished, as they had somehow over-extended themselves financially with a different project, and wanted out. The bank was willing to finance the deal, and were looking for someone to purchase the property, having financed the current owners.

The investor had noticed Dan's enthusiasm for the area, he had remarked during the introductory call, and had chatted briefly with him about environmental issues, with a seemingly sympathetic ear. Dan did have excellent local knowledge of the cay in the **Exumas** where the property lay, as it happened, having sailed in the Bahamas with his father in the summers, and often during the school year as well, his father valuing sailing over schooling much to the discomfort of his teachers. It seemed incredible that such an opportunity should present itself to him.

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," he remarked to himself, even as he wondered about the effectiveness of relying

on such ancient wisdom, and just how bad a horse's mouth might have turned out to be. He straightened the tie he was wearing despite the Miami heat, and walked into the air conditioned office.

"What a dumb name for a team," he muttered to himself. "You just should have a plural. Utah Jazz. Really. What were they thinking?"

The secretary, who was quite the eyeful, and certainly cupful, Dan couldn't help but notice, stood up when he walked in and glided from behind the desk where she had been seated, eyes glued to a Macbook, and promptly dropped the cellphone she had been twirling.

"Oops, how clumsy of me," she said as she bent to pick it up.

"Not at all," Dan replied, unaware of the irony, as the visual side of his brain was making it a little hard to think clearly.

"Would you like something to drink? Some champagne and Hennessy?" she was asking, he realised.

"I don't normally ...," Dan began, but she was already pouring, and it was quite warm in the room, "... say no to a lady," he gamely finished, as he took the glass, already sweaty with condensation.

"Call me Val," the woman said, as she put the drink tray straight. "And please, take a seat. Frank and Vincent are just with a client. I'll let them know you are here."

With that she left both the room and a starstruck Dan, who gazed around at the slightly decrepit walls of the strip mall unit, and tried to reconcile it with the quality of the leather couch he sank back in, and the weird but delicious drink he slowly sipped. His misgivings melted away as he began to look at the brochures artfully arranged on the coffee table before him, which promised an infinite future filled with infinity pools and beverages just like the one he was already holding.



Chapter Four, in which we find our compromised hero, having taken the hook and the line, but maybe not the sinker, safely back in bed.

Later that evening Dan clambered gratefully onboard the sailboat he had lived on for the past five years, anchored currently in Key Largo, one of the more northern of the Florida Keys. He felt safer on water, always had. He scratched Moron's head, having left him aboard to guard what few possessions he had. Moron was a large, miscellaneous dog that Dan had rescued as a puppy, found in a box beside the highway.

The drive back from Miami hadn't taken much more than two hours, what with traffic backed up on the Causeway, and at least one car fire that he had seen, which always caused his claustrophobia to well up. The hurricane evacuation route signs didn't help. Dan shook his head, and helped Moron into the little dingy he used as a tender, and took him ashore to do his evening business.

He often wondered what the Keys had been like before that idiot Flagler built his railway. He had only recently learned that Flagler was a founder of Standard Oil. Undoubtedly a causeway would have been built in this day of the automobile, by someone if not Flagler, and he himself obviously chose to drive. Bribed by convenience he thought.

Approaching the Keys from the water was so different than from the road. A beautiful tangle of mangroves and manatees on one side and dusty porn shops and tourist traps on the other. What havoc those early industrialists, whose hagiographies he had learned in school, had wrought on the landscape. Flagler wasn't the first to see money in the Keys, but he had had a disproportionate environmental impact that even the ravages of nature had been unable to eradicate, as the highway now ran where the defunct railway had, sold in bankruptcy to the Florida government.

Dan squirmed as he fought off the thought that he was no better, just a modern Flagler looking at the Exumas to make him rich. But surely this was different, he tried again to persuade himself. It seemed such a win-win, and he would not be exploiting the environment, surely, if his goal was to run a "green" resort and raise reef, and REEF, awareness. He really

would be different he vowed, and he could do so much with fifteen million dollars. Yes, they had really said fifteen.

The resort was valued at forty million, according to the First Bank of Exumas, which did seem rather high, given the state of unfinished construction, but they were willing to lend him sixty-five. That left him with ten million to help pay the interest on the loan over the first few years, and fifteen to use at his own discretion to finish the build. The previous owners would get their money, and **everyone stood to profit**. It was almost too good to be true, but the proof was in the pudding, and they had already deposited a signing bonus in his admittedly drained bank account.

They had done a really good job, explaining to him how it could all work, and the champagne and Hennessy hadn't hurt. He had managed to turn down what was clearly a very open invitation from Val to go for celebratory drinks after the deal had been struck. Not so much his morals as the rental car and long drive home, and Moron, waiting to pee back on his boat. Val had suggested he stay the night, and at that point what was left of his resolve had luckily strengthened, Dan thought with relief as he cast his eye around the familiar cluttered interior of his boat, dried Moron off with a towel as he had chosen to swim back, and rolled a skinny reefer before turning out the light.

Dan lay in the darkness, his mind happily turning to the trip to the Exumas, already spending his new found loan in his head as he thought of how he could outfit his old boat for the trip. He drifted off with his head full of visions of **blue tangs** and beautiful beaches, and balconies covered in **oleanders**.



Chapter Five, in which some sharks sit by a pool, and discuss the immediate future, but do not eat each other.

Frank and Vinnie, for Vincent was just for clients, sat back in the lawn chairs by the pool at Frank's house, where Val had joined them for a drink, having been rejected, much to her dismay, by Dan.

"That should hold us for a while," Vinnie said, with a satisfied look on his face.

"We get rid of Andy, with maybe twenty-five, and that leaves us with fifteen. That's a lot of profit for a day's work."

"I'll worry about the money, you worry about actually getting rid of Andy. I have met patsies in my life, but that guy was going to be the death of me. Who wears flip flops and a tank top to a construction site?" Frank groaned, looking more worried than his pal.

But that was par for the course. Frank took care of the books and strategy, with Val's help, he grudgingly acknowledged to himself, while Vinnie took care of anything else. And there was always something else it seemed, which suited Vinnie just fine, being the strong, silent type. Action not thought was his forte.

"And speaking of spending money, I think we need to spend a little of it getting over to the resort and making sure nothing gets Dan thinking too hard," he continued.

"The operation should have been all cleaned out, but you just can't trust those islanders, always have their own schemes afoot. But the salvagers should have removed anything incriminating, and they never talk, especially with the government taking such an interest lately."

"Hey Val," Frank called to her over at the outdoor bar, where she was fixing herself a consolation prize, still smarting from the evening's failed hunt, which had been a blow to her pride. Was she losing it, she thought, showing her thirty some years? She tightened her already taught midriff and walked over to the two men.

"I've been thinking ..," Frank started, as Vinnie chimed in "working without tools," unaware as always of the irony hidden in his oft repeated jokes.

"How about you head on over there too and keep trying to get your hooks into Dan," he paused, and gave her a not very pleasant, lingering glance.

"It looks like you might need to sharpen them a little first though, eh?" he added, fully aware of the disappointment in her eyes and more than a little irritated by it. Did she have to enjoy this so much?

Val sat down in the empty chair beside him and gently poked him with her elbow in the flesh roll that hung over the top of his swim trunks, as if by accident.

"Sure, Frank," she replied smiling up at him and turning on the persona that had gotten her this far, which, she thought to herself looking around, wasn't too shabby given her start in Puerto Rico. But she was an ambitious girl, this was getting big, and if they could just turn it over once or twice more ...

"We can get there tomorrow night, I already checked and [Bahamas Air](#) flies twice on Saturdays from Nassau. Three times if you count eight in the morning," she joked.

"But we will need a boat once there to get to the resort."

"That's no problem," Frank tightened up his gut as he responded, his mood improving as the alcohol dimmed his fears and the plan began to take shape.

"Vinnie can always borrow one." This poor attempt at humour cracked the three of them up, and they raised their glasses in a toast to money, the one thing they were all sure they wanted.



Chapter Six, in which we return to the Exumas and find our heroine, our bartender and one dog, perplexed.

Angie put down the soothing but alarming beverage Mickey Finn had quickly poured for her when he heard about her unfortunate discovery.

"I am not surprised he came to a bad end," the diminutive bartender said. "I have rarely been so irritated by someone on first meeting."

"Trust me, he did not improve with contact. And I hate to blame the victim, but he sure had some unsavoury looking folks with him when it looked like he had bought the resort," Angie replied.

"Or farm," added Mickey wryly. "They did not look like contractors, or at least building contractors. More like someone who would fulfill a contract that had been taken out ..," he finished.

"I know," said Angie. "That is partly why I was worried when I hadn't seen him for a few days. That and curiosity about what they were doing at the resort."

"Let me get me'mam to watch the bar, and we can go back together and decide what to do with the late Andy Anderson," offered Mickey. "I really hate to involve the police ... bad for business. Nobody knows about this but you and me?"

Angie looked up at him carefully, wondering if she were crazy to trust this man she had known for so few weeks. Yes, she thought, she was but she could. Not that you could tell a book by its cover ... well, of course you can, and often do ... the Berenstein Bears were closer with their worm inside a perfect apple metaphor, loathsome children's books that they were. And there was no denying that Mickey was handsome ... had that Irish smile that somehow included you in a conspiracy and made you feel like partners in crime, but in a good way. And there was no denying that he had some way of keeping the authorities at bay, not just through location. But there was an honesty one could sense, and after all, forgetting all logic, she really didn't want to go back to the houseboat alone, and here he was, flesh and blood, willing to help.

Mikey walked along the wooden pathway that led to the little house he lived in with me'mam, for she seemed to have no other name, and returned shortly with a little chubby woman, the widow of the eponymous Fat Freddie. She came down the walkway with surprising speed, two little dogs at her feet.

"Get yourselves off now, I can give you an hour, no more or my baking will be ruined," she ordered, patting her ludicrous red curls. "Oh, look at this place," she then muttered, and started tidying the surprisingly immaculate bar. "The way you carry on ..."

Me'mam's words were lost to the wind as Mickey and Angie quickly stuttered thanks, reduced to infancy by her powerful presence, and walked out to the beach where Mickey's old **Zodiac** was pulled up next to Angie's kayak. They hefted the kayak into the boat and pushed off the beach, and all three leapt in over the bow, some more gracefully than others. Angie started to paddle to deeper water as Mickey tilted the **twenty horsepower Merc** into the crystal clear waters of the calm ocean.

The trip to the houseboat took mere minutes compared to Angie's paddle, and after skirting the new resort, now apparently deserted despite the occasional light Angie could swear she had seen at night, they approached the bow carefully so as not to disturb the earthly, or waterly, remains of Andy. Angie clambered aboard and tied the **painter** to the railing. Taxi made it with a little help from his friends and they all walked apprehensively through the centre hall of the houseboat to the back deck, where the boathook still leant against the swim slide that graced the stern, looking so innocent in the sunshine.

Mickey picked up the boathook and turned to Angie, who had a moment's doubt about coming back alone with him as he stared at its sharp, hooked end. But she laughed and relaxed as he grinned at her and said, "I hope our chum isn't **chum!**"

She didn't find his next words so funny, but laughed nervously nonetheless.

"I fear our friend has vanished, but this sure looks like his flip-flop," Mickey said, as he waved the hideous object in the air, suspended from the point of the boathook.



Chapter Seven, in which Mickey and Angie look at each other in confusion, the elephant in the room is not ignored and Angie is unpleasantly reminded of Tolkien.

Mickey and Angie looked at each other in confusion. He, worried that she had freaked herself out and seen only a flip-flop and imagined the body, hesitated to say anything, not wanting to make her think he didn't trust her, which he did. It just seemed possible she had been mistaken. Angie was thinking almost the same thing. The pot was excellent, she had been worrying ... but she had touched that fleshy leg. Surely she couldn't have merely poked a sea cucumber? She had dragged Mickey all the way here ... embarrassment mingled with doubt.

Finally Angie broke the silence, and offered Mickey a quick cup of coffee before he rushed back to me'mam. He readily accepted, glad to move, and they went into the main cabin of the houseboat where she put the kettle on and sat down at the settee with a sigh. Mickey ground the beans and got the filter down, naturally falling into his bar-tending ways.

"Isn't that just like Andy. 'Wrong place, wrong time, wrong shoes' should be his epitaph," he said, reaching for two souvenir mugs that Angie had bought to augment the tiny ones that had come with the houseboat.

I really don't think I made this up," Angie reluctantly said, addressing the elephant in the room.

"I didn't say you did ..." Mickey started.

"But you were thinking it," Angie finished for him, "and so was I. It can be a little unsettling to be out here alone, and what with that stellar weed you put me on the track of, I suppose I could be getting a bit paranoid."

"I thought Jameson would be able to assist you. He specializes in customer service."

"As do you," Angie politely replied, accepting a steaming hot cup of coffee from him, cream and honey just as she liked it, without asking. It really was hard not to like him a bit too much, Angie thought to herself. But she was just feeling vulnerable, so that made men unfairly attractive she also

thought to herself. There were two flare guns on the boat, and she remembered the end of [Dead Calm](#) all too well.

A chill went through her despite the hot coffee and she realised she could hear the low distant thud of a helicopter. No, a few helicopters. It would be the [DEA](#), the American Drug Enforcement Agency, doing their usual swoop and terrify with their [enormous black helicopters](#).

"Don't you feel safe now?," Mickey joked as he too heard the approaching thud thud. "I really do have to get back to the bar or I am as good as dead. Do you want to come with me while you shake off the creeps?"

"No," Angie slowly replied, as she put down her coffee and started to walk with him to the bow. "I'll be fine. Either it was an hallucination or maybe the tide has taken him," she added hopefully. "You don't suppose he could be getting sucked toward the [blue hole](#)? They warned me about snorkelling near it during certain tides and said it can force water right through a hole under the reef that people can get stuck in. Seemed a bit alarmist at the time. There are fabulous fish to see."

"I hope you aren't snorkelling there alone," he looked at her with genuine concern. "It really is dangerous and you should always have a buddy. But you know that," he added jumping into his whaler.

"Yes, of course," Angie lied as she watched him start the motor. The blue hole was close and so full of blue tangs that it was irresistible, and she knew to go at slack tide. The helicopters had approached so closely now and were flying so low that the windows on the houseboat rattled, and conversation was impossible as they passed overhead, reminding Angie of the [Dark Riders](#) from Tolkien:

like vultures that expect their fill of doomed men's flesh. Out of sight and shot they flew, and yet were ever present, and their deadly voices rent the air. More unbearable they became, not less, at each new cry. At length even the stout-hearted would fling themselves to the ground as the hidden menace passed over them, or they would stand, letting their weapons fall from nerveless hands while into their minds a blackness came, and they thought no more of war, but only of hiding and of crawling, and of death.



**Chapter Eight: in which Angie gets nostalgic, acts tough,
and finds trouble.**

Angie shook off the chills and sat back down with her cup of coffee. She looked at the half full cup set down on the other side of the table. Did men feel they needed a woman in their lives to complete the picture? She really liked being alone, but that cup made her nostalgic for an image she retained from her childhood of a simpler time, a **Norman Rockwell time**, that had probably never existed for most people she sternly reminded herself. But being a modern independent woman really sucked sometimes, like now.

She finished her cup and quickly tidied up, finishing Mickey's coffee too, and decided to double check on the flare guns. They were both in a locker that opened from the back deck, and she went back and pulled the unlocked padlock from the rusty latch. The guns themselves were clean, however, and wrapped in a dust cloth, and the flares were up-to-date and dry. The houseboat company had been excellent about equipping the boat ... the rust was unavoidable with the salt water, and nobody locked much of anything around here.

Angie separated the two guns, deciding to put one if not under her pillow, darn close to it. Maybe she should put her pillow under her gun like **Chuck Norris** she thought and laughed out loud. There was really nowhere to hide it in what passed for her bedroom, which was well-named for it contained almost entirely bed, and so Angie popped it under the pillow, wrapped in a tea towel, with two flares in a ziplock baggie beside it.

With that done, Angie began to feel ridiculous. Here she was in paradise, with no one around for miles and miles, acting like a movie tough guy, and all she had to show for it was a used flip-flop. She felt awash with nervous energy, what with the drink at the bar and now the coffee, and the dim haze of the morning joint. The whole morning began to feel like a dream. A swim seemed out, but again, was she just letting things get to her? Why not just start the day all over again, and swim to the

beach with poor old Taxi who was panting in the gathering heat.

Dogs should always rule the day, she thought, and grabbing her snorkelling gear she went to the bow with a now excited pooch. She dove in, sun shirt and all, and swam back to get her gear from the deck. Much easier to put on flippers in the water, though it was still a laborious process. One day she would have to get the courage up to do a backwards roll into the water, but not today. Taxi had jumped in almost on top of her, his form of rescue that was much to be avoided, and it wasn't long before the two of them were splashing through the calm water on the short swim to the beach nearby.

The beach was on the leeward side of the cay that formed the protected harbour in which she was anchored, with the Atlantic Ocean on the other side. The land was made of ancient coral, and was tricky to walk on, but enough people over the centuries had made the trek that there was a hint of a path. Angie took off her snorkel and mask and flippers, leaving them at the side of the beach, and with her swim socks still on, clambered with Taxi to the top of the ridge and they looked together at the vast expanse before them. The wind quickly dried her wet shirt, and warming in the sun she decided to continue down to the rocky Atlantic beach.

Taxi was already there, sniffing his way along, interested mostly in fishy remains, things dropped by the gulls who came and ate their meals here, some apparently consisting of presumably unhappy clams, although their troubles were long over. Angie followed his lead, as she often did, and caught sight of something shiny a few yards up the beach. [Trying to clean the oceans of plastic](#) one piece at a time may be futile, she thought, but one should try and one never knew what one might find. Just the corner of a garbage bag, caught under some driftwood. And then another bit of garbage bag, and then a square pillow package, about the size of a big doughnut box, wrapped in white plastic.

Before Angie could really register what she was seeing, she heard the whine of a speed boat and with instinctive panic, whistled to Taxi. Keeping as low as possible she made a clumsy beeline over the ridge, slicing

her calves in the process. She turned and lay low amongst the rocks, holding onto Taxi and willing him to be quiet. The whine got louder and a slick blue boat slowed down a few hundred metres off shore. Angie could just make out a figure leaning over the edge, lifting dripping white packages into the boat, with the sunlight shining off the metal end of his boat hook.



Chapter Nine: in which the plot thickens, we meet the DEA officers who had so rudely interrupted Angie, and morality is in short supply.

The DEA helicopter headed up the chain of islands, making its intimidating return trip to Miami surprisingly quickly, and touched down behind the Department of Justice building. There had been little conversation on the ride, but Jeffrey Stewart, the junior of the two officers, finally spoke.

"That was really stupid. Why would you arrange a drop so close to that damned resort? And there is always someone anchored in behind that little cay. I am done with this ..," he trailed off, uncertainly.

"Oh, it's just some chick on a houseboat, I checked with Carmen at immigration. Pretty sure she smokes pot ... I don't think she will want to cause a ruckus." Henry Lafleur looked at his colleague. "And I told you this was the last time. Wait until you are holding your share of the profit ... I told Nick we would meet him at [The Living Room](#) once we were safe and sound. Let's go check in and check out!"

The two men walked across the asphalt towards the office building that housed the Justice Department's [High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area](#)'s regional office.

"It's simple," Henry continued. "The system is all in place, and all we do is pull a lever and drop some cargo. Fifty thousand is a lot of money for a few seconds, and anyhow do you want to say no to our boss?"

Jeffrey said nothing, head down, thinking as he often did that this bore no relation to the career he had imagined as a boy, helping people by stopping bad guys. When had he gone wrong? How could he fix it? Not by acting like he was now, he thought. Play along ... that's how he got here in the first place, but it was also how he was going to get out he dimly saw. Or at least it would keep him alive ... how did life get so complicated?

"Sure, Henry. I was just jumpy. Let's go and finish this up and start drinking. I could really use a cold beer ... or six."

Relieved, Henry pushed on the revolving doors of the building and they entered the cool, polished interior, becoming more officer-like with every step. Upstairs they quickly reported that the trip had been routine and they had seen nothing out of place, refuelling in **Puerto Bolívar**, Columbia as usual. And just to their boss, Christopher Higgins, they mentioned that the trip had also gone *very well*, and they hoped he would join them for drinks after shift at The Living Room.

"That would be great. Let me just make a few calls," he said with a wink, a wink that briefly transformed his usually nondescript face into an evil hawk if anything, certainly not the friendly conspirator he intended.

"Head along and warm up a booth." He dismissed the two men and picked up his phone as they left his office.

He called three people. His sister, Carmen, who still lived in the Bahamas but in Exuma far from **Elbow Cay** where they had been born, and who had checked out Angie for him when she first rented the houseboat. A number in Key West, which did connect to a person, but whom he wished never to know. And his mum who now lived in Nassau because of the hospital.

He was, after all, a family man. A rich family man, he happily thought, and if there were no illegal drug trade, he wouldn't have a job. He laughed to himself about the layered irony, but it never occurred to him to do anything other than profit from it.



Chapter Ten: in which Angie waits, barely breathing, a package is lost and then found, and a well-earned nap is had.

Angie waited, barely breathing while holding Taxi to keep him still, hoping the men would not come looking for their missing package. They were looking around in the water and she assumed they knew how many packages had been dropped. She shivered intensely and suddenly had to pee desperately.

"Please leave," she implored the two men silently, to herself, "this is not the package you are looking for."

Much to her amazement one of them looked at his watch and gestured sharply to the other. They took one more quick look around, but then put the motor in gear and took off at high speed. Angie stayed put for what felt to her bladder like hours, and then released Taxi from her panicked hold. The grateful hound ran off and peed under a bush, finding what little shade there was. Angie imitated her clever pooch and then sat down and pondered, while Taxi licked the blood off her right shin, the only scratch that turned out to be bad.

"There is nothing for it," she finally told the dog, "we need to go down there and at least find out what is in that bundle. Dollars to doughnuts, it isn't doughnuts."

Poking her head up over the bush, she looked around and could see the speed boat way off in the distance, just about to round the point near the resort. It seemed safe enough, and she scrambled down, much more carefully than she had ascended, toward the driftwood that had snagged the errant parcel. It was still there, bobbing with each ebbing wave, as the tide was just beginning to turn. Heart in throat she pulled it out, ripping the garbage bag outer-wrapping that had snagged on a sharp piece of metal, caught up in the driftwood and seaweed. The inner bag was tightly packed and intact, and she stared at it, uncertain of her next move.

"Okay, genius, now what? You cannot take this back to the boat ..," she began, starting to argue with

herself, as she often did. But the argument was over before it had really begun, as it often was, the answer lying in the denial.

She stood up, holding the package close to her chest, and climbed once more up the jagged coral path and then with much relief down the other side of the cay to the little beach. There was the houseboat, lying serene out of the Atlantic wind and waves, and her flippers and mask on a rock to the side making the whole thing look like a postcard.

Angie and Taxi crashed through the idyllic scene, Angie floating the package before her as she pulled on her flippers in the shallow water, eager to get within the confines of the houseboat. They tied, reaching the swim platform at the stern of the boat at the same time, and Angie helped Taxi up with an undignified push on his backside, having tossed the package as far inside as she could. She grabbed a big towelling gown, and then stripped naked, wrapping herself with much grateful pleasure in the warm folds, chilled to the bone both physically and mentally.

Picking up the package she went into the galley and put it on the table.

"Curiosity was bad for the cat," she thought as she got the sharp paring knife from the drawer.

Trying not to cut the string that bound the plastic, she slipped the knife under a fold and made a little slice. A tiny bit of white powder dribbled onto the table. Angie touched some to her lips. Cocaine, not pot. And now she had it on her houseboat. She tipped the package up so it could spill no more, and looked around for something to plug the leak. Angie stuffed in the tiny corner of a garbage bag, and then wrapping the parcel tightly with the rest of the bag, she jammed it under the hot water tank in the utility cupboard,.

"We will have to take it back," she told Taxi, "but we will do it under cover of darkness."

And then, despite all the anxieties of the situation, she lay down on her bed and fell sound asleep. Taxi took a quick tour of the boat, and then lay down at the door of her bedroom, deciding he should be on watch, or at least in the way, while his mistress took a well-earned nap.



Chapter Eleven, in which nothing much happens, a hot potato is returned, and human company is sought.

Angie woke up with a start, and for a dreadful moment couldn't remember where she was. She reached for her phone, no use as a phone down here but still a great six-hundred dollar clock, and for another confusing moment couldn't understand the time. 18:50. She had set her clock to twenty-four hour format years ago, but still had to subtract twelve sometimes to get it right. But 6:50? P.M.?

The days events slowly straightened themselves out as the fog lifted and Angie stretched and sat up, hoping it was all just a crazy dream. But there were two cups in the dish rack, the paring knife still on the table, and when she opened the cupboard, there was the package. Shit.

"Oh well, better make a cup of tea and wait for darkness," she thought with a sigh, and then laughed at how well tea would go with her hot coke-tato.

The sun was just beginning to set as Angie put down her empty cup, put on her bikini and slid into the water one more time, narrowly avoiding Taxi's leap, floating the package before her. Hard to be sneaky with a dog, but leaving him aboard seemed worse ... she was simply too nervous not to keep him by her side. They made their way quickly back to the beach, and Angie was struck again by the speed with which the sun seemed to set closer to the equator.

Back home, in **Parry Sound**, Ontario, the sun would seem to hang on the horizon for ages, filling the sky with purples and pinks. Here it was stunningly beautiful, but quick, the sun dropping into the Atlantic like a hot stone. Angie and Taxi watched from the crest of the cay, hoping to see the **green flash** some sailors claimed to have seen just as the sun went down. But no, not this time.

"Today didn't feel like my lucky day, anyway, my smelly friend," she said to Taxi, rubbing his head, and as the sun dropped below the horizon, Angie hurried down the slope, slipping over the ancient coral that formed the

island, for some silly reason determined to put the package back exactly where she had found it.

Angie saw Taxi's ears perk up before she and heard the speed boat coming. Immensely grateful that she had waited 'till dark, and giving up instantly on putting the cocaine back where she found it, she tossed it towards the edge of the water, and scrambled up the slope. Down the other side and into the water, flippers on, Angie swam as quietly and as quickly as she could to the houseboat. She and Taxi made it onto the swim platform and both sat panting for a moment, relieved to be safely back aboard.

It was surprisingly dark, which made the searchlight that suddenly played over the boat extremely scary. Angie froze, wondering if it was better to appear to be on the boat or not. Paralysis decided for her, and she sat, soaking and shivering just waiting for the light to stop. It was coming from the beach, but surely they couldn't have seen her. And why would they look over here? They must have found the missing coke by now.

"Probably just covering all their bases," Angie whispered to Taxi as she let herself breathe. "And I am no longer one of them." She waited another ten minutes, though it felt like an eternity, and then stood up stiffly and grabbed a towel.

It was only nine o'clock, and what with finding and losing a body, finding and returning salvaged cocaine, and that discombobulating nap, Angie felt much too awake and jittery to read or sleep. Every creak of the boat made her jump, and she suddenly craved human company. Nothing for it but to get in the kayak and go to Fat Freddie's.

Angie pulled on her old Levis, a favourite old tee, and to ruin the look, a faded old hoodie. No need to look like you are trying to look like you are trying ... or maybe tonight she just wanted to be a person, not a woman.

"Good thing **Stacey and Clinton** can't see me," Angie sighed, but felt much better, getting creature comfort from the feel of soft worn clothes on her swim-tight skin.

She grabbed the boathook and pulled the kayak in close, enticing Taxi in first with a biscuit, and then

getting lightly in the stern. Angie untied the painter and placing the boathook in the bottom of the kayak, paddled off just as the moon rose, late by almost an hour, as usual.



Chapter Twelve, in which Taxi is offended, Mickey is flattered, and the Mounties are dispatched.

Angie could hear that Fat Freddie's was fairly noisy as she paddled around the shore before turning into the harbour that gave access to the land. You could see where the bar had to be from the ocean side as there was an old fishing boat, about thirty-five feet long, perched high up on the craggy shore, its old faded paint blending in with the rocks but still visible from up close. From the land side this boat actually served as a lookout and sometimes patio, when the wind was down and the weather balmy, as it was tonight, with a deck built all around the base affording an uninterrupted view of the Atlantic. It also served notice that the harbour entrance was about to appear, an entrance that was hard to spot at times.

Angie made quick work of the short paddle up the harbour and pulled the kayak up the beach, stowing the long paddle beside the boathook in the bottom. Thinking of the noise, and still jittery, she untied the painter and quickly jury-rigged a lead for Taxi out of the line. He looked up at her, obviously deeply offended, and she patted his head while explaining that she trusted him, just not other people. Mollified and in complete agreement with her reasoning, he began to sniff around turning his attention to the important task of selecting which of the myriad objects that he could smell needed a little dose of Taxi scent to improve the night air. And as they made their way up the path to the bar, the lights and music and laughter began to lighten both their steps after such a ludicrous day.

Mickey Finn's face brightened as he saw the pair approaching over the boardwalk leading up from the beach, and he flashed his beaming smile at her. She smiled back, and suddenly realised that she was not going to tell him about the cocaine. Not because of lack of trust in him, more in herself. She liked him and what was she going to say? "I found a body and it vanished, and then I found some cocaine, but I gave it back and have no evidence, not even a flip-flop." No, she was going to say, "One ice cold Kalik for me, and a bowl of water for my dog, please, Handsome," and take it from there.

Which she did, and Mickey quickly reached down into a cooler to hide the flash of pleasure her words had caused, coming up composed with a dripping bottle for Angie, having also added a fresh bowl of water to the bowls already out for me'mam's little pooches. The television was on, but muted, that irritating habit that so many restaurants and bars now had, a talking head talking about the latest disaster but the sound track replaced with music and chatter, creating a horrible disconnect.

In this case, however, it was tuned to a game, and Angie had to laugh because it was a Canadian Football League game, the mighty CFL determined to show Americans how football is played: in the snow, on a longer field, with only three downs, one for each of the fans in the stadium. She had explained the difference in rules between the CFL and the NFL to Mickey, who being of Irish decent had glazed over immediately, once he remembered that the ball wasn't round and you weren't allowed to kick it much, despite it still being called football. But he must have been a little curious, Angie thought, because there it was on the big screen, and Angie felt a warm glow as she sat down and drank in the ambience.

The game was coming up on half-time, and the coverage turned briefly into a mini newscast, a brief taster of the delayed Canadian national news to come, the CBC's Newshour. Words began to appear across the bottom of the screen, and suddenly there was Andy's face. "Larger than life," Angie thought with a guilty gasp as she read:

"SEARCH CONTINUES FOR ANDREW ANDERSON, SON OF TORONTO REAL ESTATE DEVELOPER MAGNUS ANDERSON. RCMP TO SEND SMALL DETACHMENT TO MIAMI AND EXUMA, BAHAMAS, WHERE HE WAS LAST SEEN. AGAINST POLICE WISHES, MAGNUS IS OFFERING A REWARD OF \$10,000 DOLLARS FOR ANY INFORMATION ABOUT HIS SON'S WHEREABOUTS."

"Ten thousand dollars! Cheap bastard ... poor Andy, even in death his dad just had to insult him one more time. No wonder he grew up to be so irritating," Angie said to Mickey after explaining what she had read.

"Oh, Andy, you came and you took without giving," Mickey sang with a grin as he handed her another beer. "And now the Mounties are coming ... and they always get their man, or Mandy as the case may be," he finished as Angie laughed and he watched, happy to see her happy.



**Chapter 13, in which we re-meet our old friend Dan Farley,
Dan calls upon an old friend, Luke McNaughton, and a
weather window is sought for a return to another old
friend, the Exumas.**

The sun rose clear and hot the next morning, waking Dan Farley as the panting of his dog slowly resolved out of the tangled dream he was having, where blue tangs swam amongst oleanders, and he was being chased, or chasing something through a bog ... but the foul miasma was real and he reached out and ruffled Moron's head.

Dan got up and pulled on his shorts ... he would soon be swimming with blue tangs and smelling the oleanders but first he had some work to do. It was almost a year since he had actually had the boat at sail, it having turned into more his house than his boat over the past five years. Dan had been working in construction since finishing his Master's degree at the University of Miami's Biscayne Campus, which housed The School of Environment, Arts and Society (SEAS) program.

That had been a full-time endeavour but luckily he had been able to live aboard his boat during his studies, moored at the Coconut Grove. But it had been wonderful to trade the dust of academia for the dust of construction, and the bustle of Miami for the relatively laid back charm of Key Largo. And now maybe these two interests would come together in Exuma, but finally working for himself he thought. He started visualizing his eco-resort, happily day-dreaming while conveniently forgetting that the First Bank of the Exumas actually owned the whole thing, he just had the debt, having somehow also been leant the money to finance it.

After a quick trip ashore with Moron, and breakfast in a local diner, Dan sat down and pulled out his old charts and fired up his laptop, feeling a twinge, caught between two worlds and not sure how they would collide, the speed of the new versus the calmer pace of the past. But retrospection and reflection would have to wait. Plenty of time on the sail to the Exumas which would take at least a week and that was counting on favourable winds. Possible to solo it, but much better with company, not

merely canine, he thought, scratching the dog's head amiably.

He had never had much luck with the female of the species, he sighed to himself, wishing, as he had more and more frequently of late, that he had a first mate. Double entendre intended, a joke his parents used to make. He sighed again and picked up the phone, calling his old friend and sometimes boat-mate, Luke McNaughton, hoping to catch him between jobs and ready for an all-paid adventure to the Bahamas.

Luke had agreed almost immediately, wanting a break from his peculiar but fascinating job constructing water parks all around the world, [the most recent one in Beijing](#). He had always been a talented carpenter, really an artist, and despite a difficult family life, which had led to an alarming relationship with drugs, his ability to make everyday objects beautifully out of wood had kept him well-employed and had eventually led to this bizarre opportunity. But he was back in Miami, he had said, with no commitments for at least a month, and would high-tail it to Key Largo without delay.

A crew mate assured, and the best of the best, even if he would make a terrible wife ... Dan grinned at the thought of an enormous Scots wife, red-haired and possibly clutching a [claymore](#) ... and started to search for wind conditions over the next few days, hoping to see a weather window for the crossing to Bimini. There they could clear [Bahamian customs](#) and get their cruising permit, good for 90 days, and once in he could work on the logistics of getting an extended visitors permit. And then a long shot south to the tip of the Exumas, [Highbourne Cay](#), and then to what would be his new home he really hoped, in the same islands that he had sailed in as a young boy with his parents.



Chapter Fourteen, in which a relationship is not consummated but a delicious breakfast is consumed.

Angie woke the next morning on the screened-in sunporch of Mickey and me'mam's cottage, for it was more cottage than house, and stretched happily. Taxi was sprawled at her feet, me'mam's dogs were at his feet, and she and Mickey had let friendship triumph over lust. Of course there was me'mam's presence to help keep a lid on things, but both of them secretly knew that there was no consummating this flirtatious relationship if there was any hope of its lasting, at least not in the near future. Falling in lust was easy to do, but awfully messy.

Angie quickly snuck her bra back on, in **that magic way girls have** without removing her t-shirt, and slipped on her jeans. Letting herself and the dogs out for a morning pee, the facilities not being attached to the house, she smoothed her hair and composed herself for the onslaught of me'mam's presence and Irish breakfast. But a hearty breakfast was just what was called for, as she and Mickey, actively suppressing other urges, had planned to kayak around the entire cay this morning and have a peak at the resort from both sides and just generally nose around.

Breakfast did not disappoint, sausages and eggs and potatoes and cheese all magically turned out in one pan but perfectly cooked. And a little spicy, like a memory of Fat Freddie remained in her cooking. Mickey had appeared silently, clean like a schoolboy in for inspection, and had apparently **passed muster** for he got a kiss on the head. He grinned at Angie and said "I'm almost eight!" and me'mam cuffed him lightly but lovingly, and said "That makes me twenty-eight." "Twenty-four, Mam, but whose counting," he said, ducking swiftly.

Mickey and Angie tried to clean up but it was a bust, and they were quickly shoed out of the kitchen, with assurances that me'mam could hold the fort down, bar and all, at least until four that afternoon. Grabbing some water bottles and a couple of beers from the bar's coolers they made their way to the waterfront and clambered into the kayak, which floated surprisingly well, once they were

all aboard, with Taxi lying on on the glass bottom and keeping still. Tying the beverages in lest they dump the kayak, they set out back down the Atlantic side of the cay that Angie had paddled the night before. Me'mam's figure could just be made out on the balcony around the old boat up on the shore, and they waved cheerfully in the morning sun.

It was a stunning morning, and the water was crystal clear, the Atlantic strangely calm. But the weather report was clear and the radar had looked clear too, just one of those lucky mornings. They paddled silently, soaking in the joy of mechanical advantage as the boat slid smoothly forward, and then laughing when they caught a paddle full, inadvertently, and sometimes vertently, soaking the other. The cove and beach of the currently abandoned resort grew larger and larger, the beach augmented with ground up coral looking like a scar on the landscape. They stayed fairly far out, trying to see if there was anyone moving about while pretending not to. It looked clear, and they decided to paddle up a bit further to a little natural beach around the next point, where they could pull up the kayak and do a little poking around, but make a discreet exit if necessary, with Angie pulling the curious tourist routine.

It was amazing how quickly the remains of the resort were being reclaimed by the island, not to mention the islanders. The salvagers had removed almost every piece of metal, rope and wood that was loose and not too heavy, and sand and vines were working on the foundations. You could still see where everything had been ... a cooking area with fire pits and a huge old propane tank, an outdoor amphitheatre, with enormous sea buoys painted green and red in the jungle to guide the erstwhile tourists, the foundations of the rental cottages and main hotel building.

"Someone's dream," Angie said, in a whisper as if not to disturb it.

"Someone's nightmare," Mickey whispered back, and they both stood in awe at the vanity of man.



Chapter Fifteen, in which a sail is uneventful, a shore trip is not, and Taxi and Moron are ecstatic.

Dan Farley and his old friend Luke had made short work of outfitting the boat, buying everything they needed at the Key Largo Publix in the Tradewinds Plaza, including beer, wine and a little whiskey. The boat itself had needed little, as Dan, while a tad messy, always kept it shipshape. Leave nothing to chance, and always have a spare. His dad had drilled it into him.

They had decided to cross to Bimini during the day, which meant leaving at three or so in the morning. The weather forecast was terrific for the next three days, and carrying into the following week, with wind coming from the southwest, steady but not too strong. Crossing to Bimini meant crossing the Gulf Stream, one of the world's strongest ocean currents, squeezing itself between the Bahamas and Florida on its long northward journey bringing warm water to Newfoundland and beyond. But when it met a north wind the passage to Bimini became impassable, the wind and the current fighting each other and creating turbulent seas.

But the weather had held true, and Dan and Luke had cleared Bimini customs before sundown on the first day. The shot down to the Exumas was even less eventful, and the week passed quickly, with both Dan and Luke keen on the sail and pushing the boat to perform, and Moron getting a little antsy without enough shore leave. They had arrived at the resort as the sun was setting the night before Angie and Mickey had decided to investigate, and had put off their own investigations until morning. And now morning was upon them, Moron was breathing on them and it was time to see just what Dan had taken on.

"Wow, it sure looks overgrown," said Luke, as they clambered into the dingy, somewhat overfilled with the two of them and the dog. Dan edged Moron into the water, and they made their way to shore.

"Things grow quickly down here, the sand,.." Dan replied weakly. "But the environment doesn't look too disturbed." He peered through the water, and a blue tang shot by. What in the world had he expected he wondered?

He would be horrified to see a development here, and he was going to build one. He shook his head and decided that someone was going to build here, and it would be better if it were him. At least he could stop the dredging. Moron had been leading the way as they walked along the path that led to the main foundations but he suddenly shot off into the bushes, having discovered the scent of a dog, a recent dog, and therefore a potential wrestling partner. Taxi, approaching from the Atlantic side made a similar discovery, and before Angie or Mickey could react, he too had darted into the bushes, heading leeward.

Both parties of humans froze. Neither expected company, but one was here as owner and one was here as trespasser. Dan and Luke thus unfroze more quickly, and hesitating to start calling "Moron" in unfamiliar territory, they set off after him. Angie and Mickey looked at each other and shrugged. Nothing for it but to rescue Taxi regardless of consequence, and they started to stealthily follow along the path he had taken. The dogs, however, had no such concerns of ownership yet as both were new to the locale, and both had much missed the company of fellow canines, for Taxi did not really consider me'mam's dogs true dogs. This however was a dog, a real dog, and with the sniffing formalities quickly concluded the anticipated wrestling had begun.

As Dan and Luke came on the scene they had a moment's worry that the dogs were fighting and then just had to laugh as the play went on, both dogs rolling together in a sand pit, chewing on neck fur. Angie and Mickey peered through the bushes too, and Angie's fear evaporated completely as she heard Dan's laugh, and then saw him speak to his friend. She turned to Mickey and for some reason feeling a touch guilty, said "I think we might as well introduce ourselves." He nodded, thinking Dan didn't look like a threatening fellow, but that didn't mean he wasn't a threat.

Angie stood up and walked out of the bushes blushing and said, "I'm afraid that's my Taxi," realizing as the words came out how silly they sounded.

"That's my Moron," said Dan, looking in wonder at this flesh and blood vision that had appeared out of thin air. "And he seems to have found a soulmate.



Chapter Sixteen, in which nothing much happens, but we see where people stand, literally and figuratively, and Angie has a slight attitude adjustment, which she almost fails to notice.

Angie didn't need to play the dumb tourist, as she had intended if they ran into anyone, as the act seemed to be coming naturally. Dan was similarly afflicted, so Mickey, shaking his head comically at Luke and rolling his eyes, stepped forward.

"Good thing we're not dogs," he said affably, sticking out his hand. "Mickey Finn, I run a little bar down at the end of the island."

"Luke, Luke McNaughton, and that's my friend, Dan," he said correcting Dan who had just introduced himself to Angie as Nad.

Luke and Mickey sized each other up, both secretly wishing they were more like dogs, not the sniffing part so much as the **figuring out who could take who, by going at it in a sand pit** part. They were both clearly of the sheep-dog persuasion and by the looks of their two charges, they were going to need to be on their guard.

Dan and Angie were also watching the dogs, and looked as if they might find the sand pit a little too **convivial**. Perhaps Luke and Mickey could get along without a preliminary wrestle they silently agreed with some sort of secret man signal as they instinctively accepted their roles as second fiddles, a role they were both a little **too familiar** with. And as the four of them stood there, surrounded by the encroaching undergrowth, they felt a kind of natural bond, as if they too were foreign objects getting bound to the island and each other by invisible tendrils. Explanations were quickly made, and honestly, which saved much time. Dan was eager for information and Mickey was a fount of local knowledge, and the four of them sat down on the **benches of the remains of the outdoor amphitheatre** letting the dogs play to their hearts' content.

Dan's excitement at getting to actually stand on land he had only dreamed of owning, and then meeting Angie, had

him more forth-coming about his plans than he normally would have been and it wasn't long before the conflict between what he intended to do and how it would impact where he was standing and where Angie and Mickey were living began to make conversation awkward. Mickey was particularly conflicted. Development would undoubtedly be good for business, but things had been just fine as they were. Local employment was always good, but strangers brought strangers' problems. And he felt protective of Angie. Dan sighed and stood up, stretching to cover his discomfort.

"Well, I really must walk the property, and see what the salvagers have left me. And this afternoon I want to have a look at the reef and the dredging. No matter what happens, at least I have been able to stop that."

"They hadn't been able to get very far, until recently when the lawsuit against the previous owners was thrown out," said Angie who had been following the case closely. "It isn't too late ..."

"I know, I hope," replied Dan, "I have been watching it too. That's kind of how this whole strange situation came up. When the bankers contacted me they knew about my involvement with REEF. That's partly why it seemed to make sense. But the reality of it, standing here ... do you see how maybe a resort could be done gently?" he added wistfully.

Angie looked over and was about to say something flippant, struck by his saying the bankers had contacted him first, but stopped when she saw the look on his face as his eyes swept over the trees and sand. He liked it just the way it was. You could tell. Instead she stood quietly by his side, looking through the trees towards the ocean and wondered how she could help him.



Chapter Seventeen: In which Air Canada manages to deliver passengers to Nassau, as does a small charter, but that's that.

Air Canada flight 1832 touched down in Nassau at 12:50 p.m., exactly an hour and twenty minutes late, a little earlier than usual, followed shortly by a small charter from Miami. As the large Airbus disembarked its passengers, a somewhat florid and equally large Magnus Anderson could be heard giving the stewards and stewardesses a dressing down about punctuality, as though they had made the flight late on purpose to personally offend him, when in fact it was unspoken corporate policy. He had been consuming straight vodka on the flight and they had been grateful to know that the RCMP were actually aboard the flight, and even a member of the Canadian Coast Guard. But now he was down the stairs and the rest of the passengers, with a collective sigh of relief, burst from economy class and into the bright Bahamian sun, like someone had tipped over a jar of ants.

The RCMP and Coast Guard on the Air Canada flight from Toronto had been watching Magnus with increasing dismay from the back of the plane where they had been squished, budgets being budgets. Magnus had of course flown first class, needing the extra room for both his bulk and his ego, and they were increasingly aware of how difficult it would be to contain him while they investigated the disappearance of his son. There was much more to the story that they hoped he didn't know, as this was mostly cover for their true mission, which was to investigate a small branch of the Florida DEA. The Canadian and American Coast Guards had decided to cooperate in the so-called War on Drugs, and the Miami Sector of the U.S. Coast Guard had asked for some undercover assistance from their northern brethren. But this time it was themselves that needed investigating.

The RCMP detachment in reality consisted of two officers, Bob Greene and Doug Henderson, who had been chosen because of their scuba expertise and because both had worked on underwater body recovery, a sad but frequent job in and around the Great Lakes. The officer from the Coast Guard, André Ladouceur, was a Marine Navigation

Engineer, and he had been picked but as an eager volunteer, because his daughter just happened to be our heroine, Angie, and she was on an extended vacation exactly where this idiotic child of the rich had gone missing. He hadn't wanted to worry her, but he had been itching to keep an eye on her. The three of them quickly made it through immigration but the next Bahamas Air flight to Exuma was not due to depart until 6 p.m. and even they were human and they were meant to be undercover, travelling as business men wondering about investing in real estate, a common enough occurrence in the Bahamas. "Might as well enjoy it," they all said at once, and grinning got into one of the taxis waiting outside the airport, to take them to [Compass Point](#) for lunch and possibly a few beers.

The small charter plane had only disembarked three passengers, Val, Vinnie and Frank, and they had not been drinking but hoped to start soon. They knew they needed to get to Exuma, but could not resist the lure of the casino on the somewhat ironically named Paradise Island. Maybe this would be their lucky night ... and like moths to a candle they instinctively made their way to the waiting line of taxis outside the airport. One day couldn't matter and Val had booked them a fabulous suite at [Atlantis](#), an eyesore if ever there was one, but to them one of the most beautiful things they had ever seen.

But even while distracted by the gaudy glamour, Val had been on the look out for potential marks, ever the brains of the operation though Frank did have his moments she had to admit. And Magnus Anderson had the look of someone who might really enjoy her company, easy pickings if they played their cards right. She giggled at the aptness of her thought, and leaned over and spoke to Frank, subtly gesturing towards Magnus who was now calling loudly for a limo. He nodded and poked Vinnie, who had already turned his head at the noise. They didn't know exactly how they would empty his wallet and possibly bank account, but they knew how to begin. Val gently backed away from her two accomplices, grabbed the handle of her fake [Hermes suitcase](#), and acting a little vacant and lost, managed to bump into Magnus, and drop the little purse that was over her shoulder.

"Oh, how clumsy of me," she said, giving him the full tour as she bent to pick it up. "You aren't going to Atlantis are you? I am a little lost and ..." And that was all it took for Magnus to entirely forget his son as he opened the back door of a limo that had just pulled up, feeling like a winner with a belly full of Grey Goose and a strange woman by his side, in the back of a refurbished and visibly stretched 1982 Lincoln TownCar.



Chapter Eighteen in which Magnus checks in, Val checks him, and a bum is smacked a little too hard.

By the time Magnus Anderson and Val had arrived at the reception desk at the Atlantis hotel on **Paradise Island**, Val had invented a female friend that she was to meet and share a room with later. She asked the bellhop to store her bag for just a few hours, pretending the reservation was under her friend's name and that she would rather wait for her before checking in.

Turning to Magnus, she asked if he would be willing to entertain her for a bit while she waited, proposing drinks in the **casino**. He readily agreed and Val hung on his arm as he was checking in, paying close attention to the process. When Val saw the name and address on his identification she almost choked, but managed to hide her confirmed suspicions by once again dropping her purse. This was too much ... he really was the father of that idiot that they were looking for. She had begun to wonder in the limo, but the **address in Toronto** was familiar from their recent search for Andy.

Frank and Val, Vinnie not being much of one for internet searches, his skills lying more in the practical arena, had gotten as far as finding out that Andy hadn't been home to see his father in over a year and that they had a strained relationship. They were also well aware of the \$10,000 dollar reward Magnus had offered, despite being worth upwards of \$50 million, if the papers were to be believed. Real estate can be a profitable business, as she and Frank had discovered, and now this magnate, Magnus, was right beside her. Magnus the Magnate, Val thought to herself and almost burst out laughing. She had to tell Frank and Vinnie and take a minute to figure out how to play this. Val also knew Magnus was currently single, a detail she thought she would leave out when talking with Frank.

After waiting to make sure she heard Magnus' room number, not that she had much doubt he would give it to her later if not sooner, Val melted away having asked the receptionist where the ladies was, and promising to meet Magnus at the black jack table in 15 minutes. Turning to wave, but actually watching for him to make his way

towards the elevators, she ducked into the ladies and quickly checked her phone. 203. Whew, they had managed to get a room on a low floor and she could take the stairs and avoid awkwardly bumping into Magnus.

"Vinnie, let me in," she whispered when she got to the room as if someone were watching, and then caught herself feeling nervous and shook it off. She rapped more loudly on the door, and heard Vinnie growl, "Who's it?"

"Just me, who are you expecting? The Holy Ghost? Open up."

"Room service," Vinnie replied. "I was hoping for my steak."

"Steak? You already ordered? We just got here."

"I was hungry. Why are you here? Magnus a dud?"

"No, not at all my ravenous friend. Oh, there you are." Val turned as Frank came out of the bathroom, and walked over and gave him a kiss. "You will never guess who he is."

"Then why are you making me wait?"

"No need to be so snarky. He is Andy's father! But I didn't react ... just excused myself and came straight here," Val replied in a more conciliatory tone.

"Straight here?" asked Frank, always cranky when she was the bait, but always agreeing to it, which made Val a little cranky too.

"After a little diversion to the ladies," she quickly added having anticipated him. "No worries. And I am meeting him for a drink in," she looked down at her phone, "7 minutes. So you can look over his room, if you wish, number 735."

Frank looked at her with undisguised admiration, his crankiness evaporating as he started to scheme, greed managing to wash all other emotion away.

"You better get down there then. And make an impression," he added, smacking her a little too smartly on the bum as he hustled her towards the door.



Chapter Nineteen in which the RCMP and Coast Guard take an aeroplane and a taxi to a boat and drink beer.

While Val was exploring her options and trying to pretend she wasn't already well versed in black jack, having been a **croupier** in an earlier life, and Frank and Vinnie were exploring Magnus' suitcase and room, the two RCMP officers, Bob Greene and Doug Henderson, and the Coast Guard officer, André Ladoucer, were boarding their Bahamas Air flight to Exuma.

They had arranged to **rent a houseboat while in the Exumas**, an idea Andre had put forward after he had explained about his daughter's already being on site. The freedom and privacy a boat provided was essential compared to the hustle and bustle of a hotel, where the staff had access to your room while you were gone.

Their chosen cover, a scuba holiday, was perfect for nosing around and Andre explained Bob and Doug that he had managed to get in touch with Angie before leaving and he was sure she would be able to keep his cover. She had let him know of two ideal anchorages they could select tomorrow when they left the rental dock. The simple plan was to strike up a natural friendship between fellow houseboat renters and divers.

They were all looking forward to the experience now that they had met and found each other agreeable. None was a zealot, which was a huge relief to all three, and they settled into their seats eager to finally get to their destination. They planned to sleep at the dock that night and not attempt to move the boat in the gathering darkness and happily accepted a beer from the stewardess, delighted she could rally and serve the 30 or so passengers on the **Dash 8**, a very popular plane in the Caribbean. The beer was **Kalik Gold**, and the forty minute flight was over almost before it had begun and the three found their bags and went outside the **tiny airport** and arranged for a ride to the houseboat offices.

"Have you made any dinner plans?" the driver asked, clearly intent on sending them to a relative's establishment and hoping to adopt them during their stay,

a common practice on the islands. He had introduced himself as Thomas and had produced a card should they need future rides on the island.

"No, but we are mighty hungry," Doug replied, looking at the others and getting nods of agreement.

They needed to get a feel for the island, and a night out was part of the plan. Going undercover was going to be interesting and they must watch themselves, but they needed to work their way into the social scene. He asked Thomas where they should go, knowing that their options were limited. They had cased the island over the internet and through discussions with the Miami Coast Guard but had to remember that they were meant to be first time tourists.

Thomas recommended the **Chat 'N' Chill**, and they were delighted to agree having hoped that would be his suggestion. He offered to come and pick them up after they had checked in to their houseboat and they told him to wait as they were starving. The boat was just able to accommodate the three large men and their scuba gear but they quickly got everything stowed to their satisfaction and reunited with Charlie for their night out.



Chapter Twenty in which Dan discovers the joy of responsibility, Angie makes a quick decision, and Luke and Mickey go off to get the beer.

When we last saw Angie and Dan they were staring out to sea trying to see into the future. Luke and Mickey, two men who firmly lived in the now, broke them out of their reverie by calling to the dogs. It was coming up on noon and they were both starving. They had already recognized the futility of trying to break up the newly formed gang and Mickey was going to walk back to the kayak and grab the beers and food he and Angie had packed earlier while Luke took the dinghy back to Dan's sailboat and grabbed some lunch to bring back to the beach. Breaking up the dogs also proved somewhat futile, and they both followed Mickey, sensing correctly that he was the closest to any food.

Dan and Angie were thus alone at the edge of his new property as the full weight of the responsibility this ownership, or really a loan just as it was financed, bore down upon him. The word stewardship passed through his mind and he thought he suddenly understood it. Dan found to his amazement that the responsibility brought joy as well as fear, and felt that he might have finally found something he really cared about. His actions would have an immediate impact, something he had never felt before in his academic life. It was why he loved small construction where theory held little sway.

As these enormous thoughts were washing through Dan's brain in emotional waves he turned to Angie who had touched him gently on the arm and made a small sound. She was looking a little bit weepy, having had a very different rush of emotional thought, realising that she had promised her father she would of course keep his cover but that simultaneously she couldn't lie to this brand new stranger. And then she had thought of telling her father about Dan knowing he would run a police check on him and she would never be able to face him again. And then she realised that her father already would have snooped all through Dan's past.

Knowing it was either one of the smartest choices she had ever made or one of the stupidest, she found herself blurting out, "My dad's a nice guy with the Canadian Coast Guard but he is working with the DEA on an internal drug sting and might be here on Exuma by tonight undercover."

"Wow," Dan slowly replied. "Don't you hate it in movies when there is trouble and the guy just says to the girl, 'I don't have time to get into it!' but they have spent hours in a hotel room or airplane together? I really don't feel like that right now. Could you repeat that more slowly?"

"No," replied Angie now smiling, "that was a once off opening of the vault."

"Okay." And that was all he said, after zipping his mouth shut with his hand, turning an imaginary key to lock it, and throwing the key deep into the surf.

With that Angie stood up, pulled off her sun shirt and started walking towards the water.

"Where are you going," Dan asked, cringing at his pale question as he watched her tanned form and stood to follow.

"To go and find that key ... I think I just might want to keep it."



Chapter Twenty-One in which connections are made, in a number of ways.

Luke and Mickey came back with the beer and sandwich fixings and two bones for the dogs, and while Angie and Dan dried off with the towels Mickey had brought from the kayak, they laid out a spread. The four bipeds ate in silence, the quadrupeds not so much, but after the beer the chatter began again, and Angie told them about the strange lights she had seen at the abandoned resort at night, and about thinking she had found Andy's body.

Mickey, who had heard her story before, or had been there, was idly scratching Moron's head when he suddenly sat up and said, "Why didn't you tell me! Holy Mother of God, I could strangle you."

Angie, in telling the story again and in the present company, found she was describing finding the package of cocaine and putting it back. Something she had not told Micky, fearing looking like a fool after the missing corpse episode. Her story was coming out chronologically, and Mickey's shock was not so much from her omission but from realising that she had found the package shortly after they had heard the DEA helicopters. Sure, it could be a coincidence, but he didn't think so.

"There has been a real change lately in the drug world ..," Mickey paused as Dan and Luke gave him rather intense looks of interest. "It's the bar and village where I live ... you get to know everyone and everything," he explained vaguely.

Angie interjected. "Mickey was able to point me towards some excellent weed, but he just knows who to talk to. His mum is far too terrifying to have anything illegal take place anywhere near their bar," she added, grinning at Mickey.

"Once you meet her, you'll understand," Mickey continued taking the teasing in stride. "She is more force of nature than human. But really there has been more cocaine on the island lately, good clean cocaine and the question of where it was coming from has been on my mind.

But even cynical old me didn't think of the DEA. I don't see why not. They run the drugs, then they run the swat teams. Without the drugs they have nothing to swat."

"I was thinking Andy, maybe," he continued. "Rich disaffected son, from a big urban centre. And the real estate trade has always made me a little upset with the emphasis on new and improved, so I was biased."

"So he really was trying to find some coke that night in the bar when he was so obnoxious? He wasn't kidding. He was so drunk by the end of it that nothing he said made much sense. Did he sleep all night in the dinghy on the beach?" Angie asked Mickey.

"Yes. I threw an old blanket over him and got a boat cushion wedged behind him so he was stuck on his side. He must have slunk off in the morning but I'll bet he was **still drunk**. I should have hidden his keys better but the drive out will have sobered him. No, he left here alive or at least in his own vehicle ... I suppose he needn't have been alive if he had an assistant .. but I heard the motor start and me'mam's dogs started too, yapping like mad. It was early and I let them out but didn't check outside, the car was already gone."

"Whoa, whoa.," chimed in Dan, aware that he wasn't meant to know anything about this yet because Angie's confidence in him was paramount, "are you saying you think the DEA is running drugs through Exuma? Someone or something is haunting my resort at night? There is an extraneous corpse around? *And* you can get us amazing pot?"

Luke looked over at Dan. "And you said this wasn't going to be a vacation."



The World's Worst Novel: An Interlude, in which the Author apologizes, at once and more than once.

I must apologize twice, and I do, once to the Reader who is about to be terribly confused, and once to John Gardner, who wrote the terrific *October Light*, which I am clearly about to "reference". I said I wouldn't do this, but October is turning to November, and it can't be helped.

Chapter Twenty-Two: In which the reader gets terribly confused, the author references *October Light*, and the warm Bahamian waters are traded for the cold condominium towers of cement.

Sylvia put down the novel she had been reading, and took another sip of her scotch, a fine *Lagavulin*, as she heard the whirr of the car elevator smoothly stop at their floor. The double pocket doors opened quietly and her husband walked in, the faint smell of exhaust wafting in with him. She felt a little nervous, as she always did, hoping his day at the investment house had gone well. What he actually did, she wasn't so sure. She used to understand, but lately things had seemed a little crazy and she tended not to ask, in case she got an answer.

"Hello, dear," she said getting up and giving him a slight kiss on the cheek. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Yes, and make it a stiff one," her husband, James Talford replied. "Sorry to be so late but things are hot at the office. Over-night trading has become one of our prime money-makers. Did you get something to eat?"

"Sarah made me supper around 5:30," Sylvia answered, and immediately regretted mentioning the time in case he took it as a rebuke. He seemed to take it calmly, and she relaxed and handed him the double scotch she had poured him.

James sat down in the chair she had clearly just vacated and picked up the novel she had been reading. He

glanced at the back cover, closing the book and losing her place.

"Why do you read this crap?" he asked with his usual tact. "Shouldn't you read something improving?"

Sylvia was used to his bluntness, but lately there really seemed to be an unpleasant, personal, edge to his comments and she hesitated to respond in kind lest his mood prove irascible. She thought of the kinds of statistical mathematics she used to study and wondered, not for the first time, whether she wasn't selling herself a little short despite the insane income her current husband earned.

Instead she handed him the day's *New York Times*, drivel to her mind mostly, and a copy of *War and Peace* she thought to herself, knowing that he was about to turn on the business news.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Sylvia said, walking towards the kitchen end of the condo.

James grunted by way of response as he reached for the remote, his attention already glued to the massive flat screen that was slowly revealed above the fireplace, masked when not in use by a copy of *J.E.H. MacDonald's Mist Fantasy*.

Sylvia loved that painting and she watched as it disappeared to be replaced by an enormous talking head, the news made ludicrous by the eighty-five inch screen. Soon James would pop an Ambien and sleep (or drive) like a *Kennedy* or *a zombie*, or both at once. She walked out of the room and through the kitchen to the balcony and little garden space amidst all the concrete of the neighbouring towers where she had carved out a tiny green oasis. Sylvia pulled out her secret stash of Moroccan hash and sat smoking under the faint stars, dimmed by the glow of the city, while planning her escape.



Chapter Twenty-Three in which the banking system is explained poorly, James cures his anxiety very poorly, and Sylvia remembers his poor old mum.

James Donald was a high level money-manager for Blankenfields, a super bank for want of a better word. It was connected inexorably with the United States Treasury Department, one of the major banks that helped them create money through security trading, buying up the treasury bills and notes that the **Federal Reserve had somehow bought from the Treasury**. It was a profitable business but there was always an element of an offer you cannot refuse when it came to the Treasury and the Federal Bank. And indeed, the communication was often through a fellow James knew only as Tony, but he seemed to have walked right out of the Sopranos and into James' life.

However, through an endless revolving door between the two organizations, the goals were the same for both really. Keep the golden goose laying eggs or they both would go down. Blankenfields cozy relationship with the Treasury also brought it split second preference when it came to news about the direction the Federal Reserve was going to take with interest rates. And when the Treasury or the Federal Reserve needed advice, they naturally turned to Blankenfields for that advice, and so the whole cozy machine had been grinding along quite well for decades.

But lately there had been an acceleration that was felt in all areas of his work, but most importantly to James, because he simply lived to make money, was the speed with which quotes and trades could now be made. The volume of their trades brought them split second advantages with both quotes and execution of trades, and with over **25,000 trades made per second**, they were making more money than ever before. His nerves were frayed though, hence his bitter mood towards his third wife, Sylvia. He didn't have time to think about that now, eyes glued to the screen to see if any news about the company's latest gamble had leaked out. They were involved in overnight currency trading, a strange game of sloshing money around the world, with governments printing more and more money, and lately he had gotten a little ahead of himself

and his department had suffered a staggering loss. He was sure, as all gamblers are, that by morning it would have righted itself, but he had left too much money on the table, and he knew it.

The night before he hadn't slept, hadn't done anything other and stare at screens and pray, even though his Catholicism was a thing of the past. Tonight he just had to sleep. He felt the anxiety build in his chest and drained his scotch. A commercial came on for bladder incontinence and he grunted as he got up and went to the bathroom to pee and get an Ambien. Back in the living room he poured another double, or possibly triple, scotch and popped the pill. The news was back on, but they had moved from their top stories to the stories they ran to make their audiences come back for more, keeping them in a state of false anticipation, usually of a disaster just about to happen.

Sylvia had heard James' motions, and correctly assuming that he would not notice, she put on her jacket and picked up her purse and an over-night bag. It was not tonight that she was going to leave, no. This was a practice run. She was waiting until she had managed to get access to the files on her husband's lap-top. He hadn't brought it inside tonight, but one day he would and she had a portable drive ready to go and thought she might have finally figured out his password. He was a secretive man, and she had tried the obvious. Ex-wives, children, etc. But she had forgotten about his mother, Margaret. He rarely mentioned family but he had been more forth-coming when they first met and she had been scouring her brain for any details she might have missed. His beloved Maggie, who passed away when he was nine. How could she not have tried maggie as his password. She shut the door quietly, and went down the stairs, avoiding the elevator and going straight to the basement. No one noticed her as she walked out of the parking garage and melted into the crowd leaving the baseball game from the nearby astrodome.



Chapter Twenty-Four in which James makes a fatal mistake by thinking he is above the laws of pharmacopeia and Sylvia finds her dreams becoming reality, but in a most surprisingly unpleasant way.

When James decided to take his Ambien with scotch, and then stay up to watch the news, he made a common but unfortunate mistake. Missing the window of healing sleep, and adding anxiety and alcohol to the mix, he found himself staring out the window and watching the lights of passing cars.

Cars ... the office ... and with that strange floating connection that drugs and alcohol make, James found himself putting on his jacket and heading for the garage door, car keys in hand. He opened the door with the remote and got into the car. Ah, there was his briefcase. He started the car and then reached over to pull out the quarterly report he was working on. They had targeted a bank, in collusion with the Treasury Department, the Federal Reserve and a hand-picked selection of 5 super banks, for bankruptcy and had been selling repackaged debt to them for years, with the upper echelon in on the scheme knowing their retirements were getting more golden by the moment. And then when **bankruptcy became inevitable, they would become the primary creditor** and scoop up whatever assets were left. What a great scheme ...

Those were the last thoughts James Donald got to have, having forgotten to turn on the ventilation system in the garage, and having forgotten his Ambien-fuelled plan to drive to the office to try and win back the company money he had lost.

Sylvia didn't get back to the condo the following morning until nine when she could safely assume that James had gone to work. She started to clean up, taking his glass from the window sill, and walked into the kitchen. Something felt wrong and she walked back into the living room and saw his shoes beside the garage door. And then she smelt that familiar air of exhaust that seemed to cling to her husband and heard the faint sound of the car

engine running. She took a deep breath and then opened the door. Oh god. She shut the door and let out her breath.

Then, being practically minded Sylvia turned on the ventilation system, took another deep breath and opened the door and walked over to the car. Still holding her breath she opened the erstwhile driver's door, reached across the body of her husband, and turned off the car. Gasping she shot back into the condo and got her breathing under control. She should make sure he was dead ... but that had just been so obvious. There was no bringing him back. She would have to call an ambulance, but there was clearly no need to hurry, other than keeping up appearances.

The thought that James had deliberately taken his own life seemed ludicrous to her, but it certainly looked that way. And as she thought about it more clearly and the visual trauma faded from her startled mind, she realised his briefcase was in the car, on the passenger seat, and that his laptop must be there too. She went to her bedroom to grab the drive she had hidden along with a pair of latex gloves. Game time.

In a surreal state Sylvia returned to the living room and opened the garage door. The fan had done its work, and the air only held that faint tinge of exhaust. She walked over to the passenger door and opened it, quietly as if she might wake him. She lifted the lid on the laptop and it turned on with a whirr that made her jump. Another deep breath and then with a slightly shaky finger she typed maggie into the password field. A moment of nothing, and then up came James Donald's home screen. Sylvia looked around the empty garage and knew she had enough time to copy his whole hard drive. The coroner could wait.



Chapter Twenty-Five, in which rigor sets in for James, and reality sets in for Sylvia, who she rises to the occasion before sinking to the floor.

It didn't really take very long for the files to copy, but it seemed an eternity to Sylvia. Every tiny noise made her jump and she knew that James' absence from the office would be beginning to be noticed. Although he was usually in by 7:30, the occasional late morning wasn't completely unusual. But he normally would have at least called his assistant, the curvy redhead Mary whom Sylvia disliked and distrusted and was sure was more than just an assistant. Oh god, she realised with an extra surge of loathing for the man she had mistakenly married, she probably reminded him of his mother. Well it looked like his fondness for his mum was going to be his undoing, if now posthumously, if she was right about the evidence she was sure was on his laptop.

Sylvia slipped out the portable drive with a sigh of relief when it finally finished ghosting James' hard drive, the longest fifteen minutes of her life so far it seemed, and gently closed the lid on the laptop. She carefully shut the passenger door and walked back out of the garage. Looking around Sylvia slowly became aware, as if waking from a dream, that the apartment would be thoroughly searched, and knew she had to hide the drive before calling 911.

Despite the evidence pointing to suicide she would fall under suspicion, as spouses naturally do and she stood to benefit rather substantially from his work life insurance, she suddenly thought with a jolt. It had never occurred to her that he would die. She had hoped he might go to prison, though that was out of style [for Americans](#), just look at [New Jersey](#), but commit suicide? It was too out of character. And would suicide nullify the insurance?

Sylvia shook her head, trying to focus on the immediate job at hand, and went out to the balcony where she hid her secret stash behind a favourite hibiscus. Looking around to make sure there were no prying eyes, she pulled out the carved wooden box and tucked in the mini-

drive beside her rolling papers. She carefully lifted out a recently planted oleander and dropped the box into the planter, tucking the plant back in on top, and smoothing out the dirt. Okay. Now just the gloves. Back in with the paint supplies in the cupboard.

Impossible now to look at the files, but knowing they were safe, Sylvia picked up the phone and dialed 911. After the operator made sure about the ventilation, she asked Sylvia to go and check to see **if James was really dead**, and it was all she could do to suppress a chuckle thinking of the old joke. Luckily it came out as a gulp and the operator assumed she was scared to check and told her she would stay on the line with her and that help was on the way.

Sylvia walked slowly towards the garage and as she opened the door she knew she was going to vomit or faint, or maybe both. She muttered something into the phone and dropped it, remembered to unlock the front door of the condo and made it to the bathroom. It was all real now. Before it had been exciting to think about, and she had felt revengeful towards James. Now he was gone it was different but the same. The crimes that had been committed had been committed and more were to come if she didn't act. But she would have to wait to act. She heard footsteps outside and let her head sink with relief onto the cool granite floor. She had always liked this floor she thought incongruously, and shut her eyes as the firemen, always first on the scene, burst through the door.



**Chapter Twenty-Six, in which a faint is feinted, twice,
people are reflected poorly, and a nod is indeed as good
as a wink.**

The firemen found Sylvia first, and content that she was breathing and warm, didn't do what she expected and open the door to the garage. She kept her eyes closed, now pretending the faint that had been real, feinting a faint she thought, and listened intently. They were just waiting, milling about. She had been right to be paranoid.

The door to the condo opened again, and Sylvie heard voices that she assumed were police officers, and then one voice she knew all too well, that of James's mistress, for she might as well call it what the press were about to, Mary. How the fuck did she get here so quickly, Sylvia thought, beginning to sit up. But as she moved she realised that she had currently been apparently forgotten and she sank gently back to the floor, but with her head where her feet had been, and having grabbed her pocket mirror from the bathroom counter.

With careful angling she could just make out figures in the living-room, strange floating images reflected back in the 10x magnification, wildly out of focus. But yes, it was Mary and she had arrived with the police, plain-clothed police, whom Sylvia recognized nonetheless, **not so much from the shoes**, but because she knew the chief from social functions she had attended with James.

The chief immediately cleared the room of firemen, telling them to check the ventilation system for the whole building, and then to return. Somewhat surprised, but obedient, they left the room. One young fireman turned to look towards the bathroom, obviously having not forgotten their other charge, but also unwilling to countermand an order from those so well positioned to destroy his career in a politically run city. He caught Sylvia's eye, and she winked at him, hoping he would understand. To her great relief, he winked back and walked quietly out of the room with his superiors, in rank if not in character.

As Sylvia continued to watch in amazement, Mary pulled a laptop from the large briefcase she was carrying, identical to James'. The police chief nodded to another

man unknown to Sylvia, who then opened the door to the garage and Mary alone went in. Sylvia could only wait and stay as still as possible. A very long five minutes passed, and Mary came back into the living-room, laptop in hand as well as a file folder of papers. Cool as a cucumber she slid them into her briefcase, put the laptop where its twin had been, and left the condo with the strange man. Mary was a professional Sylvia realised, possibly a plant from the beginning. She hadn't shown a flicker of emotion and had just spent five minutes alone with the corpse of her lover. A shudder went through Sylvia's body as she woke up again to the reality of the danger she was in and the kind of people she was hoping to bring down.

Within seconds of this strangely well-orchestrated performance, the condo filled back up with firemen as well as uniformed police officers and paramedics. The paramedics came to Sylvia first, who managed to quickly slide the mirror she had been holding under the claw-footed bathtub so out of place in the sterile condo. But James had thought it opulent, to use his word, and bless him for thinking so she thought as the mirror vanished to a quick inspection, and the paramedics started asking her questions. Sylvia thought it wise to continue to act confused, although it was becoming less of an act, and brokenly told the story of seeing his shoes by the door to the garage, and then smelling the familiar odour of exhaust.

When they started to ask about James' recent behaviours and moods, obviously circling around the question of whether this was suicide as seemed so likely from the appearance of things, Sylvia decided it was time to faint again and felt herself being put on a stretcher and wheeled from the condo. As they placed her in the ambulance she again saw the young fireman who had understood her wink. He nodded at her, and they both couldn't help but grin, because a **nod was as good as a wink** and they understood each other perfectly.



Chapter Twenty-Seven, in which chaos breaks loose, a cold fish gets his way, and the police lock the barn door after said fish has bolted.

There was stunned silence around the offices at Blankenfields that day, not because they had heard of James' demise, for that information had been carefully guarded for the moment, but because of the fall in the Yen brought on by another spectacular round of money printing by the Japanese government. Blankenfields had had a nearly perfect track record in over-night currency trading thanks to their boss' cozy relationship with the Treasury, but this last week things had been haywire. Good thing he was away, was the general thought, as hope took over rationality and they began to simply wish the numbers on the screens would turn around.

Mary and Ken Mitchell, for that was the name of the strange man that had accompanied Mary to James' home, walked into this silence and put on a great show of normality. Trying to appear calm and everyday, they went into Mary's office which served as an antechamber to James' office, and leaving the door open, sat down on opposite sides of her desk and talked randomly of this and that, hoping their casual attitude would infect the office and give them some breathing room.

After about fifteen minutes, Ken got up and shut the door and joined Mary on her side of the desk. They brought out James' laptop and for the second time in twenty-four hours the contents were copied onto a drive that had been brought for that purpose. Mary didn't think there could be anything new on there that she didn't know about, but when you are a sneaky person for a living you begin to suspect everyone around you. She certainly didn't trust Ken and had wanted to destroy the laptop on the way over, but he had insisted on bringing it here and copying it, saying that he would "take care of it". He was a very cold fish and she couldn't help but wonder if he had had something to do with James' death. It would never occur to her that it had just been a preventable accident, one of those twists that defeats casting a narrative over life.

And then chaos pretty much broke loose. The news of James' death had leaked out and into the office through Twitter. The main news stations still could be manipulated, but the internet was frustratingly hard to control from an authoritarian point of view, and the lead time to control the situation had evaporated. Ken stood up first, still an image of calm despite the staff outside beginning to react loudly to the news of their boss' demise. He took the computer, and promising to destroy the hard-drive as they had intended to do together, he put it in his briefcase and walked into James' inner office. Shutting the door behind him, he opened the liquor cabinet, and reaching for a bottle of **Liqueur Galliano** that was way at the back. As he gently twisted it one of the **book cases across the room began to turn.**

Ken walked through the opening and entered a hidden room that was set up for entertaining, both business and personal, but which also contained a further hidden vestibule that hid what was essentially a bug-out bag and more importantly, a door that led out into the corridors of the steel and glass tower that housed Blankenfields. Ken locked the door through which he had entered, so it could not be accessed from the office, and quickly swapped his business clothes for those of a bicycle courier. Putting the laptop in a bike sack, Ken peeked out into the corridor through a tiny opening. The door was on a dead end, near the stairs, and it was all clear. He snuck out and quietly shut the door behind him, now invisible from the outside, just a panel housing the fire hose.

The police came into Blankenfields' offices just as Ken was exiting, and sealed off James' office so they could investigate the circumstances surrounding his untimely death, one the coroner was hesitating to label suicide, but he wasn't going to hesitate for long. It looked like the loses the investment house was about to absorb could have been motive enough, at least to those who did not know the man and his **extreme narcissim.**

