



CARIBBEAN RIM

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

NEW YORK

PUTNAM

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

Publishers Since 1838

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

375 Hudson Street

New York, New York 10014



Copyright © 2018 by Randy Wayne White

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[Insert CIP]

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

BOOK DESIGN BY MEIGHAN CAVANAUGH

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Imagine your grave on a windy winter night: you've been dead seventy years; it's been fifty since a visitor last paused at your headstone—now explain why you're in a bad mood *today*.

—S. M. TOMLINSON, *One Fathom Above Sea Level*

A valid point Darwin didn't make but could have made: In most dimorphic species, males are interchangeable, so expendable. Perhaps that's why only male vertebrates inherit the war gene.

—MARION D. FORD, "*Sexual Dimorphism in Gulf Fishes*"

[DISCLAIMER]

Sanibel and Captiva Islands and the Bahamas are real places, faithfully described, but used fictitiously in this novel. The same is true of certain businesses, marinas, bars, and other places frequented by Doc Ford, Tomlinson, and pals.

In all other respects, however, this novel is a work of fiction. Names (unless used by permission), characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events or locales is unintentional and coincidental.

Contact Mr. White at WWW.DOCFORD.COM.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel was seeded many years ago on my first visit to Cat Island, Bahamas, and was augmented by a recent hopscotch seaplane journey from Sanibel Island, Florida, to Andros, then southeast to islands known and unknown. We landed as needed and fished when we didn't need to, but landed anyway. I am unaware of a more intimate way to explore a vast blue schematic of salt and karst geology, for an amphibious plane fires the wanderlust in those who inhabit remote places and brings them on the run, always equipped with advice and a wealth of local knowledge. Tales of piracy, old and new, are as common as opinions on where to eat, sleep, rent a boat, and as compelling as rumors of witchcraft—Obeah, it is called—and of Spanish coins that a friend or relative came *this* damn close to finding. What makes it fun is, in the Bahamas, the rumors are sometimes true.

For this book, a key source of fact and lore was Captain Mark Keasler, an eco-fishing guide who has lived on Cat Island for more

AUTHOR'S NOTE

than thirty years. We met in 1995, and were the first to dive a spot known locally as the Horse Eating Hole because, we were told, it was where dead livestock was dragged by day, and was eaten overnight by something—a dragon, old-timers claimed. “A crocodile, more likely,” Mark suggested, and not only provided a rubber raft but joined me in the lunacy of hacking our way to a pond that locals avoided day and night—no footpaths, no litter, no human spore of any kind. Just Mark, his brother Andy, my young son Rogan, and myself.

As I described the place in my column for *Outside Magazine*:

Horse Eating Hole is encircled by mangroves so dense that even on a bright Bahamian day the light seems to have been leached away by shadows and stillness. It is a brackish water pond that lies off a sand trail at the north end of the island and below a network of caves from which, each day at dusk, emerge thousands of fruit bats. En masse, the bats create smoky contrails over the mangroves, ascending charcoal strokes above a tree canopy of waxen green.

Get the picture? Spooky? You bet.

We paddled out. Mark took the lead by using the anchor to sound for depth. Over and over he tossed and measured. Rarely was the water deeper than a swimming pool. But then, at a spot near the mangroves, sixty feet of line peeled through his hands, and the anchor snagged something solid below. Because exploring

AUTHOR'S NOTE

the pond was my idea, protocol demanded I pretend to be courageous. Worse, I had to get in the damn water. Wearing snorkel gear, I followed the anchor line down through a darkening gloom until I lost my nerve and surfaced. “Too murky,” I told my buddies. “Let’s go home.” Who were we to sneer at a century of Cat Island legend? The creature—whatever it was—could’ve been down there in its hole, seriously peeved at having been awakened by the rude thunk of our anchor.

Mark didn’t give up as easily. When he jackknifed toward the bottom, we waited for what seemed too long for a man without tanks to be down there in all that blackness. Then he came shooting to the surface, wide-eyed, yelling, “Our anchor landed right in the mouth of the cave. It’s clear, man. You get down close to the bottom, the water turns crystal clear!”

Incredible. I swam down through thirty feet of murk into a lucent world of bright-green-and-yellow rock, all domed in a huge bubble of clear saltwater. There was our anchor, sitting smack in the horse-sized mouth of the cave. Not far away there was yet another, larger cavern.

No wonder research for this book began with a phone call to Capt. Mark, and that Cat Island became my base of operations. Uncle Mark, as he is known to every child on the island, patiently fielded questions about local history, language, and customs, and provided a key plotline hook when he explained why he started a free program to teach children how to swim—Team Barracuda, it is called. “Seventy percent of Bahamian women and almost as

AUTHOR'S NOTE

many men never learn,” he told me, “so they tell their kids to never wade in deeper than their waist. Generation after generation, it’s been that way. Maybe that’s why there are so many legends about monsters in places like Horse Eating Hole—a way to keep the kids safe by scaring them.”

Child by child, things are changing on Cat Island. If you’d like to fish or explore with Capt. Mark, contact him at: bwanacat@yahoo.com or call him in the Bahamas at: (242) 474-0840.

This book has much to do with finding shipwrecks, and there is no better resource than my friend Capt. Carl Fismer, a legend in a business that has many pretenders but few true pros. During his forty-year career, Capt. Fizz, as he is known, worked over three hundred shipwrecks in Florida, the Bahamas, the Indian Ocean, and Central and South America, and recovered millions in Spanish gold, silver, jewels, and other artifacts. For years, he partnered with treasure historian Jack Haskins, and he was Mel Fisher’s choice to direct part of the salvage diving of the *Santa Margarita*, sister ship to the *Atocha*, so no surprise that he was awarded the Mel Fisher Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010. Fizz provided valuable guidance as I researched this book, and also an authentic voice (I hope) to my fictional character, Capt. Carl Fitzpatrick. While the two men share many admirable qualities, I want to make it clear that Fizz cannot be faulted for Fitzpatrick’s negative qualities (if any) nor the fictional character’s choice of language or misstatements of fact. To learn more about Capt. Fismer, I highly

AUTHOR'S NOTE

recommend his book, *Unchartered Waters: The Life and Times of Capt. Fizz*. Or go to <http://www.carlfismer.com>.

As stated, this novel is a work of fiction, but the scaffolding is based upon fact. Therefore, before thanking others who contributed their expertise or good humor during the writing of *Caribbean Rim*, I want to make clear that all errors, exaggerations, or misstatements are entirely my fault, not theirs.

Insights, ideas, and medical advice were provided by doctors Brian Hummel, my brother Dan White, Marybeth B. Saunders, Peggy C. Kalkounos, and my nephew, Justin P. White, Ph.D.

Pals, advisers, and/or teammates are always a help because they know firsthand that writing and writers are a pain in the ass. They are Jeff Carter, Gary Terwilliger, Ron Iossi, Jerry Rehfuss, Stu Johnson, Victor Candalaria, Gene Lamont, Nick Swartz, Kerry Griner, Mike Shevlin, Jon Warden, Phil Jones, Dr. Mike Tucker, Davey Johnson, Barry Rubel, Mike Westhoff, Capt. Tony Johnson, Commander Dan O'Shea, Steve Smith, Garret Anderson, Mark Futch for seaplane advice, and behavioral guru Don Carman.

My wife, singer/songwriter Wendy Webb, provided not only support and understanding but is a trusted adviser, as are my daughter-in-laws, Oceana Blue and Rachael Ketterman White. Bill Lee and his orbiting star, Diana, as always have guided me safely into the strange but fun and enlightened world of our mutual friend, the Reverend Sighurdhr M. Tomlinson. Equal thanks

AUTHOR'S NOTE

go to Albert Randall, Donna Terwilliger, Stephen Grendon, my devoted SOB, the angelic Mrs. Iris Tanner, and my partners and pals, Mark Marinello, Marty and Brenda Harrity.

People I met at Cat Island's Fernandez Bay and nearby one-room eateries—The Starlite, Hidden Treasures and Four Brothers—were as generous with their stories as they were with local recipes. Due to my laziness and poor penmanship, I will thank them by first names only: Wendylee, Marlene, Sheena, Karen, Erica and Dan from Fern Bay, Desha Star, Dahnay and Eugene of New Bight.

Key to this novel's plotline is the long history of Freemasonry in the Bahamas, a uniting influence that continues to join people of disparate backgrounds with trust and a potent bond. My fraternal brothers Dominique Gibson of Nassau, and Jovann O'Neil Burrows of Mount Alvernia Lodge, Cat island, donated a lot of time, information and fun to the writing of this book—a kindness I hope to repay.

Much of this novel was written at corner tables before and after hours at Doc Ford's Rum Bar and Grille, where staff were tolerant beyond the call of duty. Thanks go to: Liz Filbrandt, Capt. Tommy, Kim McGonnell, Tyler Wussler, Tall Sean Lamont, Motown Rachel Songalewski, Boston Brian Cunningham, and Cardinals Fan Justin Harris. Chefs Sergio, and Dustin, my friends Allyson, Alex, Amanda, Andy, Ashley, Becca, Brenda, Casey, Carline, Carle, David, Gina, Heather, Jerry, Jim, Jon, Mandi, Mary, Michelle, Patti, Peter, Rachael O, Ray, Sara W, Sarah, Samuel, Scott, Tiffany, Terri, Whitney, Yamily and Yvonne, Abbie, Brian,

AUTHOR'S NOTE

St. James, Jim and Lisa, and hostesses Briana, Carolina, Samantha, Shelby, and Tall Cheyne Diaz.

At Doc Ford's on Fort Myers Beach: Lovely Kandice Salvador, Reyes Ramon #1, Reyes Ramon #2, Netta Kramb, Sandy Rodriguez, Mark Hines, Stephen Hansman, Kelsey King, Brandon Cashatt, Timothy Riggs, Jessica Del Gandio, Bre Cagnoli, Drew Acord, Jaqui Engh, Karli Goodison, Reid Pietrzyk, Alex Wyatt Hall, Justin Voskulhl, Brian Westheimer, Eric Wesheimer, Rachel Lane, Zeke Pietrzyk, Samantha Wylie, S'iva Goodman, Amel Hadzic, Jordan Veale, Kirby Miller, Jose Mata, Nicole Volberg, Krystian Martinez, Carly Cooper, Kelsey Collins, Denise Beckham, Rich Capo, Rocky Olah, Gabby Moschitta, Shae Conrad, James Patterson, Austin Edward, Alexis Terran-Cortez, Tony Anderson, Stevie Cooper, Mitchell Arimura, Jade Beuth, Annette Williams, Nora Billheimer, Eric Hines, Timothy Riggs, Jeff Bright, Eric Munchel, Violet Vetter, Shelby Fleshman, Ryan Schlottman, Chantel Marineau, Carlos Rios, Jessie Fox, Consuelo Parra-Hermida, Jordan Kryzk, Kasee Buonano, Edith Lopez, Lizet Leon, Tayler Glavin, Nick "the man" Howes, Jon Healey, Raul Muniz, Hector Rodriguez, Carlos Rubi, Nick Dowling, Edgar Zapata, Daniel Castaneda, Louis Gyenese, Cody Brown, Alam Nabil, Seth Wiglesworth, Aiden Collins, Ross Pinkard, Cadin Kin, Eroll Brackman, Nelson Rojas, Bronson Janey, Kandice Salvador, Meredith Rickards, John Goetz, Andrea Aguayo, Baltazar Lopez, Adrian Uscanga, Oralia Ramos, Enrique Hernandez, Catalina Ramirez, Nicolas Cardona, Jaime Rodriguez, Zeferino Molina, Julio Cruz, Cristian Ramos,

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Juan Vargas, Jose Perez, Ramon Luna, Carlos Cano, Jorge Cuevas, Jose Mixtun, Reyes Ramon, Roni Martinez, Jose Vaegas, Carlos Marcial, Luis Cuevas, Joseph Bodkin, Jose Gutierrez, Alonso Ramos, Adrian Trinidad, Evodio Lopez, Enrique Tello, David Leon, Yadiel Velazquez, Heriberto Ramos, Roberto Deleon.

At Doc Ford's on Captiva Island: Big Pappa Mario Zanolli, Joyous Joy Schawalder, Hiya Shawn Scott, Adam Traum, Alicia Rutter, Ally Llanos, Amanda Schaefer, Bob Butterfield, Chris James, Christina Teixeira, Daniel Leader, Donald Yacono, Dylan Wussler, Edgar Mena, Erica DeBacker, Heather Walk, Joey Wilson, John King, Jon Economy, Amazing Josh Kerschner, Matt Ginn, Ray Rosario, Ryan Body, Ryan Cook, Sarah Collins, Sue Baker, Shelbi Muske, Tony Foreman, Yakhyo Yakubov, Lovely Cheryl Erickson, Ko-Ko Heather O'Dell, El Capitán Steve Day, Karla Garathea, Krystal Bovan, Skyler Muske, Adrian Medina, Garrett Hartle, Ivan Riverol, Jose Sanchez, Miguel Pieretti, Robert DelGaudio, Sam Uscanga, Oscar Baltazar Ramirez, and Guitar Czar Steve Reynolds.

My sons have typed or retyped and sent the last two words of every Doc Ford novel since 1990, so once again my loving thanks go to Lee and Rogan White for helping me finish yet another book.

—*Randy Wayne White*
Sanibel Island, Florida



Marion Ford spent Friday battling traffic, romantic issues, and writing automated replies to thwart future intrusions, and by Tuesday was in the Bahamas distanced by a turquoise sea.

Isolation. He craved it at junctures, the skin-on-bone reality of a tent, zero electronics, miles of beach to run, the indifference of saltwater, tide, wind. Two books, minimal supplies, a fire starter for abundant driftwood. The process, not time, was spatial. Whatever was enough to quell his own sense of drifting, the weakness granted to sloth, pointless emotion, guilt. Love, too—if “love” existed beyond the chemical bond that, in his experience, clouded reasonable behavior

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

Family was different. Those bonds were inviolable. The same was true of friendship—a select few.

After a week, he packed his seaplane, a Maule four-seater, and returned to Andros Town not refreshed but newly focused. Luck is an illusion embraced by those who are unprepared. Ford seldom was. Two days later, he struck the trail of the man he wanted to find but had no reason to hurt, let alone kill.

Someone on the island, he discovered, possibly did.

The man, a professor turned bureaucrat, was too caught up in Lydia, his former student, to give a damn about being followed, or anything connected with the past. To hell with the past. To hell with bills, his job, his unhappy wife, and the new boss, too, a supercilious business grad—not a qualified maritime archaeologist—who wore Polos to show off his tattoos, for Christ’s sake, and was ten years younger.

“There’s nothing wrong with a tat or two,” Lydia, no longer a student, had counseled, “or smoking weed, for that matter. You can’t smell it on his clothes? I did when I came to your office yesterday to apologize. The real problem is, he’s just another ambitious shark. They scare people like us. Admit it.”

This was eight months ago after he’d almost had her arrested for using a metal detector in Ocala National Forest. And he would’ve done it, called a ranger, if she hadn’t . . .

CARIBBEAN RIM

Well, there were a couple ways to explain why he had fallen under her spell. He remembered her from Advanced Anthropology, a night course for working students. Lydia, bland-faced, thin, always on time, always in the back row, off by herself. They were alike in that way—outsiders, solid, responsible, both subdued by what the mirror had failed to promise every morning since puberty.

He was five-eight and bald. Lydia, an introvert, averted her eyes while speaking. A slow, voltaic awareness evolved.

The girl often lingered long enough in the parking lot to call, “Good night, Professor Nickelby.” And twice had waited with him for Triple A to jump-start his pathetic old Volvo. Their clumsy small talk was memorable only because she hadn’t brought up Indiana Jones. Lambasting Hollywood was how the socialite types denounced a fantasy that had, in fact, flooded archaeology with their kind.

Not Lydia. The notebook she’d turned in was fastidious. Legible cursive with footnotes in fine block print. No copy-and-paste plagiarism, the new academic norm. And not a single goddamn emoji or doodled happy face.

One exchange *was* memorable. The Triple A guy had been busy with paperwork when, out of the blue, she’d asked, “Do you ever wonder if the things might be fixable? Like your timing’s totally off and it’s up to you to change, to . . . I don’t know, do the unexpected. Something totally . . . risky.”

“I can’t afford payments, so I’m stuck,” he’d replied. “The

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

timing belt was serviced at seventy thousand, just like the manual says, and, safety-wise, I did the research. Volvos are the least risky when it comes to . . .” He’d rambled on in lecture mode even after realizing he had totally missed her meaning.

The silence that followed lasted seven years. He married. He changed jobs, although remained an adjunct professor because the State of Florida didn’t pay crap. More than once, alone in the stucco confines of a home he couldn’t afford, he had replayed that conversation in his head.

Do you ever wonder if the way things are might be fixable?

Jesus Christ, he’d been an idiot. The Volvo’s timing belt had nothing to do with it. The girl had wanted to explore bigger issues. Archaeology as a profession, possibly. Or she was talking about life. Her life, his life. All screwed-up lives.

It’s up to us to change. To do something . . . risky.

This was a tantalizing fragment. Had she been addressing their age difference? Him close to tenure, her not yet twenty years old. If so, my god, it was the way a shy student might attempt to seduce an older man without compromising his career.

That brief voltaic awareness took root as his marriage crumbled. Humiliations he suffered in the bedroom sought refuge in fantasy. The girl, rather cute, not bland at all, came alive in his mind. She had glistening brown hair, a thin body, but not so thin her clothes—jeans and tank tops often—didn’t reveal taut hips and small stiletto breasts. Sloped valleys, too, one night in the

CARIBBEAN RIM

parking lot when she'd knelt to retrieve a book, then stood as if to prove he was taller.

The fantasy motivated him to finally do the legwork.

Lydia Johnson had dropped out midway through her sophomore year. She had forfeited an academic scholarship and a housing grant based on economic need. It made no sense. A straight-A student on the fast track who also had minority status—an unexpected twist. DNA results proved she was nine percent Native American. Documentation had been provided after acceptance.

This was an eye-opener. Sweet, shy Lydia was also damn savvy. In academia, minority status was the golden umbrella. So why the hell had she left all those perks behind?

He dug deeper, and it all began to unravel.

Campus police and a court hearing had been involved. No details. Her record, if any, had been expunged, and the file sealed. A theft of some type, possibly, but more likely drugs—selling, not just using. The dorms would be empty otherwise.

Fantasy could not tolerate the realities of Dr. Leonard Nickelby's respectable, stuffy world.

Seven years passed. When he thought of Lydia, which wasn't often, he winced at what might have happened that night in the parking lot. Then, a year ago, there she was in Ocala National Forest, wearing earphones, sweeping a path with a metal detector. He didn't recognize her at first. Not consciously. Then she turned and flipped him the bird in response to what he'd yelled, which

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

was, “That’s a felony, you idiot. Don’t bother running, I’ve got you on video.”

It took her a long moment, too. “Professor Nickelby?” The way her face lit up caused him to fumble his phone. Thank god, because he had park headquarters on speed dial. He wouldn’t have heard her add, “You have no idea how many times I’ve thought about you.”

He’d stammered something pompous about switching jobs, and she should consider herself damn lucky to be his former student. Five minutes of talk was all he could spare. Steaks were on, and a group of lobbyists awaited him at a nearby pavilion—a picnic intended to win the ear of government officials.

“A meat eater,” she’d chuckled. “I used to wonder if anyone else saw that side of you. Congratulations. I always knew you’d be a big success.”

Huh?

The fantasy could not end with another question mark. After three sleepless nights, he would’ve phoned if she hadn’t shown up at his office to “apologize,” then suggested they meet the next day.

“I can’t,” he told her at the door.

“You will,” she replied. “What worries me is, you’ll never understand why.”

Lydia and her cryptic remarks.

Yet she was correct. They were alone on a riverbank when she referenced his boss, a handsome shark who smoked weed. “They

CARIBBEAN RIM

scare us—people who think doing exceptional work will be enough, but it never is. Admit it.”

What he wanted to talk about was that night in the parking lot. Instead, he nodded wisely. “I’m certainly not frightened of him or any of my colleagues, but, for argument’s sake, let’s say you’re right. Is that why you dropped out of school?”

No, Lydia had been asked to leave—she offered no explanation—and went to work for a treasure salvage company based in West Palm Beach. The company’s founder was in jail after refusing to reveal where he’d hidden four hundred million in gold bars and coins.

“Not surprised, professor? In your new job, you must deal with treasure hunters all the time. They’re not all thieves.”

The job wasn’t new, he’d been at it six years. He knew enough about the guy to say, “Maybe not, but they’re all con men, the way they think, the way they live. You worked for Benthic Exploration? Jimmy Jones must’ve hired you, so you understand why he’s in jail, right?”

Jimmy and her eighteen months with Benthic were not topics to be discussed. “Benthic was a good group to work for at the time, that’s all I know. I learned a lot.”

Lydia’s stubborn deference irritated Nickelby. “What? You’d rather be a thieving pirate than sit behind a desk, I suppose, and enforce state statutes.”

“It would be a lot more fun than what I do now, which is

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

doctor cattle for a bona fide creep. Here, relax—” She produced a joint that was twisted at the ends not unlike pre-Columbian cordage.

“You work on a ranch?”

“For a vet clinic. My boss is a hormone pusher, the type cattle barons love.” Lydia exhaled through her nose and passed the joint to him, a man who didn’t drink or use drugs.

Nickelby felt as if he was dreaming. Stared at the joint between his fingers and worried about residue accumulating on his skin until she said, “Your beat-up old Volvo—do you remember the night we waited for Triple A? I wanted to talk about it then, how to deal with being like us. You know, smart, dependable—conformists by nature—but not other people’s idea of . . .”

“Fashion models?” he suggested when her voice faltered. “You’re wrong. I’ve always found you quite attractive, but—” In a daze, he put the joint to his lips, inhaled, then had to deal with a coughing fit, before explaining, “I was too darn stuffy to take the chance. To do something risky. Those were your exact words.”

Her eyes actually began to tear. “You remember.”

“Of course I do. Almost every night for I don’t know how many years.” He took a more aggressive hit.

“But the age difference . . . If you meant what I think you did in the parking lot, why would you . . . Why me?”

“I don’t date boys,” she replied, studying him in a way that meant something. “I never will.”

“Oh come on. You didn’t wait all these years just because—”

CARIBBEAN RIM

“I didn’t say that. Waiting and not moving ahead are two different things. I’ve seen the future too often. Women like me, with brains, and the train wrecks they end up marrying because they’re too fat or too thin, or their background isn’t quite suitable. Whatever. Another caged bird, professor—that’s the way I felt when I met you.”

Her face, framed in smoke, was suddenly lucent in the sunlight. The sense of loss Nickelby felt was numbing. “I . . . I don’t know what to say. But, at your age, you truly have no idea of the responsibilities that come with my—”

“Shut up, Leonard. I’m the only person you’ve ever met you can say any damn crazy thing that comes into your head, and it’ll be okay—as long as it’s the truth.”

Her boldness, so unexpected, wasn’t an epiphany. More like a kick in the butt toward a door he’d never found the courage to open. “You shouldn’t speak to me that way.”

“I just did. After class, all those nights I walked you out, I felt like a fool because—”

“You don’t think I wanted to?” He puffed, held his breath, coughed, “Goddamn right, I wanted to. I was an idiot back then. A coward, okay? Who followed every rule because that’s what I’ve done my entire fucking life. Risk jail and my career for an underage student? Brilliant. But that’s exactly what I should’ve done. I just wish to heck I would’ve—”

“You still can,” Lydia said. She took a step back, stripped off her tank top, and unsnapped her bra, then held it to her chest,

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

watching him all the while. Several seconds passed before she did it, bared her body for him to see—ribs beneath pale skin, erect nipples—then stood nose to nose. “Do you like?” she whispered.

“Oh my god . . . Beautiful, yes.”

“I’m not and I never will be. Don’t ruin what’s real by saying crap like that.”

“You are to me.”

“No more talking.” Her fingers found his belt buckle, a metallic sound as it popped free. Next, his zipper as she knelt. Shaded by trees, the river flowed while Lydia made it all become real.

Eight months later, he was still married but willing to risk everything when she produced a chart of the Bahamas and said, “The next step is, we need money.”



2

Mars Bay, South Andros, is a mangrove village born of a freshwater spring, not commerce or ease of access. Ford arrived on a Wednesday, mid-July, and started asking around.

“I don’t understand why people care ‘bout a loud-mouthed little fella like that,” the dive shack owner said. “He was nice enough, kind of fun even, but that voice of his. Sort of high-pitched, like a bird, you know? But formal in an educated way.”

“I’m not the first to ask about those two?”

The owner’s name was Tamarinda Constance, according to the sign. Tamara, for short, she’d told him. She was big-boned, observant, and had appeared slightly bored standing outside her

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

tin-roofed dive shack, beachside. Ford had spent half an hour on pleasantries, discussing local dive spots before risking a question about the runaway archaeologist who was also a thief.

“No, sir. A few days back, there was a big fella—well-dressed, he was—with an accent. Cuban, I thought at first, but he had money, so he could be from South America. Spain, maybe. He asked did a man claimed to be an archaeologist come to rent tanks and regulators. What’s so important about him?”

“The guy,” Ford said, “supposedly he’s the quiet type. Leonard Nickelby. Are you sure we’re talking about—”

“Same name on the dive card he used to rent equipment. Doctor Nickelby, is the way he said it. Bald fella who got louder and louder when him and his girlfriend, or niece—could be, she’s so much younger—when they started drinking rum punches over there to the Turtle Kraals Café.” Tamara’s eyes swept bayside to a thatched *palapa*, where there was a driftwood bar, stools upturned on tables, shaded by palms. Overhead, in the high green fronds, parrots rioted in the tradewind heat.

“Hard to believe someone like Dr. Nickelby would cause trouble.”

“What he caused was a party, mostly local folks since not many tourists are around this time of year. Shoulda seen that little man playing drums and leading a conga line around the fire.”

“That seems out of character.”

“Partying? You don’t know the Bahamas very well.”

CARIBBEAN RIM

“I mean he works for the Florida Division of Historical Resources, Underwater Archaeology. Or did. Supposedly, he’s as straitlaced and sober as they come. We have mutual friends, so I wanted to say hello since I’m in the area.”

“Florida Division of . . . ?”

“They monitor treasure hunters, usually from behind a desk. It’s not what you’d call exciting work.”

Tamara nodded as she processed the information. “Shut up in an office, he’s just that kind. Reminded me of a nervous little dog who’d been caged and coming here was his first taste of freedom. Barking for attention and running wild. Like that. But loud drunks, I got no use for them no matter their reasons.”

Ford felt the same, and wanted to learn more about the Cuban-sounding man who’d inquired about Nickelby. It was probably nothing to worry about unless he’d been misled about what was at stake. On the *palapa’s* wall a chalkboard read *Fresh Snapper, Lobster, Conch*. “If the food’s any good, maybe I can buy you dinner tonight. We can talk about the wreck you mentioned, and how you got started.”

“Not unless you want me to cook it, too. I work the grill when my shop closes. On this island, a woman’s gotta do what she can to make ends meet. This the slow season, sir, and money’s hard to come by.”

It was a statement, not a veiled invitation. He decided he liked her. A pragmatist, Ford relied on instinct more than he cared to

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

admit. He also had a soft spot for people who hadn't been gifted with wealth or physical beauty yet battled on toward whatever success their secrets embraced.

"What about tomorrow? If you're available, I want to hire your boat. Let's talk about it over a drink after you get off."

"Talk about this fella you're after, you mean," she said, suddenly not so friendly. "I got a five-year-old child at home and get back too late as it is."

"Invite your husband to come along."

"My husband got nothing to do with the subject, you don't mind me saying."

When he tried to apologize, she interrupted. "I trust who I want to trust. The other fella, he had a hard look and treated me like I was stupid, so I sent him on his way. With you, well, I've enjoyed our conversing, but this here's a professional business I run. People's privacy on the island, why they come, that's none of my affair. First thing I shoulda asked, I guess, is are you some kinda po-lice?"

The cautionary awareness imprinted on blacks and whites in the U.S. did not exist in the rural Bahamas. That wasn't the issue. From a shoulder bag he removed an envelope embossed with the crest of the Bahamian Ministry of Fisheries. "Maybe this will help."

She unfolded an ornate document. It granted this pleasant, solid-looking American permission to spend a month in the islands taking coral samples and doing research on something

CARIBBEAN RIM

called Conditioned Auditory Response of Marine Fishes, Subclass *Elasmobranchii*.

“You’re a scientist,” she said, impressed. “Marion D. Ford, P-h-D. That’s a very pretty name for a man. What’s the auditory response thing?”

“How sharks respond to the sound of boat engines.”

“Oh, Elasmob . . . another word for sharks, huh? I’ve heard that’s true.”

“About boat engines? It’s a fairly recent issue. Guides who specialize in marlin, sailfish—the deep-water trolling species—they say ocean-going sharks have figured out what they’re doing. Not just here. Throughout the Caribbean. You know how a boat has to back its engines when a big billfish takes a bait? They claim, fish or no fish, all they have to do is throw the engines into reverse and sharks appear.”

“Hmm, then I’m glad I use a sailboat on my dive trips.” She nodded, still reading. “Coral samples, too. Collecting coral is illegal for most folks. You must know some powerful people, they give you papers like this.”

Ford, a marine biologist, did. He had used similar credentials often enough to know they were useful, but not enough to disguise an obvious lie. “Leonard Nickelby has nothing to do with my project. He supposedly knows a lot about wreck sites in the islands, and diving wrecks is a hobby of mine. My friends thought he might give me some tips.”

“What kinda wrecks?”

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

“Any kind, as long as they’re not too deep. I’m pretty new at it. That spot you told me about sounds interesting, the one you haven’t figured out yet.” He was referring to a sandy basin where she claimed to have seen what looked like dinosaur bones even though dinosaurs had never roamed the Bahamas.

Tamara indulged him. “That’s smart mixing business with pleasure. Collect your coral and study sharks while doing what’s fun. This man, Nickelby, let me ask you something . . . Well, it don’t matter. Been lots of experts show up on this island and they’re all after treasure of some type. No one ever says what they’re really looking for.” Her eyes, when they made contact, added, *Including you*. “Come on now, sir. There’s nothing illegal about hunting other valuables that might float up here.”

“Such as?”

“You serious or playing dumb?”

“I’m asking.”

“Oh-h-h, people look for lots of things. Glass fishing floats, they can still be found. Others collect rare wood that sometimes floats all the way over from Africa. Or bottles that wash up on the windward side. Someone like you, though, might have something else in mind.”

Ford looked at her blankly.

“Come on. The gray rock, you know? That’s where the money is.”

“The what?”

“Amber wax. Floating gold, as old-timers would say. Most come here these days, that’s what they’re after. It’s a recent thing.”

CARIBBEAN RIM

“Never heard of it.”

“Truly?”

“Are you talking about cocaine?”

She rolled her eyes like a teenager, meaning he was way behind the times. “Ambergris. Ambergris from the belly of whales. You’re a scientist and don’t know that? It sells for more than gold to perfume makers in France. Stuff washes up on the reefs, if you know where to look, sometimes balls of forty, fifty pounds. New Providence used to be the best place, which is why no one bothered with the south islands ’til recently. No need to pretend with me if that’s your reason, sir.”

Ford was familiar with ambergris, its origins and content, but was more concerned with losing the confidence of a woman who might be a useful source. And not just because of the wayward archaeologist.

“Tamara—mind if I call you that? I’m going to trust you with something I should’ve told you right off. Dr. Nickelby stole a logbook from a friend of mine. That’s not the main reason I’m here, but I would like to find him.”

“I knew it,” she said. “I’m almost always right about such things. Like a ship’s log from a boat?”

He added a few details. The logbook belonged to an aging treasure hunter who had invested forty years of travel, hard work, and research in the notes the book contained.

“Why didn’t you tell me before—”

“Because we just met and I want to keep this out of the news.

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

Nickelby's a respected public official in Florida. His wife's worried. She wants him home safe. I happened to be in the area anyway, so why not try to talk some sense into the guy before the police have to get involved?"

That won her over. Temporarily. "Bet she's mighty angry, too, him and that teenage-looking girl he's acting the fool with. What exactly's in your friend's book so important you gotta show me those government papers, then pretend to like wreck diving?"

"I'm not pretending," he said, and tucked the research permits away. "Let me charter you for the day and I'll tell you the rest of it. That spot you mentioned sounds like a good start. What I'm looking for is bleached coral. I'm sure you're familiar with it, a disease that has nothing to do with bleach. Thermal bleaching, it's called, very common on reefs around—"

"Tell me this now," she interrupted. "That little man's an archaeologist? Explain something. I told him about the same spot, what I'd seen—a big tusk-looking bone from dinosaur times—but he wasn't interested. That doesn't make sense. Spanish wrecks, that's what he's after, and you know it. Either that or amber wax."

"Like you said," Ford replied, "everyone's looking for something."

Her thin smile was either a ruse or that of a willing conspirator. "Sounds like this book you're after might be valuable. It contains wreck numbers, I suppose. Or what did your friend do, draw maps? Like, X marks the spot? Mister, I can count how many of

CARIBBEAN RIM

those I've heard about. You plan to steal that logbook back, I suppose."

Ford's laughter sounded genuine. "If I had the nerve, it might be fun trying something crazy for a change. But, no, I just want to talk to the guy before he screws up his life more than he already has. It's kinda weird, though, I'm not the only man looking for him. Remember anything else about the foreign guy you mentioned?"

"Screwin' up people's lives," Tamara said, "is what a lot of men are good at. The same's true of you, I suppose."

His expression asked, *Me?*

Her dubious snort replied, *Don't play innocent.*

Ford had to laugh again, because she was right. "I've done too many dumb things to list, but the life I screw up is usually my own. Are we on for tomorrow? I'll pay cash."

The frankness of that seemed to go over okay. She got around to saying, "First light, meet me at the dock. If you change your mind once you see my boat, I suggest you hire your treasure hunter friend."