

MURDER IN KEY WEST

Tony Whyte's once sparking blue eyes were lifeless and stared into oblivion; his frozen expression suggested no fear or pain, not even surprise and his Key West tan had turned ashen. Both hands clutched an old sword blade that had been forced through his chest and impaled him to the boat chair where he died. A small pirate flag hung from its handle.

A puddle of congealed blood sloshed like Jell-O under the chair as the luxurious 50-foot trawler rocked in its slip. The teak-paneled main cabin appeared neat, only Tony looked out of place, while the sweet stickiness of blood, mixed with the sourness of death fouled the cabin's air.

I searched for a pulse in his neck, but knew I wouldn't find one. Tony was as cold as granite from a Quincy quarry and almost as hard.

Classical music played from the trawler's satellite radio. I looked at the radio's screen and *Bach, cello suite no. 6 in D major by Pablo Casals* scrolled across it. The music was counterpoint to the cacophony of sounds coming from the Key West Old Town marina outside Schooner Wharf Bar; a mixture of bar patrons' happiness, captains barking orders to crews, tourists shrieking excitement, boat engines revving and traffic.

I walked outside to breathe the salty air. Too many people had seen me on the boat, so I couldn't walk away. Not that I wanted to. Tony was a guy I had worked with years ago on a newspaper in Puerto Rico. We had taken different roads in life, but two months ago, our paths crossed again in Key West, Florida, my home.

Tony had been sober four years and was writing again. He was happy and talked freely of his alcoholism, of waking confused and scared from his blackouts, and how long it had taken him to hit bottom. His journalism career crashed and burned, while mine flourished. Slowly and

sober, Tony had been writing his way back, one day at a time.

I looked inside the cabin and thought again about how neat it was. Tony had been a barfly, a scraper who knew how to survive, but this time he hadn't. He knew who killed him, but hadn't seen it coming.

I sat in a deck chair and felt the morning sun on my face. Clouds moved across the pale sky and the air smelled of saltwater, humidity and seaweed. Tarpon broke the surface, their splashing echoed around the marina. It smelled a lot better than inside. Lines, holding boats in place, moaned from stress and birds cried in protest, as the first reef bound catamarans, filled with tourists waiting to sunburn, left for a day of snorkeling.

The sounds of life vibrated from the marina and harbor walk, while the silence of murder sat quietly in the boat's cabin.

I used my cell phone to call Richard Dowley, the chief of police. Had someone, or something from Tony's alcohol-hazy past found him? Or, had a murderer with a pirate fetish surfaced in Paradise? Murder was almost unheard of in Key West. We were more than 100 miles from Miami and a million miles from its violence.

* * *

The Chief, dressed in creased blue slacks and a blue Polo shirt with a police logo on its breast, stood with a Styrofoam cup of *café con leche*, a mixture of strong Cuban coffee with hot milk and lots of sugar, sunglasses perched on his large nose, looking at Tony's body.

Sherlock Corcoran, the crime scene investigator, and Detective Luis Morales, both wearing surgical gloves, looked cautiously around the room. They had turned the boat's air condition to high, but the room still held the stench of violent death. Few new Sherlock's real

first name, but the nickname came with his job.

Their casual attire conflicted with my cutoff jeans, sleeveless button-downed collared shirt, faded pre-World Series Boston Red Sox baseball cap and flip-flops. I had three good cigars in my pocket and wanted to light one, to help kill the foul air.

"Who was he?" the Chief sipped his *con leche*. "And how do you know him?"

"Tony Whyte," I turned away and looked outside. "Whyte with a Y. Years ago we worked on the same paper in San Juan."

"What's he doing on Wizard's boat?"

"He was helping Wizard and his two partners write their memoirs on discovering the Spanish treasure." It was the truth, but not the whole truth.

When I mentioned the Spanish treasure, Sherlock and Luis stopped and stared at me. The three boat bums - Wizard, Lucky and Bubba - discovering millions in Spanish treasure in the '70s was a Key West legend with little, if any truth told with the story. When the new multi millionaires were sober they had varying stories about the discovery and they told other versions when they were drunk, which was often. Their only consistency was their inconsistency.

"Wizard do this?" the Chief took a long swallow and finished his *con leche*.

"No, I don't think so."

"Why?" He took a cigar from my pocket, sniffed it, and smiled.

"Wizard's too frail and this guy is twice his size," Luis said. "He didn't do it. Whoever did it had enough strength to push the sword through a man's ribs."

The Chief looked at me and I nodded. Wizard was in his late 70s and had always been a

beanpole. In his prime, he had a difficulty with a scuba tank until he was in the water.

"Let's talk to him anyway," he said to Luis and handed the cigar back. "Have a car check the bars," he looked at his watch. "There are only a few open this early."

Luis went outside to tell the uniformed officers.

"Awfully neat for a murder," Sherlock opened a cabinet and looked inside. "This the way you found it, Mick?"

"Exactly. I checked Tony for a pulse and then called the Chief."

"You couldn't tell he was dead?" Sherlock tried to hide a smile. "I'm going below."

Sherlock walked the narrow steps to the lower section of the trawler.

"You want to tell me anything?" the Chief put his empty cup down. "If he's writing the memoir, what are you doing here?"

"He was supposed get with Wizard at the Breakfast Club at Schooner Wharf. Tony said they had a few things to discuss and then he wanted to talk to me." I turned back toward Tony and wondered what he wanted. "We were gonna meet at Schooner and go have breakfast, when he didn't show up I walked down here and found him like this."

"Maybe Wizard had help," the Chief thought aloud.

"No fuss, no mess," I looked around the neat cabin and wished I was outside. "A patrol car is looking for him, Chief," Luis walked in.

"Sherlock's down below," the Chief said and Luis went in search of him.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Go have breakfast at Harpoon Harry's."

"This doesn't bother you?" He seemed surprised.

"Chief, I've covered drug wars, gang wars, revolutions, and riots in L.A., and I've learned to be grateful it ain't my blood on the streets, and appreciate I'm still alive and capable of being hungry."

"You'll need to come to the station and give Luis a statement," the Chief said as I headed toward the deck.

"You know the guy hates me."

"Yeah, but I love you," he smiled. "Come to the station when he calls."

"Sure." I walked outside, took a deep breath, and fought the urge to look at Tony one last time.

* * *

Padre Thomas Collins sat at one of Schooner Wharf's empty thatched-roof patio tables drinking a *con leche* and eating an egg sandwich on Cuban bread. He wore dark cargo shorts, a faded blue dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up past his elbows, with an opened package of Camel cigarettes in the pocket, and sandals. He motioned me over and pointed to a second Styrofoam cup. I picked it up and was surprised to find it warm.

"For me?"

"I thought you might want it," he looked up and smiled. "What do you think happened?"

Padre Thomas, as he liked to be called, grew up Irish Catholic outside of Boston. He became a missionary priest, had a parish church in Guatemala and about ten years ago walked away from his rectory. For the past eight years, he has been in Key West. Rumor is he lives on a stipend from the Church, but rumors run rampant around the island and rarely hold any grains of truth. His skin is tanned like leather from riding his bike, his only mode of transportation. He volunteers at a hospice and the Catholic soup kitchen, otherwise his time is his own.

I met Padre Thomas at Schooner Wharf a few months after he first arrived and everyone warned me that he was crazy, because he claimed to see and talk to angels. I believe he sees the angels, but I haven't made up my mind on whether or not he's crazy. He still considers himself a priest, but without a church.

"It's not Wizard," I sat down and took the lid off the *con leche*.

"I know," he bit into his sandwich. "I think they'll find him having breakfast at Harpoon's."

"Wizard?"

"Yes, I saw him outside there as I left."

"The angels tell you anything about this?" I sipped from the Styrofoam cup.

He looked up with a devilish grin. "Someone is very concerned about the book."

"Who?"

"Someone involved back then. Long before you or I ever thought we'd be in Key West."

"Do you know who it is?"

Padre Thomas shook his head and took another bite of his sandwich. "I warned Wizard yesterday. He told me he had an idea for protecting everyone and was supposed to pass it on to Tony this morning. He wouldn't tell me more, just not to worry."

"Tony should've worried," I sipped the warm *con leche*.

Padre Thomas put his sandwich down and lit a cigarette. "Wizard doesn't even know."

"How do you know?"

"He asked me if I had seen Tony."

"What did you say?"

"I told him no." He inhaled deeply. "Because I hadn't."

"Can you help the cops?" I finished the coffee.

"You know I can't," his grin returned. "At first they wouldn't believe anything I told them and then, since I'd give them information only the killer should know, they'd think I did it."

He had a point. In the past, his knowledge of things that happened in secret or dark places had gotten him in trouble. I was one of the few people he confided in, maybe because he knew I believed him about the angels, or at least wanted to.

My cell phone chirped. "Yeah."

"Mick, it's Tracy at the Hog's Breath," the words whispered hoarsely in my ear, like

Lauren Bacall talked to Bogey in the movies. "One of those old treasure guys is here looking for you."

"Wizard?" It was too early for the Hog's bar to be open.

"No, the one they call Lucky."

"Where is he?"

"Downstairs." Tracy worked in the office on the second floor. "He left you something, but he's sitting at the bar waiting."

"Thanks, Tracy, I'll be there in a little while." I closed the cell phone.

"All three of those treasure hunters are in danger," Padre Thomas crushed out the cigarette and bit into the last of his sandwich. "Be careful, Mick."

"Tell me something I can use, Padre."

"They've scared someone from back then," he mumbled as he chewed. "Someone who'll kill to keep a secret."

"Thanks for the coffee," I got up and rode my bike down the harbor walk toward the Hog's Breath, having learned nothing from the Chief, but Padre Thomas explained it hadn't been Tony's past that caught up with him, it was someone else's.

* * *

It smelled and felt like rain, the humidity getting thick, as clouds blowing in from the south began to hide the morning sun. Key West had been getting afternoon showers everyday for almost a month and they brought a summer mugginess that reminded us we lived in the

tropics as well as in the southernmost city in the Continental United States.

The Hog's Breath Saloon is a short block from the waterfront, at Duval and Front streets, but large hotels block any scenic view of the water. When cruise ships are in port their smokestacks rise above the hotels and are visible from the Hog's outdoor patio bar. It's a friendly place where the bartenders remember your name and what you drink after only a few visits and, because it's outdoors, smoking is allowed. I routinely meet friends there for cigars.

The parking lot between the bank and the Hog's Breath had two cars in it and the outdoor bar area looked empty. As I rode in off Duval Street, I thought Lucky got tired of waiting and left. I was wrong.

I locked my bike in the bike rack and headed in.

To the right of the parking lot entrance of the Hog there is a stage, to the left a small raw bar that also served draught beer. Straight ahead was the large full-service bar with seating on all four sides.

Lucky was sitting on the ground, bar stools were turned over, and a sword, thrust through his stomach, impaled him to the bar. A small pirate flag hung from its grip. Lucky's face showed pain and fear. Blood dripped in multiple spots down his T-shirt. I looked around, but there was no one. The *con leche* turned in my stomach. I walked to the side of the bar that faced the restaurant, so I wouldn't have to see Lucky, and called the Chief.

Next, I called Tracy upstairs.

"Tracy, there's going to be some police action downstairs," I took a deep breath, "stay upstairs, but call Charlie and tell him someone has died at the bar ..."

"Mick!" She didn't let me finish. "Who?"

"You're going to have enough cops upstairs in a little while, just call Charlie and prepare yourself ..."

"For what?" the gravelly whisper began to sound nervous. "What's happening?"

"Call Charlie, Tracy, and don't mention my package, please. All you know is Lucky asked for me, so you called me, nothing else. The cops are on their way. Put the package in the

safe, please," I disconnected the call and lit a cigar. I needed the package and I trusted Tracy to put it away and keep our secret, but knew it would cost me a lunch and twenty questions, in a day or two.

A squad car screeched into the parking lot, lights flashing, and siren wailing. The Chief pulled in a few seconds behind and had the cop turn them off. He held the uniformed officer back and walked toward me. He stopped and looked down at Lucky, then motioned me to meet him.

"You said he was Lucky," he shook his head. "I guess he isn't anymore."

I chomped on the cigar, but there wasn't the foul odor that the boat cabin had, I was just nervous.

The Chief got closer and bent down to the body. "Stab wounds," he said, more to himself than to me.

"There's a trail of blood from the raw bar to where you are," I pointed to small splatters of blood on the cracked concrete floor.

"Why are you here?" he stood up. "Where you meeting him too?"

"I was having coffee with Padre Thomas and Tracy upstairs called and told me Lucky was here looking for me."

"The crazy priest! Don't you know any normal people?" he shook his head and watched the crime scene van drive in. "Did you touch anything? The sword?"

"You're the most normal person I know, Chief, and no, I didn't touch anything."

Sherlock stopped at the entrance and looked down at Lucky. He scanned the stage and the raw bar and he saw the blood splatters. He walked to where they began and waved the Chief over. Pretending he was holding a sword, Sherlock twirled his wrist and thrust forward like Errol Flynn in an old swashbuckling movie, forcing the Chief backward.

"Tell me something," he stabbed forward and the Chief backed up. "Tell me something, tell me something," he repeated as he thrust forward. In four or five steps the Chief had his back against the stage railing and Sherlock turned him to the bar, "Tell me something," he

yelled and the Chief almost tripped over Lucky.

"The killer is getting messy and nervous," Sherlock said, dropping his imaginary sword. "There was a conversation, he didn't like what he heard, or didn't hear and killed the guy quickly and cleanly on the boat. Here, he stabbed the vic," he looked down at the body, "maybe six times from what I can see. He's after something or someone and he's getting nervous. Who's left of the three?"

"Wizard is back at the station, so we know he didn't do this," the Chief looked at me. "The other old guy is Bubba?"

"Yeah," I sat back down. "If he's not on his boat, he's probably at a bar."

The Chief took Sherlock's radio and called dispatch. He wanted Bubba picked up.

"What is it with the swords and pirate flags?" Sherlock checked behind the body.

"You know their story about finding the treasure, right?"

"Yeah, I've heard so many versions, I don't believe any of them."

"You're probably right," I took the cigar out of my mouth. "Tony was helping them write their memoirs and my guess is someone's afraid of something in the story."

"Why?" the Chief moved closer.

"If I knew that, I'd know who the killer is, wouldn't I?"

"This sword looks as old as the other one," Sherlock studied the sword handle. "There can't be that many pirate swords on the island ... maybe we're looking for a collector."

"Since the Pirate Soul museum opened there's no shortage of replicas," I said.

"Damn," he stood up. "Two bodies, two swords, it's gotta be the same killer," he pointed toward the sword and pirate flag, "who is scared and that makes him more dangerous than methodical. Unless you've got an idea about a suspect, Chief, I think you need to call FDLE."

"Yeah," he sat at a barstool, his back to the body. "But let's give our detectives a few hours on their own, maybe they'll come up with a suspect."

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement is like a state FBI and is used often by

small municipalities in the Florida Keys when major crimes occur. Sherlock regularly uses the FDLE crime lab in his investigations.

"Someone at the marina must have seen something," I added in support.

"You're right there, Mick," Sherlock answered a little too quickly, "people saw you, but no one saw anyone before you got on the boat."

"Well, then," I stuffed the cigar back in my mouth, "they didn't see Tony get on, so they missed him, why not the killer?"

Two police cars pulled to a stop in the parking lot. It was time for the investigation to get going and I knew that meant talking to Tracy.

"Give your statement to the officer outside," the Chief said. "And come to the station when Luis calls you. Any idea why Lucky was looking for you here, when the bar's not open?"

"None," I lied.

"You were lookin' for the first vic and he got himself killed," Sherlock said flatly, "you were comin' to meet this vic, and he's dead. Do me a favor, Mick, go home and stop lookin' for people!"

* * *

I didn't go home, because I needed the package Lucky had left with Tracy. A section of the sky filled with rain clouds, but to the north, the sun shined. I rode my bike to Harpoon Harry's, knowing it would be hours before the police finished at the Hog's Breath.

The breakfast crowd had gone and it was too early for the lunch bunch, so I grabbed a table in back and Ron, the owner, brought me a mug of black coffee and the menu. I ordered an egg and cheese sandwich on Cuban bread.

"You mind if I join you?"

Attorney Shawn Eden stood there, a warm smile spread across his freshly shaven face. I was pouring sugar into my coffee and pointed at the empty seat across from me.

Shawn is a big man, in size and in the community. His thick mop of hair has turned gray, but once it was as black as his attorney's heart. His family has been in the Keys for forever and

he is a Conch, the name given to local families that have lived here for generations. His dress code is colorful print shirts, creased linen pants, and expensive loafers without socks.

Ron brought him a mug of coffee and Shawn waved off the menu.

"A shame about your friend," he said and poured four spoons of sugar into his coffee. "I talked with him recently about my backing the treasure hunters." He couldn't stifle a laugh. "I don't mean to be disrespectful, but those guys were anything but treasure hunters."

"You made a lot of money off their treasure, counselor," I sipped my coffee.

"I met the three of them back in the '60s," he closed his eyes. "More than forty years ago. I was fresh out of law school and I had my degree. What you see here in Key West today, that's not what it was like when I can home." He pointed toward the harbor and Waterfront Market, "That area there was filled with shrimp boats, PT's was a tough country-western bar. And the shrimpers weren't bringing in much shrimp, but they had a lot of square groupers to unload," he laughed, again. "God, what a town this used to be."

Square groupers are bales of marijuana. Key West businessmen backed local fishermen and they made fortunes bringing in loads of marijuana from mother ships offshore. It went on into the 1980s, but then the smugglers switched to cocaine and the rules changed. The money was better, but DEA and Custom Agents where in Key West and family men were going away to do hard time in far off jails. It stopped being a sport everyone was involved in, about that time.

"You're right though, I made good money off their treasure," he sipped the coffee. "I never thought I would. I saw the three of them as colorful characters and tried to help them out with money. I thought of it as a handout, they considered it an investment in their businesses."

"Then you're lucky they looked at it that way."

"Well, yeah," he smiled. "For the derelict drunkards and liars they were, or are," he smiled again, "they turned out to be men of their words."

"They sign anything?" I began to nibble my sandwich.

"Never, we shook hands," he closed his eyes again. "I backed their bringing Conch in from the Bahamas and they scuttle their boat on some sandbar and ended up eating most of the

Conch before the Coast Guard found them. I paid for them to get their captain's licenses so they could use one of their boats to take tourists to the reef. Hell, Mick, there had to be a dozen other schemes. I remember the day they walked into my office with some of their treasure and wanted me to be their partner."

"They needed money."

"You got that right. In all, I probably put in a little more than fifty grand," he grinned. "What a return on that investment."

"You know Lucky was murdered too," I watched him for a reaction. I didn't see one, but then he's an attorney and I am not sure they react to anything other than billing hours.

"Yeah, I got a call from the police."

Shawn's contacts went into all city departments and many local businesses, because he and his family owned a variety of businesses in Key West and the Upper Keys.

"Everyone knows I handle their legal affairs," he broke off a piece of my sandwich and ate it. "I do that pro bono, too."

"The cops have the Wizard and they're looking for Bubba."

"I know these guys, they couldn't kill anyone, they might drown you by mistake," he laughed, "but they couldn't kill anyone."

"Maybe it has something to do with the book?"

Shawn laughed clearly this time. "The book! Mick, it wouldn't be a memoir it would be a work of fiction. They haven't been in their right minds for forty years. Is that what the cops think?"

"I have no idea what the cops think."

"Yeah, but you found both bodies."

"I can't argue that, counselor, and I think I'm Sherlock's number one suspect."

"You're another one I'd lay money on couldn't kill someone."

"You know me, Shawn, I believe in running away so I can run another day."

"A man after my own heart. Hey, I need to get to the police station and see they aren't

using a rubber hose on Wizard. I'll see you around," he stood up, said something to Ron and left.

I drank another cup of coffee, but still had a couple of hours before I could go back and get what Lucky had left with Tracy.

* * *

Light rain wet one side of Caroline Street, as I rode my bike toward Simonton Street, where I turned and then again on Fleming Street, going against the one-way traffic. The rain stayed at the waterfront. I locked my bike in front of Island Books.

Books, shelved and in stacks, filled the narrow store. Books about Key West, its history, and its characters ran along the right wall; and there were signed books by Key West authors on a display as you first came into the shop. New books, used books, picture books filled the store. In the next room, the condition was the same, books, and more books.

I saw Mitch's head through the open door to his small office in the back, he was working at his computer. There was no one at the register and two customers wandered through the store.

"You're here early," Mitch said. He must have had eyes in the back of his head.

"Have you heard about the two murders?"

He turned in his book-cramped office and stared at me. "In Key West?" Classical music played lightly from his computer speakers.

"Yeah, in Key West."

"Tell me," he pushed his glasses up on his nose and waited.

I told him and he listened quietly.

"Any suspects? I mean, besides you."

"Thanks," I said. "I don't know what they've done in the last few hours, maybe they do, maybe they don't."

"Are you hiding out?" he twisted in his chair.

"When they call me to come in for questioning I'll go in."

"Really? Take an attorney."

"I don't need one."

"Famous last words. Look it, if they've got no one else, then it has to be you. I beg your pardon, but that's how it works."

"I don't think so, Mitch. I have witnesses, there's no physical evidence ..."

"Coincidence, Mick," he pushed his glass back in place and stood up. "Take my advice and don't go to the police station without legal representation, coincidence has put others in jail."

Outside, I lit another cigar and decided to walk along Duval Street toward the Hog's Breath. I could see the rain clouds hovering at Lower Duval. Cars and scooters rushed in both directions and the sidewalks were busy with tourists. Outside Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville Restaurant, people were lined up for lunch seating. At Fat Tuesday's early revelers enjoyed the toxic frozen drinks they served and across Caroline Street Fogerty's had its first lunch group seated. The island was busy for mid week. Rain was a block away.

The two hundred block of Duval was the party area, be it spring break or Fantasy Fest or any day of the week with a D in it. The Tree Bar, Angelina's Pizza, and Rick's were open and busy. Across the street, the Lazy Gecko, Sloppy Joe's Bar, and Irish Kevin's were just as busy. This block of Key West sold a good time by the glass and there was no shortage of takers. Rain drizzled across Greene Street, like a beaded curtain.

The bank's parking lot was full and the afternoon entertainment had begun at the Hog's Breath. Joel Nelson sat on the rain-protected stage and played for a half-full bar. We nodded at each other as I walked in. The bloodstains on the broken cement floor had been washed away and all the bar stools were upright. Kevin tended the raw bar and Irish Bob was alone behind the big bar.

"Interesting morning," Irish Bob said as I passed.

"How long have you been open?"

"About an hour," he smiled. "You gonna tell me about it?"

"Later, I need to go to the office," and I kept walking.

Tracy was alone.

"You owe me," she smiled, and put down what she was working on. "Hold on."

I closed the door as she walked into the back room. She came back holding a manila envelope.

"What's in it?" she handed it to me.

I opened the envelope and six audiotapes and a note from Tony slid out. I put them back.

"Thanks, Tracy. I'll let you know as soon as I listen to them. You okay?"

"Are you okay?" she sat down. "Morales had a lot of questions about you. I told him what I did, called you, and that was it. The son of a bitch doesn't believe me."

"His job is to be suspicious. Don't let him get to you."

"I had to sign my statement."

"Consider yourself lucky, I have to go to the station to give mine."

I stuffed the envelope against my back and walked out into the rain.

* * *

Tony's note echoed what Shawn had said about the book having better prospects of being a mystery novel rather than a memoir. The afternoon rain pounded the deck on my sailboat, the Fenian Bastard, as I pulled my small tape recorder from storage and played the tapes. I poured some Jameson over ice and sipped the drink as I listened.

The three treasure hunters had sat with Tony and told their stories; each cutting in on the other to make corrections, because they never seemed to agree. The most interesting parts were about smuggling marijuana and who had financed their frequent trips. They even named some of the Mexican boaters on the mother ship, as well as local backers, but again, they argued about that. Much of the information had been rumored for years around the island, so there was little new in the tapes.

It was almost humorous when they talked about discovering the treasure. They were

diving, illegally, for local lobsters when they discovered the first few artifacts. It took them weeks of scrapping the bottom by hand to find more and then they took it to Shawn. They each respected Shawn for his years of support and always considered him their business partner.

I put a blank tape in my recorder, put my Glock, with a round in the chamber, in the pocket of my foul-weather jacket with the recorder, and called Chief Dowley. I told him where to meet me and left as the rain turned to drizzle. I had a good idea of who the killer was, but it didn't make any sense. Then again, murder rarely does.

* * *

Lightening flashed and thunder boomed, as I walked into the plush empty outer office. The inside door was open and classic music played from hidden speakers. I unzipped my jacket and turned the tape recorder on, as I walked through the open office door and closed it. Shawn sat at his clear glass-topped desk; a coke spoon in his hand came down empty from his nose. A small bag of white powder and a revolver sat on the desk.

"Do you want some?" His eyes stared hard at me, but he smiled.

"No Shawn, I have a hard enough time being a drunk."

"This is better than booze." He filled the small coke spoon and inhaled it through one nostril. "You have the tapes?"

"Yeah, I have them."

"The crazy bastards," he growled, "I didn't think they'd turn on me."

"They didn't."

He looked puzzled for a moment and then smiled again. "What do you mean?"

"You were right, Shawn," I moved away from the desk. "Mostly they argued on the tapes. Talked about their smuggling and joked about finding the treasure."

"They lied about me and my family, I know they did." He was becoming agitated.

"No they didn't, Shawn," I tried to say calmly. "There are more rumors out on the street about how Key West families got their money from square groupers, than are on the tapes."

"That's what Tony said. I didn't believe him, either."

"He told you that before you killed him?"

"Yeah," he growled again. "Now you're saying he told me the truth?"

"He wasn't going to write the memoir, he wanted to use the information for a mystery novel," I moved another step back.

"That's good news, but it's a little late." His laugh sounded like an animal's howl. "Of course, it's not good news for you, is it? You know the truth," he inhaled another spoonful of cocaine. "I have to kill you, and then this will go away."

"Are you going to run me through with a pirate sword, too?" I stood still and put my hand on the Glock.

"No, the swords are gone," he smiled. "Wizard had two of them and Tony made me so angry I just picked one up and drove it through him as he went to sit down."

"You took the other one with you to kill Lucky?" I wanted it all on tape.

"Tony told me Lucky was taking the tapes to you, so I went after him," he said quietly. "I didn't realize I had the other sword with me until I got to my car. I drove around and saw Lucky walk into the Hog and I parked around on Front Street," his hand was shaking so much he couldn't hold the coke spoon. "I waited for him by the parking lot and when he came down stairs, I confronted him and I still had the sword. He wouldn't go back for the tapes. Damn fool, he didn't think I'd do it, even after I stabbed him a few times."

"Shawn, it has to stop. You're connected enough to cop a manslaughter plea," I said for the tape recorder. "Turn yourself in."

He howled again and stood up, the revolver in his quivering hand. "It stops when you disappear, no sword, no body."

"It will be messy in here, Shawn, blood and noise."

"Let me worry about that," he said and stepped away from the desk. "Where are the tapes?"

"On my boat. You gonna go get them?" I watched his gun hand tremble.

"Unless you want to take me there," he laughed cruelly, his eyes wide.

I backed up, I wanted distance between us.

"You were wrong to worry about the book, Shawn, and wrong about me, too."

"Wrong about you, how?" He moved back toward a file cabinet, but held the gun aimed at me.

"I can kill, Shawn," I said calmly. "I can't run a sword through an innocent man, like you did, but I can kill to protect myself."

"Yeah? But I have the gun."

"Wrong again, Shawn," I kept calm and smiled. "I have a gun in my pocket and it's aimed at you."

"Show it to me," he challenged me angrily. "I don't believe you."

"Put the gun down, Shawn, and we'll both be alive when the police arrive."

"I still don't believe you," and he fired one shot that went past my left shoulder, his hand trembled. "Damn you!" He fired again and missed.

The two shots echoed and the room smelled of burnt cordite.

I fired the Glock and hit him square in the chest. The cocaine rush kept him standing, but he looked down at the growing bloodstain on his flowery shirt and then back at me. He raised his arm up, ready to fire again. I had the gun out of my pocket and pointed at him. I shook my head.

"No Shawn, drop it." He didn't and I shot him again, and my ears rang from the noise.

He fell against the file cabinet and slid to the floor. The door behind me crashed against the office wall as Chief Dowley rushed in, gun in hand. He looked at me and then at Shawn, who died with a cocaine smile.

"Damn, Mick, I hope you're right," he said softly. "You just killed an important guy."

I pulled the tape recorder out of my pocket and handed it to him. I heard sirens from outside. "Yeah, in self defense and I solved two murders for you."

He took my Glock, put it on a chair, and then rewound the tape. Two uniformed officers

came in, guns drawn.

"Call the paramedics," he told them and led me into the outer office. "He confesses on this?"

"And fired first, it's all there."

He placed the recorder next to his ear and played the tape. He smiled. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I hoped I was wrong."

"So why call me to meet you here?"

"If I was wrong I was gonna buy you beer."

He put the recorder in his pocket and talked to the uniformed officer at the door. Chief Dowley waved me over and led me outside.

"Let me buy you a drink, after all, this is Key West, not Miami and you ain't goin' anywhere. Hell, Mick, it's been one long day," he put his arm around my shoulder, "and I can use a beer. Then we have to go see Luis for your statement."

"They guy hates me, Chief," I allowed him to tug me toward the street.

"Yeah, but I still love you."

"What about my gun?"

"It's in an evidence bag," he said and we walked away in the rain.

###