

THE FLOATER

By Michael Haskins

Some days just seem to begin right, to hold promise. The day began that way. I stood barefoot, shirtless, wearing cutoff shorts on the deck of my 40-foot sloop, the Fenian Bastard, and I had a cup of freshly brewed coffee and the daily paper. The morning sun had begun to inch its way over Key West, and the summer breeze carried scents of tropical flora and almost tasted salty. Cotton-ball-like clouds moved across the dark blue sky. The temperature was in the low-80s and by noon, it would be closer to 90. I loved it. It looked like another perfect hurricane-free day in Paradise.

The morning held promise, that is, until a naked body floated face down less than ten feet from the Fenian Bastard and then all promises quickly dissolved.

Key West has more than its share of quirky characters, so seeing a naked person in the bight wasn't shocking. I stared, expecting to see movement, but instead I saw a head angled strangely in the water.

"Hey," I yelled, but received nothing back.

I jumped down to the finger dock, still hoping to see movement. When I didn't, I dove in and swam to the body. Long dark hair danced in the warm current around the half-submerged head. I reached out and touched an arm. It felt cold, even in water that was about 78 degrees. I grabbed a hand, its fingers pinched and wrinkled white from being in the water, and swam with the body back toward the dock.

My name is Liam Murphy, but friends call me Mad Mick Murphy. Mad, like in crazy, because of the stunts I pulled in college and Mick because of my Irish heritage. I live in Key West, Florida, and work, when I have to, as a freelance journalist. I'd rather be sailing, than doing anything on land.

The body was a young Latina's, maybe early 30s, and as I turned her face up, I saw she had been attractive, but in the last few hours, death had stolen her life and beauty. Her mouth was slightly ajar, as if she was ready to scream, and her large brown eyes looked ready to pop from their sockets and stared into a dimension I couldn't see and wasn't sure I wanted to. Raw bruises scared her neck.

There were no fish nibbling discolorations or marine life visible on her body, so she hadn't been in the water long. I pulled myself onto the dock and wondered what to do. I couldn't pull her out of the water without doing more injury to the body. As a journalist that had covered murder trials, I knew moving a body often tainted evidence.

I rushed to the deck of the Fenian Bastard, took my cell phone from the cockpit, and grabbed a pole hook. She began to float away, as I jumped to the dock, so I entangled her long hair in the hook, and mumbled a prayer of apology. I dialed 911, told them where the floater was, and disconnected, as they asked me to stay on the line.

I called Richard Dowley next, the chief of police, a friend for the past eight years. I told him about the floater and he said to keep hold of her. It was eerie as the tide's incoming current tugged at the body. I didn't want to hurt her, but realized it was too late for that.

The sirens wailed. First the fire truck, then a police car and finally the paramedics. The main fire and police stations were a long block away, but, as I stood holding the body in place, it seemed to be forever before anyone arrived.

Two firefighters, in jeans and gray Key West Fire Department T-shirts, ran down the dock. I whistled to get their attention. They looked at the body. One mumbled in surprise, while the other used a two-way radio to talk to Pat Epps in the truck. I knew Pat, he was part of the fire department's dive team.

The young firefighter who mumbled asked for the pole hook and I gave it willingly. Two Key West Police officers walked down the dock with Pat, he carried a small scuba tank and dive bag. Another firefighter came down behind them with a rolled up SKED, a collapsible hard orange plastic backboard with straps. Its main use is for removing an injured person or body from the water.

Pat nodded and looked down into the water. "She float face up?"

"No, I turned her."

He put the tank and dive bag on the dock. "Why?"

"To see if she was alive."

He knelt down and touched her arm. "She's already cold."

"Yeah, but the body's clean. She hasn't been in the water long."

“You after my job,” the voice came from behind me. “Or are you watching too many CSI shows?”

Sherlock Corcoran, the police department’s crime scene investigator, stood there with an impatient expression etched on his face. The nickname came with the job. He rested his crime scene box on the dock, opened it, and removed a camera. He took photos of the body in the water, adjusting the lens from wide angle to close up, without looking at me.

“Get her out, Pat, before she becomes bait,” Sherlock bent down with the camera hanging from his neck to check the bruises.

Pat slipped into the water from the other side of the dock. He opened the SKED, loosened the straps, and slipped it under the body. The firefighter unwound the hook from her hair and caught the SKED, while Pat strapped the body in place.

Sherlock and one firefighter pulled the SKED onto the dock, as Pat pushed from the water. It moved easily, splashing water as it came to a rest. Pat lifted himself from the water.

“Does anyone know her?” Chief Richard Dowley asked from a gathering of police officers and firefighters. He moved forward and bent down to examine her.

“Sherlock, what are these?”

“It looks like rope burns on her neck, Chief.”

“Like in a hanging?”

“Be my guess right now.”

“How’d she get into the water? You don’t hang yourself and then walk into the bight.”

Sherlock took close up photos of her throat and didn't answer the chief's question because it didn't need one.

Paramedics rolled a gurney to the finger dock; an opened body bag lay on it. Wearing latex gloves, the firemen and two paramedics un-strapped the body from the SKED and moved it into the body bag. They lifted the unzipped bag and strapped it to the gurney.

"You meetin' us at the hospital?" a paramedic asked Sherlock.

"Give me a half hour," he said. "Pat, dive the dock, talk to Mick, and figure out where he found her?"

"Sure."

"Look for anything interesting, clothing, rope ..."

Sherlock checked the body quickly, but carefully; he scraped something from beneath the nails on one hand, and sealed whatever it was in a small plastic bag. He zipped the body bag and the paramedics rolled the gurney away.

"Mick, I need to talk to you," Richard straightened his sunglasses.

"I need him first," Pat slid the small air tank on. "Tide's comin' in, right?"

"Yeah," I was still dripping water from my short swim. "Be high at nine."

"About where was she, when you first saw her?"

"No more than ten feet off the bow."

"Current bring her in?"

"She was floating with it."

"Did you hear anything, before you saw her?" Richard moved toward us.

“No, it was quiet. I brewed coffee, walked up and bought the paper, came back, poured a cup, came on deck and saw her.”

Richard looked off toward the access cut, maybe forty feet wide that allowed access to Garrison Bight from the Gulf of Mexico. To the right of the cut was Hilton Haven, an area of million dollar homes, and to the left was Navy housing. On the other side of the cut was Rat Island, home to vagrant boaters, and close to the city’s mooring field, where live-aboard boaters occupied most of the moorings.

“Could she have come from the moorings or Rat Island?” Richard continued to stare.

“I don’t think so.” While keeping her from floating away, I had thought about where she could have come from, instead of what I was doing. “The charter boats leave early, and one of them would’ve seen the body.”

Charter boats take tourists out to the Gulf Stream for a days fishing, usually leaving at first light.

Pat dropped into the water and swam to where the body had been. “Here?” he yelled.

“Close enough.”

Pat went under, to begin his search.

“I want you to come to the station,” Richard put his hand on my shoulder. “Go change.”

“All I did was find her, I didn’t ...”

“I have something to show you,” his expression became serious. “It involves her, the floater.” He turned away. “Don’t be long,” Richard walked toward the parking lot without turning back.

* * *

After a quick shower, I put on a pair of cargo shorts, a T-shirt, my faded pre-World Series Red Sox’s ball cap, flip-flops, and rode my bike to the police station.

“Do you recognize her?” I was seated in Richard’s office when he handed me a fax sheet with four color photos of the floater that were taken while she was alive. One could have been a driver’s license photo, the others were more spontaneous. No information appeared on the page.

“She was pretty,” I gave him back the fax, becoming upset because someone had stolen more than life from her, they stole her future. “Where’s the cover sheet with her name and wrap sheet?”

“No wrap sheet,” he hesitated before picking up a few sheets of paper from his desk.

“Someone’s princess trying to find excitement in Paradise?” If she had a scandalous background, maybe I would get past being upset.

“You’re an unsympathetic son-of-a-bitch,” Richard slid the sheets across his desk.

They were in English and Spanish and had the seal of the Colombian government’s *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad*, its secret police. Another sheet was from the DEA. I read the English first and then scanned the Spanish to see if it translated correctly.

Her name was Gabriela Luisa Morales, a thirty-one year old Colombian. She was becoming a real person and I didn't need that.

"How'd she go missing?"

"She's was an undercover agent for the Colombians," Richard said. "Our DEA in Colombia knew and trusted her, she gave them a lead that brought her from Bogotá to Miami and that's where they lost her."

"And you are telling me this because?"

"You're involved," he sipped from a cup of coffee.

"With her?" The accusation surprised me. "You don't believe that."

"No," Richard smiled, walked out of the office, and returned with two cups of coffee, he put one in front of me. "You know the people who live at the bight," he sat down. "I don't have a cop here that knows the live-aboard community like you do. By noon I'll have the Feds converging on my office."

"DEA?"

"Yeah," he sipped coffee, "and Colombian DEA and they'll wanna know what happened. They confided in me, they expect something in return."

"What's her story?" The coffee was horrible, even with two sugars. "Why was she in Miami?"

He told me.

Years ago rightwing Colombian militias hired Israeli mercenaries to train them, so they could protect certain haciendas from the leftist guerillas. As the militias became successful, they began to work with Colombian drug cartels, which used the protected haciendas as transportation centers. One of the mercenaries was actually a Brit, Neville

Cluny, who quickly realized there was more money in drugs than in war. He became sociable with the drug lords and was soon their security chief for the cocaine's long trek from Colombia to Miami.

Gabriela met the mercenaries because of her contacts with the cartels. She recognized Neville's plan and wormed her way into his trust. Being bright and pretty didn't hurt, either.

"How does all this lead to Key West?" I left the coffee untouched.

"Don't know," he frowned. "But it led here because you found her body."

"And the Limy?"

"He's vanished too."

"Maybe he's dead."

"Possible, but you didn't find him, so maybe he caught on to her."

"I was thinking of how she died," I had spent too much time thinking about her.

"If looks are right, and Sherlock's right, she was hung. You saw the marks on her neck."

Richard nodded, halfheartedly.

"How do you hang someone around here without being noticed? If you wanted to hang a person on a tree at Bayveiw Park to set an example, you'd leave the body, I can see that." I picked up the fax sheet with her photos. Unlike the dead eyes I had seen in the morning, in the photos her large brown eyes seemed to sparkle, impish like, and there was even a sprinkling of freckles across her nose.

"It had to happen in the bight, can you ask around, see what you can find out?"

He mumbled and tried to smile, "This is between us. Only a couple of my officers know what's really going on."

Richard wouldn't say more, so I left to see what I could find out about the murder of a young woman I had never known.

I rode my bike by Schooner Wharf Bar at the Historic Seaport. The traffic was mid-morning light and the sun had risen halfway to its noon high. The temperature was climbing too. Young girls with ponytails, bronze tans, and bikinis, laughed as they washed down the Sebago catamaran, spraying each other in the process, while preparing for an afternoon sail and snorkeling trip full of tourists.

Seagulls and pelicans rested on pilings, waiting for the afternoon arrival of the seaport's few remaining charter boats and their free meal. Six-foot tarpon skimmed the surface, looking for handouts in competition with the seabirds. Small groups of tourists wandered along the wooden dock, stopping to gawk at the tarpon and the classic ships that rested in their slips.

"Mick," someone called my name as I rode by the bar.

The tables in the dirt and pebble courtyard of the driftwood-built Schooner Wharf Bar were mostly empty, but at the open-air bar, the remainder of the Breakfast Club sat nursing beers. Padre Thomas sat at one of the tall, thatched-rooftop tables in the sunny courtyard with someone I didn't know. He waved me over.

Thomas is one of the eccentric characters that call the end of the road home and he enriches Key West's uniqueness. Irish born, and raised in Boston, he was a Catholic missionary in Guatemala until the day he claims angels told him to walk away. He says he sees and talks to angels and I sometimes believe him.

He sat with a tall, lanky guy with bushy sun-streaked hair that could have been an Afro if he had been African-American. They had Styrofoam coffee cups in front of them.

“Mick, this is an old friend from Guatemala,” he stood and slapped the man’s shoulder. “Coco Joe, meet my friend Mad Mick Murphy.”

Coco Joe stood, he had to be six-foot, and smiled as we shook hands.

“Visiting?” I sat down with them.

“No,” Padre Thomas answered, “he’s playing at the Hog.”

The Hog’s Breath Saloon is one of my hangouts. “You’re with the California band?”

“Yeah, we just drove down from Atlanta, from another gig,” he kept a smile on his boyish face.

“You don’t sound Guatemala.”

He laughed. “No, I worked with Padre Thomas as a Peace Corps volunteer, years ago,” Coco Joe turned to Thomas and his smile got larger. “Hey, dudes, I need to check in at the club and then get some sleep. It was nice meetin’ you.”

He picked up his bulky backpack as we shook hands; Coco Joe and Thomas hugged like brothers, and then he headed toward Duval Street, a distinct limp to his right leg.

“Looks awful young to have been in the Peace Corps when you were in Guatemala,” I sat down.

“Yes, his boyish looks can fool you,” Padre Thomas smiled. “He was a good kid down there, a lot of help to the villagers.” He sipped his coffee.

“Where’d he get the limp?”

“He was shot by a soldier when he helped the villagers, but he doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“Why Coco Joe?” When the time was right Padre Thomas would tell me the story of the shooting, because I didn’t believe Peace Corps members got shot. “At least you can’t say his name without smiling.”

“I don’t know he was Coco Joe when I met him. Once I overheard him say, an uncle called him that and it stuck. I guess it’s a California thing,” he hunched his shoulders with a who-knows expression on his face. “He’s playing at 10:30 p.m., can you come by?”

“I’ll try, Padre.” I went to stand, but he held up his hand and motioned me to sit. “Something I can do for you?”

“I know about this morning,” he pulled a wrinkled package of Camels from his shirt pocket, took a bent cigarette out, and lit it.

“What about this morning?” I returned his roguish smile.

“Not a believer today?” he exhaled smoke.

“I believe in a lot things this morning, Padre. What do you believe in?”

“I believe you care about the young woman,” he took a long drag on the cigarette and crushed out the stub. “I believe you feel a responsibility to her, though you never knew her.”

“If I plead ignorance ...”

“Ah,” he shook his head slowly, forced a smile and found the old brogue, “would a nice Irish Catholic boy lie to a man of the cloth?”

We both laughed, but it was with sadness, not humor.

“You wanna know what I know?”

“Of course,” he lit another cigarette.

“I know her name and that she was an undercover agent for the Colombian DEA,” I wished I had a cigar. “She disappeared from Miami and I found her floating just before seven this morning.”

“You didn’t mention she’d been murdered, hung to be exact,” he inhaled, left the cigarette dangle from his lips, and exhaled smoke through his narrow nose.

I looked at him and wanted to be surprised by what he said, but wasn’t. He didn’t get his information from officials, but I thought he might have overheard someone talking at the bar. Otherwise, he’d have me believing in angels, again.

“Thomas, I need to know how you know this. It could be important.”

He sipped from a Styrofoam cup as he stubbed out the cigarette. “You know how I know it, Mick.”

I pulled closer to him. “If you overheard someone talking, I need to know.”

I had a feeling I didn’t want to hear his answer.

“I overheard no one, Mick,” he pulled the cigarette package out of his pocket, but didn’t take a cigarette. “At five-thirty this morning, my vision came.”

“The angels?”

He nodded, his face lost all expression and his pale gray eyes widened. “I saw the girl gagging for breath, her hands scratching at the rope around her neck, as she hung from a tree. I saw the two men toss her into the water. I saw you on your boat.” His knuckles turned white, he held onto the table so fiercely. “I know you care and don’t understand why.”

“Wait a minute, Padre,” I moved closer. “You said a tree, what tree? Where?”

“I don’t know, somewhere close,” finally he let the table go, pulled a cigarette from the package, and lit it. “Close to the water,” he inhaled deeply, “close to your boat.”

“Padre, if I take this information to the cops they’re gonna come looking for you,” I said out of frustration. “And we both know they aren’t big believers in angels.”

“But you believe me, right?”

“I know you didn’t kill her, Padre, that’s all I know.”

“You can find the killer from what I’ve told you.”

“The police think she was hung from a mast and dumped in the water.”

“That’s not what happened,” he took another long drag on his cigarette.

“Well, Padre, a mast or tree, it means little to her, right now. I promised to check around the marina and see if anyone heard or saw anything strange,” I stood and pulled my bike from the next table. “Did the angels show you Bayview Park?”

“No, Mick, it was a lone tree in a yard,” he stubbed out the cigarette in a full ashtray. “You’re wasting your time at the marina.”

“I’ll see you tonight, Padre.” I peddled my bike toward Harpoon Harry’s, hoping to catch some of the marina locals having breakfast.

“I’d like that, Mick,” he lit another cigarette and walked toward the water.

* * *

Richard met me at *El Siboney*, our favorite Cuban restaurant, for lunch. We sat at the counter, to avoid the busy restaurant and spoke quietly.

“An autopsy report come in?” I drank my *café con leche*, a mixture of strong Cuban espresso, milk, and lots of sugar.

“Not an official one,” Richard sipped his glass of homemade sangria. “They found a little saltwater in her lungs.”

“She drowned?”

“No, her epiglottis relaxed when she died, so water was able to get into her lungs,” he played with the glass of spiced wine. “The way her head was angled allowed the water in, but it wasn’t enough to drown her.”

“Broken neck, then?”

“Unofficially for now, yeah. The medical examiner agrees with Sherlock,” he took a drink. “But she put up a fight, she had someone’s skin under her nails.”

“DNA?”

“Too early, this ain’t TV, Mick.”

“I know,” I sipped the *con leche*. “I’ve got nothing. I checked a lot of bight residents at Harpoon’s, even mooring field people.” I held back what Padre Thomas had told me. Richard didn’t like him, thought there was more to Thomas than a renegade priest.

“Well, the DEA is here and working with the FDLE,” he glanced at the menu.

“Why do I read the menu, I always order the same thing.”

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement is a state police agency that assists small community police forces. They have the labs and technology that are too expensive for small police department budgets.

“Colombian agents too?”

We ordered *arroz con pollo*, yellow rice cooked with pieces of chicken mixed in.

“Two Colombians,” he said as the waitress left. “The feds have taken over the investigation.”

“What about the Limey?”

“They don’t think he or any of the cartel are still here,” he took a sip of wine. “They assume the cartel caught on to her true identity, killed her here, and went on their way.”

“Do you believe that?”

“It makes sense, Mick,” he looked straight ahead. “You kill someone in Key West and move on. They’re smugglers, not street sellers.”

Our food came, I ordered a Dos Eques beer to go with it and avoided explaining to Richard that he was wrong and Padre Thomas’ angels were probably right.

* * *

I lit the first cigar of the day and rode my bike back to Garrison Bight. The water was calm, so I motored my dinghy to the mooring field, and when I found someone on board a vessel, I asked if they heard anything out of the ordinary around sunrise. Most wanted to know why and I told them about finding the body, but little else. No one heard anything. Sound travels on the open water and if she had put up a fight, especially a verbal one, someone would have heard it; I might have even heard it, but I hadn’t.

I met my friends Bob and Burt at PT’s for dinner and told them more than I should have, but they had already heard a rumor about the floater. I filled them in during the meal. The coconut telegraph carries an abundance of rumors, but most of them turnout to be just that, rumors. As the editor of the local rag says, never let facts get in the way of a titillating story.

After eating, we lit fresh cigars and walked to the Hog's Breath. Bruce and Red were playing the mid shift gig, so we hung around, had a few beers and finished our cigars. Padre Thomas showed up, I bought him a beer, and Bob and Burt left. I waited around for the California band to play.

The band, Malibu, began playing at 10:30 p.m. and was not a surfer band, contrary to its name. They had a pretty good repertoire of classic rock hits, but I enjoyed their original music the most. It was a mixture of folk and rock and Coco Joe was the lead singer.

He wanted to see the Fenian Bastard, so Padre Thomas, Coco Joe, and I taxied to the marina at 2 a.m. The rest of the band went to Duval Street to explore the nightlife.

Street light reflection, from North Roosevelt Boulevard, streaked across the black water and highlighted the marina's docks; a steady stream of traffic hummed along the four lanes. A full moon hung in the cloudless sky, surrounded by a protective army of stars, and a soft wind rippled the bight. I gave Coco Joe a tour down below, brought out three Mexican *Bohemia* beers, and we sat in the dim lit cockpit, facing the Gulf of Mexico.

"What are the lights out there?" Coco Joe pointed toward the cut where a few small windows radiated light.

"To the left is Navy housing," I tasted the beer. "Over there," I pointed right, "is Hilton Haven, where homes begin around a million."

He whistled at the price. "So you got the same water view, but for a lot less dough. Way to go, dude."

"I got the view, but they have the land."

The homes on Hilton Haven have seawall docks. One home had a pontoon boat tied off to its seawall. A little further, a 40-foot fishing boat was tied off to a dark seawall.

Padre Thomas used his empty beer bottle for an ashtray.

“A girl was murdered over there less than twenty-four hours ago,” Padre Thomas’ tone was somber as he looked across to the homes on Hilton Haven. “They killed her somewhere over there.” He pointed into the dimness.

Coco Joe and I remained silent and finally Padre Thomas went below and brought us beers we didn’t need.

He lit another Camel and exhaled smoke into the breeze. Coco Joe didn’t smoke, what do you expect from a Southern California boy, but he didn’t complain about the cigarette or cigar. His first beer remained mostly full.

“Padre Thomas told me about his vision,” he sipped a little of the *Bohemia* and waited for my reply.

“You know about his angles?” I took a long swallow of my beer.

“I was in Guatemala when the visions first started. Do you believe him?”

“Do you?”

“I find it easier to explain what he knows from his visions, if I believe him.” He stood and walked to the stern of the boat. “I want to be a skeptic,” he stared across the bight, “because it seems to be the politically correct thing to do,” he laughed. “I guess no one has looked on the back of their money recently.”

“He doesn’t see God, he sees angels.” I tossed my cigar butt into the bight.

Padre Thomas had fallen asleep, while we talked, and a soft snore belched from his lips. I stuffed his burning cigarette into a beer bottle and walked to Coco Joe, who was laughing to himself.

“Look at him,” he pointed to Thomas. “If angels weren’t looking out for him, do you think he’d survive?”

“I don’t know why any of us survive.”

“Maybe we all have angels.”

“Maybe.”

Coco Joe stared across the bight, intent on seeing something, while Thomas continued to snore.

“I need your help,” he said, the California youthfulness gone from his voice. “I’ve read your jacket.”

With those few words, I was taken back to a life I thought I’d left behind; a life of trying to avoid my government’s intimidation as I traveled civil-war-torn Central America as a journalist. I turned and looked at him with his sun-bleached curly hair and peach skinned face. I didn’t answer.

A small outboard engine twittered from the other side of the cut. Street traffic was sporadic, but the sound of humming tires echoed off the night water.

“I worked with Gabriela,” he looked across to Hilton Haven. “Someone over there killed her and I want to take him down.”

“Who are you? Really?”

“You know who I am, what I am.” He spoke into the darkness.

“A spook.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

“Are you with ...”

“No,” he cut me off. “I’m supposed to be here, she’s supposed to be here, and Cluny is here.”

“Cluny is the Limey.”

“Yes and I think he’s still here.”

“Why?”

“Are you going to help me?”

“Do what?”

“Whatever it takes,” the Californian idioms were gone.

“If I can help you find him, I will, but I’m not gonna take him down,” I turned to face him. “The DEA and Colombians are here looking for him, too.”

“They don’t think he’s here, I do.”

“And that’s because?”

“He always talked to Gabriela about Key West and how he liked it, his home away from home.” He paused and stared across the bight. “He wasn’t delivering drugs to Key West for sale. The drugs came here by boat to be transported to Miami. It’s slower but a safer route.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“You see that fishing boat?” he pointed to the 40-foot boat tied off at the seawall. “I bet in the daylight you can see a flag pole in the back yard, and a tree too. And I’ll bet you the pole’s flying the Union Jack.”

All the homes at the end section of Hilton Haven are walled in, for privacy. But, he was right, I had seen the flag poll.

“I haven’t seen a flag on the pole.”

“Whoever lives there is a part-time resident, right?”

“Yeah, who likes to party after fishing,” I checked my watch it was almost 3 a.m.

He walked to his backpack and pulled out a large pair of binoculars. He looked toward the fishing boat, adjusting the binoculars.

“There are lights on in the house and people in the yard,” he kept staring across the bight to the seawall dock. “What time is it?”

“Three a.m. How can you see across there?”

“Night-vision goggles,” he handed them to me.

Twenty years ago, night-vision goggles were bulky; this pair wasn’t much larger than the binoculars I had on board. I looked across the bight and, as my eyes adjusted to the strangeness, I saw movement by the back gate and a dim light in one window.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” I scanned the seawall before giving the binoculars back.

“They’ve moved the drugs off the boat and I bet they’re loading a truck right now,” he stared through the binoculars toward the house.

“Let’s call ...”

“No,” he almost yelled through clenched teeth. “I don’t want the Colombians to get him.”

“Why?”

“I don’t trust them,” he turned to me, the binoculars hung at his side. “She didn’t trust a lot of them and I don’t know which ones are here.”

“I don’t know what my *jacket* said about me,” I sipped my warm beer, “but I was *never* an operative. I didn’t take people down.”

In the darkness, his smile was brighter than it should have been.

“Yeah, you were listed as a fellow traveler with the guerrillas but,” he smiled again, “you had no problem turning in drug runners. Cluny is a drug runner and a murderer.”

“We don’t know how many are there or how well armed they are.”

“You still have your Glock?”

“Down below.”

“And I’ve got mine and we have surprise on our side.”

“The odds are on their side.”

“You wanna let ‘em get away?”

“No.”

“Then let’s do something. Damn it, you found her, you saw what he did.”

Staring into the night, I saw her again, as I turned her over in the water and realized how young she was. My insides trembled and I wondered why I felt this attachment to someone I had never known.

“Are people still in the yard?”

He looked through the binoculars and nodded.

“Listen to my idea.”

“Go ahead.”

“We dinghy over to the cut and get on the road. From there, we can see the truck pull out. We ID it, license plate, color, whatever and I call the chief of police, he’s a friend.”

“The Colombians still get them.”

“If Cluny’s smart, he isn’t going to travel with the drugs.”

“Good point.”

“There may only be the smugglers and Cluny and they’ll go with the vehicle.”

“Then we take Cluny down,” he said excitedly.

I wondered if take down meant kill, his excited tone made me think he did.

“Cluny wouldn’t be alone,” he said. “He’ll have one or two people with him.”

“It’s still better odds than going after them all.”

“Okay, we’ll do it your way.”

I got my Glock out of its hidey-hole below deck and took the three extra clips I had. One clip was too many and three wasn’t going to be enough. Coco Joe waited on the dock, by my dinghy, his backpack already on board. I wondered what kind of arsenal he had.

We got on, without speaking, I started the engine, and we moved through the black water, past the cut and into the Gulf of Mexico. Off to our right a large condominium unit raised up and I steered toward its docks. A false dawn was beginning as we tied off.

“When we come out,” I whispered, “we’ll be about three houses up and can watch when the vehicle leaves.”

We quietly moved toward the road and sat behind some shrubs. At 4 a.m., a white Cadillac Escalade left Cluny's gated property. It had tinted windows, so we couldn't see how many were inside. I caught the Florida license plate number and called Chief Dowley. He wasn't happy to hear from me.

"Are you drunk?" He fought to wake up.

"Listen to me," and I told him about the Cadillac and the drugs.

"Mick, how do you know this?" he was waking up.

"I stumbled across it by accident, but you need to get them before they cross Cow Key Channel or they belong to the sheriff."

"I'll talk to you later," but it was said in an unfriendly way, and he hung up.

"Show time," Coco Joe slapped my shoulder. He walked slowly toward Cluny's, fumbling in his backpack. "Here," he held out two hand grenades.

"What the hell are those?" We were almost at the gate.

"Equalizers."

I didn't take them.

"One is a flash grenade, the other," he raised his right hand, "is a fragment grenade."

I shook my head in disbelief and kept walking.

The gate was closed. Coco Joe took something out of his backpack, fooled with the lock on the pedestrian door, and got it to open. He racked his Glock. I racked mine and we crept through the door into a quiet front yard. We froze up against the gate and listened, but heard nothing.

I was about to say that maybe they all left, but he held his finger to his lips and we inched our way along the wall toward the backyard. He stopped at a green plastic Waste Management rubbish bin and opened it. Pieces of women's clothing were tangled up inside. Coco Joe's eyes were angry, but he let the top down quietly and just looked at me for a second, nodded and we kept moving. There were two motorcycles and a Jeep Wrangler in the carport.

We could see the marina's lights as we entered the backyard. A large tree stood in the middle, between the house and back wall, a tipped over stool underneath and uncoiled length of rope spread out on the ground. My stomach knotted, because I knew Coco Joe had been right, this was where they had murdered Gabriela.

He took a hand grenade out of the backpack, indicating *one* with his finger and then handed me another and raised two fingers. He motioned me to stay there and indicated he would go around to the front.

I nodded my understanding.

Using his fingers, he point one finger toward the window and made a tossing motion, and then he pointed two fingers.

I nodded.

He held up one finger and mouthed 'minute.' I nodded as he headed back toward the front of the house.

I counted to sixty, saying Mississippi between numbers. I guess he figured I knew how these worked, or maybe it was in my *jacket*. After I said 'sixty Mississippi,' I pulled the pin out of the first grenade and tossed it through the window. In the quiet morning,

the breaking glass seemed to reverberate. The grenade exploded loudly and with a blinding light that lit up a few windows. The window I tossed it through shattered.

I don't know how long I waited, I was no longer counting, but I pulled the pin in the second grenade and tossed it through another window and when it exploded it was twice as loud and all the windows in back shattered. A neighbor would be calling the police.

Alarms went off inside and the backyard security lights came on. I ran to the tree for cover, almost tripping on the rope. The backdoor opened, smoke came out, followed by a man holding a rifle. He fired wildly into the yard. I fired back and hit the door. He closed it quickly and I heard the pop-pop-pop of automatic gunfire out front.

I was positioned in the back to force people out the front, so I stayed put, while the popping continued, with an intermittent sound of Coco Joe's Glock firing. He must have tossed another flash-bang because I heard it explode and saw the light from the backyard. There was rapid fire from the Glock and then quiet.

The quiet didn't last long. The pop-pop-pop returned, and I could tell it was more than one weapon firing. In between the popping sound, I heard a motorcycle start and then the explosion of another grenade rocked the house and it was quiet, again. The air burnt with the smell of spent gunpowder.

I heard the motorcycle, again, and knew it was speeding off. I ran along the side yard toward Coco Joe. When I passed the carport both motorcycles were gone. Out front, two men lay dead. There was no sign of Coco Joe. Smoke began to come out of the broken windows and I heard sirens. The front gate was open and I rushed out to my dinghy.

* * *

Richard Dowley stood with a cup of my good coffee in the cockpit of the Fenian Bastard. Padre Thomas was sleeping in the main cabin.

“You wanna run that by me again?” He wanted to pace, but there wasn’t room.

“Padre Thomas had a little too much to drink last night, so I was trying to walk him sober and saw these guys loading drugs into the Cadillac in the Lyons Club parking lot. Simple as that, and I called you.”

“Then you heard all the commotion across the way earlier, right?” he sipped coffee and looked across the bight to the burnt out house.

“It could’ve woke the dead,” I smiled and drank from my coffee mug. “What happened?”

“Not sure,” he frowned. “Two dead outside, one dead inside. Sherlock said it looked like grenades, automatic and small arms fire. Lots of brass on the ground.”

“Well, that would explain the explosions I heard.”

“How many,” he refused to sit down.

“Three, maybe four.”

“He’ll corroborate your story?” Richard pointed down into the cabin.

“I doubt it, I think he’s still drunk. He slept through the whole thing.”

“I meant about the walk.”

“If he remembers.”

Richard finally sat down and I got him a fresh cup of coffee.

“The guy who rents the house,” he pointed across the way, “took off in his small plane just about the time we got calls about the gunfire.”

“He’s gotta land.”

“Yeah, well, he flew below radar, but we think he went to Cuba.”

“That’s illegal,” I said and then laughed.

“It gets better.” He didn’t laugh.

“How’s that possible?”

“About fifteen minutes later, someone stole a small plane and went in the same direction, like they were following him.” He finished his coffee. “You don’t know anything about this, right?”

“I know what I saw and what I heard, but you already know that.”

“The sheriffs caught your drug smugglers and the DEA is coming for them, so this closes the case on the floater too,” he put his cup down and stood up.

“I’m glad it worked out,” I stood and walked with him to the dock.

“I didn’t say that, I said it closes the case. That’s what the Feds told me. I don’t like any of it, but I’m glad they’re gone.” He gave me a tired smile and walked away.

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