

Scarecrow



Darren G. Burton

SCARECROW

Darren G. Burton

First published in the United States by
Lulu Publishers 2007

This paperback edition 2008

Copyright © Darren G. Burton, 2007

The Author asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

ISBN 978-1-4092-0780-1

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Sydney, Australia, Darren G. Burton has been writing for more than 20 years. He has had numerous articles and short stories published in major Australian publications and has written several full-length novels. With a keen interest in the arts, his other artistic pursuits include electric guitar and songwriting, creating ambient music CDs, photography and landscape painting.

Books by Darren G. Burton

Non-Fiction

Dating & Mating: The Power of Flirting

Dating and Mating: Attract the Opposite Sex

Dating and Mating: Reading the Body Language
Signals

Shut the Fuck Up!: Every Man's Key to Happiness

Chick Magnet: The Secret of the Attraction Factor

Turn Me On: How to Attract a Man

When It's Over: How to Mend That Broken Heart

How To Keep Your Man: And Keep Him For Good

Real Life Dramas - Volume One

Fiction

Power Play

Minotaur

Scarecrow

Silhouette

All available at:

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

<http://www.ambienceproductions.com.au/books.htm>

Prologue One

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

Fishhook Island, The Bahamas - 20 Years Ago:

The night was dark and humid, storm clouds homing in on the island from the south-west. Lightning danced in forks on the horizon, thunder grumbling like an awakening beast. The island lay in wait, no wind; just eerie calm.

A scarecrow stood in the middle of a cornfield, lifelessly gazing out over the ocean. It had wooden arms and legs, with a coat and trousers packed with straw. But its head was once a living thing; a human skull with the vacant eye sockets of a long-since decomposed face. On top of the skull hung the tendrils of an old mop, over which rested the traditional straw hat. Its coat began to flutter as the breath of the storm finally reached the island.

Lightning cracked closer to shore, the thunder louder. The high moon and stars were quickly blotted out as the storm consumed them.

The scarecrow continued to stare inanimately out to sea, as if watching the storm approach, waiting for it.

A gust of wind hit the cornfield, blowing the stalks to forty-five degree angles. The wind brought with it the first drops of rain; big drops that spread to

the size of a baseball when they struck the dirt. The scarecrow was quickly drenched, its coat and trousers now hanging limply with the weight of the water. Sheet lightning flashed high above. A random bolt struck the water a hundred yards offshore. Thunder boomed. The water hissed and sizzled. Another bolt struck, this time on the beach; getting closer.

The scarecrow still stared ahead. Still waited.

A third bolt of lightning struck the ground, this time in the cornfield two hundred yards from the scarecrow. Dirt and cornstalks exploded. Thunder cracked like a thousand whips at once.

Two lightning bolts shot down simultaneously, joined together like a Y and hit the scarecrow between the eyes. There was another crack of thunder, but the scarecrow wasn't destroyed. Instead, it glowed with an aura of white light. It seemed to fill out, take on a more human shape, but at the same time remained a scarecrow: Made of wood and straw and that human skull.

The air around it crackled with static. The aura began to undulate as the scarecrow slowly, stiffly, began to move. It uprooted its legs from the ground, took one step, two. Then it was walking freely, most of the stiffness gone.

In the jungle two hundred yards to the east, an old man hid in the darkness, the rain pelting into his face. He looked on in disbelief as the scarecrow walked through the cornfield. His heart hammered and a pulse beat rapidly at his temple. Then he fled into the night.

The scarecrow continued to walk, the storm raging around it. A barn loomed at the southern end of the cornfield, a farmhouse adjacent to it. The

scarecrow moved purposefully toward the barn and entered its open doors. It searched inside. The interior was dark, but it could see. Its eyes were alive now and glowed like red-hot coals.

When it found what it was looking for, it left the barn and moved toward the farmhouse, a scythe in its hand.

Prologue Two

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

The helicopter flew over Fishhook Island. Beside the pilot sat a young black man, lines already appearing on his face from the pressures of police work. Sergeant Rhafne had got the call an hour ago. Fishhook Island was his jurisdiction, so he flew straight out from Nassau.

They circled the island to prepare for landing. The island was small, maybe three miles long and two wide at its broadest point. It was easy to see how it got its name. It was, in actual fact, the shape of a crude fishhook. The island was home to maybe a hundred people; mostly fisherman and their families, a few small-time farmers. In the curve of the hook, which formed a small bay, lay the little township of ramshackle huts. A few trawlers and some other rather unseaworthy-looking boats were moored in the bay. The helicopter landed on some bare ground in the centre of town, greeted by half the population; who got excited every time life from outside visited. Although they didn't look too excited today.

When the blades had slowed, Rhafne climbed out onto the patchy grass and quickly walked away from the chopper. He hated getting out of those things; always feared the blades were going to drop down and take his head off.

A white man walked up to him. He was a rough

looking fisherman named Shaw. He'd been the one who made the call to Rhafne an hour ago. He'd found the bodies.

"Sergeant," Shaw grunted and shook Rhafne's hand.

"Take me there," Rhafne quipped.

A jeep was parked beside a tiny hotel in the sandy street. Shaw got in behind the wheel, Rhafne beside him. The engine fired to life and the jeep lurched off, heading south. They followed a dirt track. On the left was palm-tree jungle, on the right lay a field of sun-baked corn. The road was littered with tree branches and broken palm fronds.

"Bad storm here last night. Lightning struck the ground several places. You can see where it's gouged holes and burnt the corn." Shaw drove on past a barn and pulled to a stop in front of the farmhouse. They got out. "I came here to deliver some fish to the Richardson's this morning. That's when I found them....Or what's left of them."

Shaw entered the house, Rhafne close behind.

"I hate this part of my job," Rhafne said, referring to the moment just before he was about to lay eyes on a corpse, not quite knowing what sort of carnage was going to greet him. He steeled himself and followed Shaw into a bedroom.

"In here," Shaw said quietly.

Rhafne held back a gasp. On the bed lay two headless corpses; presumably Mr. and Mrs. Richardson. The bed was soaked in blood, the walls splattered with gore. Rhafne forced himself to take a closer look. He touched the blood-stained sheets. The blood was dry. He prodded one of the corpses with a finger. It was stiff. They'd been dead for some

hours.

"Notice something?" Shaw said.

Rhafne nodded. "Of course I notice. Their heads are gone."

"Not just cut off," Shaw went on. "They've been taken away."

"Let's search the house," the sergeant decided. "Maybe the psycho dumped them somewhere." He had another thought. "Are there any other bodies in the house?"

"No. The Richardson's had no children, thank God."

After a thorough search they came up with nothing.

Rhafne sighed and said: "Let's try the barn."

The barn yielded zero as well. Rhafne lit up a cigarette and offered one to Shaw. Then they stood in the doorway to the barn and smoked.

"Want to know somethin' else that's unusual?" Shaw said, dribbling smoke through his nostrils.

"What?"

"The Richardsons had a scarecrow out there in the cornfield. Now it's gone. I thought maybe the storm blew it down or somethin'. I checked. There's no sign of it."

"So what do you think? Someone murdered the Richardsons just to steal their fucking scarecrow?" Rhafne was incredulous.

"I don't think anything," Shaw returned. "It's just damned strange, is all."

Rhafne considered it, couldn't see any possible connection between the missing scarecrow and the murder. He shrugged it aside and finished his smoke in silence.

"Better fly the coroner out here," he decided.

Prologue Three

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

Wes Marshall rubbed his eyes and glanced out the window beside his bed. It was still dark outside, silver moonlight washing in through the window like a stream.

Something had woken him. Some sound, he guessed, but couldn't recall what. He'd been in a deep sleep, not consciously hearing the sound, just jolted awake by it. Now he heard a creak somewhere in the hut. Clumsy footsteps approached the bedroom door from the other side. Wes lived alone, so he was out of bed like a shot, reaching for a bowie knife he kept on the bedside table. The footsteps stopped outside the door. He held his breath. In the silver light he saw the doorknob slowly turning, the door painstakingly slow to creak open.

Wes watched, open-mouthed, as the figure entered the room. His blood ran cold when he saw the glint of moonlight off the steel blade of a scythe. But what shocked him the most was the figure that held it. It was unmistakable, even in this dim light.

The scarecrow moved towards him, red eyes glowing in its skull of a face.

Stunned by the impossible and frightening sight, Wes' muscles went to jelly. The bowie knife slipped from his grasp and clattered to the floor. He tried to say something but his mouth wouldn't work. He just

started to babble as the thing raised the scythe for a strike. Terror gripped Wes' heart like a cold fist. But he didn't have to endure the fear for long as the scythe struck like a lightning bolt, severing his head clean off the shoulders. Wes Marshall's head bounced off the wall onto the bed. The body remained standing for a moment, gushing up blood through the neck like a fountain, then gradually fell forward and hit the floor with a dead thud.

The scarecrow retrieved the head, briefly examined it, then stuffed it in an empty canvas bag. It studied the mess it had made and, pleased with its work, walked stiffly out of the bedroom.

In a hut set back in the jungle, the scarecrow found a heavy black woman and her daughter sleeping in the only bedroom. It struck swiftly and silently, first decapitating the sleeping woman. The point of the scythe gouged a hole through the mattress as the blade separated the head from the body. The little girl stirred as blood splattered her face. Her eyes fluttered open but saw nothing, not yet adjusted to the gloom. She touched the stickiness on her face and was about to let out a scream when the scythe took her head off as cleanly as a knife chops a vegetable.

The scarecrow gathered the two heads and added them to the bag with its first prize.

Satisfied with the evening's efforts, the thing left the outskirts of the little town and headed south, the three skulls in the bag only the very beginning of the harvest it planned to reap.

Prologue Four

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

For the second time in as many days, Sergeant Rhafne was woken up early by a call on his two-way radio from Fishhook Island. Even before he responded to the call, he knew what it was going to be about. The radio message from Shaw confirmed it. Another body had been found, same condition as the last.

He hurriedly dressed, kissed his slumbering wife goodbye and headed off to organise the chopper.

This time he took the coroner and a young deputy with him.

They made Fishhook by eight-twenty. As usual, the majority of the townsfolk greeted their landing. Once Rhafne was safely away from the chopper's whirring blades, he took in the expressions on the faces of the townsfolk. Their faces were etched with fear; fear of an unknown, bloodthirsty maniac who was ravaging their peaceful community.

A possibility struck Rhafne as he studied the faces: A seriously real possibility. He could very well be looking into the face, right now, of the psycho who was doing this.

He found Shaw sitting in his jeep smoking a cigarette. Rhafne, the coroner and the deputy climbed into the jeep. Shaw drove them east, inland toward the jungle, and soon they skidded to a stop in

front of a hut on the outskirts of town.

"Wes Marshall's his name," Shaw told Rhafne as they entered. Then added, "Or was."

Marshall's corpse was in the bedroom, lying chest down on the floor. Once again, Rhafne noticed, the head was nowhere to be seen. The bedroom reeked of gore and death. The coroner immediately got to work, and Rhafne walked outside for a smoke.

Shaw joined him. "There's a madman loose on the island. Most likely it's someone I know. I know everybody here."

Rhafne searched Shaw's weather-hardened face. "Anyone in particular been acting strange lately? Anyone stressed or depressed? Or violent?" he asked.

Shaw smoked and thought about it. "No," he said finally. "No one I can think of."

"Could be an outsider," Rhafne mused. "Been any visitors here? Anyone new on the island?"

Shaw shook his head.

At that moment a young black boy of about fourteen or fifteen hurried up to the hut. His face was flushed and he was excited, more with fear and shock than anything, Rhafne decided. "Mr. Shaw! I've found two more!"

Shaw tossed his cigarette away. "Who? Where?"

The boy pointed into the jungle. "Mrs. Ogilvie and Catherine."

"Oh, shit!" Shaw spat and leaped off the verandah. Rhafne was with him and together they followed the boy deeper into the jungle. They came to a run-down hut, made of wooden slats and fibro, nestled comfortably amid cooling palms. A hammock was strung between two of the palms: A

hammock these two people would never relax in again.

Inside, in the bedroom, was the familiar scene: Two headless, lifeless figures lying amidst a gory, spray-painted like pattern of blood.

"That makes five in two nights," Rhafne calculated. "Better check all the dwellings on this island to make sure there are no others we don't yet know about."

The boy went over to touch one of the corpses.

"Don't do that, son," Rhafne said gently, but firmly.

Shaw said, "Come on, Josh. Outside and get back to your folks."

Josh slinked away out the door, a little stunned by what he'd seen, but not yet visibly affected by it. Wait till he tries to sleep tonight, Rhafne thought somberly. Poor kid.

"Where's the lady's husband?" he asked Shaw.

"Dead. Died a few months back. Taken by a shark while spear-fishing."

Rhafne shook his head sadly and went back to assign the deputy the task of looking after the Ogilvies.

Rhafne and Shaw headed into the village and organised some men to search every dwelling on the island. The main township didn't take long, but the sergeant and Shaw spent the better part of an hour driving to scattered huts throughout the atoll. They came to the final dwelling, a hut that stood alone on the eastern shore, nestled amidst thick jungle and undergrowth.

"Who lives here?" Rhafne asked.

"Old man Jake. Keeps to himself. Lives off the

land basically. Eats coconuts, catches his own fish with a rod. Don't see that much of him. He's a bit of a crazy old fool."

Rhafne got out and knocked on the door. Waited. No response. He hammered at it this time. Still no answer. Quiet.

"Hope he's okay," Shaw murmured. "Maybe he went fishing?"

Rhafne shrugged. "I think we better take a look inside anyway. Just to make sure he's not victim number six."

The door was unlocked. It creaked open like tired bones. Rhafne entered first. The interior was gloomy. As the sergeant's eyes adjusted, things began to materialize. The hut was made up of only one room, with a small section closed off with shower curtains to make up the bathroom. There was an open window on the far side, but with the jungle so thick behind it, it didn't offer much in the way of light. There was a bench and wood-burning stove on the right. On the left wall was a rack holding several rifles. Another rack next to it held an assortment of fishing rods. A hammock was strung between two poles near the window, and in the centre of the room was a single armchair. Somebody sat in the chair.

"Jake?" Shaw said quietly. The figure didn't stir. "Jake!" he repeatedly more urgently.

The head of the figure ever so slowly swiveled to face them.

Jake looked to be at least sixty, Rhafne figured. He had absolutely no hair, just a sunburned, wrinkled pate. His gray eyes were deep-set amid a valley of wrinkles. He wore no shirt and looked surprisingly fit for his age.

"You okay, Jake?" Shaw asked uncertainly.

Old man Jake nodded slowly. "Okay. Yeah," he croaked.

"Have you heard about what's been happenin', Jake?"

Again he nodded. "It's harvest time."

"Harvest time?" Rhafne repeated, confused. "What do you mean?"

The old man looked at him with his deep-set eyes. "When it's time to harvest, out comes the reaper."

Shaw whispered: "Ignore him. He's crazy."

"Yeah," Rhafne whispered back. "But what's a crazy man capable of?"

Shaw motioned the sergeant outside. "You don't think Jake's responsible, do you. He's old and he's senile, but he ain't no butcher."

"Then who is?"

Shaw shrugged. "I dunno. But I can't see him doing anybody any harm. My bet is it's an outsider. I don't know who, or why, but I just can't imagine anybody on this island doing such a vicious deed."

"Okay, then," Rhafne decided, "we'll just have to organise a watch party for tonight and see if we can't catch this guy. Gather together about a dozen of your most trusted men. Move the rest of the community into the huts in the centre of town. That way we can keep an eye on everybody. You can start by telling Jake to come with us."

Shaw went back inside, re-emerged a few minutes later. "He won't come."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"It's his funeral."

They drove back to town and set to work

organising the plan. By the time sunset came, pink and orange over the bay, everyone was in position.

The deputy had since flown back to Nassau with the coroner and the bodies. Rhafne had assigned him the task of filing the necessary paperwork, leaving Rhafne free to deal with things here.

Rhafne himself was situated on the western outskirts of town, on the bay. Shaw was stationed on that side as well, about a hundred yards away further north. As requested, all the townsfolk were gathered together for the evening in about ten huts in the centre of the village. Those dwellings around the outskirts were empty. A dozen or so men were stationed at strategic locations around the outskirts of the village, every man armed with a rifle or hand-gun and within sight of another.

The hours passed. Rhafne smoked cigarette after cigarette. As the moon was rising over the jungle, Rhafne checked his watch: Quarter after nine. He wondered if the guy was going to show. If the maniac was one of the villagers, he most certainly wasn't going to do anything tonight. If it was an outsider, arriving somewhere on the island by boat, he'd be none the wiser as to what was going down.

The minute hand of Rhafne's watch moved slowly on to the twelve: Ten o'clock. Still no action. The island was dead silent.

He lit another smoke, concealing the flame behind the bushes where he hid. By the time he finished his smoke it was ten after ten. Damned time was dragging by like a dying dog. But patience was the name of the game in a stakeout situation. He hated this part of his job as well. It was boring as hell, but a necessary procedure.

By midnight Rhafne's cigarettes had run out, and he wished he had another packet. Even more bored without any smokes, the hour from twelve to one seemed more like four.

Jack "Jumbo" Williamson, as he was affectionately known, was stationed at the southern end of town. Behind him was jungle, beyond which lay the cornfield of the deceased Richardsons. He nervously smoked a pipe. Didn't like being down this end at all. He could see Sergeant Rhafne to his left, a little further north, standing next to some bushes near the beach. Jumbo, as his name suggested, was a big black man. Unfortunately, most of his size was stacked around the waistline. Still, he was as strong as an ox, he knew. And if this scumbag showed his face tonight, he planned to give the guy a real hammering-

Jumbo's head hit the ground with a soft thud. His fat body made a loud thud as it fell.

The scarecrow stood there with its scythe, the blade dripping blood onto the sand. It was getting quicker, it realised. More flexible, more efficient. More silent and deadly. It jammed the point of the blade into the crevice of the neck and scooped Jumbo's lifeless head into the bag. That made six. This was a good harvest.

The scarecrow's clothes were wet with salt water, and they rubbed as it walked into town.

Rhafne saw it first, an indefinable silhouette against the moonlight. He knew it wasn't one of the villagers. Too tall. And it walked with a strange gait.

The shape moved towards the first hut, carrying

something in each hand. Moonlight glinted off steel. Rhafne recognised it as the unmistakable blade of a reaping tool; a scythe. He withdrew his police issue hand-gun and stealthily moved in on the shape. Shaw had seen it too, and was coming in from his position further north. The figure had now entered the hut, which was empty. Shaw joined Rhafne and together they walked towards the building.

"Where's Jumbo?" Shaw whispered. "He should have seen him. Came from his direction."

Rhafne shrugged and whispered, "Maybe he fell asleep."

"Better fucking not have."

Shaw was armed with a rifle. He squatted below the open window of the hut, while Rhafne positioned himself beside the open door. Rhafne peered around the corner, couldn't see a thing inside. Too dark. Damn, he thought. Should have brought a flashlight. Not good preparation, he chastised himself silently. He motioned to Shaw to look in through the window. Shaw sneaked a quick look, then shook his head. Couldn't see anything. Rhafne waved him over and Shaw scuttled across to the sergeant on his haunches.

"Too dark to see a damned thing," the fisherman said under his breath.

"I know," Rhafne responded quietly. "There's no one inside other than this guy, whoever he is, so we'll just wait for him to come out. You stay on this side of the door, and I'll cover the other side." When Shaw nodded, Rhafne rolled across the front of the door to the other side, then stood up with his gun ready. He peered inside. Two red eyes stared back at him. There was a whooshing sound above the sergeant's head. Instinctively he dove to the ground

and rolled away, just as the blade of the scythe carved a gash in the dirt where he'd been half a second ago.

Shaw went to raise his rifle for a shot, but felt the full brunt of the scythe's handle in his stomach. He grunted and doubled over. Then the figure was off. Rhafne watched the figure running away, too stunned to move for a moment. Shaw got to his feet, the pain in his gut subsiding.

"That looked like the Richardson's fucking scarecrow!" Shaw grunted in surprise. He shook his head to clear it.

"Couldn't have been," Rhafne tried to dismiss the insane idea.

"Well what's it fucking look like to you, Sergeant?" Shaw challenged gruffly.

Rhafne stared after the figure as it disappeared south along the beach. He'd seen it close up: Straw hat, ragged clothes, skull-like face....and those horrid red eyes.

"I've seen that scarecrow a thousand times," Shaw went on. "I'd recognise it anywhere."

"But how?" Rhafne couldn't comprehend it.

"Who knows how? We'll worry about that later. Let's just get the jeep and be after the thing!"

The jeep was parked in the centre of town. Within two minutes, Sergeant Rhafne, Shaw, and two other men armed with rifles were riding the jeep south along the beach in pursuit.

They caught up with the scarecrow at the southern tip of the island. The moon was high and full now, illuminating everything with a silver sheen. The scarecrow entered the water.

"He's heading out to Hollow Island!" Rhafne yelled.

"It," Shaw corrected him.

Hollow Island was a tiny island, maybe only a couple of acres in land mass, with a large underwater cave beneath it. The island was only two hundred yards off shore and was clearly visible in the moonlight.

As the scarecrow disappeared into the water, Shaw and the other men fired off several rounds each. Bullets fizzed and ricocheted off the smooth surface, but never struck anything solid. The scarecrow was gone, vanished into the depths.

Rhafne stopped the firing. "Shaw! Get me a boat, some scuba gear and an underwater flashlight. Bring some other flashlights as well. Tell the others to stay there and guard the townsfolk."

"Right," Shaw responded and got into the jeep.

To the other two men Rhafne said, "You two stay here with me....In case it comes back."

"What is it?" one of the men asked, not sure of what he'd just seen, and not having seen it up close like Rhafne and Shaw.

"I don't know?" Rhafne replied honestly. "I don't really know."

Shaw took twenty minutes to return with the gear. Behind the jeep he towed a trailer, on which was a dinghy with a small outboard. He backed the trailer into the water while the other men unhooked the dinghy. All four got in and Shaw started the motor.

The small craft cruised out toward Hollow Island. As they got closer, Shaw had to maneuver the vessel around rocks and reef that protruded through the surface. He beached the dinghy in a small cove on the western shore of the island.

Rhafne was first to alight. The others got out and

they dragged the boat up onto dry sand.

Hollow Island was only sparsely covered in vegetation, mostly just palms lining the beaches with a small rise in the centre that was pretty much bare.

"Let's search the island," Rhafne decided.

Shaw handed each man a flashlight.

"Do you think we should fan out?" one of the men asked.

"No," said Rhafne. "Could be too dangerous. Let's stick together."

They circumnavigated the tiny island, following the beach. When that revealed nothing - no sign of the scarecrow, no footprints in the sand - they ventured inland and checked the centre.

Shaw lit a smoke. "I think it's in the cave." He pointed down at the ground to the cave below the island.

"That's where the scuba gear comes in," Rhafne said. "Can it breathe somewhere in there?"

Shaw shrugged. "Doesn't matter. If it's what I think it is, it don't need to breathe."

"How much diving gear have you got?" Rhafne asked him.

"Enough for two."

"Good. You're coming down with me."

"I am?" Shaw blew smoke into the night.

"Yes. You are."

The four men went back to the cove and the dinghy. Rhafne and Shaw stripped down to their underwear. Shaw's back, arms and chest were smothered in tattoos, which he covered over with a wetsuit vest. They put on tanks, fins and masks. Shaw had included two waterproof flashlights, so they each were armed with one.

"You been in there before?" Rhafne asked.

"I've been down there. I haven't been inside."

"Right. You lead the way then."

"Thanks," Shaw grumbled and waded backwards into the water.

Rhafne followed suit. The water was cool around his legs, but not cold. When they were in waist deep, they flicked on their torches and slipped beneath the surface. Rhafne had trouble purging the water from his tired old regulator, but he eventually got it clear and followed Shaw's light out to a rocky outcrop. The water was pitch dark outside the range of their lights. Here the bottom dropped off markedly. Rhafne trailed Shaw down to the sea bed. They followed a channel in the rocks and arrived at a large, dark hole: The entrance to the cave that led under the island. They shone their lights inside, the beams penetrating down a seemingly-endless tunnel.

Rhafne's heart gave a stutter. He had a sudden sensation that something was behind them in the channel. He shone his light behind him. Two red eyes in a skull-like face stared back. Movement; the glint of light off steel. Rhafne reacted too slowly and the point of the scythe dug into his ribs. He gritted his teeth down on the rubber mouthpiece as the pain hit him. The scarecrow darted past Shaw and swam into the tunnel. Shaw shone his light after it, then aimed it at Rhafne. Rhafne pointed to the surface and they swam back to the cove.

On the beach, Rhafne dumped his gear in the boat and stripped off his vest. The scythe had penetrated through the rubber and sliced the skin between two ribs on his left hand side. The wound bled a bit, but was only superficial.

"Luckily it couldn't get a good swing underwater," Rhafne mused.

"Could have gone into your lungs, otherwise," Shaw noted. He rolled the sergeant a cigarette, lit it and gave it to him.

Rhafne accepted it gratefully and puffed tenaciously. He thought quickly. "Do you have any salvage workers on the island?"

"One," Shaw answered.

Rhafne nodded. "Is that the only entrance to the cave?"

Shaw nodded. "Except for a tiny opening in the centre of the island. But nobody could fit out there."

"Okay. I want you to go back and get me some underwater explosives."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have a plan. Just get me the explosives and get back as quick as you can."

Shaw nosed the dinghy into the cove, started the motor and roared off. Meanwhile, one of the other men pressed a handkerchief hard against the sergeant's wound. By the time Shaw returned, Rhafne's wound had stopped bleeding. He and Shaw suited up again as dawn's first rays of faint light coloured the eastern horizon in hues of pink and red.

"What have you got?"

Shaw showed Rhafne a lump of plastic explosive molded around the curved bottom of a beer bottle. Attached to that was a detonator, some wire, and a timing device.

"The curvature of the beer bottle will direct the explosion in the direction you want it to go," the seaman explained. "We set the timer for, say, five minutes so we've got time to get the hell out of there."

But a word of warning: Once you set it you can't stop it. Strictly set and forget."

"Okay. Let's do it."

"You gonna seal off the entrance so it can't get out?" Shaw surmised.

"You got it. Hopefully it's still in there."

Rhafne put on his mask and stuffed the regulator in his mouth. There was still about fifteen minutes of air left in the tank, so that should be plenty. He waded into the water, then dropped beneath the surface.

The water was still dark, just a hint of faint, murky light beginning to penetrate. He followed his flashlight beam to the channel, and swam it to the cave entrance. Shaw joined him there. Both of them shone their lights around to make certain the scarecrow, or whatever it was, wasn't lurking nearby. They saw nothing but rocks and coral and sand. Rhafne probed the cave entrance with the light, saw nothing but stone as far as the light would penetrate. He then surveyed the cave entrance, searching for an ideal spot to locate the plastic explosives. There was an eight foot overhang, like an awning above the cave mouth. If the explosive was aimed to blow that off, that section of stone would be enough to seal it off.

Rhafne checked down the tunnel again. No sign of the scarecrow. He found a ledge about six feet up the tunnel wall just inside the entrance. He indicated for Shaw to place the explosive on the ledge, aimed up at the overhang. Shaw did so, then set the timer for five minutes.

They turned to swim away. It was then that the long, lithe shape loomed out of the twilight. It was only a shadow in the eerie, early-morning gloom, but

its shape was unmistakable. As the prehistoric fish swam through the beam of Rhafne's light, he saw the brown stripes along its side and knew it was a tiger shark.

It kept swimming past, seemingly endless; like waiting for a train to go by. The shark reached the end of the channel and turned around. The channel was about twenty feet across, and the shark had room to turn around, but not by much.

Had to be at least a fifteen footer, Rhafne figured. His skin tingled with nervous anticipation. He remembered the gash on his left side and prayed that the shark couldn't smell it; that it wasn't bleeding again.

The shark cruised past and Rhafne hoped it had just lost its way and was swimming out of the channel. But then, with a mighty flick of its tail it turned around and was coming back.

Rhafne feared now that his wound was bleeding and the monster was homing in on the scent. He and Shaw moved under the rock overhang. Rhafne shined the light down the tunnel. No sign of the scarecrow at least. He trained the light on the charge. Three minutes until it blew. The thing was irreversible. Couldn't even pull a damn wire out or the thing would blow. It was like a damned booby-trap. He sensed Shaw had vanished. Rhafne shone the light around. Shaw had indeed gone.

The tiger shark still cruised the entrance, its skin now rippling with agitation. Rhafne shone the light down the channel and what he saw made him sick to the stomach. Another shark, as big as the first, had entered the channel. But what terrified Rhafne the most was what it had in its mouth. Shaw's entire head

and one shoulder had disappeared into the cavernous jaws; three rows of teeth and a powerful, thrashing body tearing Shaw to shreds. The man was already dead. Rhafne could tell by the limpness of his figure.

Fuck! he thought desperately. Fuck! What the hell do I do now?

Even as he thought those words, and as blood permeated the water, two more sharks entered the channel to join in the feast. But the shark cruising in front of the cave seemed disinterested in the hapless body of Shaw. It seemed only interested in Rhafne.

Rhafne checked the timer again. Two minutes to go. Shit! There was no way out of here. Not inside the cave, not outside in the channel, and certainly not here in the entrance.

He shone the light out in the channel again. There were sharks everywhere now. Instinctively, he trained the beam back into the depths of the cave. And there it was: The scarecrow, evil red eyes and that deadly scythe, slowly coming towards him.

And then Rhafne knew what had to be done. It was insane, but it was the only way of keeping this hellish creature away from the rest of the world. There was no other choice.

Rhafne reached for the charge, gritted his teeth, took a deep breath, prayed to God to look after his wife, then turned the timer to zero.

One

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

THE PRESENT DAY:

The ferry ride from Nassau to Fishhook Island took three hours. There were about thirty people on board, en route to the Fishhook Island Resort.

Three young men sat in seats on the open top deck. Kurt Rogers, his short blond hair blowing in the afternoon sea breeze, drank Jim Beam from a can and watched the resort loom closer. They were still a good mile or two out to sea, so the resort was an indistinct blur surrounded by smudges of green vegetation.

On either side of Kurt sat his two college graduate buddies; Peter Malone and Matthew Gaines, both drinking stubbies of Budweiser.

"What time have you got, Kurt?" Matt asked and drank down the rest of his beer.

Kurt checked his digital diver's. "Four thirty-two."

"Four thirty-two," Matt echoed. "What's the exact time?"

"Could sure use a shower," Pete remarked.

"Yeah," Kurt agreed. His shirt was glued to his back with sweat. The air was thick and steamy, and he looked forward to escaping to the sanctuary of the air-conditioned resort.

"Still say we should have stayed in Nassau," grumbled Matt. "More to do there."

"There's plenty to do here," Kurt said. "Plenty of what *we* want to do. Heaps of reef to scuba dive on. You can hire boats and windsurfers. There's tennis, squash, beach volleyball, bars, restaurants. A nightclub. A gym. What more do we need?"

Matt smiled. "Babes."

"There'll be plenty of those here, too," Pete assured him.

As the ferry motored closer, the resort grew more defined. It was built around the entire cove, the main building rising five stories high and curved around in a gentle U-shape. In the centre of the curve was a huge swimming pool, and several tennis courts. Palm trees and flower beds were placed strategically, but not too geometrically, around the pool and courts. Four or five jetties grew out from various points along the cove. One jetty was particularly long, with about twenty cabin cruisers and speedboats moored along its sides. At the end of that jetty was a large shed.

"I'd say that's the boat hire and dive shop," Kurt mentioned. "Gathering from what I've read in the pamphlets."

The ferry moved away from that jetty and slowly approached another long pier on the opposite side of the cove to the right. An Island Cruiser vessel was moored alongside this jetty, out for a day trip from Nassau. The ferry throttled down to idling speed and virtually crawled up to the wooden platform. A few practiced gear changes from forward, to reverse, to forward again by the skipper lined the ferry up parallel to the pier. Deckhands tied ropes to the

moorings and the vessel was secured.

Kurt, Matt and Pete were first off, each carrying a suitcase and backpack stacked full of clothes and other belongings. Kurt had a camera slung around his neck, and he paused to take a picture of the resort, with Matt and Pete in the foreground. He then turned and snapped off a shot of the ferry, the automatic winder whirring as it advanced the film to the next frame.

"Come on trigger finger," Matt grumbled. "Let's get into the building and find some reprieve from this heat."

They walked past the pool. A couple of girls in deck chairs gazed at them curiously. Matt stiffened as he walked by, making the muscles pop out in his sleeveless shirt. The girls checked him out thoroughly, then giggled between themselves.

"Too young to appreciate beauty," Matt commented to his friends. Then they were past the pool and entering the foyer of the hotel, into the relief of crisp, cool air-conditioning.

The foyer had rich, blood-red carpet that was plush enough to sleep on. Huge paintings of ocean scenes decorated the walls, and numerous couches covered in bright tropical floral print lined the windows overlooking the pool outside.

Kurt moved over to the reception desk, which had a counter made of black polished granite. The desk clerk behind the counter wore a tuxedo and bow tie. He was an ageing black Bahamian with grey flecks in his curly hair. He smiled broadly as Kurt approached. "Yes, Sir?" he said in a friendly tone.

"Hi," Kurt offered. "Room for three under the name of Kurt Rogers."

The clerk punched a few keys on his computer, waited a few seconds for the machine to process the information, then nodded. "Two weeks, paid in full. Very good." He reached for some keys from a rack of many behind him and handed the keys to Kurt. "You have room number two-ten, Sir. That's on the top floor." He tapped a bell on the counter. "I'll have a porter take your luggage."

Within seconds a young white man dressed in red jacket, black pants, white shirt and black bow tie, arrived at the counter.

"Michael," the clerk addressed the young man. "Take the luggage of these three gentlemen and show them to room two-ten, please."

Michael nodded, found a trolley by the wall, and loaded their suitcases and backpacks onto it. Then he said, "Follow me," and wheeled the gear around the corner and over to one of three elevators. He punched a button and the elevator's doors opened immediately. They rode the elevator to the top floor and entered a hallway of the same red carpet as downstairs. Room two-ten was only a few paces down the hallway on the left. Kurt unlocked the door and entered behind the porter pushing the trolley. More red carpet in a spacious room filled with one double bed, two singles, a couch and armchair, television, DVD, stereo, and a coffee table. There was a kitchenette with a small dining setting on the far side, beside which was a sliding glass door leading out onto the balcony overlooking the bay. To the right of the balcony door was a doorway which Kurt presumed led into the bathroom.

Pete tipped the porter and the man left them alone to their room.

"Breathe that air-conditioned air," Matt said luxuriously and inhaled deeply.

Kurt smiled. "What's the point in coming to a tropical island if all you're concerned about is air-conditioning?" he ribbed, even though he secretly shared Matt's relief.

"I don't mind the heat and sultry tropical nights," Matt told him, "just so long as I've got a haven to retreat to."

"I'm grabbing a shower," Pete said. "Feels like somebody wallpapered this shirt to my back." He disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door.

Kurt investigated the kitchenette. There was a medium-sized bar fridge. He opened the door. Half a dozen tiny containers of motel milk lined the top shelf inside the door. The only other thing in the fridge was a tray of ice cubes in the freezer compartment. On a bench next to the fridge was a set of hotplates - no oven. But there was a microwave oven in the corner, beside which was an electric kettle and toaster. A cupboard below the sink revealed mugs, plates and glasses on the top shelf. On the shelf below was a jar filled with one serve sachets of coffee, and another jar filled with tea bags. A third container revealed a stack of individually-wrapped pairs of sugar cubes. The second cupboard produced cooking utensils and a bottle of dishwashing liquid. Two drawers beside the sink held cutlery and various other kitchen implements.

His curiosity satisfied, Kurt went and sat on the edge of the double bed, where Matt had sprawled out and made himself comfortable.

"I suggest we all get cleaned up and find one of those bars," Kurt said.

"Sounds like a plan," Matt agreed.

In the bathroom the water stopped running, and a few minutes later Pete emerged with a white resort-issue towel wrapped around his waist, his body thin and lean.

"We're going to grab a shower, too," Matt told him.

"Not together, I hope," Pete replied with a grin.

"Yeah, right," Matt returned facetiously.

"We thought we'd go find a bar and have another drink," Kurt informed him.

Pete nodded his agreement and searched for some clothes in his suitcase, while Matt quickly dashed into the bathroom before Kurt even had a chance to move.

Kurt relaxed on the double bed while waiting for Matt to finish. Matt eventually did finish and Kurt took his turn in the bathroom.

The bathroom was a small and simple affair, with a wash basin and mirror, a cupboard below the sink, one small window, a toilet, and a shower cubicle surrounded on two sides by a glass wall and glass sliding door. A fresh white towel hung on a towel rack beside the wash basin.

Kurt showered, using a complimentary soap the size of a postage stamp. When he'd finished, he dried off in front of the mirror, pleased with the condition his physique was in. He was lean and well muscled, though not big. Just a normal build. His skin was a little pale, though, from the American winter, and all those months of hard indoor study to graduate from college. But he planned to change that and be well tanned by the time he'd spent two weeks on this island.

He combed his short blond hair, darkened by the

dampness of the water in it, then checked his face for any sign of wrinkles. There were none, and at twenty-two years of age he didn't expect there to be any. His hair was thick and healthy, and he hoped like hell he didn't go bald when he was older. He wrapped the towel around his waist and went out to get dressed.

In the main room he found Pete and Matt already fully clothed. "You two don't muck about," he noted.

"We're thirsty," Matt told him.

Kurt opened his suitcase, found some underwear and slipped them on under his towel. Then he dropped the towel and shrugged himself into a pair of Levis. He tucked a white T-shirt into his jeans and squeezed his feet into a pair of brown casuals.

"All set?" Pete asked him.

"Yep." Kurt grabbed his wallet, the keys and followed the others out to the elevators.

Downstairs in the lobby they looked around for a bar. They saw a coffee lounge, a door leading into a restaurant that was not yet open, and next to that a sign that said: *The Old Wino*.

"That's gotta be a bar," Matt decided.

"I'd put money on it," Kurt agreed.

They entered the bar, which was filled with round tables surrounded by bar stools. More bar stools lined a well-stocked bar to the right, behind which was a middle-aged bartender dressed in the same fashion as the clerk at reception. Apart from the bartender and themselves, there were only two other people in the room; a young couple talking intimately at a table in the far left-hand corner. The two continually smiled and looked deeply into each other's eyes as they talked. Kurt felt a pang of regret

when he saw the couple so happy together. He still missed Corinne.

"I bet you those two are here on their honeymoon," Matt said with a smile. He then realised his mistake and added, "Sorry, Kurt," and patted him on the back.

"No need to be," Kurt assured him and forced a weak smile that turned out more like a grimace.

"Let's get some drinks," Pete decided quickly. "What'll it be? My shout."

"Now that's what I like to hear," Matt quipped. "A brew for me."

Pete nodded. "Kurt?"

"Jim Beam on ice. No Coke."

Pete raised his eyebrows. "The man wants a bit of fire." He went to the bar to get the drinks. Kurt and Matt found some comfortable booths at the far end of the room, with tinted windows overlooking a sparse palm tree jungle that led through to the northern beach. They took seats opposite each other in a comfortable booth and soon after Pete arrived with the drinks. When Pete was settled next to Matt, he said to Kurt, "So, Mr. Facts and Figures, what else can you tell us about this place?"

"Yeah," Matt put in. "You're the journalism major; the words man. You're supposed to be good at research. Have you done your homework or what?"

Kurt sipped his straight bourbon. It burned his throat as it went down, but it felt good; slightly mellowed by the ice. He felt better now.

Being in the profession he was hoping to make a living in, he was pleased to relay some facts he'd dug up on the place. He drank some more bourbon before beginning.

"Well, this island was bought out about five years ago by the British-owned hotel chain, Berwicks. Fishhook Island used to be inhabited by native Bahamians, mostly fishermen and their families. Berwicks kicked everyone off. Relocated them on another island. There is still one guy living here from back then, apparently. Refused to go. Some old fellow who lives in a shack on the other side of the island someplace. Fends for himself, it seems."

He paused to drink more bourbon. "Berwicks tore down the town to build this place. With two hundred and forty odd rooms, the resort can probably hold up to a thousand people. Live-in staff members run the entire show, including the boat hire. The building's five stories high with three underground basement levels. One's for storage, the lowest one houses a generator and water purification system which both supply electricity and fresh water. But the first basement level, according to this pamphlet," Kurt dug a glossy brochure from the pocket of his jeans, "has a gym, which you no doubt will be interested in, Matt, an indoor swimming pool, spa, sauna and games room."

"What's in the games room?" Pete interrupted to ask.

Kurt scanned the brochure. "Pool tables, the latest in video games and pinball machines; plus a gambling room."

"What kind of gambling?" Matt was immediately interested.

Still checking over the pamphlet, Kurt replied, "Blackjack, roulette, and a few slot machines. That's in a separate section that you've got to be over eighteen to enter. But not many kids come here

anyway. The place is designed for, and mainly attracts either young single adults, or honeymooners. They advertise in the brochure that it's a honeymooner's haven." He paused and slowly sipped his drink. "Which is why I know a bit about the place. It was one of the islands Corinne and I were thinking about spending our honeymoon on."

"So why did you suggest we come here?" Pete asked carefully. "Isn't it going to drag up bad feelings about what might have been?"

Kurt shrugged. "I don't know. So far I feel okay. I figured that coming here might help me deal with things. Face reality. Oh, I've accepted the fact that Corinne is dead, but I'm still finding it hard to move on. I think this will help."

Matt smiled mischievously. "What you need is to meet some girls while you're here."

"We'll see," Kurt managed a smile. "But anyway, on with the report. The resort, including the grounds and the cove, takes up around a third of Fishhook." He scanned the brochure again. "There's an outdoor bar in the pool, and a kiosk. Inside there are more bars, a couple of restaurants and coffee shops, general store, souvenir shop, and on the first level there's a nightclub."

Kurt finished his bourbon. "So, as you can see, just in the resort alone there is plenty to get up to. That's not to mention all the scuba diving we can do. Which is primarily what we came here for anyway." He stood up. "Anyone else like another drink?"

"Beer for me," said Matt.

"I second that order," Pete chimed in.

"When I come back, I'll tell you some interesting facts about the history of this island." Kurt liked the

fact that he'd sounded mysterious. It was good practice for his writing career.

When he returned with two beers and another bourbon for himself - this one with Coke - Matt said, "Okay, Columbo. Tell us what else you know."

"Right," Kurt said, getting settled again. "This island used to be inhabited, like many of the other islands around the Bahamas, by pirates about three hundred and seventy years ago."

"Don't tell me," Pete interrupted. "There's a buried treasure on this island somewhere and we're going to find it."

"Now all we need is an ancient treasure map to locate it, with an *X* marking the spot," Matt added sarcastically and drank his beer.

"No," Kurt said seriously. "There isn't any treasure buried on this island that I know of. And we don't need a map." He paused to add drama. "But there is the possibility of some close by."

Again he paused, took a sip of bourbon.

"Well, go on," Matt urged.

"Back in the early sixteen hundreds a French pirate named Louis Lorenz and his band of buccaneers, sacked a Spanish galleon sailing from Mexico - or New Spain as it was known then - back to Spain. The galleons used to sail to Vera Cruz, load up with gold and silver to be sailed back to the king. Plus there was also personal treasure; things like gold and silver bars belonging to rich merchants."

"Okay," Matt said impatiently, though there was a distinct gleam of excitement in his eyes. "Forget the history lesson. Get down to the nitty-gritty of the story; the part that involves this island."

"I'm getting to that," Kurt promised. "Galleons

usually sailed in large fleets for protection. Pirates generally preyed on lone vessels. This particular fleet, however, was a small one; only four ships of which two were galleons."

"So the king's treasure ship in this fleet was sacked by this Lorenz character," Pete guessed.

Kurt nodded. "The ship was called the Antilles. It was so loaded down with treasure and passengers that it lagged behind the other vessels as they traveled north through the Florida Straight. Lorenz and his crew were waiting in ambush and attacked the treasure ship. They slaughtered the crew and passengers, loaded as much of the treasure as they could onto their own ship, then scuttled the galleon.

"The other three ships were too slow in getting back to help them. Lorenz got away with much of the treasure. The rest sank with the Antilles."

Kurt noticed his friends getting more impatient with him. "Anyway, to cut a long story short, the three remaining ships sailed back to Havana. The district officer sent a task force of soldiers out into the Bahamas to search for Lorenz. They eventually found his island, waged a battle and killed all the pirates: Except him."

"So," Pete interjected again. "This was Louis Lorenz' island?"

Kurt smiled. "That's right. Anyway, Lorenz escaped in a longboat with a swag of gold coins; doubloons. The soldiers caught him out on Hollow Island - which is just south of here - dumping all the coins down a fissure in the centre which fell into a cave. Except for maybe Lorenz, no one knew about the vast cave that ran under the island then. The Spanish soldiers thought the gold was lost beyond

reach. To punish the guy, they tied him to a stake and burnt him alive. Apparently, while Lorenz was being fried, he vowed vengeance on them. When he was charred, the soldiers cut off his head and stuck it on a pole out there to rot in the sun."

"So you're saying all that treasure is still there in this cave?" Matt asked hopefully.

Kurt slowly shook his head. "No. When it was discovered that there was a cave beneath Hollow Island - thus giving the island its name - and the story came to light about Louis Lorenz, then all manner of treasure hunters converged on the cave and searched it many times. Some treasure was found. Quite a lot, actually. But then it dwindled out and interest waned."

"So there's no treasure left," Pete sounded disappointed.

"Ah, but there could be," Kurt insisted. "The treasure was there for over three hundred years before anyone searched for it. Much of it was probably buried under the sand by that time. There could still be more. The sea's a living thing. Covers and uncovers things all the time."

"Could be worthwhile checking out," Matt mused.

"Oh, for sure," Kurt was adamant. "There is one problem, though."

"What?" Pete asked.

Kurt finished his second bourbon. "Someone twenty years ago blasted the cave entrance shut. Nobody seems to know much about it. All I could find out was that there was a series of murders out here at that time," he paused, a stab of emotional pain hitting him, "culminating for some reason in the cave being sealed. The guy who sealed it died in the

explosion. It was all very hush-hush for some reason."

"I say we dive on the cave tomorrow and see if we can get it open," Matt said with enthusiasm. "Do you know where the entrance is, or used to be?"

"I have a fair idea," Kurt told him.

"I have a question," Pete said. "What happened to the head of Louis Lorenz?"

Kurt smiled. "It became the prize possession of an island witchdoctor. But more recently, one of the islanders here, before the resort was built, made a scarecrow out of him."

Two

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

They chose the a-la-carte restaurant on the first floor for dinner. By the time they'd finished a main course of barracuda and vegetables, it was nine-thirty.

Kurt was finishing off his meal with a cappuccino. He produced another glossy brochure from his pocket and spread it out on the table. "This is a guide to the resort," he told his friends. "I found a pile of them down in the lobby before. It pinpoints where all the indoor and outdoor amenities are."

Matt and Pete leaned over the table for a closer look.

"As you can see," Kurt went on, "it shows all of Fishhook Island, plus at the south end here it also outlines Hollow Island. What it shows as well is the best reef and rocky areas around each island to dive on."

He sipped his cappuccino, leaving a frothy moustache on his upper lip, then continued. "From what I discovered in my research of Hollow Island was that the cave entrance was on the western shore at the end of a channel in a rocky outcrop." Kurt pointed a finger to a spot on Hollow Island's western shore. "It's a tiny island and that's the only rocky outcrop, judging by this map, that I can see on that side."

"I'd say you're absolutely right," Pete agreed, scrutinizing the not-too-detailed map.

Matt yawned. "I say we call it a night and get an early start on this thing tomorrow."

"You don't want to check out the nightclub?" Kurt asked.

Matt shook his head. "Tomorrow night."

"I thought you wanted to meet some girls," Pete reminded him.

"Plenty of time for that," said Matt. "I feel a bit tired from the trip out from Miami."

"It was only a short flight," Pete said incredulously.

Kurt drank down his coffee and stood up. "Matt's the most experienced diver out of us three, so I say let the man get his rest."

Kurt awoke at six the next morning. He climbed out of the double bed, which he'd claimed for the first night, and went to use the bathroom. He finished by sloshing cold water over his face. Back out in the main room Matt and Pete were still asleep. It was only early and he figured they could sleep for another hour or so yet, so he quietly made himself a coffee in the kitchenette and took it out on the balcony to drink it.

Outside it was warm and slightly muggy, with the promise of a sultry day ahead. The sun was already quite high, rising from behind the resort, which cast a shadow over the grounds and empty swimming pool below.

The view from the top floor was excellent. Kurt could see all along the expanse of Fishhook Island to the south. But Hollow Island was obscured from

view. The water, even in the early morning light, was pellucid blue. It looked extremely inviting, a desire that would increase with the heat of the day.

Kurt finished his coffee and went back inside, where he performed a mandatory morning set of push-ups and sit-ups.

Matt awoke soon after, earlier than expected, and he quickly went to drag Pete out of bed.

"Up you get, son," Matt told him. "We've got some serious diving to do."

Pete grumbled a few incoherent words and rolled over to go back to sleep. But Matt wouldn't let him and kept shaking him until Pete sat up. Kurt shoved a coffee into Pete's hands and gave a second cup to Matt.

Matt sipped the hot beverage. "Think we'll need our wetsuit vests when diving today?" he asked Kurt.

Kurt shook his head. "Not unless you're worried about the straps cutting into your shoulders. The water should be pretty warm. We'll just need to hire some weights, tanks and a boat. We've got the rest of the gear."

When he'd finished his coffee, Pete finally looked awake. "Let's get our gear together and head downstairs for some breakfast," he suggested.

"I like that plan," Matt said enthusiastically.

The three of them slipped into swimwear, shorts and shirt, gathered their snorkeling gear and towels into a backpack, then headed downstairs to dine in one of the coffee shops. After a meal of eggs and toast, and more coffee, it was after seven-thirty.

Kurt got out of his seat. "Time to visit the dive shop."

Outside, shadow still half covered the pool. But

in the area where the sunshine reached, people were already gathering in deck chairs to soak up the Bahamian rays. Several of them were couples, one was a man in his thirties sitting by himself. Probably divorced and hoping to meet someone new, Kurt thought. Nobody was swimming in the pool as yet.

Matt led the way to the pier, obviously keen to do some diving. Kurt was right behind him, equally as keen. Pete languished in the rear, checking out the girls around the pool as he walked.

They reached the boat hire and dive shop, which had a sign on the open door that read: *Open From 6.00AM Till Late.*

Inside, the entire left hand wall was decked out with masses of fishing gear; rods, reels and tackle arranged neatly. The rest of the shop was devoted to diving equipment. Scuba tanks in racks along the walls and resting independently in the centre of the shop. There were regulators of all makes, fins and masks and snorkels. Some of the gear was new and for sale, but most looked used and was obviously the stuff for hire. A Rolla door at the far end opened out onto the wharf. Hanging on two racks either side of the door were wetsuits of all sizes. There was a counter on the right side of the shop, topped with a cash register, receipt books and miscellaneous scraps of paper. No one stood behind the counter.

"Nobody here," Pete muttered.

But then they heard an engine suddenly burst to life close by. Kurt looked to his right. Near the counter an open door led into an adjoining shed. Through the doorway he could see outboards mounted on stands, and the far wall was lined with neatly arrayed tools.

Kurt poked his head through the doorway. "Good Morning," he said to a black man working on one of the outboards. The man shut off the engine he was working on and wiped his oily hands on a rag.

"Morning," the man replied and smiled with even white teeth. Kurt figured the man to be in his mid-thirties. The dark skin of his face was smooth, but for a few deeply-etched wrinkles around the eyes. His hair was cropped short and frizzy, just slightly receding from the forehead. He eyed Kurt, Matt and Pete with friendly brown eyes. "Josh is the name. What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"I'm Kurt. This is Matt and Pete. We were hoping to hire a boat and some scuba tanks."

"You've come to the right place," Josh said, still smiling. "It's the only place, actually." He tossed the rag onto a bench and walked into the shop. "You guys got licenses to dive?"

The three of them showed Josh their respective PADI certification cards. Josh checked them out briefly, then nodded his approval. "And for driving the boat?" All three had boat licenses and produced those as well. "Okay," he said. "That's it for the formalities. How long do you want the gear for?"

Kurt thought about it. "About three hours, I'd say."

"Sure. Boat's fifteen dollars an hour, plus a hundred dollar deposit which is refunded upon its return unscathed. How much diving gear do you need? The works?"

"No, just three tanks, regulators and weight belts," Matt told the man.

"The rest of the gear we've got ourselves," Pete put in.

Josh nodded. "A tank and regulator will set you back twenty dollars. Won't charge for the weights. You can have them half an hour or all day. Costs you the same amount. So," he quickly performed some mental calculations. "You're lookin' at a total of a hundred and five dollars, plus a hundred deposit on the boat."

They each put in their share of the hundred and five dollars, while Matt put up the hundred for deposit. Josh wrote down a few brief details in a receipt book, tore out a page and gave them a copy. He then selected three full tanks of air with harnesses from the centre of the store and searched out regulators from behind the counter.

"You each grab a tank and follow me down to the boat," Josh instructed them.

The man selected a silver runabout at the end of the jetty, equipped with a one hundred and twenty-five horsepower outboard. The guys dumped their gear into the boat and climbed aboard. Pete took the key offered by Josh and eagerly got behind the wheel. Matt sat in the seat beside him and Kurt in the rear.

Josh untied the vessel from its mooring. "Where you guys plannin' on getting wet?"

"Hollow Island," Kurt told him.

"Nice calm spot," Josh said. "Have fun."

Pete fired the outboard to life, which blessedly had electronic ignition, put the craft full throttle into forward gear and sped away from the jetty, heading south.

The water was as clear as the day was, and the craft cut a clean path through the glassy surface. Matt handed around a pack of gum, and each of them chewed on a piece of spearmint.

Matt asked, "What time have you got, Kurt?"

Kurt checked his watch. "Five to eight."

"Five to eight," Matt repeated. "Not four minutes and thirty-three seconds to eight or anything?"

Kurt just smiled.

Pete slowed as they came to an area of shallow reef about halfway along Fishhook. He negotiated the craft smoothly through a channel.

Kurt looked over the side. He guessed the water to be about fifteen feet in the channel, and it was teeming with sea life. He could see schools of fish of all colours and sizes, and found himself eager as hell to get into the water.

Hollow Island loomed ahead as they rounded the end of Fishhook. Pete cruised slowly across the channel toward it.

"Go around to the right on the west side," Kurt guided him. "We'll beach the boat somewhere and dive from land."

Pete located a small cove between some clumps of rocks and cut the motor, letting the vessel drift ashore. Kurt and Matt got out into thigh-deep water and pushed the runabout up onto the sand.

"Okay, Mr. Geography," Matt quipped. "Where's this cave entrance supposed to be?"

Kurt pointed to a rocky outcrop just to the south, extending west into the sea about fifty yards or so. "Somewhere out there. Like I said last night, there's a channel out there that runs between the rocks. That part's probably submerged. It is, or was, at the end of that channel."

"Let's just get the gear on and take a look," Pete suggested.

Kurt started off by strapping a diver's knife to his

right calf. He wouldn't dive without it. Not just for fear of predators, but there was always the possibility when diving of getting a leg tangled in seaweed or an old rope or something. Next he eased a mask over his face with snorkel attached. Following that he slipped his feet into fins, then readied his tank. He screwed the regulator hose to the top of the tank, then opened the valve. There was a sharp hiss as air filled the regulator. He then slipped the tank over his shoulders and was ready. Pete and Matt were ready a few seconds later, then all three checked each others' tanks to make sure everything was functioning properly. They all checked out fine.

"Let's get wet," Matt said, his lips distorted from the pressure of the mask.

Kurt squeezed the rubber mouthpiece into his mouth and breathed deeply. The air in the tank tasted nice and clean. It would end up being a short dive if it wasn't. He led the way into the water, not much more certain of where he was going than his friends were, and dived beneath the surface.

He felt a tingling of excitement as he always did when diving. Underwater it was a different world. Snorkeling was good, but there were restrictions. Being able to sit on the bottom and actually breathe was an exhilarating sensation. He loved it, got naturally high on it. Skimming along the bottom, Kurt swam in the direction of the outcrop. Angel fish darted in and out of his path. A flathead, lying buried beneath the sand with only its eyes showing, was disturbed and scooted off.

The water was crystal clear, and Kurt figured he could see for perhaps fifty metres. He spied a rock wall ahead through the schools of fish and kicked

towards it. He reached it and followed it further out to sea, searching for the entrance to the channel that was supposed to be there somewhere. The rock wall ended. Kurt rounded it and was faced with the channel. Here the bottom dropped off markedly; sort of like a driveway that led down to a basement car park.

Kurt kicked gently down it, wondering if they would find any sign of the cave entrance. If it was totally sealed, after more than twenty years of tidal wash and marine growth, it would be virtually unrecognisable. But still, you never know till you have a good look, he told himself.

The channel actually went in a gradual curve to the left and was about twenty feet wide, he guessed. Pete and Matt swam up either side of him. It was their appearance that made Kurt realise something was strange. They were the only form of life in the channel. With all the schools of fish they'd swept over in the boat, and swam through to get to the channel, Kurt hadn't encountered a single fish in the channel itself. It was weird. Seemed like a good place for fish to congregate. But there were none. Not one bream, rock cod, angel fish. Nothing.

Kurt shrugged and swam on. Maybe it was too cold in this channel or something. But the water felt fine, just as warm as the rest of the ocean outside. He hadn't swum through any thermo clines, either; the water was an even temperature.

They reached the end of the channel and scrutinized the rock wall for any sign of the cave entrance. Kurt looked up to the surface, which he figured was thirty feet away. The rock wall rose right up to the water level and beyond. Next time, he

thought, it would be simpler just to walk along the rocks and jump straight in at this point.

Swimming up and down the face of the rock, all three of them searched for any hint of a crack or an opening. The wall was covered in moss and marine growth; barnacles, oysters and other crustaceans. Eventually Matt pointed to the surface and they rose, trailing their exhaled bubbles.

Matt spat out his mouthpiece. "Can't see a damned sign of any cave entrance. Nothing even remotely indicating there was once a cave mouth there at all."

Kurt noticed Pete studying the layout of the channel, the rocks, and the island. "What's on your mind?" he asked him.

Pete slipped the mask off his face. He drew an arc with his finger. "The channel curves this way, to the left of Hollow Island."

Kurt looked at Hollow Island, green and sparsely wooded. The end of the channel they were in angled towards the passage between Hollow and Fishhook Islands, rather than being in a direct line with Hollow Island itself. Now he understood what Pete was thinking. "The mouth of the cave may not have been in the end wall at all," he mused. "But could have been towards the end of the channel but on the side."

"That's right," Pete smiled, water dripping from his dark hair. "And to hazard a calculated guess, I'd say on the right wall. It's got more chance of leading under the island than an entrance in the end or left wall would have."

"Sounds feasible," Matt tried to adopt an intelligent look.

Kurt checked his gauges. Had probably forty-five

minutes of air left. Plenty. "Let's check it out," he said, stuffed the mouthpiece back into his mouth and slipped beneath the surface.

As he swam the thirty feet to the bottom, clearing his ears as he went, he kept an eye out for any sign of fish. Still none. Not a fish of any kind. He reached the bottom and skimmed along the sand. The one thing he really liked about diving was that it was almost like flying; or what he imagined being able to fly would be like. A feeling of virtual weightlessness. He kicked effortlessly over to the right wall and examined the rocks several feet away from its junction with the wall at the end of the channel. Pete joined him on the sea bed to the right, while Matt hovered above about halfway up the wall.

Kurt skimmed the bottom, looking for fissures. The rocks here were rougher and virtually free of marine growth, other than the odd oyster or bit of algae. He kicked past Pete, who was searching the wall at eye level, and came across a section of wall that was rougher still. He stopped and studied this section, which jutted out subtly from the rest of the wall, and appeared to be more a conglomeration of rocks rather than a solid mass. He unsheathed his diver's knife and began probing at the crevices in the wall. Kicking up about seven or eight feet off the sea bed, he probed a deeper pocket between rocks. He opened a gap with the point of the blade and was sure now that this was a group of rocks and not a solid wall.

Locating a rock about the size of an American football at the top of the rough section, Kurt commenced scraping around it with the knife. He worked vigorously, everything silent around him

except for the muffled scraping of the knife on stone, and the hollow sound of his own breathing.

Suddenly he was aware of a presence beside him. It was Pete. Pete removed his own knife and joined Kurt in scraping away at the rock. Small particles of stone began to crumble out of the grooves the two men were making. Kurt dug his knife in. It sank in deeper, finding space between the football rock and the surrounding rocks. He sliced the blade around the rough crevice. More stone particles fell out and sank to the sand, where they were quickly buried in the currents.

Kurt removed the knife. Now there was a gap of half an inch at the top of the stone. He gouged some more and widened the gap to an inch. He paused again and tried to peer into the crevice. Saw nothing but blackness; wasn't sure if he was staring into a hole, or just staring at more rock a few inches back. He slid the knife back into the sheath, then slipped his fingers into the crevice, motioned with his head for Pete to move out of the way, placed his flippered feet against the wall and heaved back on the football-sized stone.

It didn't budge.

Readying himself for another effort, Kurt took a deep breath from his tank and heaved again, trying to use the strength of his legs as well as his arms. There was a crack. More shards of rock fell to the ground. The stone moved slightly, then jammed again. Kurt released the rock and rested. He was breathing too fast from the effort and had to force himself to slow his inhalations down to a normal pace. When he had his breathing stabilized, he again studied the stone. Another gap an inch wide had opened up down the

right hand side of it now. It was coming free, gradually, but Kurt felt the effort might require someone stronger than he.

He looked around for Matt, who was hovering nearby watching the action, and indicated for him to have a go. Matt was easily the strongest of the three. Did weights all the time; was built solid, with muscles like cut chunks of granite. Matt positioned himself as Kurt had been; feet against the wall, hands gripped as best as could be around the rock.

Matt tensed and jerked on the rock with a sudden burst of strength. There was a grinding sound, more cracks and pieces of stone falling. Next thing Matt was tumbling backwards to the sand with the football-shaped stone in his lap.

Kurt lifted the stone off him and dropped it in the sand. He then turned his attention to the black hole in the wall. Pete was already up there trying to peer into it. Kurt joined him for a look, but could see nothing. It was a black void. He probed the hole with his hand, sliding his arm in up to the elbow, then the shoulder. He felt nothing but space. The sudden image of a moray eel latching onto his hand with its needle teeth sprang to mind, and he jerked his arm out of there, his heart pounding.

Pete eyed him with a puzzled expression. Kurt felt a little sheepish. He gave Pete the "okay" sign by making a circle with his thumb and forefinger.

Matt had since picked himself up and attacked the wall again. He tried to tear out another section of rock, but failed to budge it even a millimetre.

Kurt scraped away at a new crevice with his knife. Both Pete and Matt joined him, scraping out pieces of rock and marine growth from every visible

crack. They worked away steadily for fifteen minutes. Kurt could feel himself sweating in the water. Air must be running low by now, too. He checked his gauges, and his watch. Probably only had about five minutes left. Ten at the most. He held up a hand to stop the other two from working and indicated for Matt to try again at breaking a piece from the wall. Matt nodded, sheathed his knife, got a firm grip on the rock below the opening and pulled. Kurt watched his friend's face strain from the effort, turning red behind his mask. Matt's muscles bulged, almost to the point where they looked like they were about to burst through the skin. Then they suddenly relaxed. Matt kicked away from the hole. The wall remained intact.

Kurt felt a tightness in his breathing. He ran a finger across his throat to indicate he was out of air, then kicked for the surface, drawing the final breath from his exhausted tank. Pete and Matt followed him up.

None of them glanced back at the hole in the rocks, where two abhorrent red eyes peered out from the darkness.

Three

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

Kurt broke the surface first. He spat out his mouthpiece and inhaled deeply several times. He hated that feeling when the tank ran dry.

Two heads bobbed up beside him. Matt and Pete spat out their mouthpieces and took off their masks. Kurt slid his mask up onto his forehead. "I'm getting out," he announced and breaststroked over to the rocks. The tide was high and he only had to hoist himself up about twelve inches. At low tide it would probably be too high at this point to do that. Would be forced to swim down further where the rocks dropped off into the water.

Matt swam over with Pete in tow, and soon all three had shed their tanks and were sitting on the rocks to dry off in the sun.

"We need a crowbar or somethin'," Matt said. "I can't budge any more of those rocks by hand. No way."

"Josh at the dive shop might have something," Kurt hoped. "Or maybe something else that could be useful."

"I hope all this effort is worth it," Pete put in. "I mean, I hope we find something in there."

"If we get in," Matt said.

"When we get in," Kurt corrected him. "Maybe we'll find something, maybe we won't. But at least we won't die wondering." He studied the sky, the sun

rising rapidly to its zenith in the relentless blue. "You guys keen to get wet again after lunch?"

Pete and Matt looked at each other. Pete shrugged. "I guess so," he nonchalantly replied.

"We've paid for the diving gear all day," Kurt added. "Just get the tanks refilled. And if we take the boat back now, that should leave us with about an hour's hire time owing to us. Just pay for another hour this afternoon and we can have us another dive. Maybe get the cave right open this time."

A runabout motored past about a hundred yards away. Kurt recognised it as one of the hire boats. Two fishing rods were set up in the stern, lines angling into the water. The boat cruised at a slow speed, trolling for mackerel or barracuda.

Kurt glanced at his watch and stood up. It was almost ten. "Let's get this boat back and organise things for this afternoon."

After stowing the diving gear into the boat and pushing it out into the water, Matt took the wheel and drove the runabout back to the resort at a speed of forty knots. He kept up that pace until they reached the congested waters of Fishook Cove, where by now windsurfers, snorkelers, swimmers, surf skis and water-skiers were out in force. He slowed almost to idle as he weaved a passage through the water sport enthusiasts. Fifty metres from the wharf and the boat hire shop, he let the craft glide into the pier, turned left to line it up with the wharf and threw the stick into reverse. He gave it a few revs to slow it down until it was almost motionless, then killed the motor. The engine sputtered and died as the runabout nudged the end of the jetty.

Kurt and Pete got out and secured it to the pier

with two ropes; one bow, one stern. Matt then started handing up the tanks, finishing off with the backpack full of their snorkeling gear and towels. The three of them carried a tank each up the wharf, which was cut out of new timber; treated, so it wouldn't rot. Kurt was lumbered with the backpack, which was filled with thirty-six pounds in lead diving weights as well as the rest of the gear, and his tank, which wasn't light. By the time he reached the dive shop he was sweating and puffing.

Inside in the shade he was greeted by the blast of a ceiling fan at full speed, and a pedestal fan behind the counter, also at full throttle.

Josh was busy serving a customer. Kurt recognised him as the man sitting alone by the pool earlier. The man was buying snorkeling gear, trying on mask after mask. Kurt, Pete and Matt waited patiently. Finally the man made up his mind and settled for a red Tusa mask. He paid Josh for the mask, a matching snorkel and fins, then left the shop.

Josh turned his attention to them and grinned. "Thanks for being patient." He then rolled his eyes and threw his hands in the air. "Some people have so much trouble making up their minds. It's just a mask. They're all as good as each other for the price range he was looking at." He shook his head to dismiss his frustration. "Anyway, how did your dive go?"

"Fine," Kurt jumped in quickly. "We still have just under an hour's hire time left on the boat. We'd like to be reimbursed for that time this afternoon when we hire the boat out again."

Josh eyed them suspiciously. "You find something interesting out there today?"

"No, not really," Kurt told him. "We're just keen

to do some more diving. We need our tanks refilled as well. How much for that?"

"Five bills a tank," Josh said simply. "Fifteen bucks."

"Also, we need a crowbar," Matt slotted in. "You got one we could borrow or hire?"

Josh pondered it. "I haven't, but the hotel maintenance people have a couple. I'll organise it for you."

"Thanks. We'll see you in a couple of hours," Kurt said and was about to leave the shop when Josh stopped him.

"What you needin' with a crowbar, anyway?" the black man asked.

Kurt shrugged easily. "Just found a bit of rusted metal stuck under a clump of rocks near Hollow Island. We want to dig it up and see what it is."

Josh nodded and left it at that, although he didn't look entirely satisfied.

When they were outside the store, Pete said to Kurt, "Why did you lie? Why didn't you just tell him what we really want it for?"

Kurt held up a hand to silence him. "Like I said last night, that cave used to be a real popular place for every petty treasure seeker under the sun. If word gets out around a resort full of leisurely holiday makers with nothing better to do - that the cave, once filled with pirate treasure, is open again - it'll be deluged with people looking for a cheap thrill."

"Yeah, like us," Matt chirped.

"Yeah, just like us," Kurt said seriously. "Us is plenty. If we get it open, we deserve first look inside for any remaining treasure. Once we've had a good look, it won't matter who knows. But I don't want

anyone knowing about it until we've searched it thoroughly first."

Matt shrugged. "Fair enough."

Kurt looked at Pete. Pete nodded.

"Okay, that's settled," Kurt said. "Who's for a swim in the pool?"

Matt was out of his shirt first. He caused a big splash as he jumped awkwardly into the water, wetting a nearby couple in some deck chairs by the edge. Pete's slender frame followed quickly behind, almost landing on top of Matt.

Kurt dumped the backpack on a vacant deck chair. He stripped out of his shirt and shorts, down to his bright blue racers. He paused to gaze around the pool. It was fairly crowded now, most of the deck chairs full. The pool itself was also congested and was now in full sunlight. It was shaped in roughly the pattern of a number six, with a small round bar styled in the tradition of a Polynesian hut in the centre of the six's loop. Two attractive arch bridges, strung with ropes for handrails, led over to the bar from each side, with bar stools sunk into the water around the bar's edge.

The bar was at the far end, closest the hotel, and already open. Most of the people seemed to be gathered around it. Kurt dived into the water and surfaced, flicking droplets out of his hair. Felt good to be in fresh water. Hated that feeling of dried salt on his skin; especially when the weather was hot and steamy like it was today.

Pete and Matt had swum down to the bar area. Kurt dived under the water again and contemplated swimming down that end, too. When he surfaced, though, he found himself face to face with a beautiful

girl. She was only several feet away and staring at him. Her long brown hair was slicked back from her forehead with water. She had an oval face, smooth chin and prominent cheekbones. Her dark eyebrows were thick in the middle and tapered out to thin lines. Her eyes themselves were a deep shade of blue, slightly almond-shaped, with whites as bright and clear as the Milky Way on a cloudless night.

The girl smiled, her teeth cutting an even line between her parted lips. Kurt found himself smiling back. His heart gave a flutter, and he suddenly felt like an adolescent. But then again, he figured, that first instant of attraction would feel the same no matter how old you were.

Before he knew it his mouth opened and his voice uttered that single word that always broke the ice. "Hi," he said.

"Hi," she returned, still smiling, then dived into the water and swam off in the direction of the bar.

Kurt was left standing there in the water feeling dopey and conspicuous. He felt everyone in and around the pool knew how he was feeling; that he had this intense urge to swim after that girl and trap her into conversation down at the bar. But he waited a respectable amount of time, then swam down to join his friends.

He found Matt and Pete under one of the bridges, checking out the bar. Two people served behind it; a man and a woman, both white. Kurt swam under the bridge and searched the pool for the girl. Couldn't see her. Damn it was crowded down this end!

The majority of the people crowding the bar were in their twenties, and hardly any looked to be over mid-thirties; except for the occasional second or third

time newly-weds.

"Who you got your eye on, Kurt?" Matt queried him.

"What?" Kurt said, his concentration averted. "What makes you say I've got my eye on anyone?"

Matt shrugged. "You just look like you have."

Pete smirked. "Or are you just checking out all the merchandise in general?"

"I'm a writer," Kurt told them. "A creator of scenes and events. I'm supposed to observe and write what I see."

"Sure," Matt ribbed.

"I am," Kurt returned, a little sharply. He didn't know why he was being defensive and evasive, he just was. Maybe he wasn't ready to admit it to his friends yet that he may have an interest in somebody? Or maybe he just didn't want to admit it to himself? His thoughts returned to the past, to Corinne, the girl he had planned to marry. Until that tragic night: A time of bitterness, confusion and emotional torment such as he never dreamed he could experience. But he had endured the pain, sort through the confusion. Time had softened the blow of losing a loved one, and the bitterness towards the person responsible for her death had cooled, though not entirely extinguished. He still felt a nagging sense of guilt himself, of responsibility for not having looked after her properly.

He was over Corinne's death now, he was sure of it. Enough time had passed and it was time to move on. There was no betrayal in seeking out a new love. Corinne was dead. That relationship was over, no matter which way he looked at it. It could no longer exist. Relationships weren't a one way street. They

were two way, involving two people. And Kurt was but one. He was single, he told himself, and at liberty to date whomever he saw fit. He'd been handling things here okay, where he and Corinne had planned a honeymoon. It was definitely time to move on.

He'd been staring down at the water the entire time he was thinking, and now he felt someone nudging him in the arm.

"Hey, Kurt!" Matt's voice said. "Come back, buddy. Back to this planet."

"Yeah, you've been staring down at the water for a good five minutes," Pete informed him.

Kurt smiled sheepishly. "I was just thinking about something, that's all."

"What?" Pete prompted.

"Nothing. Everything's fine."

Matt had a peculiar smirk on his face. "Well things are gettin' better by the minute for you, my man. The whole time you were staring at the water, that girl over there's been repeatedly checking you out."

Kurt's interest peaked. "Who?" he said quickly, and immediately wished he hadn't sounded so over-eager.

When the girl wasn't looking, Matt pointed her out. She was sitting on one of the sunken bar stools, wearing a white one-piece that contrasted well with her lightly-tanned flesh. Kurt immediately recognised her as the girl he'd said hello to a few minutes ago. She hadn't been sitting there before, but he was glad she was now.

"She would look at you, look away, then look back again," Matt told him.

"Yeah," Pete interjected. "She was probably

hoping to catch your eye or something, but you were too busy mesmerizing yourself with the tiles on the bottom of the pool."

Kurt found himself smiling. He felt strangely excited, like he used to in his teenage days in this situation.

"Hey. MacLean's. She's definitely interested in you, man," Matt affirmed.

The girl suddenly glanced over, then turned away coyly when she saw all three of them had their attention on her.

Kurt was certainly interested himself. He was very physically attracted to her, and that was a start. But apart from that, he knew nothing about her.

"You gonna go talk to her?" Matt prodded.

Kurt shrugged. "I don't know. We might be all wrong for each other."

"Well," Matt told him. "There's only one way to find that out, old son."

"Yeah, you're right," Kurt agreed. He took a deep breath and casually breaststroked over to her. She saw him coming, and before he was able to weave through the people to get to her, she swam off to the edge and got out of the pool.

"Damn it!" he cursed under his breath. Is she playing games, or what? Annoyed, he swam back to his friends.

Matt was grinning broadly. "Well, looks like I was wrong. She's not interested after all."

Kurt just shrugged and tried to pretend he wasn't disappointed. But he was fooling himself. He was disappointed. Maybe she was just a flirt? But no, she didn't have that look about her. She looked genuinely keen. He shrugged again. Who knows? he thought.

Pete patted him on the back. "Cheer up. We won't tell anyone you scared off all the girls. Let's grab us a pre-lunch drink at the bar."

Matt produced a soggy ten dollar bill from his shorts and ordered three beers. They came in ten ounce mugs and Matt waded through the pool with them back under the bridge and into the shade.

Kurt sipped at his, still feeling a touch let down; though that initial disappointment had now dissipated somewhat. To get his mind off girls, he turned his thoughts to the cave and what might lay inside. Provided they could get in there. But at least they'd made a start. They'd located the damned thing and had succeeded in opening a part of the entrance. With the aid of a crowbar he felt confident they could make the hole wide enough to fit through on this afternoon's dive.

"Always thinking, aren't you, Kurt," Matt said.

"Somebody's got to," Kurt retorted. "Certainly can't leave that up to you."

"That's for sure," Pete chimed in good-naturedly.

For the next fifteen minutes they stood in the pool drinking their beers. Matt and Pete were comparing notes about what they would do after the trip. While they chatted, Kurt kept glancing around the pool and the grounds, hoping to spot the girl somewhere. He thought he spotted her once, but it turned out to be someone else. If he got the opportunity again, he hoped next time she wouldn't run off.

"Who's for another beer?" Matt asked.

Kurt shook his head. "Not if we're going diving again soon. Let's get an early lunch, let that settle, then hit the cave again."

Not wanting to get dressed up, they settled for the

coffee shop where they'd had breakfast; this time consuming toasted cheese and ham sandwiches, more coffee, topped off with an iced chocolate.

An hour later, after sun-baking around the pool while their lunch settled, they were back at the dive shop. Josh had full tanks and stowed them into the same runabout they had that morning. As promised, he had the crowbar for them. It was a six feet length of solid gray steel. Josh stowed that in the boat for them also, then waited for some money.

"My shout," Kurt told Matt and Pete as they opened their wallets. He paid Josh for an hour's boat hire, and fifteen for the refilled tanks. "Any charge for the crowbar?" he asked.

"No charge," Josh replied and smiled. "But when you dig up whatever it is you're after, let me know what you've found."

"Sure," Kurt said easily, although he had no intention of letting the man know anything yet; even if they did get the cave open today.

Matt got behind the wheel and started the engine. When Kurt was about to protest, Matt said over his shoulder, "You can drive it back, old son." With those words he gave it full throttle and the craft surged quickly away from the resort.

By twelve-thirty they had beached the boat for the second time on Hollow Island. From there they carried their gear over the rocks to the water at the end of the channel. The tide was still quite high, and there was only a drop of a few feet to the water.

Kurt rinsed his mask and spat in it, rubbed the saliva over the glass, then rinsed it again. He slipped it on, dangled his feet in the water to wet them, then slipped them into fins. After strapping the standard

knife to his calf, he climbed into the tank straps, checked to see that the others were ready, then in one smooth movement, pushed off from the rocks and dropped into the water. No sooner had his bubbles cleared and Matt and Pete splashed in above him, once again blurring his vision. But the bubbles caused by their entry soon dissipated and he could see clearly once more. He swam down to the bottom. When he felt the pain in his ears, he pinched his nose, blew out, heard two squeaky pops in his ear canals and the pressure was gone.

On the bottom he encountered a slight current trying to gently pull him out to sea, and figured it was the tide on its way out.

The stone they'd pulled out from the wall a few hours ago was now half covered in sand on one side. Kurt swam up to the hole in the wall and tried once again to peer inside. At that moment he could have kicked himself for forgetting the obvious: A waterproof flashlight. At least then they would have at been able to see if it was in fact the cave, or just more rock behind it. But he already knew it was the cave. When he'd probed in there with his arm earlier, he'd felt nothing but open space.

Matt floated up beside him, armed with the crowbar. He indicated with a flick of his head for Kurt to move out of the way. Kurt did so, kicking a few feet away to the right as Matt slid the crowbar into the hole. When about two feet of the bar had disappeared into the hole, Matt jammed the protruding end against the top of the hole and pushed.

But all he succeeded in doing was pushing himself upwards in the water. In a state of virtual weightlessness, his efforts were useless.

This is going to be harder than I thought, Kurt pondered the problem. He decided they should attack the crevices with the knives again, try to widen them enough to slot the crowbar into and push on it from an angle where they could stand on the ground and use the sea bed to stop them from floating and negating their efforts.

Kurt unsnapped the restraining strap on his knife and unsheathed it. He indicated to Pete and Matt to do the same. They joined him in once again gouging out the sea growth, sand and rock particles between the larger rocks. Within half an hour Kurt figured they had gouged enough out of one crevice to slot the crowbar into it.

Matt picked up the crowbar and guided the point into the groove. It went in about four inches. The rock he was attempting to move was about four times the size of the first one and situated about two feet below it. Matt dug his flippered feet into the sand, gripped the bar tightly, and heaved back on it.

Pete, watching the wall closely, indicated that he saw the rock move.

Matt rested a moment, then grasped the bar tightly again and heaved. Kurt watched the strain on Matt's face, the muscles in his arms bulging and straining with the effort. Matt's feet started to slip in the sand. Kurt swam over to help and pushed on the crowbar as Matt pulled. Kurt's feet slipped. He paused to kick off his fins and dug his bare feet into the sand. They had more grip now. Matt did the same and when he was ready, nodded to Kurt.

He pulled while Kurt pushed, both men straining to the limit. Kurt realised he was holding his breath. He took a gulp of air, and as he exhaled, pushed with

all his might against the bar. He heard a grinding sound, felt the bar give slightly, jam, then gave way entirely as the rock fell out of the wall.

The sudden release of resistance caused him to lurch forward into Matt and the pair fell in a heap on the sand.

The rock falling out of the wall proved to be a catalyst for more rocks to dislodge. The cascade of falling stones rendered the water cloudy with sand. After a minute or so when the sand had settled and his vision was once again clear, Kurt saw a hole four feet high and three wide in the wall about four feet above the sea bed. He slipped his fins back on and kicked over to the hole. He peered inside. Saw nothing. It was dark and foreboding. He didn't fancy swimming even a few feet inside without a light. And besides, the entrance really needed to be bigger. Didn't want to bang a scuba tank on the rocks.

Kurt noticed that some of the rocks around the bottom of the hole were loose. He commenced pulling them out of the wall. The first couple came away easily. Several more pulled free with a bit more effort and soon the hole was six feet high.

Matt commenced hacking away at the sides with the crowbar to widen the entrance, while Pete collected the rocks that fell away and put them aside.

The rocks at the bottom of the hole were in a more dense conglomeration. Kurt started to try and move some of them, but thought better of it. What was the point? There was no need. The entrance was easily large enough now. But before he turned his attention away from the scattered rocks, something he saw just inside the entrance, still in the range of sunlight, caught his eye. It was a long, thin object;

not a stick and certainly not a stone. It looked a dull gray-white colour. A dead colour. He grasped it in his hand and pulled. It was stuck. He tapped Matt on the shoulder and indicated for him to help him move a rock that jammed the object. Matt lowered the crowbar and Kurt guided it between two rocks that sandwiched it. Matt leaned back on the bar, the rocks parted, and Kurt pulled the object free.

It felt rough in his hands. Deciding to study it up in the brighter light, he kicked for the surface. There he hauled himself up onto the rocks and scrutinized the object closely as Matt and Pete surfaced nearby. They kicked over to him to see what he'd found.

"It's a bone," Kurt told them simply. "Like I said last night, somebody was killed in the explosion. My guess is his bones are scattered in pieces amid the rocks still in the cave mouth."

"Looks like part of the forearm," Pete observed. "Judging by the length of it. Torn off from the elbow and at the wrist."

Matt shuddered visibly. "Chuck it away. It gives me the creeps."

Kurt grinned, unaffected by the find. "What? Mr. Macho is afraid of something?"

"I just don't like handling dead people's bones," Matt returned.

"You're not. I'm handling it." Kurt put the bone down on the rocks and shrugged out of his tank. "Tomorrow morning we come back with some waterproof flashlights and explore the cave."

Down below, peering out of the cave entrance after twenty years, the scarecrow stared up at the surface and watched two sets of legs kick out of the water. It had been a long time. Far too long. But

now it was free again. It was time to continue the plan; a plan that had been delayed for many years.

The scarecrow kicked back inside, into the safety of darkness. It didn't like the light. But later, when it was dark, it would venture out and continue its work.

Tonight would be a big night.

Four

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

When they arrived back at the resort, Josh asked them immediately what they'd found. Kurt breezed through another lie. "Nothing, really. Just proved to be a rusted old propeller from an outboard motor."

"You find that near Hollow Island?" Josh quizzed.

"Thereabouts," Kurt said evasively.

Josh just nodded and handed them back their deposit on the boat. They left the shop without a further word being said about Hollow Island.

Back in their room, they showered and changed. Matt dressed in bike pants, singlet and runners. In a bag he threw a change of clothes, a towel and some weightlifting gloves. "I'm going down for a workout," he announced. "Check out this gym. You guys wanna come?"

Pete shook his head.

Kurt was undecided. "I might work out tomorrow. Take a look at the games room instead. What do you say, Pete?"

"Sure," Pete was agreeable.

Kurt said to Matt, "Join us when you're through. By that time you'll probably find us in the gambling area."

"Sounds good," Matt said. "You guys get dressed and we'll head on down." He smiled. "That way you can show me where the gym is."

Kurt shrugged. "I've never even been down there."

"No, but you're the one with all the layout up here." Matt tapped his skull.

Pete dressed in walk shorts and T-shirt, with white casual shoes and no socks. Kurt opted for jeans and a button-up red shirt. He maneuvered his feet into brown leather boots and slid a matching brown belt around his waist. He grabbed his wallet and announced, "I'm ready."

They descended to the first basement level via the elevator. The doors opened to reveal a corridor. They stepped out and were faced with a sign that said: *GYM, POOL, SAUNA, SPA*, with an arrow pointing left. A second sign read: *GAMES ROOM*, with an arrow aimed to the right.

"See you guys in about an hour," Matt said and walked left.

"He didn't need you to show him where it was after all," Pete noted as they entered a room filled with the sounds of pinball and video games. Cue balls made sharp, cracking sounds as they struck one another. Kurt looked right and saw four pool tables, all occupied, in a section at the far end. The walls in the area where he and Pete stood were lined with pinball machines, and placed neatly around the centre of the room were the latest in arcade games. A doorway to the left led into the gambling room, with a sign above it that read: *Patrons must be over eighteen to enter*. Amid the arcade games in the centre of the room was a change booth, with a rather bored-looking young black woman idly reading a cheap paperback behind the glass screen.

They got some change and played pinball for

about half an hour. Without successfully managing to score any free games, Kurt said, "I've had enough. Let's go do some gambling."

In the gambling area there were four blackjack tables, three roulette wheels and about twenty slot machines; some draw poker, some keno. There was a cashier's counter at the far right with security bars from bench to ceiling. Next to it was a bar. Kurt moved over to the bar and ordered a beer for himself and Pete. While the beers were being pulled, he noticed an assortment of cigarettes and cigars on a shelf. He generally didn't smoke, but did like to indulge in the occasional cigar; especially when gambling.

The barman, a young white man dressed in a tuxedo, placed the beers on the counter. "Three, sixty," he quipped.

"Oh, and a box of those Henri Winterman's Panatellas as well," Kurt said and nodded at the selection of smokes.

The barman got the cigars and added a complimentary book of matches with a picture of the resort on the front. He rang up some digits on the till. "Nine, fifty-five," he announced.

Kurt paid him, left a small tip, and then roamed the blackjack tables.

There were only about thirty people in the gambling room at the moment, and at least ten of those were busy playing slot machines. Only one roulette wheel was operating, and two blackjack tables were closed down. One of the two operating tables had a full compliment of seven players, the other four. Kurt sat at the far end of the table of four where he would be last in the order of dealing. Pete

sat in a vacant seat next to him.

Kurt sipped his beer and looked around the table. A small plastic sign told him the minimum bet was five dollars. He plucked a fifty from his wallet and waited for the current hand to finish. When it had, the dealer cleaned up, everybody losing their bets. Kurt placed the fifty down on the table. The dealer exchanged it for ten red five dollar chips. Pete, the big time gambler, swapped a twenty for four chips.

Pete sat out the first hand, but Kurt went in. He placed a chip in the square on the green felt in front of him. While he watched the cards being dealt, he removed a Panatela, lit it, and located an ashtray. He sipped his brew and puffed on the cigar, every so often inhaling the smoke. It burned his throat as it went down, but it felt good; akin to a sip of straight bourbon. The first card placed in front of him was a three. Not good. The dealer had a five. That was good. The dealer had a good chance of pulling a bad hand.

The second set of cards were distributed. This time Kurt was dealt a queen, giving him a total of thirteen. That was an awkward amount. If he pulled again, he risked going over twenty-one and busting. If he sat on thirteen, he had an excellent chance of being beaten.

He watched with interest, his face surrounded by an aura of cigar smoke, as the dealer went from person to person to see if they wanted to draw or sit on what they had. The first two players drew ten cards and both went over twenty-one. The third player had an ace and a nine and sat on twenty. The fourth player had fifteen and tapped the table for another card. A king was dealt and the player went

bust.

The dealer now focused his attention on Kurt. Kurt thought about it. Three ten cards had been drawn in a row. Chances were he wouldn't pull one. He tapped the table, wanting an eight or less. The dealer swept a card from the shoe and placed it in front of Kurt. It was a six. Nineteen. Kurt sat with that.

The first card the dealer drew was a two. Now a total of seven. He drew again. A nine, making sixteen. Having to draw to seventeen, he swept another card out and placed it face up. It was a five, giving a total of twenty-one.

"Shit!" Kurt said under his breath as the dealer took his five dollar chip.

"I'm in this round," said Pete. "With you off to a bad start, that might mean luck's with me."

Kurt took several gulps of beer, then drew on his cigar. He tossed another chip into the square and awaited the next hand.

An hour later, with a win-loss ratio of about four to five, Pete had lost his twenty dollars and announced to Kurt that he was off to play roulette. At that moment Matt walked through the door, his hair wet from a shower. He spied Kurt at the blackjack table and came over to him. "How you doin'?"

Kurt shrugged. "Holding my own." He had eleven chips, so presently he was five dollars up. "Can't seem to get a roll on, though."

"Want me to get you a drink?"

"Yeah, thanks." Kurt handed him some change. "Bourbon and Coke."

Matt returned a few minutes later with the drinks.

The dealer was currently in the middle of a

shuffle. Kurt took the opportunity to relax and gaze around the room. The place was gradually filling up as the afternoon wore on. A second roulette wheel was now in operation, the slot machines were all taken up, and another person sat down at the blackjack table; a young Japanese man of about twenty-five. He sat in the vacant seat next to where Pete had been sitting, leaving a space between himself and Kurt.

"You gonna play?" Kurt asked Matt as he lit up a second cigar.

Matt shook his head adamantly. "Nuh. I have rotten luck on blackjack. Think I might join Pete at the roulette wheel." With those words he wandered off.

Kurt sipped his bourbon. The dealer had completed the shuffle and dealt the next hand. Kurt's first card was an ace. He puffed hungrily on the cigar as he awaited the second card. It was a king.

"Blackjack," the dealer quipped.

But the dealer himself had drawn an ace as his first card, so there was still the chance of him scoring a blackjack and forcing a stand-off.

Kurt took another sip of bourbon and saw somebody sit down beside him out of the corner of his eye.

The dealer drew a six. Kurt was paid for the blackjack.

Kurt smelt sweet perfume and turned to see the girl from the pool earlier that day draw a fifty from her purse. She was nicely done up in a black body suit, with light make-up on and her straight dark-brown hair teased up at the fringe with a little gel. Kurt's heart skipped a beat and he somewhat

nervously sipped his bourbon.

When the dealer had exchanged her fifty for ten chips, the girl withdrew a gold cigarette case from her handbag, removed a menthol cigarette, lit it with a matching gold lighter, and turned to Kurt and said, "May I share your ashtray?"

"Certainly," Kurt agreed and placed it between them on the green felt.

She smiled at him, puffed on her cigarette, then placed a chip out on the table.

Kurt sat out a hand, content to draw on his cigar and watch proceedings.

The girl did well on her first hand, pulling twenty-one and winning a further five dollars.

"That's a good start," he told her.

"Better than usual," she replied and drew on her cigarette.

"My name's Kurt," he offered.

"I'm Ellen. Glad to meet you."

"I saw you in the pool earlier today."

"Yes, I know. I remember you. I saw you staring at me a couple of times."

"From what I noticed," Kurt informed her, "that staring was reciprocated."

"Maybe," she said coyly and placed her bet. Ten dollars.

Kurt put in another five. "You been on the island long?" he asked her.

"Three days. And you?"

"My friends and I just arrived yesterday."

"That was your friends you were in the pool with?"

"That's them."

"The big guy's got a cute body," she said rather

bluntly.

"Matt? Yeah, he works out at the gym a lot."

"It shows." She inhaled on her cigarette again and blew smoke towards the ceiling. "But he's not my type. Too macho."

Kurt couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. He stubbed out his cigar, preferring to enjoy the aroma of her perfume. "What makes you say he's macho? Because of the way he looks?"

"Not just that. I can tell his type. He'd act macho as well."

"Yeah, well, you're right there," Kurt admitted. "He does act that way."

"I like a little bit," Ellen conceded. "But not over done."

Ellen's first two cards were a two and a jack. Kurt had an awkward hand of a ten and a five. The dealer had an ace and called for insurance against a blackjack. Ellen placed a five dollar chip on the insurance line. Kurt didn't worry about it.

The dealer went around the table. Two of the players went bust, the Japanese man losing a fifty dollar chip. The croupier came to Ellen. She had twelve and tapped the table for another card. The card was a seven. Ellen waved her hand to sit on nineteen. It was Kurt's turn. He decided to risk pulling another card. Ordinarily he would have sat on fifteen, but with Ellen beside him he felt a little more ballsy. Probably the male ego urging him to show off a bit. The dealer dealt the card. A six: Twenty-one.

Kurt sighed inwardly with relief.

The croupier drew his next card, and Kurt sighed a second time. This time in dismay. It was a king.

"Blackjack!" the dealer announced.

"Damn it!" Kurt spat.

"Should have bought insurance," Ellen chided him and smiled.

The dealer removed all bets from the table. Ellen was the only player intuitive enough to claim insurance and she received a further ten dollars for her five dollar insurance bet; thus covering her original wager.

Kurt had finished his bourbon and stood up to go get another. "Buy you a drink?" he asked Ellen.

She looked up at him with pretty blue eyes. "Okay. I'll have a Tia Maria and milk." She went to hand him a five dollar chip.

Kurt waved her away. "Forget it. My shout. You can buy me a drink at the nightclub tonight."

Ellen smiled sweetly. It gave Kurt the extreme urge to kiss her, but he refrained.

"Can I now," she said. "I didn't know we were meeting at the nightclub tonight?"

Kurt winked at her and went to the bar. When he returned to the table, he was just in time to see Ellen win another hand.

"You're doing well," he noted and handed her the liqueur.

"Thanks for that," she offered and sipped gratefully on her drink.

Kurt reseated himself and jammed a cigar between his teeth. He offered one to Ellen.

"No, thanks," she declined. "Too strong for me." Instead she lit a cigarette and lit Kurt's cigar for him.

They smoked in silence while the next two hands were played. Ellen won both of them. Kurt lost both. He counted his chips. Forty-seven dollars, fifty worth; the odd two dollars fifty being part of his

blackjack payout. He was now two dollars, fifty down on his original outlay.

"So," Kurt said, being daring and placing ten dollars in chips in the square. "Will you meet me at the nightclub tonight?"

She smiled and nodded. "Guess I'll have to. Seen as though I owe you a drink."

"Say, nine o'clock?"

"Okay."

The dealer dealt the cards. Ellen sat on seventeen. Kurt had twelve. He drew another card. It was a ten.

"Over," said the dealer and swiped Kurt's ten dollars from the felt.

Kurt realised he hadn't won a hand since Ellen had sat down beside him. He must look really impressive, especially since Ellen had practically won every bet she'd placed so far. The dealer drew seventeen. Ellen's hand was a stand-off and she retained her bet.

Right. Time to win a hand, Kurt thought with determination. He placed a further fifteen dollars on the table. Ellen sat out a hand. Kurt's first card was a four, his second a seven. He decided to double down on eleven and placed three chips on the edge of his box. The dealer placed one card sideways across the other two cards. It was a jack: Twenty-one.

Ellen nudged him in the shoulder and smiled.

The dealer had a ten. He drew his next card.

"Blackjack!" he announced and removed Kurt's money.

"Shit!" Kurt hissed between clenched teeth.

"Can you believe that?" Ellen said.

Kurt shook his head and managed a strained smile. "I think I've had enough of this game for

now." He collected his remaining seven dollars, fifty in chips and stood up.

Ellen collected her own chips, far more than she commenced with, and stood up as well. "I'm going to go lie down for a few hours before tonight. I feel a bit tired from being out in the sun all morning." She smiled a promising smile. "I'll see you at nine."

Kurt watched her leave, her nicely rounded hips swaying smoothly as she walked, then he moved over to his friends at the roulette wheel.

As twilight succumbed to full dark over Hollow Island, the scarecrow dared to venture out of the cave for the first time in over twenty years.

It rose to the surface, climbed onto the rocks and headed for the beach. It walked on the sand under starlight and the light of a quarter moon. In one hand it carried the scythe, the blade now coated in rust but still in good repair. It had stored it on a ledge in the cave above the waterline, so it didn't rust away entirely. A bit of honing and polishing and it should come up as good as new; shiny bright steel, razor sharp, and capable of killing in one swift, powerful movement.

In its other hand it carried a canvas sack, a few holes now eaten into it. It, too, had been stored on the ledge, but hadn't fared as well as the reaping hook. But it still served its purpose, bulging with the weight of six skulls, the flesh long-since decomposed.

The scarecrow's clothes, limbs and joints had fared well, preserved by the power that dwelled within it.

It moved through the sparse trees and into the clearing in the centre of Hollow Island, where it put

the sack down and removed its contents. Lovingly, it examined the six grinning white skulls one by one and placed them in a row on the grass.

Soon, it thought, it would venture over to the larger island. When it was late. Not to kill tonight. Oh, no. Right now it had a much more important job; something that had been delayed for far too long.

Five

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

By seven the three had had enough of losing money at the gambling tables, and moved into one of the coffee lounges to dine on omelettes and cheesecake. Relaxing after eating with a cappuccino each, Matt said to Kurt, "I saw that girl from the pool sitting next to you at the blackjack table. How'd you get on?"

Kurt shrugged. "Okay, so far. We didn't talk that much. I'm meeting her at the nightclub at nine tonight." He grinned.

"Sounds promising," Pete said. "She's certainly very pretty."

"She seems quite nice to talk to as well," Kurt added. He looked at Matt and said, "She thinks you've got a cute body."

Matt grinned and took on a conceited look. "Well, that's to be expected," he joked.

Kurt smirked. "She also said you're too macho and not her type."

Matt raised his hands and let them fall in a gesture that said: I can't please everyone.

"So what's she think of you?" Pete asked pointedly, sipping his coffee.

Kurt shrugged. "I'm not sure. But she agreed to meet me at the nightclub, so she must be reasonably interested, at least."

Pete asked carefully, "No thoughts of Corinne

standing in the way of your interest for this girl?"

"No," Kurt was adamant. "Although, to be honest, I still feel bitter about what happened to her."

"You'll probably always feel bitter about it," Matt put in. "Because of the way she died."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Kurt agreed. "But I feel like I can move on now. I don't know how things will work out with Ellen. I'll just have to get to know her and see what happens." He finished his coffee. "You guys going to come along?"

"Sure. Why not?" said Matt. "We'll check her out for you."

Upstairs in their room, Kurt showered and shaved, splashed on some French after shave, and then blow-dried his hair. After applying some gel, he went out into the main room and dressed in black pants and a jade shirt. He slid his feet into black leather boots and figured he was ready. On the inside of the wardrobe door was a full-length mirror. He checked out his appearance in it and adjusted his shirt a little. His face was a touch browner from today's stint in the sun. He looked healthier for it.

"You look very pretty," Matt stirred him and went off to take his turn in the shower.

Matt and Pete seemed to take an eternity to get ready. Kurt sat on the bed, repeatedly checking his watch. He felt strangely nervous, although there was no real reason why he should be. He'd already met her and spoken to her. The ice had been broken.

By five past nine his friends were finally dressed and ready to go. They made it down to the first floor by ten past. In the corridor a sign pointed left to *Club Tropicana* nightclub. The sign wasn't really

necessary in this instance, as they could hear the music pulsating from the southern end of the hallway.

"Do we have to pay to get in here?" Matt asked Kurt.

"Shouldn't have to. It's all part of the hotel."

They came to the end of the corridor, where the music emanated loudly from behind tinted glass doors. A bouncer greeted them and opened the doors to let them through. Inside, the sound of dance music wasn't deafening, but loud enough that they had to shout to each other to be heard.

The club was crowded. An array of round tables with stools lay in front of them. All were taken. A strobe light flickered from the far end and Kurt saw a multitude of people bopping and gyrating on the dance floor. To the right was the bar, also congested. Kurt looked around for Ellen. He wasn't sure if she would be here with friends, or alone. If she was here with others, chances were she was seated around one of the tables. He tried to see past those standing in the club to check out the tables. Couldn't see her anywhere. Maybe she was at the bar; which would be a good place to look if she was here alone.

A hand tapped him on the shoulder. He thought it was either Matt or Pete, but turned to see Ellen smiling at him. Her face was beautifully made up with subtle hints of make-up to enhance, rather than cover, her natural features. She was wearing a tight red dress that exhibited the fullness of her breasts and the sensual curves of her hips. It was short, but not too short. Tastefully so.

She handed him one of two drinks. "The bourbon and Coke I owe you." She smiled again. "You're late."

"I know," said Kurt, close to her ear so she could hear him. "I was waiting for my friends to get ready. You here by yourself?"

Ellen nodded, moved close to him and said, "I was waiting for you at the bar. I saw you come in and got you a drink." She sipped at hers. "So, introduce me to your friends."

Kurt introduced her to Matt and Pete, then they moved closer to the dance floor in the hope of finding a table down that end.

Apart from those on the dance floor, it seemed to be less crowded down this end of the club, and they were fortunate enough to find a free table. Kurt sat next to Ellen, with Matt on his left and Pete opposite. Ellen removed a cigarette from her handbag and offered one to Kurt.

"No, thanks." He removed his remaining Panatela from a pocket and unwrapped it. "I still have a cigar left."

Ellen offered cigarettes to Pete and Matt, but they both declined. She lit Kurt's cigar, then her cigarette, and returned the lighter to her handbag.

Kurt moved close to her. "Are you here vacationing with friends, or family?"

She shook her head. "Neither."

"You're here on your own?" Kurt was surprised.

"Yep. All on my lonesome."

"It seems unusual for someone to holiday on a place like this by themselves."

Ellen explained. "The vacation was a graduation present from my parents. I wasn't going to come alone. I was going to bring a girlfriend, but all my friends had already made other plans.

"You see, I didn't know about this trip until after

I'd graduated. It was to be a surprise. And, well, I don't have a boyfriend or anything, so I had to come alone." She paused to draw on her cigarette. "I'm still having fun. I've met a few people already. Like yourself. I played tennis yesterday with a girl from Tampa Bay."

"Where are you from?" Kurt asked her pointedly.

"Miami Beach."

Kurt raised his eyebrows. "My friends and I are from Miami."

"Really?" she sounded equally as surprised. "I guess a lot of people from Miami come to the Bahamas. What part of Miami do you live in?"

"I live on the bay. At a marina, actually."

"You live on a boat?"

Kurt nodded and smiled. "Yep. A forty foot, diesel-powered yacht. Equipped with a four berth cabin, galley, a mega sound system. I won the thing in a competition."

"What kind of competition?" she wanted to know.

"Just one of those things where you buy a two dollar ticket, put it away and forget about it, and be surprised one day when someone calls around to tell you you've actually won it."

"I bet you were rapt?" She exhaled smoke towards the ceiling.

"I sure was. I never expect to win any of those things. All I have to pay for is mooring fees, registration and insurance."

"Did you drive it out here?"

"No. I thought about it. But I've only had it a year, and with college and all, I haven't had much time to practice driving the thing. Before I won that I used to be boarding with Matt and his parents."

"Hey!" Matt said, smiling. "Are you guys going to talk to us, or just amongst yourselves?"

"Sorry," Kurt offered. He figured he would find a way to talk to her alone later.

"Kurt was just telling me how he used to live at your place," Ellen told him.

"Yeah. Finally glad to get rid of him."

Kurt kicked him under the table. "He's just joking," he said to Ellen.

She turned to Pete and said loudly above the music, "So, what are you doing after college?"

Pete sipped a brew. "I majored in business, so I'm hoping to start up my own business of some kind. I'm not sure what, yet. In a few weeks I start a job with an insurance firm. I'll work at that for a while, save some money, then hopefully come up with a good idea."

She turned to Matt and Matt then went into lengthy detail about how he managed to get a scholarship playing college football, and that he'd just signed a contract to play with the Miami Dolphins next season.

"What position do you play?" Ellen asked him.

"I'm a flanker back, or wide receiver as it's often called. I get to score a few touchdowns. Do you follow football?"

"Not really, but my father's a fanatic about the game."

"Who does he follow?" Matt asked her.

"The Miami Dolphins."

Matt raised his arm in a victory salute. "Way to go!"

Ellen turned to Kurt. "Your turn," she said.

Kurt drew on his cigar, inhaling the smoke. It

was giving him a headspin. "I'm a journalism major, hoping to land a job with either a magazine or newspaper. Plus I want to do freelance work; both writing and photography. I'm a photographer as well. I've already had an article published in *Photographic* magazine in Los Angeles: An article on underwater photography.

"Which reminds me," he said to Matt and Pete. "I forgot to take my camera with us today when we went diving."

"Good photographer you're going to make," Matt chided him.

Kurt shrugged. "For some reason it just slipped my mind."

"You do scuba diving as well?" Ellen said. "I've never tried that."

"Maybe I can give you a few lessons while we're here?" Kurt suggested.

"That'd be great," Ellen replied with enthusiasm.

"Anyway, back to what I was talking about. At the moment I have a job doing bar work at nights in a restaurant. I've worked there part time for a few years now as a kitchenhand to help pay my way through college; and to give me some spending money. Plus I made a little bit of cash through selling the occasional article and short story."

"So what about you, Ellen?" Pete piped up. "What's after college for you?"

"My father owns a hotel in Miami Beach," she replied, lighting another cigarette. "I'm going to be working there in various positions for a while, with a view to one day being assistant manager of the place."

"How big is this hotel?" Matt asked.

"Sixteen stories. They're basically first-class suites for rich tourists and businessmen and women. The hotel also has a bar, a restaurant and nightclub, plus a few souvenir shops."

"So you'll be working in all those areas," Kurt said, "to learn the ropes?"

She nodded. "I'll be doing hands-on work in every facet of the hotel; from cleaning the rooms, to valet parking at the door, working on the reception desk, room service, waitressing in the restaurant, selling souvenirs, supervising security in the nightclub. A little bit of everything so I get an idea of how everything functions."

"Sounds like a big job," Pete noted.

She nodded. "But it'll be fun." She smiled. "Especially when I'm finally assistant manager and get to boss everyone around."

Matt smirked. "Women usually enjoy doing that."

"Chauvinist," Ellen told him light-heartedly.

The latest Madonna song came blaring through the loudspeakers.

"I like Madonna!" Ellen said excitedly. "Want to dance with me?" she asked Kurt.

"Sure."

They weaved their way out to the centre of the dance floor, which had flashing coloured lights in the tiles. They danced to the Madonna track and a couple of other recent hits. Ellen moved well, keeping in time with the music with graceful steps and gyrations. Kurt always felt a touch stiff and awkward when dancing, especially improvised dancing such as this, but did his best. He kept his steps in time with the beat no problem, and that was the main thing.

After three songs and just starting to work up a sweat, Kurt and Ellen moved off the dance floor and back over to their table. Pete was sitting there alone.

"Where's Matt? At the bar?" Kurt asked him.

Pete shook his head and pointed to a nearby table. "He's over there tuning those three chicks."

Kurt looked in the direction Pete was pointing. Sure enough Matt was there, chatting gregariously with three young women. His attention seemed focused on one in particular; a blond, her face heavily caked in cosmetics. Kurt could understand why Matt was so taken with that particular girl. Her breasts were so voluminous she virtually had to rest them on the table top.

Kurt smiled and said in Pete's ear, "Seems like he's in his element. Why don't you go join him?"

"Nah. Not my type. Listen, I might check you guys later. I'm gonna go hit the hay." Pete rose from his chair, said goodnight to Ellen, winked at Kurt, then made his way out of the club.

"You want another drink?" Kurt asked Ellen.

"No, thanks. Why don't we take a walk outside instead, away from the noise where we can talk without shouting."

"Sounds good."

Kurt led the way out of the club.

"Have a good evening," the doorman offered as he let them out.

"You, too," Kurt returned.

They took the elevator down to the ground floor and walked out through the lobby. Outside, away from the air-conditioning, the night air was warm, but not muggy. Wandering past the pool, Ellen casually felt the temperature of the water.

"Water's nice," she said. "We should go for a swim."

Several other couples milled around the grounds, soaking up the tropical night. But the pool was empty, the lights in and around it having been shut off at nine o'clock.

"Okay, sure," Kurt agreed. "Let's go back inside and get changed then."

Once inside the elevator Kurt hit button five and said to Ellen, "What floor are you on?"

"By the look of it, the same floor as you."

"That's convenient. What's your room number?"

"Two, fifteen."

"We're in room two, ten."

The elevator reached the top floor uninterrupted. The doors slid open and they stepped out.

"Let's meet back here in five minutes," Kurt suggested and let himself into his room. Ellen's was only just a little way down the hall on the right. She waved as she slipped inside and closed the door.

Kurt found Pete lounging on the bed watching reruns of Miami Vice on the television.

"Thought you would have been sick of Miami by now, Pete?" Kurt quipped.

Pete shrugged and sipped on a cup of tea. "I've always liked this show." He sat up. "What are you doing back so soon? I thought you'd be spending as much time as you could getting to know Ellen. That's why I left you two alone."

"Don't worry. I'm just getting changed to go for a swim in the pool with her. We'd had enough of the nightclub. You can't relax and talk properly in those places." Kurt unceremoniously stripped out of his clothes and pulled on a fresh pair of black racers. He

climbed into a sleeveless T-shirt and shorts, grabbed a towel, didn't bother with shoes, and was ready to go. "Enjoy the show," he said to Pete on the way out. "And thanks, buddy."

Pete nodded and Kurt closed the door.

Outside, the hallway was empty. Ellen hadn't emerged yet. While he waited by the elevators, Kurt wondered how Matt was getting along. He knew Matt was the type of guy to pick up ladies for the evening, and he figured that's what Matt had in mind with that well-built girl downstairs. And by the look in her eye while she spoke with him, her mind was on the same thing Matt's was.

Kurt looked up when he heard a door open and close. Ellen walked down towards him. She was wearing a white skirt, and showing above it was the top part of that white one piece she had been wearing in the pool that morning. Kurt could see the faint outline of her dark nipples through the tightly-stretched material. Ellen's breasts looked full and firm; a good size. Not big, but not small either.

He quickly averted his eyes, not wanting her to catch him staring at her chest.

She smiled at him and Kurt hit the elevator button.

Downstairs by the pool they dumped their towels on a deck chair. Kurt slipped off his shirt and shorts and Ellen took off her skirt, exposing her smooth hips and athletic legs.

She quickly glanced him up and down. "You've got a cute body, too. And face," she added before diving into the pool.

Kurt dived in after her and followed her past the bar, beneath one of the bridges, and up to the other

end.

"I have a question," he said when they'd stopped swimming.

Ellen looked at him expectantly, her eyes sparkling from the moon's reflection off the water.

"This morning when we were in the pool and you were sitting by the bar," Kurt posed his question. "Why did you take off when you saw me coming over to talk to you?"

Ellen shrugged and flicked her hair back over her shoulders. "I don't know," she smiled sheepishly. "I guess I just got a little shy when I saw all you guys looking at me. I am a bit shy sometimes. Not always. But I get the odd irrational attack of the bashfuls."

"So you didn't run off because you didn't want to talk to me or something?"

"No. And I wasn't playing games with you, either. If I didn't want to talk to you, I wouldn't be here now." She turned and rested her arms on the side of the pool. "I'll let you in on a little secret."

Kurt smiled. "Oh, yeah. And what's that?"

"This afternoon, in the gambling room, I deliberately sat down beside you at the blackjack table. You may not have noticed, but there was a free seat at the other table. I could have sat there, but I didn't. It was just lucky that there was a vacant seat beside you. Otherwise I would have had to come up with another plan to meet you." She paused. "I thought I might have put you off after taking off in the pool this morning, so I figured I'd have to make the next move to show you I was interested. Otherwise you might not have bothered to try and talk to me again."

"Some guys mightn't have bothered," Kurt said honestly. "But I would have. So long as I was pretty sure you were interested. I don't really like playing games, though. This sort of flirtatious, hard-to-get routine. Not that I want a girl to be easy in a sexual way. But if she's genuinely interested I expect her to act like it and be approachable."

"I honestly wasn't playing games with you."

"I know that," Kurt assured her. "At first I thought you might have been, but I wasn't sure."

"Your accent. It's not truly American, is it?" Ellen observed, changing the subject.

"No. I've lived in America since I was fourteen. I was from Australia originally. My father decided to move out to Florida because he got a job offer he couldn't refuse. Back home in Australia my father was a dolphin trainer at Sea World, which is a water theme park on the Gold Coast. He was somewhat of an expert in his field, so when some visiting officials from the Miami Seaquarium saw him, they were impressed with him and offered him a job in Florida. He saw it as a great opportunity with top money, so he accepted. We packed our bags and moved out there. That was eight years ago."

"So where are your parents now?" Ellen asked him. "Why were you living with Matt's family?"

Kurt took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. "My parents were killed in a boating accident." He paused. "They were returning a once injured dolphin to the wild just off Key West. Their boat apparently broke down and drifted into the path of a P & O cruise liner. As you can imagine their boat was smashed to pieces." He paused again to swallow a lump that had formed in his throat. "And so were

they."

Ellen obviously didn't know what to say to him, so she just reassuringly touched his arm.

"It's okay," he told her. "That was a long time ago now. Seven odd years ago." His mind was drifting to the past, but he forced himself back to the present. "Anyway, I knew Matt from school and I knew his parents pretty well. They took me in for six years. Helped me through it all. Supported me like a family through high school and college. Matt's been more like a brother to me than a best friend."

"Do you have any brothers and sisters?"

"No. How about you?"

Ellen shook her head. "I'm an only child, too." She paused before posing her next question. "You don't have a girlfriend back in Miami?"

"No. Not at the moment. I did have a girlfriend a few years ago in college. We were going out together for two years. In fact we were engaged to be married. But that's another story in itself. I'll tell you about it some other time. We've had enough of my morbid stories for one night."

To lighten the mood, he said, "I'll race you down to the bar. Loser gives the winner a massage."

Matt left the nightclub with Monique, the big-breasted girl he'd been chatting up earlier. They walked past the pool and failed to notice Kurt and Ellen lazing about in the water. Matt led her down to the beach where they walked south a little way to ensure some degree of privacy.

The moment Matt stopped walking, Monique was all over him. She'd seemed pretty keen in the club, and now that keenness was let loose in her actions.

She grabbed him around the neck and darted her tongue into his mouth. Matt felt himself going hard immediately. He grabbed the cheeks of her ass and brought her closer to him, grinding his pelvis into hers. Monique removed her arms from his neck and, still kissing him, found his belt and struggled feverishly to undo it. She finally got it undone and zipped down his pants. She thrust her hand inside and gripped his hardness through his underwear.

Matt's hands groped for the hem of her minuscule skirt and hitched it up over her hips. He stroked her bum with one hand, and rubbed her dampening crotch with the other. She was wearing G-string panties and he tugged the string tight up her cheeks. This seemed to stimulate her somewhat, so he did it a few more times.

Then, as if by some unspoken message, they broke the embrace simultaneously.

Monique dropped to the ground on her knees and pulled Matt's pants down to his ankles. The bulge in his underwear looked as big as a hammer. This excited her to the point of almost desperation and she ripped his underwear off to expose his thick, throbbing cock. She took it into her mouth immediately; and the way it stretched her lips apart reminded her of a visit to the dentist. She swallowed as much of the length that she could, but only managed to gorge about two thirds of it. It was too fat and long to deep-throat all the way.

I may be practiced at this, she thought, but I can't do the impossible.

Matt, meanwhile, was enjoying the sensation of her mouth around his *weapon*, as he called it.

Monique stroked his testicles with her fingernails

as she worked. Matt played with her hair, encouraging her to keep going.

She suddenly pulled away. "That's enough," she said with a lewd smile. "I don't want you to cum yet. He's got work to perform first." She pointed at his erect penis.

Monique stripped out of her skirt and top, her heavy breasts bouncing out of the fabric. "Like what you see?" she asked, proudly sticking out her chest.

"Yeah," Matt managed to say while staring at her two soft, mountainous forms. He brought her to him again and sucked hard on a nipple. It was already erect but stiffened further under the touch of his lips and tongue.

"I like a man sucking roughly on my tits," she swooned. "Be fair and give the other one a try."

He did, sucking greedily like a starving man. As he sucked he worked her panties down her thighs and they dropped to her ankles. She kicked them away. Matt reluctantly moved away from her breasts and stepped out of his pants and underwear. Monique roughly tore open his shirt. Buttons flew off and landed in the sand.

"Nice chest," she commented and began running her tongue along the lines of his finely defined pectorals. "A ripply stomach, too," she said between licks. "I like that."

Next thing Matt knew he was lying on his back in the sand with Monique straddling him. She squatted down and guided his length between her thighs toward her steamy mound. She liked the sensation of when the head first touched her lips, and the anticipation of pleasure to come as she was about to drive it deeply into her hungry tunnel. She caressed

her clitoris with the tip for a few moments, teasing him and herself, then dropped her full weight onto it and drove it all the way inside her.

It was a tight fit, making her feel stretched and full. But her pussy was lubricated enough to swallow it in one thrust. She rose all the way up to the tip and slowly dropped down again, feeling the length of it.

"Ooh," she sighed and dug her nails into Matt's tight chest.

Matt gripped her hips with his hands and met her gentle thrusts. He felt her lips squeeze the head of his dick as she rose, and felt it grind into the end of her pussy as she dropped all the way down again. He decided there was no better physical sensation than this.

As she worked away on top of him, he watched the expressions fluctuate on her face. As Monique rose her features would soften and relax. As she slid down again, her face would tense up and she would moan.

Gradually her tempo increased, thrusting faster and harder, grinding her pelvis on his at the end of each descent.

He gripped a meaty breast in each hand and squeezed the nipples.

"Suck on them," she hissed.

Matt squeezed her tits together so the nipples were only an inch apart and sucked them both into his mouth at the same time. This drove Monique wild and she doubled her tempo, driving down relentlessly on his shaft.

"I'm going to cum," she told him and let out a huge sigh. Then another, and yet another. When she'd finished she relaxed, but kept slowly thrusting.

"Do you want to cum in me this way?" she asked.
"Or do you want to get on top?"

"I want to take you from behind."

"Ooh," Monique said and smiled. She slid off his length, which glistened with her juices, and positioned herself on her hands and knees. She thrust her buttocks up a little, making her lips pout open.

Matt eyed her orifices and positioned himself behind her. He gripped his eager tool in one hand, placed his other on a cheek of her ass and guided himself into her. The fit was a little tighter now since she had cum, and she tensed several times on his entry.

"I get really sensitive just after I've cum," Monique told him. "But I'll relax after a minute. Just take it slow for the first few thrusts."

Matt did so, easing his member in and out. He watched it enter her, filling her all the way up. After a few more strokes, Monique had relaxed somewhat and he commenced pounding away at her more steadily.

"Ooh. You really know how to give it to a girl," she praised.

With each stroke Matt increased his tempo, hungry for relief. Monique began thrusting her buttocks at him, meeting his strokes. The first few times were uncoordinated, but they soon established a rhythm. Matt liked the way she was thrusting back and he knew he was going to explode soon. After several more strokes his stomach tensed up and he felt an intense tingling sensation in his loins. He came in quick bursts and kept on thrusting until he was drained. Then he pulled out and sat back in the sand to rest. Monique turned around and sat opposite

him, a broad smile on her face.

"You enjoyed that?" he asked lightly.

"What do you reckon?" she returned. Her expression suddenly darkened, her eyes focused on something behind him.

Matt turned and looked. Across a plain of straw and dead earth he saw a shadow moving along the edge of the jungle. He figured it must be someone from the resort. But the person moved in a slightly awkward manner, like the joints were stiff with arthritis.

"What a strange looking man," Monique said.

Ellen lay on the deck chair with Kurt straddling her and massaging her shoulders. As he dug his fingers into her muscles, enjoying the feel of her skin, he saw a figure approaching from the south. The figure skirted the edge of the resort lights and moved down to the beach.

The figure was very tall, wore tattered clothes and a scruffy-looking hat, and appeared to move a little stiffly.

Kurt shrugged his shoulders, figuring it was the old man who still lived on the island somewhere, come to scavenge for food. But even after deciding that, he felt a cold shudder run up his spine.

The figure seemed to move in an almost inhuman manner; and just for a second, though he figured it was only his imagination, Kurt thought he saw two glowing red eyes in the dark face.

Six

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

Kurt, Matt and Pete had a light breakfast of toast and coffee. By eight-thirty they arrived at the dive shop. Josh didn't look impressed.

"Someone broke in here last night," Josh explained his mood. "A side door in the workshop was forced." He shook his head. "The funny thing is, all that seems to be missing are a few wetsuits. All the tanks and regulators are still here. All the expensive stuff. Nothing was damaged. Just those wetsuits gone."

"Have you called the police?" Pete quizzed.

"I've informed hotel security. They're looking into it. Apparently the souvenir shop was also done over. All that was taken from there were some hats. Weird, man. Very weird. And that's not all. Some tools went missing from the maintenance shed. A damned strange mix of stolen goods." He shook his head again as if to rid it of the confusion.

"You here to hire another boat?" he asked, changing the subject.

"That's right," said Matt. "And the same gear as yesterday."

"Crowbar as well?" Josh raised an eyebrow.

"No," Kurt said. "We'll swap it for some waterproof flashlights."

Now Josh raised both eyebrows. He looked like he was itching to ask what they wanted them for, but

refrained. After all, it really wasn't any of his business. "Okay," he said finally. "Three waterproof flashlights."

Josh organised the gear, and included three black rubber flashlights. He led them out onto the jetty. Kurt noticed that a number of the boats had been hired out already, including the one they'd used yesterday. Josh dumped two tanks into a red boat. Matt carried the third and placed it beside the other two. Kurt jumped in and took up a position behind the wheel.

"Storms are forecast for today," Josh told them. "Around here they can rip in as fast as a tornado, so if you see any sign of trouble, I don't care how far away, get your butts back here. Don't mess around."

Kurt fired up the outboard and Josh untied the rope from the cleat on the jetty. When the boat had cleared the wharf, Kurt opened up the throttle a little and the craft motored away.

Already there was a wind gusting up, and windsurfers galore were out sailing on the bay. Kurt weaved smoothly around them. When he was clear of the congestion, he opened the throttle further. By the time they reached Hollow Island the water was beginning to chop up.

Kurt ran the boat up onto the beach, the tide on the way out. He wiped sweat from his brow and climbed out. The day was certainly sticky enough to produce a storm or two.

They quickly climbed into their gear, keen to see what was inside the cave. Kurt had his camera with him, encased in a waterproof housing. He slipped the strap around his neck and carried his fins over the rocks to the channel. The water in the channel was

turbulent, splashing up over the rocks with each gust of wind. Kurt hated diving in wishy-washy water like this. You always had to fight fluctuating currents. But he slipped his fins on and dropped in.

Beneath the surface it wasn't too bad. He kicked down to the bottom. As he descended he wondered what Ellen was doing at this moment. Probably still sleeping. They were up late talking and drinking coffee in her room after finishing with the pool. He'd felt like sleeping in himself; had felt pretty tired dragging himself out of bed early this morning. But that fatigue succumbed to his enthusiasm to explore the cave. It had been lying here open all night, waiting. What would they find inside? he wondered. Nothing, probably. But maybe something? One or two gold coins overlooked by the treasure hunters of days gone by?

He reached the bottom, and Pete and Matt arrived soon after. Together all three stared at the entrance to the cave; a cave that had been sealed shut for twenty odd years. It looked dark and forbidding, but at the same time fascinating and compelling.

Kurt snapped off a photo of the entrance, then switched on his torch and shone it into the cave. All he saw for the expanse of the beam were rock walls and ceiling and a sandy bottom running straight ahead.

Matt and Pete peered down the tunnel, standing either side of Kurt. Kurt looked at Pete and saw him shudder. Kurt gave the okay signal. After a moments hesitation, Pete returned the signal. Kurt then repeated the process with Matt. He nodded and put thumb and forefinger together.

Let's go, Kurt prompted himself, feeling a

shudder crawl up his own spine. Torch out in front of him, he kicked into the cave.

Everything was silent as he swam down the tunnel. The only sound was his own breathing. He peered behind him to make sure his friends were following, and was greeted with two bright lights staring him in the face. One of his friends - he couldn't tell which because of the glare - was swimming along above and behind him up towards the ceiling, while the other was skimming the sandy bottom. Looking forward again, his own light picked up a left hand curve ahead. He rounded the curve and the tunnel ran in a straight line once more.

The cave was well lit with the three lights blending as one solid beam. From ceiling to floor, Kurt figured it was nine or ten feet. He wasn't sure what distance they'd come so far, but estimated they must be close to being beneath Hollow Island by now.

He paused to take a photograph of the tunnel. His camera had an inbuilt flash and he snapped off a frame.

The further they swam into the tunnel, the more murky the water became. Before, the flashlight beams had been bright white. Now they were rendered a yellowish milky hue. Visibility had dropped from about forty feet to only fifteen.

Up ahead he saw the tunnel branch off into two. He shone the light down the left side of the fork. Saw nothing but murky water. In the right fork the water looked clearer, so he chose that one.

They swam on for what seemed like ages. But when Kurt checked his watch in the flashlight beam it had only been two minutes. This section of tunnel so

far had revealed nothing. Just more rock walls and sandy bottom. If this was the correct tunnel, they should be approaching the cavern soon, where the fissure in the rock above would have sunlight streaming in through it. And that's where it would get interesting. If there was any of the ancient Spanish treasure left, that's where it would be found.

The tunnel curved left and opened up. Here the water was still murky, but a little clearer because sunlight was darting down from above. They had reached the cavern. The walls spread apart and the ceiling vanished. Kurt rose slowly and was surprised when his head broke the surface.

Above the water the cave was bright. Kurt looked up toward the ceiling about six feet above and was blinded by the light pouring in from the outside world. He looked away and gradually his vision readjusted. When he glanced around the cave he determined it to be eighteen, maybe twenty feet in diameter, and was in the shape of a crude circle. There was a ledge several feet above the waterline and he hoisted himself up onto it in a sitting position. The ledge was about three feet wide and eight long, and on that ledge something glinted brightly in the slash of sunlight: A stack of gold coins standing three inches high.

Kurt's heart hammered. He held his breath and gingerly, almost afraid they would disappear before his eyes like a mirage, reached out to touch them. They were cold and hard under his touch, as solid and real as the ledge he was sitting on. Excitement gripping him and he quickly counted them. Thirteen. Thirteen Spanish doubloons!

"Look at this, you guys!" Kurt shouted at the

other two as they surfaced, unable to contain his elation.

Matt and Pete raised themselves onto the ledge and looked at the coins in disbelief.

"What the hell are they doing sitting up here?" Matt demanded.

"Yeah," Pete chimed in. "You said this cave had been searched thoroughly heaps of times. This ledge would have been the first place anyone looked."

Kurt shook his head and shrugged, then shook his head again. "I know. I don't understand it. I just found them here sitting in a neat pile. All thirteen of them."

"How much would they be worth?" asked Matt, a definite gleam in his eyes.

Again Kurt shrugged. "I have no idea. In gold value alone, probably a few grand all up. But because they're ancient Spanish treasure, at a wild guess I'd say they'd be worth a few grand each. At least!"

"But I still don't understand what they're doing sitting in a pile there?" Matt reiterated.

Again Kurt shrugged, not sure what to think. "Maybe that guy who was killed in that explosion twenty odd years ago was collecting them."

"But why would he leave them here, seal off the cave and blow himself up in the process?" Pete debated.

Kurt held up his hands. "I don't have the answers."

"Let's duck down to the bottom," Matt said eagerly. "See if we can dig up some more in the sand."

It was a race to the cave floor, each of them as

keen as hell to find more gold. Pete got there first and started digging. Clouds of sand billowed up and rendered the water even more murky than it already was.

For the most part the torches weren't necessary as the sunlight illuminated much of the cavern. But around the edges the light didn't reach, and Kurt needed to use his torch as he dug close to the wall. A hole formed where he was digging, but it was difficult to see if anything was in it. The milky water and sand obscured his vision. After a while he relied more on feel than sight.

He felt something, removed it from the sand, and held it up close. It was only a shell. Kurt tossed it away with disdain and commenced delving in another spot. His hand touched something else. He felt the object. It was cold, hard and round. His heart hammered as he brought it close to his mask. He let out a sigh of disappointment, causing a stream of bubbles to erupt from his regulator. It was a coin, yes, but a worthless one as far as he was concerned. Disappointed, he slipped the American quarter into his pants and tried another location. The coin had probably fallen out of some other treasure seeker's pocket years before. Or had been dropped there deliberately as a joke.

After digging in three more spots without result, Kurt swam over to where Matt and Pete were digging below the ledge. He tapped Matt on the shoulder and raised his hands. Find anything? he was asking. Matt shook his head. Kurt asked Pete the same thing. Pete shook his head while still digging, then held up a palm to say, *wait a minute*. He withdrew his other hand from the sand, the fingers clenched tightly

around something he'd found. Pete brought it up into the sunlight and opened his fist. A gold coin sparkled resplendently on his palm, casting golden reflections over Pete's face.

Kurt punched Pete in the arm to say, *good on you*, and Pete rose to the surface to place the new coin with the other thirteen. Kurt dug in Pete's hole while he was gone. He probed deeply until his right arm was in up to the bicep. Just at the very reach of his fingertips he felt something hard. Containing his growing excitement, not wanting to lose what he'd touched, Kurt slowly dug his hand down an inch deeper and grasped the object between his middle and index finger. He withdrew his hand just as Pete returned, and showed him another doubloon. Kurt took this one to the surface and placed it on the ledge. He then snapped off a photo of the coins, turned and took a shot of the cavern, then dropped back into the water.

Below, he checked on Matt, who shook his head again. Still nothing. Kurt decided to look over near the entrance to the cavern. Maybe the currents years before had tried to drag some of them out into the tunnel.

In the *doorway* to the cavern, he dropped to his knees and shone the light on his watch. They'd been down thirty minutes. In another twenty they'd have to go. Didn't want to risk running out of air in here.

He fanned the sand away with his hand, holding his face close to the ground so he could see into the hole. The light picked up something. Only another shell. He kept fanning, the action forming a gentle hollow in the cave floor. Two more shells were revealed. He plucked them out and tossed them

away, then moved to a spot just outside the cavern.

Kurt fanned in this new spot. Almost immediately he saw glitters in the sand. He fanned some more, waited for his vision to clear, then shone the flashlight beam into the hole. He held his breath.

What he'd uncovered was a veritable carpet of gold coins. He took several photographs of them, then eagerly, but carefully, began plucking them from their grave. He counted as he plucked, and by the time he'd counted eleven the hole was empty. Kurt felt in the hole with his fingertips. Couldn't feel any more.

He swam back and showed his friends. They looked at his haul in astonishment. Kurt rose to the surface and placed the new coins with the rest. They now had twenty-six in all.

Two heads bobbed up beside the ledge.

"Where did you find all those?" Matt demanded excitedly.

"Just outside the entrance to the cavern," Kurt enlightened them.

"Are there any more?" Matt asked.

"I don't know. I've brought up all I've found so far."

"Well, let's go take a look." Matt duck-dived to the floor.

Pete disappeared below after him.

Kurt checked the time. Twelve more minutes and they'd have to be out of there. He jumped off the ledge into the water and kicked downwards.

On the bottom he saw two lights shining just outside in the tunnel. He swam over to them and found his friends already digging haphazardly in the sand. Kurt laid down his torch and grabbed their

arms to stop them from digging. When they'd ceased, Kurt shone the torch on his own hand and held it upright in a gesture to say, *wait*. Then he proceeded to show them how he'd done it before and gently fanned the sand away in a spot just near where he'd found the last eleven. Immediately there was a glint in the sand. Pete plucked the doubloon from its watery hideaway. Kurt continued fanning while the other two shone their lights into the hole and kept their faces close to the ground so they could see in the murk.

Feeling pushed for time, Kurt fanned faster, really clouding up the water now. He wanted to find as many as possible before they had to leave the cave this morning; just in case somehow word got out about the cave and the gold. Everyone would be converging on the cave then, and any chance they had of finding more gold would virtually be gone. It was like the fisherman who found a good spot on the beach where he was hauling in fish after fish. Before long, every other fisherman in the area was fishing the same spot, really cutting down the spoils.

Matt stopped him from fanning. Kurt waited while Matt and Pete worked away in the sand cloud. Each of them emerged with four doubloons. That made thirty five now.

Kurt examined the hole. No more coins or glints in the sand. He moved to the left a few feet, nearer the wall and fanned in this new spot. He fanned for five minutes before finally uncovering another doubloon. Kurt snatched it up and checked his watch. They were out of time.

Damn! he thought. He was feeling greedy as hell now. They probably still had ten minutes of air left.

What would another five minutes hurt? No! he told himself firmly. There are no reserves on these tanks. Come back later with a fresh tank. Nobody knows about the cave. And what good are the coins going to do you if you run out of air and die in here?

He tapped his watch, saying time's up, and kicked up to the ledge. Kurt dropped his coin in the pile, and Matt and Pete deposited theirs as well.

The hard part now would be getting them out of the cave without losing any. Then he had an idea. Kurt sat up on the ledge, slipped off his fins, then his bathers. The quarter fell out onto the ledge.

"What the hell are you doing?" Matt wanted to know, astonished by his friend's actions.

Kurt piled the coins into the buttocks area of his swimmers before answering. "We need a way to carry these outside, don't we. And this is far more important than my modesty."

Matt shrugged. "Fair enough. Better you than me."

Kurt slipped his fins back on and handed his torch to Pete. "Carry this for me. I want both hands free to hold the coins." With those words he folded the bathers around the coins, put in his mouthpiece and dropped into the water.

Down below in the tunnel Pete took up the lead with two torches, while Matt brought up the rear. The journey out seemed shorter, and soon they were kicking for the surface in the sunlit channel. Kurt couldn't believe how free it felt to swim with nothing on.

It wasn't until he'd broken the choppy surface that he heard the distant boom of thunder. He looked south. A bank of bluish-gray storm-clouds were

forming on the horizon. Lightning licked across them, followed five seconds later by another rumble of thunder.

"Better get back before this storm blows in," Pete decided. "You heard what Josh said."

Kurt laid the coins on the rocks and climbed out of the water, naked except for his tank and weight belt. They hurried back to the boat as a stiff north-westerly wind whipped up in resistance to the oncoming storm.

Once back at the boat, Kurt dropped his tank and gear onto the deck, dried himself, wrapped the gold doubloons up in his towel, and slipped his bathers back on.

Matt was already pushing the boat into the water. Kurt jumped in the passenger seat and Pete fired up the motor. When Matt was aboard, Pete reversed the craft, swung a hard left, put it in forward and surged away from Hollow Island.

Kurt glanced back at the storm, the clouds undulating like roiling mist. His eyes then skimmed over the island, and just for a split second he thought he saw something bright and colourful hanging from a tree near the clearing. But then they were too far away to see, leaving him to wonder what it might have been.

Seven

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

They made it back to the resort just as the first rain drops began to fall. The wind had swung around to the south-east, with gusts reaching almost gale-force. The wind blew the rain ahead of the storm, but the storm itself was fast approaching. Lightning flickered across the clouds as they consumed the sun. Thunder cracked almost simultaneously with the lightning flashes. And as the sun was obscured, the daylight succumbed to an eerie twilight.

Kurt noticed all the other boats had returned already as Pete edged their craft up to the jetty. The waters had cleared, everyone scattering for cover.

Josh met them on the wharf and quickly and expertly secured the boat. Kurt and Matt handed up tanks and the other equipment. Kurt then stowed his towel containing the doubloons into his backpack and hurriedly stuffed their fins and masks in there as well. Last to go in was his camera. He snapped off a shot of the approaching storm, then put it in the bag and zipped it up. He joined the others up on the jetty and together they all carried the equipment down to the boat shed. The rain came down like Niagara Falls just as they entered the doorway. Josh quickly closed the Rolla door leading from the wharf to the shop as the rain was pouring in there.

"You just made it back in time," Josh said, fishing in the till for their deposit. He handed Kurt a hundred

dollar bill. "Like I said, the storms come in like hell's fury around these parts."

Josh commenced stowing the gear. "So. Did you find anything interesting this morning?"

"No," Kurt said, a little too quickly. He changed the subject. "Have you heard anything about your missing wetsuits?"

"Not yet. Don't expect I will. Not unless someone just dumped them somewhere for the hell of it."

"Not very likely," said Pete.

There was a brilliant flash of lightning outside. Kurt tensed up in anticipation. The thunder followed, exploding like the repercussions of a thousand shotguns firing at once. Even though he was ready for it, Kurt still jumped when it came.

They decided to wait in the shop until the rain eased; which didn't take long. The squall passed within fifteen minutes, leaving in its wake just a light drizzle.

Kurt was anxious to be back in the room so he could examine their horde of doubloons, and as soon as the rain had eased, he thanked Josh and was out the door.

They passed the empty pool and entered the lobby. On the right the souvenir shop and general store were busy, everyone indoors due to the weather. On the left their favourite coffee shop was also bustling with customers.

Upstairs in the room, Kurt locked the door behind them. The room was dim. He turned on the light, dumped the towel on the bed and unwrapped it. Thirty-six gold doubloons lay there sparkling in the fluorescent light. Kurt picked one up and examined

it. It was in mint condition, with an etching of the king of Spain on the front and some words in Spanish he couldn't comprehend. But the date he could: 1630. He whistled in amazement. "This coin is over three hundred and seventy years old!" He checked the dates on some of the others. They were all minted in 1630. He flipped over one of the coins and examined the back, or *tail* side. It depicted a vague impression of the Spanish royal coat of arms.

Matt picked up a handful and tested their weight. "They're quite heavy, aren't they," he noted.

"Of course they are," Pete told him. "They're pure gold. Twenty-four carat."

"We're rich!" Matt said and grinned.

"Not quite," said Kurt. "But on premium value, there's got to be at least a hundred thousand dollars worth here."

"And we might find more, yet," Pete said excitedly.

"You're going to be rich, anyway," Kurt told Matt. "With that contract with the Miami Dolphins."

"Yeah," Matt grimaced. "But you're getting your ass busted every week for that money." He nodded down at the pile of gold. "This is easy cash. All you've got to do is dig holes in the sand."

"You can't tell me you don't like playing football," Kurt said.

"I love playing football. But you do risk a lot of injuries. Which reminds me. I should go downstairs for a workout. Got my first training session when I get back. Gotta keep in top shape. You coming, Kurt?"

"Yeah. About time I did some weights, I guess."

"Pete?" Matt said.

Pete shrugged. "I'm not into weights, but I'll go down for a swim in the indoor pool."

"This afternoon, after this storm passes, I want to go diving in the cave again," Kurt said. He really wanted to go back now, but he knew while the weather was bad there was no way Josh would hire them the gear.

"Greedy bastard, aren't you?" Matt quipped.

"Aren't you guys keen?" asked Kurt, stuffing the doubloons under the mattress for want of a better hiding place.

"Sure we are," Matt replied. "But we can't work on an empty stomach. We'll go after lunch. By that time the storm should be long gone."

Downstairs on the first basement level, Pete ducked off for a swim while Matt and Kurt went into the gym. There were about a dozen people working out; either on pin-weight equipment, free weights, or hydraulic aerobic machines. At least half of those were women, and one of them Kurt immediately recognised.

"You warm up," he said to Matt. "I'll be back in a second."

Matt commenced stretching exercises while Kurt weaved through equipment to reach a row of exercise bikes. Ellen was riding one, wearing tight pink bike pants and a midriff black cotton top. She saw him coming, and even though she was riding hard, managed a smile. Beads of sweat clung to her forehead and fringe. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, but didn't break her rhythm.

"Hi," she greeted him.

"Working hard?" Kurt asked.

"It sure....feels like I am," she managed between

breaths.

"I won't interrupt you. I just wanted to ask you if you want to join me for lunch when we're through here?"

She nodded and wiped more sweat away. "Sure," she agreed and smiled again.

"Okay," Kurt grinned. "I'll see you soon. No slackening off now."

"I won't," she puffed.

Kurt moved over to the warm-up area, and performed a few mandatory stretching exercises to loosen up his muscles and ligaments. When he was through, he joined Matt in the nearby free-weights section. Matt was currently lying flat on his back doing bench press.

With a grunt, Matt put the bar back on the squat stand above his head and said to Kurt, "Throw another ten kilos on each side, will ya."

"How much have you got on here now?" Kurt asked, removing the collars on each side and slipping on ten kilo discs. He then replaced the collars and tightened the wing nuts.

"Counting the bar, a hundred and four kilos," Matt told him. "That's my warm-up. Now I get serious. Ten reps at a hundred and twenty-four, eight reps at a hundred and thirty-four, then six at a hundred and forty-four."

"Shit!" Kurt exclaimed in astonishment. "The last time we worked out together you were pushing to do a hundred and ten kilos."

"Come a long way since then, old son."

Matt gripped the bar, his hands just outside the squat stand uprights and heaved. Grunting with each rep, his face frowning and going red with the effort,

arm muscles bulging, Matt completed the ten and replaced the bar.

"Five more on each side, please."

Kurt put a further ten kilos in total on the bar, and Matt pumped it eight times. He then rested for a minute while Kurt put the bar up to a hundred and forty-four. Matt pressed the first one slowly but comfortably, struggled a little with the second, struggled even more with the third, and really strained to complete four, five and six. With a huge sigh of relief, he dropped the barbell with a clang on the squat stand and sat up. "Your turn," he said and grinned.

"I'm not lifting anything like that amount," Kurt was adamant as he took his place on the bench.

"How much do you want to start off with?" Matt asked him while removing a substantial amount of weight from the bar.

"About fifty, counting the bar," Kurt instructed.

"Only fifty," Matt ribbed.

"That'll do for starters," Kurt assured him. While Matt set up the bar, Kurt watched Ellen doing light reps of her muscular legs on one of the pin-weight machines. He thought it would be nice to caress those legs.

"Fifty-one kilos," Matt announced. "I've got two tens on either side and a two and a half. The bar's six. Go to it, my man. Fifteen reps."

"Fifteen!" Kurt exclaimed. "I was planning on ten."

"Fifteen," Matt said firmly. "You want to stay in top shape for that lady over there, don't you?" He grinned at Ellen and waved. "She's watching you, you know."

Kurt felt a few butterflies flutter around his stomach. He half wanted her to watch, half didn't; afraid he mightn't look as strong as he wanted to. But he gripped the barbell tightly and hoisted it off the stand.

The first few repetitions weren't too difficult. By the time he reached ten, though, his muscles were really seizing up. He struggled to complete the last five, but willed himself on, knowing Ellen was watching. He couldn't look like a wimp in front of her.

"Fifteen," Matt counted and Kurt replaced the bar on the squat stand.

"Phew," he sighed with relief. "I feel as weak-as this morning."

"You did okay," Matt assured him. He put more weight on the bar. "Ten reps at fifty-six."

"In a second," Kurt said. He caught his breath and noted Ellen had moved to a different exercise machine and was working on her arms. She glanced his way and smiled, and Kurt felt a tremendous urge to go over there and kiss her.

"Let's go, buddy," Matt prodded.

Kurt hoisted the bar off the stand and ground out the next ten reps, feeling more enthusiastic.

They worked out on the pin-weight machines for the next half an hour, then headed off for the showers. The gym was air-conditioned, but nonetheless they were both sweating profusely.

Ellen, her brow covered in perspiration and her shirt saturated, came up to Kurt before he entered the men's shower block. "See you in about ten minutes?"

"Yeah. I'll meet you outside in the hallway here."

When Ellen had disappeared into the ladies'

showers, Kurt said to Matt, "Ellen and I are having lunch together. What are you and Pete going to do?"

"You mean we're not invited?" Matt remarked in mock disappointment.

"Not this time. I want to spend some time alone with her and get to know her better. We'll all get together another time. Hey, what about this girl you were tuning last night? Are we going to get to meet her?"

Matt shrugged. "I shouldn't think so. It was just a one night thing."

"Suit yourself." Kurt entered a cubicle, stripped out of his clothes and had a quick, cold shower. He dried himself, dressed in a clean set, then went out to comb his hair in the mirror. Matt joined him a moment later and slicked back his short, dark-blond hair.

"What time have you got, Kurt?" Matt asked, ready to leave.

"Eleven, forty," Kurt replied. "Why don't you buy a watch?"

Matt shrugged. "Then you'd have nothing to do." He picked up his bag. "I'm gonna go round up Pete. We'll meet you after lunch back in the room."

Kurt nodded. "Hopefully conditions will be favourable for a dive by then."

Matt left the men's' change rooms.

After another quick check of his appearance in the mirror, Kurt went out into the hallway. Ellen hadn't emerged yet, so he waited patiently for her to finish up in the showers.

The door suddenly swung open and Kurt looked up expectantly. But it wasn't Ellen. Instead, two other young women stepped out into the hallway.

One of them smiled at Kurt. He half-heartedly returned the smile, and continued to wait. The door opened again, and once more Kurt looked up expecting to see Ellen. This time, though, it was a heavy-set, middle-aged woman. She glanced a little balefully at him as she waddled by, and Kurt suddenly felt he must appear to be some sort of desperate pervert, waiting for opportunities to attain cheap glances into the ladies' showers every time the door opened.

But finally Ellen emerged and he was relieved of his discomfort.

"Sorry I took so long," she apologized. "But there are only a few showers in there and some of those women take an eternity to finish." Ellen smiled. "So, where to for lunch?"

Kurt chose to dine in the restaurant upstairs. They passed on the entrees and just ordered the mains. Kurt chose rump steak with mushroom sauce and vegetables, while Ellen opted for a small seafood platter.

"Would you like a pre-dinner drink?" the young black waitress asked them.

"Sure," said Kurt. "Bourbon and Coke. Ellen?"

"Tia Maria and milk, thank you," Ellen told the waitress.

"Would you like a garlic bread or anything?" the waitress enquired.

"Sure. Garlic bread would be fine," Kurt agreed.

The waitress disappeared into the kitchen, then re-emerged and prepared the drinks at the bar.

The restaurant was pretty quiet, with only two other couples dining at the moment; and the waitress, apart from the cook, appeared to be the only staff

member on duty. She arrived with their drinks and told them the garlic bread would be ready shortly.

Kurt, feeling thirsty after his workout, had a long sip of bourbon and Coke. It burned his throat a little. "That's pretty strong," he noted.

Ellen grinned. "Maybe the waitress fancies you and wants to get you drunk so she can seduce you?" she said.

"Maybe," Kurt sipped more bourbon.

Ellen's expression turned more serious. She sipped her drink and appeared to Kurt to be trying to formulate a question.

"Do you," she began, then stopped and smiled. "I'm not sure how to ask this."

"Just ask away," Kurt said easily.

"Do you like a lot of women?" she said finally.

Kurt didn't understand the question.

"I mean," Ellen rephrased it. "Do you like to sleep with a lot of different women?"

Kurt shrugged. "I like women, but that doesn't necessarily mean I sleep with a lot of them."

"I guess I'm trying to ask you what kind of relationships you prefer. Do you prefer no ties and one-night-stands? Or do you search out serious relationships, or just like casual relationships?"

Ellen appeared to be suffering one of her attacks of shyness, and had trouble looking Kurt in the eye when she asked her questions.

Kurt replied frankly. "I did have a couple of one night stands when I was a teenager. Physically I guess they were satisfying, but they didn't fulfill anything else. And now that I'm older, I'm certainly looking for much more than just physical flings; or even casual physical and emotional relationships for

that matter. I believe if you're going to have emotional ties to someone in that way, it's got to be full-on, otherwise it's just frustrating more than anything else."

"So," Ellen assumed. "If you're looking for a girl in your life now, it would be for a full-on relationship? Not a one-night-stand or casual affair?"

"That's right," he affirmed.

Ellen's shyness seemed to pass with getting that out in the open.

"I was engaged to be married at one stage, remember?" Kurt reminded her. "You can't get any more full-on than that."

The garlic bread arrived.

When the waitress had disappeared to another table, Ellen said, "Are you ready to tell me about her yet?"

He shook his head. "Soon, but not yet. It was a pretty painful thing." He pulled off a chunk of garlic bread. "So, tell me about your views on relationships. What are you looking for?"

"The same as you, it seems," she told him, helping herself to some bread. "Something full-on. I've never been into one-night-stands or anything casual. I was involved in a full-on relationship once, when I was about nineteen or so. At least I thought it was full-on. The guy I was seeing was a marine. Anyway, he got called up to go fight in a conflict in Africa. That was the last I ever saw of him."

Kurt felt his heart stutter. "He was killed?"

She shook her head adamantly. "No. He's alive and well, all right. He wrote me while he was over there and told me our relationship was all off. He didn't say why, but I ran into one of his marine

buddies in Miami about six months later, and he told me that Jason - that was my boyfriend's name - had met an English girl over there, and apparently he went back to London with her when the conflict was over."

"Nice guy," Kurt commented and stuffed a chunk of bread into his mouth, washing it down with bourbon.

"I was just young and naive and thought it was more than it actually was. I guess Jason was just using me physically for a while. But," she smiled, "it hasn't put me off men or anything."

"That's good. We're not all users."

"I know. I decided to judge every man on his merits, and not on previous bad experiences."

"That sounds like a good plan," Kurt assured her. "So, apart from working out in the gym, what did you get up to this morning?"

"Nothing much. I didn't wake up until nine. I lounged around the unit for a bit, had some toast and coffee, then went to the gym. How about you? Did you manage to get up early and go diving like you planned?"

"Yep."

"Where did you go?"

Kurt debated for a few moments about whether to trust her yet or not. He was itching to tell her what they'd found, wanted to share something positive with her at this time, rather than his tale of Corinne's death.

"Okay," he decided.

"Okay, what?" she looked confused.

"I'll tell you what we've been up to. But first, promise me you won't tell anyone about any of it."

"Any of what?"

"Just promise me first."

"Okay, I promise."

Kurt looked around to make sure no one else was within earshot, then said quietly, "My friends and I have been diving for treasure."

Ellen smiled a smile that said she wasn't sure if he was being serious or not.

"It's true," he said adamantly. "And we've found some, too."

He then went on to tell her the story he'd related to Matt and Pete the other evening, about Louis Lorenz the pirate, the cave and how it had been sealed shut for twenty odd years, and how they'd managed to force it open again. She looked astonished when he finished by telling her they'd found about a hundred thousand dollars worth of gold coins that morning.

"Can I see them?" she asked hopefully.

He considered it. Now that he'd told her about the coins, he didn't see any harm in showing them to her. "Okay. As soon as we finish lunch I'll take you upstairs and you can see them."

"They're in your room?" Ellen said in surprise.

"Of course. Where else would I keep them?"

She smiled. "I thought you might have buried them or something, for safe keeping."

"I'm not a pirate," he told her. But when he thought about it, the idea wasn't as ridiculous as it sounded. Especially considering the thefts that had taken place last night. Plus there were maids who serviced the rooms every three days. Wouldn't want the maid stumbling upon them lying under the mattress when she made the bed. It was something worth considering.

Their lunch arrived, and Ellen ate hers in an

obvious hurry. Kurt took his time, teasing her, knowing she was anxious as hell to see the gold. She finished when he was still only halfway through his steak.

Ellen sat there a little impatiently while Kurt finished his meal.

"I'm getting there," he told her. He then had a thought. "How about coming diving with us this afternoon. I can give you a brief lesson."

"Sounds good," she agreed.

Kurt finally finished his steak and paid the bill.

Upstairs, the door was locked. Kurt opened it with his key and entered to find the room empty. Pete and Matt were still out to lunch.

"Close the door and lock it," Kurt instructed Ellen. When she had done just that, Kurt removed the Spanish gold from beneath the mattress of the double bed. They were wrapped up in a T-shirt now, and he unraveled it.

The coins reflected in Ellen's eyes, adding gold flecks to the deep shades of blue. She picked up a couple of the coins and studied them. "Wow," she said softly. "How come they're not all covered in tarnish or growths or something?"

Kurt picked up a coin, flipping it around in his fingers. "That's the beauty of gold. It's impervious to the elements. Nothing grows on it. Nothing tarnishes it."

"But," Ellen protested, "I've had gold rings and chains that have gone discoloured."

"Yeah, but this is pure gold. Twenty-four carat stuff. The gold people wear is rarely pure. It's got a percentage of other metals in it to harden it."

At that moment the door opened and Pete and

Matt entered. They both looked surprised to see Ellen in there, and even more surprised to see that Kurt had shown her their horde of doubloons.

Matt appeared to be about to protest, but then changed his mind. Instead, he said, "The weather's cleared. We'll be able to go diving again."

Kurt glanced out the balcony windows, where it was still cloudy, but the rain had stopped and the wind had died to a gentle breeze. He turned to Ellen. "Why don't you go get ready, and meet us back here in a few minutes."

She nodded, sensing a certain unease between the three men, and left without a word.

When she'd gone, Matt turned on Kurt. "What the hell are you doing?" he said angrily.

"What are you talking about?" Kurt replied calmly.

"Showing your girlfriend the coins! We were supposed to keep this thing secret."

"I'm in charge of this little operation!" Kurt said testily. "I can show whoever I want!"

"You're in charge!" Matt bit back. "Since when are you in charge?"

"Since neither of you two knew a thing about the cave, or the coins. And you still wouldn't know anything about it if I hadn't told you." He stared at Matt with a challenging glare. His heart was hammering. He'd known Matt for a long time, and confrontations like this were a rare thing.

"Well what happened, *Mr. boss man*, to all this bullshit about keeping this thing quiet so nobody else got wind of what we were doing?"

"Ellen's not about to tell anybody. She promised to keep quiet. Besides, she's here on the island alone.

She doesn't know anybody else but us. Whereas, if we told somebody like Josh, who rents out boats and diving gear all day, and who is a diver himself, who knows what would happen then? It's a totally different situation with Ellen."

Matt appeared to be considering Kurt's words, then he reluctantly shrugged. "Okay, but let's not let anybody else in on this. We don't want the whole bloody resort in there searching for gold."

Kurt grinned suddenly. "So now who is being greedy? Ellen won't tell anybody. And she's not looking for a cut in what we find. She just wants to come diving with us. That's all."

On the way out to Hollow Island, with the sun threatening to break through a thin membrane of cloud, Ellen posed a question. "Why was this cave sealed up in the first place?"

"That's apparently a bit of a mystery," Pete offered.

"Yeah, no one seems to know too much about it," Matt told her. "At least, Kurt couldn't dig up any information on it, anyway."

"And as far as I know," Kurt put in, "only one of the original islanders remains on Fishhook. He's an old guy who lives in a shack on the eastern side. The rest of the islanders were relocated elsewhere when this resort was built by Berwicks."

"How come you don't go ask this old man?" Ellen queried.

Kurt shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I will before we leave. But right now I'm far more interested in finding gold than solving mysteries."

"I do know one thing about this island," Ellen conceded. "That is it used to be inhabited by a bunch

of voodoo heads. Witchdoctors."

"Yeah, I know," said Kurt. "Louis Lorenz' skull became the prized possession of one of them. But that was hundreds of years ago."

"There was something else I heard about this place," Ellen went on, pausing to light a smoke. "Something my girlfriend's father told me a few weeks ago when he heard I was coming out here for a vacation."

"And what's that?" Matt sounded interested.

Kurt sensed that Matt was more at ease with the fact of Ellen knowing about the gold now. And Pete didn't seem to mind.

Ellen answered, "The islanders who used to live here claimed that the place was haunted. Particularly Hollow Island. Did you know there was a series of murders out here around twenty years ago?"

Kurt nodded.

"Well the islanders claim that they were committed by something that wasn't human."

Matt smirked. "Maybe it was a big bad fish that they trapped in the cave. And he's going to come and get us when we go down there."

"I never said I believed the story," Ellen returned, sounding a little bit annoyed. "I'm just telling you what I heard."

"Yeah, well islanders in these parts are known to be a superstitious lot," Pete said.

Matt eased the boat across the channel dividing Hollow and Fishhook Islands and cut the motor.

As they climbed out, Kurt suddenly recalled something he'd seen in their rush to beat the storm back to the resort that morning. "I'll be back in a second," he said and wandered off through the thin

jungle, which was steamy from the recent rain, to the clearing in the centre.

"Where are you going?" Matt called after him.

But Kurt didn't answer. He couldn't answer. His voice was caught in his throat when he laid eyes on what was waiting for him in the centre of Hollow Island. He stared, mesmerised, at what he saw. Then he awoke from his stupor and snapped off several photographs. When he found his voice, he shouted, "Come here, you guys!"

Matt, Pete and Ellen crashed through the bushes and joined Kurt in the clearing.

Kurt said, "I think we've found Josh's missing wetsuits."

The other three gaped, open-mouthed, at the six tall figures that stood in the clearing.

"They look like scarecrows," Pete observed.

"That's exactly what they are," Kurt agreed. He walked closer to the figures and felt them with a hand. Each of them wore a full-length, brightly-coloured, brand new wetsuit. The wetsuits were hung over a wooden frame and stuffed with straw and sea grass. On each one's head rested a new straw hat with floral hat-bands. But it was the head of each one that stunned him the most.

"Are those skulls real?" Matt wondered, coming close to touch one of them. He reached up to the nearest scarecrow, which stood a good six inches taller than he, and gingerly traced a finger over the grinning teeth of the skull. "It's real, all right," he reported.

"Shit!" Pete exclaimed.. "Who would have built these bizarre things?"

"Fuck knows," Matt said.

"We'll have to head back and report this," Pete told them.

"No," Kurt said firmly. "At least, not yet. First we dive in the cave. Then we report them."

"What?" Pete was astonished.

"Look," Kurt explained. "If we report these now, we may never get another chance to look in the cave. Not with the police, reporters, and God knows who else out here nosing around. Let's take one more dive, find as much as we can, then we report them."

"Gives me the creeps," Ellen admitted. "Where did those skulls come from?"

"Fuck knows," Matt said again, still staring mesmerised at the figures.

Kurt pulled himself away from the intriguing scarecrows. "Let's go diving."

One by one they filed back to the cove. Kurt quickly assembled his diving gear, keener than ever now to get back into the cave. Then he remembered he'd promised Ellen a brief diving lesson, and felt himself torn between an urgency to forget it and use the time to search for more gold - as they may not get another chance - and to keep his promise to her and give her a quick lesson.

But Ellen made up his mind for him. She touched his arm. "Forget today's lesson. You can teach me another time. You've got more important things to do right now."

Kurt was both surprised and pleased by her understanding. "You sure?" he asked.

She nodded.

He hoisted his tank out of the boat. "I will teach you, though. If not today, tomorrow or the next."

"I know you will." She smiled at him with a

smile from the heart, and Kurt got the distinct impression from that smile and the look in her eyes that she was beginning to care for him. "Be careful down there," she added.

"I will." Kurt looked back through the trees toward the clearing, where he could just make out the bright colours of the scarecrows' wetsuit clothing. "You be careful up here. Keep an eye out." He nodded towards the clearing. "We don't know what crazy fool built those things."

Looking into her eyes, once more he felt the extreme urge to kiss her. But now still didn't feel like the right time, although he'd figured out by now that she was definitely interested in him in a romantic way. Maybe he would kiss her later. He just didn't want to put her off by her thinking he was moving too fast.

Instead, he winked at her and moved off toward the channel, where Matt and Pete were already preparing to drop into the water.

"You guys go on in if you want," Kurt told them, seeing they were ready. "I'll meet you down there."

Matt nodded and put in his mouthpiece. He dropped into the water, disappearing in a stream of bubbles. Pete gave Kurt the okay sign then dropped in after Matt.

Kurt hurriedly slipped into his fins and mask, strapped on the weight belt and knife, and shrugged into his tank. He squeezed the mouthpiece into his mouth, inhaled a few times to test that the air was coming through okay, then splashed into the water.

He kicked hard for the bottom, clearing his ears a number of times on his descent. At the cave mouth he noticed that the others had already ventured inside.

Kurt peered in, couldn't see any sign of their lights. An involuntary shiver tingled up his spine, not fancying venturing into that dark tunnel all on his lonesome.

What the hell, he thought, switching on his flashlight and kicking inside. There's nothing in there but water and stone walls.

The torch beam penetrated ahead about thirty feet before it was consumed by the black tunnel. He swam on, repeatedly glancing behind him, but by now he'd rounded the bend and the cave entrance was out of sight. All he could see in that direction was sheer blackness; a darkness that was darker than dark, a total absence of light.

Kurt arrived at the section where the tunnel branched off into two. He swam towards the right one and glanced into the left as he went by. His heart gave a sudden jolt. He wasn't sure what he'd seen, or even certain if he'd seen anything at all, but thought he saw two pinpricks of red light down that tunnel. He had the impression he'd seen something like it before, but couldn't remember where.

He swam on, more quickly now, and was relieved to spy the light of the cavern ahead, and even more relieved to see his friends there digging in the sand.

They were excavating a shallow pit just outside the cavern, near to where they'd dug up a heap of doubloons earlier in the day.

Kurt tapped Pete's shoulder and raised his hands. Find anything? Pete shined his flashlight on his clenched fist and opened it. Two doubloons rested in his palm.

Spurred on by the discovery of more gold, Kurt began digging a hole a little bit further down the

tunnel. Instead of fanning this time, which seemed to take an eternity, he raked his fingers through the sand. He dug deeper each time, and on the fourth rake, digging down about eight inches, his fingers scooped up a pile of coins. He quickly counted them. Six. He placed them in a plastic bag he'd brought for that purpose. He folded the bag and slipped it into his pants, then continued. After discovering nothing more in that spot, he raked a new spot a few inches over. Delving deeply, he dug up three more coins. These were placed into the bag with the others.

For half an hour he worked that general area. His efforts produced a dozen more coins, then the area seemed to run dry. Kurt kicked over to his friends and offered up the bag to Pete to put his find in. Pete placed about two dozen coins inside. Kurt looked at Matt, but Matt indicated Pete had all the stash.

Matt commenced a new hole. Kurt looked on while Pete continued probing the old excavation. Matt's current hole proved fruitless, so he tried a spot between there and where Kurt had been digging a few moments ago.

Kurt trained the torch on the sand while Matt fanned away. There was a glint almost immediately. Kurt snatched the doubloon from its watery grave and waited for more glints. They came thick and fast, Matt uncovering coins quicker than Kurt could pluck them out and place them in the bag.

They worked this area for a further fifteen minutes, then the supply of Spanish loot ran dry.

Matt grabbed Kurt's wrist and shone the flashlight beam on his watch. Matt tapped the watch. *Time to go*, he was saying.

Kurt shook his head and pointed to the sand. *I'm*

staying and digging for more coins. Still time yet.

Matt's eyes darkened and he tapped Kurt's watch more firmly. *Let's go!*

Still Kurt refused. He wanted to utilise every possible second he could to find more gold.

Frustrated, Matt grabbed Pete and indicated towards the tunnel. Pete swam off, heading for the channel. Matt clutched Kurt's shoulder on his way past, trying to pull him out after him. But Kurt shrugged him off. He watched Matt disappear down the shaft, then recommenced digging in the sand.

He uncovered several more doubloons, and placed them into the now bulging bag.

Everything was silent as he dug for more. He felt in a dreamlike state, here alone in the water, digging in the sand. But after finding nothing more, that serene state disappeared and he realised he must be perilously close to being out of air.

Clutching the bag of coins he kicked into the tunnel.

He'd only traveled about half the distance to the cave entrance when he felt a tightness of breathing. Now he *was* out of air. He managed to suck one last lungful from the exhausted tank and kicked madly along the tunnel. He approached the bend so quickly he bumped into the wall. Recovering rapidly with no time to waste, Kurt thrashed wildly along the last stretch of tunnel. His lungs were aching, hungry for air. The entrance was getting closer, but not quickly enough. Nowhere near quickly enough.

And he feared he wasn't going to make it.

Eight

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

Kurt let out a stream of bubbles to relieve some of the pressure in his lungs.

The cave mouth was getting brighter, larger by the second. And next thing he was shooting through it out into the channel. He kicked hard for the surface, but the weight of the coins was holding him back. Rather than drop them, he unsnapped his weight belt and let it sink to the bottom. That lightened the load somewhat and he shot upward, ignoring the rule to rise no faster than his exhaled bubbles. There was no time for that. He felt lightheaded now, as if on the verge of passing out.

With two tremendous thrusts of his fins, simultaneously exhaling the last of the air in his lungs, Kurt broke the surface where he gasped for breath. He found it difficult to get any air into his lungs, he was puffing that much. But he eventually settled down and was able to inhale some good deep breaths.

Matt reached down and dragged him bodily out of the water.

"You're a fucking idiot!" Matt shouted at him when Kurt was on the rocks. "You could have fucking killed yourself! You know that?"

Kurt nodded, feeling like the complete idiot that he knew he was. "I know. You're right. That was a stupid thing to do."

"Damn right it was!" Matt assured him. He then visibly attempted to calm himself down. "It wasn't all your fault," he relented with a sigh. "I shouldn't have let you stay down there."

"I didn't give you much choice," Kurt admitted. "It was either go, or stay there and run out of air as well."

Matt's anger briefly fired up again. He jabbed a finger into Kurt's chest. "Just don't do anything like that again!"

Kurt just nodded, not knowing what else to say.

"You okay, buddy?" Pete asked him.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Had to drop my weights on the way up, though. They were holding me back. It was either them or the gold. And there was no way I was dropping this bundle of booty." He held up the heavy plastic bag bulging with doubloons.

"How many have we got?" Pete asked, eyeing the bag of gold with excitement.

"I don't know. I haven't counted them yet."

"You two go on back to the boat. I'm going down for the weight belt," Matt said.

Before Kurt could protest, Matt had jumped into the water and free-dived down to the bottom.

Kurt carried Matt's tank for him, and he and Pete stowed all the gear into the boat.

"Is everything okay?" Ellen asked. "What was all that shouting about?"

"I just did a dumb thing," Kurt told her, feeling embarrassed. Here he was, supposed to be going to teach her to dive, and he couldn't even follow the rules himself.

Matt returned with Kurt's weight belt.

"Thanks," Kurt offered.

Matt just nodded and hauled the boat out into the water. Kurt got behind the wheel and started the motor. He drove the craft back to Fishhook Cove at a slow pace. Nobody said a word on the return journey.

The sun was shining brightly now as they reached the jetty, and the doubloons gleamed resplendently in the bottom of the boat.

"Better stuff those in the backpack," Kurt said to Pete over his shoulder.

Pete quickly stowed the coins while Matt leaped onto the wharf and moored the runabout. Together they carried the gear inside.

"We found your wetsuits," Pete told the black man.

"Where?" Josh was surprised.

"On Hollow Island," said Matt. "Somebody made scarecrows out of them."

Josh seemed flustered by the knowledge, and Kurt could see the wheels turning in his brain. Josh's eyes darkened. "Scarecrows?" he said. He appeared to have something else to say on the matter, but held it back. Instead, he said, "I better close up shop and go take a look."

"You may want to call in the police first and take them with you," Kurt advised.

Josh raised his eyebrows questioningly.

Bluntly, Kurt said, "The scarecrows have got human skulls for heads."

Josh was stunned by this revelation. "They can't have."

"I assure you they have," Kurt said firmly.

"And they're definitely real," Matt convinced the man. "I touched one of them."

"Shit!" Josh exclaimed, a response which surprised everyone. "It can't be. It can't be happening again."

"What are you talking about?" Kurt wanted to know.

Josh was deep in thought. He shook his head. "Nothing. Forget about it." He went deep into his own thoughts again. Suddenly he turned on Kurt. "You guys have been diving in that spot a number of times now."

"Yeah," Kurt conceded. "So what?"

"What have you been up to?"

"Just diving," Kurt tried to be evasive, but it wasn't going to work this time.

"But where exactly? First you wanted a crowbar. Then waterproof flashlights. You've opened up that damned cave, haven't you!" The last sentence was a statement, not a question.

"Maybe," Kurt admitted.

"You have, haven't you!" Josh said vehemently, his hot breath stinging Kurt's face.

What is this? Kurt thought. Pick on Kurt day.

"Shit!" Josh exclaimed again. "What did you open up that damned cave for? It was sealed shut for a reason!"

"What reason?" Kurt protested. "What the hell are you talking about?" He was annoyed now, sick of the outbursts being flung his way.

"That's not your concern," Josh said irritably, his disposition totally reversed from the placid, friendly nature he usually exuded.

"Well it sure sounds like it's my concern!" Kurt challenged.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Josh said

more calmly. "I've got to get out to Hollow Island as soon as possible." He went deep into thought again, then looked around at the four confused faces that stared back at him. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave now." He handed them their deposit back. "I've gotta close up shop for a while."

When the four of them got back to the room, Ellen said, "What the hell was all that about?"

Kurt shrugged. "Search me. I seem to be putting everyone off-side today."

"It's not your fault the guy's a loon," Matt said to Kurt. "He probably built the fucking scarecrows himself. He sounds crazy enough to. Anyway, ignore him. Let him sort it all out." Then he said excitedly, "Let's count up the loot."

Pete got out the plastic bag and poured the contents onto the bed. Kurt counted them into piles of ten, and finished with a total of seventy-seven coins.

"Wow!" Ellen said in awe. "They must be worth a bit."

"How many's that give us in total, Kurt?" Matt asked.

Kurt performed some quick mental calculations. "A hundred and thirteen doubloons," he announced with pleasure.

Pete beamed. "If we weren't rich before, we're sure getting there now."

Josh beached the boat in the cove on Hollow Island. More cloud cover had blotted out the sun. Another storm was brewing in the south.

He made for the clearing and silently pondered the six abstract-looking scarecrows that stood lifeless

before him. He'd called the police in Nassau, and they would be here soon to examine the things and dismantle them.

Josh went back to the boat and prepared some diving gear.

He strapped on a weight belt and knife, slipped a mask onto his forehead. He then removed a box from a compartment in the console. Inside was some plastic explosive wired up to a detonator and timing device. Putting the device down, he slipped into a scuba tank, grabbed some fins and the charge, then walked across the rocks to the channel.

Below the surface the water was clear, but gloomy due to the lack of sunlight.

Josh kicked down to the bottom, where he saw a pile of rocks half-buried in the sand. Hovering a few feet above the seabed, he eyed the open cave with a mixture of dread and fascination. He'd never actually seen what it was that the sergeant and Mr. Shaw had trapped in there all those years ago, but he'd been told about it later by some of the other men on the island. And he knew what evil lurked inside there. It had to be stopped before it went on another rampage.

He dropped to the bottom and placed the charge amid the pile of broken wall. He was hoping the loose rocks would act like splitting atoms and greatly increase the potency of the explosion. Josh wanted to seal that cave good and tight so nobody opened it ever again.

I should've stopped those kids, he thought. Should have warned them away, or refused to hire them the gear once I'd become suspicious of what they were up to. Probably heard about the treasure that was once in here. But he was pretty sure that had

all been found long ago.

As Josh arranged rocks around the charge, a shadow passed overhead. He quickly looked up but the shadow was gone. Then he spied a movement out of the corner of his eye to the left, and before he had time to move the creature was upon him.

Josh flailed at it with an outstretched leg. But this just gave the tiger shark an easy limb to prey on. The big fish obliged him and took the offering into its cavernous mouth. Josh gritted his teeth in pain as the predator bit deeply into his thigh muscles, sinking three rows of sharp teeth right through to the bone. The thing rolled and thrashed its head from side to side, trying to tear off the leg. Josh felt faint now, the pain was unbearable. The water had clouded with blood. He was scared to death.

He remembered the knife and reached for it, but it was strapped to the leg that was in the shark's mouth. He panicked and started hammering at the shark's nose and tried to poke it in the eyes. But the creature was cleverer than that. It rolled again, the force of the roll flinging Josh's upper body away from its head. Josh looked down as he was flung about and could see the charge only a few feet away from his outstretched hand.

It was all over for him now, he knew that. There was no escaping this creature's awesome death grip. If he could just reach that charge and set off the bomb, then maybe, just maybe, he could save a lot of other people's lives.

But the shark proved clever again, too clever for the limited brain matter that it possessed, and dragged Josh well away from the cave.

Josh's last thought before he passed out was how

fast the creature could swim as it dragged him out to sea.

Nine

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

A police helicopter landed on Hollow Island a few minutes later. Four men filed out into the clearing; a police sergeant, a deputy, the coroner and the pilot.

The sergeant knew Josh pretty well and was surprised when the man wasn't there to greet them like he said he would. Pushed for time and not bothering to wait for Josh to arrive, the sergeant took his men over to the scarecrows, which stood out like six beacons.

"Pull these things down and dump those skulls into a body bag," the sergeant instructed. "We'll take them back for analysis. Maybe we can match up dental records or something."

The pilot and the deputy uprooted the scarecrows, stripped them of their hats and wetsuits and removed the skulls. They didn't bother to dismantle the wooden limbs. The coroner examined each skull as it was removed, and grunted when he'd come to an unofficial conclusion about something.

"These skulls have been around for a long time," the coroner told the sergeant. "They're definitely human. And whoever they belonged to, these people appear to have been deceased for a considerable number of years."

"How many years?" the sergeant quizzed, interested.

The coroner rubbed his jutting chin. "Hard to say, but at least ten or more. Maybe fifteen or twenty."

"Reminds me of a case the Nassau Police were involved in out here about twenty years ago. Six people murdered. All decapitated. Their heads were never found. The murderer was never found, either, and one of our own men was killed in an explosion on this very island. Though no one seemed to be able to tell us exactly what happened that morning. Or why he was messing about with explosives."

Through a gap in the trees, the sergeant spied a runabout beached in the cove. He left the clearing and went to investigate. The boat was empty, nobody in or around it. The sergeant scanned the area, saw no one.

"Hmm," he mused. He figured it was one of Josh's boats, considering Josh said he was going to be here. But where was Josh? Diving, maybe?

The sergeant strolled casually across the rocks and arrived at the top of the channel. He looked into the water, heard thunder rumbling off in the distance. Couldn't see Josh in the water anywhere. But the water seemed to have a strange hue to it. There were patches of a deep greeny-red colour. It looked like blood.

Feeling concerned at the sight of that, the man walked briskly back to the boat, and a quick search of the craft produced a diver's mask. When he couldn't find any other equipment, he figured that would have to do.

Back at the channel, he stripped off his clothes down to his boxer shorts, slipped the mask onto his face, scanned the now-clearing water for any predators, then jumped in. Treading water on the top,

he inhaled a deep breath and duck-dived towards the bottom.

He had difficulty clearing his ears on the way down and was suffering some pain when he reached the bottom. A quick look around told him Josh wasn't here. Then he saw the cave and swam over to it. It looked like it had been recently forced open. There were piles of loose rock in the sand at the entrance. He then saw something that wasn't rock and scooped it up. Needing oxygen by this time, he made for the surface, thinking Josh might be exploring the cave.

The sergeant broke the surface and climbed onto the rocks to examine what he'd found. C4 plastic explosive, wired up with a detonating device and a timer. Had Josh placed this down there? And if so, why?

With a shrug of his shoulders, he took it back to the boat.

He decided to wait half an hour. If Josh didn't show up by then, he had probably been...Probably been what? Taken by a shark? He didn't like the look of that water. Was sure it was blood he'd seen. He hoped he was wrong, but feared he wasn't.

The scarecrow roamed the tunnels beneath Hollow Island. It walked slowly through its watery hideaway to the cavern, wanting to check if night had fallen. When it entered the cavern, it found it filled with a misty twilight. The creature rose to the surface. There was a brilliant flash of light from above, followed by the raucous sound of earsplitting thunder. Good, it thought. Good. A storm was approaching. Soon, very soon, it would all be happening.

It climbed onto the ledge and was surprised to find the pile of doubloons gone.

With nothing to accomplish for many years, trapped in this tunnel, it had sifted through the sand, idly collecting any coins it could find. The doubloons had once been the treasure of a former life, when the scarecrow had been Louis Lorenz, the most feared of all pirates. That life had been taken away by the Spanish soldiers. But they'd only managed to kill the body, not the spirit. And with the help of a witchdoctor, that spirit had been preserved. The head from its former life had been placed on a pole and made into the form that it had now become; set in a field, year after year watching the storms come and go. Come and go. Waiting, always waiting, for that chance lightning strike to hit it between the eyes and bring its spirit to life once more in a physical form.

For a mere few days it'd had that freedom to roam around, seeking the revenge it had desired for oh-so-many years. It hated the world, despised its people. They were all Spaniards, it was sure, and they all deserved to die.

But it couldn't accomplish that task alone. Oh, no. It needed some help, more creatures like itself to aid it in its quest: An insatiable desire to destroy mankind. They were all responsible for taking away its former life, and all deserved to be punished.

The scarecrow contemplated the empty ledge for a few moments more. The missing coins were of no consequence. Gold was of no use to it now; not any more.

It was time to go outside and await the storm. He had the power now - a power he was not strong enough to possess before - a power to summon the

lightning to its friends it had set up in the clearing. The spells it had performed had kept the spirits of those it'd killed alive, spells it had learnt from the witchdoctor when its own spirit was in the houngan's care. The scarecrow had instilled its own feelings of hatred into its offspring, and soon they would come alive to roam as he, armed with only one desire, one urge, one mind: An unquenchable thirst to destroy mankind.

The scarecrow made its way out of the cave and onto the island. When it reached the clearing, lightning flashing intermittently across the darkening sky, it was filled with rage. Its offspring were gone.

On the ground it saw the remains of the six scarecrows, now reduced to mere wooden frames. But what fuelled its rage most were the missing skulls.

The creature stood there seething for a few moments more, greatly distraught by this setback in its plans.

But it could rebuild them, and soon. All it needed were more skulls, and tonight it would go and get them.

The scarecrow waded back into the water and through the cave. It emerged a few moments later carrying the scythe, its blade now a gleaming length of lethal steel again after a day's careful polishing.

On the sea bed, it then walked across the channel and up onto Fishhook Island.

Ten

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

"You've had a hard time of it today," Ellen noted.

Kurt shrugged, sitting on the couch in Ellen's suite, cradling a mug of coffee. "Yeah, I've had a few confrontations. Two of them with Matt, which is unusual. We usually don't argue at all. Even when I was living with him and his family."

"Did Matt complain about you telling me about the gold?" Ellen asked. "I noticed there was a bit of tension in your room this afternoon when they walked in."

Kurt went on to explain the situation, about how he'd wanted to keep it quiet and how Matt was surprised he'd told her about it all.

"Was he afraid I'd shoot my mouth off?" Ellen lit a cigarette and stepped into the kitchenette to locate an ashtray. She returned and sat adjacent to him in an armchair.

"A little. But I knew you wouldn't. You're not the type. But apart from that, you don't even really know anyone here besides us."

"Did he think I would want a cut in the treasure if I became involved?"

Kurt shook his head. "No, not really. Just more concerned about our secret getting out."

"What about that guy at the dive shop? He seemed to be getting on your case a bit, too."

"I think he was getting on all our cases. For some reason he seemed to be directing the bulk of it at me, though."

"What was all that about, do you think?" Ellen drew on her cigarette and exhaled smoke towards the ceiling.

Kurt thought she looked sexy the way she exhaled that smoke, something to do with the way she pursed her lips. He forced himself to concentrate on the question she'd asked him. "I really have no idea, to be quite honest. He seemed really pissed off that we'd got that cave open for some reason. Hell knows why?"

"Maybe he wanted to go for the gold himself?" Ellen mused.

"If that was the case, then why didn't he himself open up the cave and do just that?" Kurt put it to her.

Ellen couldn't answer that question. Instead, she asked another on a different subject. "What's Australia like? A lot of people hold the impression of kangaroos bounding through the streets, and stuff like that."

Kurt laughed. "I've heard that. No, there aren't kangaroos bounding along the streets. Contrary to popular belief in some sections of the US, Australia isn't a backward country. It's just as upmarket and civilized as America." He finished his coffee.

"Want another one?" Ellen offered, standing up.

"Sure, but you stay there. I'll get it." He moved over to the kitchenette, where the window overlooked the back of the resort, facing the east. The storm had passed an hour ago, and in the moonlight he could see palms, and beyond that the shimmer of the ocean. He dumped coffee into two mugs, sugar in his, none for

Ellen. Then he poured in the boiling water and some milk, and took them back over to the living area.

"It's true Australia is basically a barren country," he continued when he was settled on the couch again. "Most of the population lives on the coastline where things are generally more fertile. That's not to say there is no fertile ground inland. That's where all the farms are. But there is a lot of desert area out in central Australia, plus much of the other inland areas are covered in scrubland. The Australian coastline is beautiful, though. And there's so much of it. Lot's of beaches, which I like."

"And what are the Australian people like?" she asked, sipping her coffee.

"Pretty much an easy going lot. Not everyone's easy going of course, but the general atmosphere is laid back. Especially on the Gold Coast, where I lived for most of my time back home."

"I've heard of the Gold Coast. It's a major tourist city, isn't it?"

"Yeah. The lifestyle's sort of similar to Miami and Miami Beach. I guess that's why I feel at home in Miami."

"There's some sort of big car race on the Gold Coast. I remember my father watching it on television a few months ago."

"That's the Indy Grand Prix," Kurt enlightened her.

"Do you miss Australia?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes. But I'm pretty happy living in Florida. I've been back home a couple of times; once soon after my parents died, and again last summer. It was winter in Australia at the time. Winter on the Gold Coast is pretty mild, though."

"But Australia can be limited in its opportunities sometimes, having only a small population of some twenty odd million people."

"Sounds deserted," Ellen said.

"No, not really. Australia is a vast country, and with only twenty million or so people you would get the impression it must seem pretty deserted. But like I said, most of the population lives on the coastline. Especially the east coast. The Gold Coast has a resident population of around half a million. That's a population that can temporarily treble in a good tourist season. It's a pretty busy area for only a forty kilometre strip. That's about twenty-six miles or something.

"But like I was saying, some of the opportunities can be limited back there, simply because there aren't enough people to support things. Especially creative things or sports. An example is like this: A good footballer in Australia is doing exceptionally well if he's contracted for five hundred thousand dollars a season. Whereas, an American footballer of similar standing would be commanding dollars in the multiple millions, or tens of millions. And that's all just simply due to the much greater population supporting the sport. It's the same with my field; writing and photography. You can make more money from it in the US, because there are more people buying books and publications."

"You don't look like a writer," Ellen told him with a smile.

"What's a writer look like?"

"I don't know. Kind of dorky, with glasses and a beard. You look more like the outdoors type. How did you get interested in writing to begin with?"

"I'm a photographer as well as a writer, and my style of photography involves a lot of outdoor work. And just because you're a writer, it doesn't mean you sit in doors all day, or never do any exercise. I love the outdoors. When I write, I spend time indoors. When I'm not writing, I'm outdoors. Suits me down to the ground.

"As for how I got interested to start with. Well, I've always read a lot. Novels, magazines, newspapers, non-fiction books on helpful subjects and the like. In high school I received good reports on essays and papers, and I worked on the school newspaper. I did a part-time night course in photography, which included black and white and colour processing.

"Well, after working on the school newspaper in high school, I became pretty interested in pursuing that line as a career. Not necessarily as a news reporter or anything, but more so as a feature writer. And if I'm capable of taking my own quality photographs for the pieces I write, it adds up to giving me more chances in the job market. And like I said to you the other evening, I'd eventually like to go freelance. Maybe even try my hand at a few novels. I have this thing about the Spanish conquest of the New World era, so maybe I'll try some novels in the historical genre."

"That's how you knew all about the cave and the treasure this pirate, Louis...."

"Louis Lorenz," Kurt finished for her.

"Yeah, him. That's how you knew about the treasure he'd dumped down the hole on Hollow island. From reading books on that subject?"

"Pretty much. But part of that was due to me

digging up research on this island when we were planning a vacation out here."

"Do you think you'll be able to dive for more treasure?"

Kurt shrugged. "I don't know. It all depends on what happened out there this afternoon. The way Josh was acting, he probably won't hire us the gear if he knows we're going out there again."

"He can't stop you," Ellen pointed out. "Just complain to the hotel management and they'll order him to hire you the gear."

"That's true. But I'd really like to know what his problem was this afternoon." Kurt shook his head after a few seconds of trying to figure it out, unable to reach any conclusions.

He noticed Ellen eyeing him with a certain longing. He wasn't sure if it was the right time or not, but it was time to take a chance. "Why don't you come sit over here," he said to her, his voice soft and inviting.

She smiled, put down her mug on the coffee table and sat close to him on the couch.

Kurt cupped her face in his hands and kissed her gently on the lips. They were soft and sweet, just as he'd imagined many times that they'd be like.

"I've been waiting for you to do that," she said, with a sultry look in her eyes. "I was nearly going to make the first move myself, but I thought you might think I was too forward."

"Never," Kurt assured her. "I like a girl to be forward in her feelings."

He kissed her again and her lips parted, allowing his eager tongue access to the sweet juices of her mouth. He explored her mouth with his tongue, she

explored his with her own; and soon they were virtually devouring each other.

Ellen broke the embrace. Kurt immediately feared he'd gone too far, but Ellen's suggestion totally allayed those fears.

"Why don't you go turn off the light and spend the night with me," she said in a seductive tone.

Kurt got up and moved awkwardly over to the light switch, his member like hardened steel in his pants. He turned off the light and watched Ellen undress in the faint glow of the moon that came through the balcony doors. His heart hammering and his flesh eager, Kurt undressed and joined her in the bed where they collapsed in a heated embrace.

Darleen walked south along the beach of Fishhook Island. She was still fuming from her argument with her boyfriend, Graham.

How dare he accuse me of flirting when he was the one smiling and winking at that dumb blond by the bar!

"If I find out he's done anything with another woman," she said to herself, "I swear, I will cut that bastard's balls off!"

A half moon had risen in the eastern skies, and it cast an eerie silver glow across the treetops to her left. She shuddered, not from being cold, but because she was out here alone. She was way too agitated to go back yet, though, so she kept on walking, wrapping her arms around her as if to protect herself from the night.

Up ahead someone was standing on the beach, motionless. Darleen's heart pounded. But as she drew slowly nearer, she saw the long extension of a

fishing rod angling out over the water. She sighed. It was just a fisherman.

As she passed him, the young man turned his head and said, "Hey, baby. Instead of hanging my pole out over the water, maybe I could stick it inside you?"

"Shove it up your ass, creep!" Darleen said savagely.

"Fiery, eh!" he called after her as she walked away from him down the beach. "I like that in a woman!"

Darleen was about to respond again, but thought better of it. She decided it was best to ignore the jerk...in case he was more than just all talk.

After walking for a further ten minutes, Darleen rounded the southern tip of the island. A smaller island offshore lay basking in the placid moonlight. She thought about continuing her circumference of the island and walking back to the resort on the eastern beach. But she didn't want to venture over there. It was all thick jungle on that side. So instead, she decided to take her chances in passing by the fisherman again. Hopefully he would be gone by then.

Darleen turned and started walking back in the direction she'd come.

After walking for a while she saw that the fisherman was still there. She paused, steeled herself and mentally prepared some comeback lines in case he offered any more of his lewd remarks, then walked briskly toward him.

When she was within ten feet of him, the fisherman turned toward her. Darleen gasped in horror when she saw the skull-like face and the

penetrating red orbs that were its eyes. The thing dropped the fishing rod and was instantly clutching something else in its hands.

Darleen screamed when she saw the shimmering blade in the moonlight, its wide arc coming to an abrupt halt as it slashed into her throat. A geyser of dark blood jettisoned from her neck, splattering all over the scarecrow's body. The blade only managed to cut halfway through, and the scarecrow had to saw it the rest of the way. The blade made a squelching sound as it severed sinews and tissues laden with blood. But the head eventually came free and plopped onto the sand.

I will have to sharpen this damn blade a little more, the creature thought to itself.

The scarecrow placed Darleen's head into the old canvas bag next to the head of the fisherman, stripped her of her clothes, then dragged the girl's body out into the water where the sharks would finish her off. Unlike the time before when it'd killed on this island, it planned to get rid of the evidence so no one hunted it down this time.

Pleased with its work so far, the scarecrow moved on in search of more prey.

Ellen parted her legs beneath him and Kurt entered her. His dick was bursting with a raw energy; an energy that hadn't been released inside a woman for a couple of years. He thrust vigorously for the first few minutes, then realised he was going too fast and would cum too soon. He didn't want this first time with Ellen to be a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am affair. He wanted it to be lasting and intimate, postponing a climax as long as possible. Ellen was

becoming increasingly more special to him, and he wanted to demonstrate that in his lovemaking.

Encircling him with her arms and legs, Ellen rotated her hips, grinding her crotch against his stiffness in a circular motion, while Kurt continued to stroke in an up and down manner.

"How does that feel?" she whispered and tongued his ear.

"Good. Really good," he replied. And it did feel good. Her hot, wet lips wrapped tightly around his shaft sure felt better than holding it in his own hand.

Ellen groaned each time his meat went in deeply. "Fills me up," she sighed. "I love that full feeling. Sends tingles all through my body."

Growing in confidence with each stroke, Kurt's rhythm became smoother, more penetrating, and more regularly hitting Ellen's high spots.

He searched out her mouth with his and ran his tongue between her parted lips. She sucked on it and licked at it, then ran her tongue across his teeth and deeply down his throat. She tasted damned good, Kurt thought and devoured her mouth. He worked his lips and tongue over her cheek, lapped at her ear, then sank his teeth gently into her neck. Ellen responded favourably to this and ground her hips more vigorously, fervently humping to meet his accelerating thrusts.

Kurt propped himself up on his elbows, his chest hairs tickling Ellen's nipples. He pounded at her now, like he had when he'd first started off, sensing she was close to a climax. Her supple body rose and fell in harmony with him, like the rocking of a boat on a light swell. She gripped his arms around the triceps, digging her nails into the muscles. The action sent

pinpricks of pain through his nerves, but the pain was pleasurable.

Ellen's face furrowed in intense concentration, and she let out a long moan as she climaxed beneath him. Kurt kept humping away at her. He was close, could feel her tightening up after her orgasm, could feel his testicles contracting as he approached his own crescendo. Then the desired tingles of release shot up his shaft and he came in powerful bursts inside her. He seemed to cum forever, and could feel her tunnel flooding with his juices. But then his climax was over, and he rested on top of her.

"I think I'm really falling for you," she said.

The scarecrow located two more potential victims lying in sea grass amid the bushes just south of the resort grounds. It didn't kill them right away, however, but was content to watch them for a while with idle fascination.

They were a boy and a girl, making love. The scarecrow vaguely recalled what that had been like. In its former life, when it'd lived with its pirate band on this very island a long long time ago, it had indulged in many an orgy with the wenches that dwelled with them. Those had been good times. Carefree times of passion and pleasure, war and wealth.

But that was all gone. Now it was reduced to this: A useless form with no sex organs, no desires of that kind in a physical sense. Only in its memory of former days.

A surge of anger welled up inside it like lava through a volcano. It no longer wanted to watch this, could take no more of it. With one mighty heave, the

scarecrow brought the tip of the scythe crashing down into the boy's back. It went straight through him and through the girl beneath him as well.

The two uttered wet, gurgling sounds as they lay there stunned, impaled together on the sea grass, the blood filling their lungs and throats. Then with the sound of someone vomiting, the boy's mouth opened wide and blood gushed out over the girl's head. The scarecrow removed the blade. The two were dead now.

It had since gone back to Hollow Island to hone the blade some more, and now it was razor sharp, working as efficiently as it had done twenty years ago.

The scarecrow wasted no time and severed the heads from the bodies like a fisherman does when he lands a fish. The heads were placed into the sack, the bodies stripped of clothes, then dragged down to the water. No sooner had it floated the bodies out into the sea and several sharks thrashed them to pieces.

Sharks were easy to control, it thought. They had feeble minds and only one urge: To eat. It was a simple task to summon them to do the job.

That made four heads. Two more and tonight's work would be accomplished.

Eleven

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

Bright sunlight streamed in through the balcony doors.

Kurt awoke with it stinging his eyes. Dazed, he lifted his head from the pillow. Ellen was still asleep on his left, facing away from him, her beautiful dark-brown hair fanned out on the pillow behind her. Kurt blinked into the sunlight on the right. It must only be early, he thought, and checked his watch where he'd left it on the bedside table.

Six, forty-seven.

"Ah, shit," he groaned and lay back into the comfort of the pillows.

His body felt stiff from the night before. He wasn't used to exerting that kind of sexual vigour lately.

He smiled at his recollections of the night before. Not only did they make love for the first time, but two more times after that. Following the first effort, they rested in each others' arms for a while, then did it again, after which they both fell asleep. Ellen woke him in the middle of the night wanting more sex. She explained that she'd just had a dream about him making love to her, and she woke up feeling all horny. That time she'd gone down on him, got him hard, then climbed on top and worked away until they both came. By then, Kurt was totally exhausted; both in energy and male fluid.

He didn't want to get up this early. Felt like sleeping all day. But when he closed his eyes and tried, he just couldn't relax his mind and drift off into sleep.

Besides, Ellen was stirring beside him now. She rolled over to face in his direction and her eyelids fluttered open. She smiled a sleepy smile.

"Good morning," she said sweetly.

Kurt returned her smile. "Did you sleep well?"

"Mmm," she said contentedly. She reached down and gently stroked his naked genitals. Despite his fatigue, Kurt felt himself responding to her touch.

"Don't tell me you want it again?" he grinned.

"Uh, uh," she shook her head on the pillow. "I'd like to but I feel a bit sore."

"Yeah, my muscles are aching a bit, too," he told her.

"I wasn't talking about my muscles," she replied.

"Oh," Kurt understood.

Ellen kissed him on the cheek, eased her way out from under the sheets and stood up, her naked frame facing away from him. He eyed her form, enjoying the softness of her tanned shoulders, the sleekness of her back, and her firm, rounded buttocks and hips. She looked at him, smiled, and without saying a word, walked off towards the bathroom. As she rounded the bed, Kurt glimpsed her breasts and the wiry blackness of her pussy.

"You look good naked," he told her.

She paused at the doorway and eyed his form beneath the sheet. "So do you," she replied with a lewd smile.

"You can't even see me."

"I saw you last night," she reminded him and

closed the door behind her.

After a moment, Kurt heard the toilet flush, then the shower bursting into life. He lay back and relaxed. About five minutes later Ellen emerged, her wet hair brushed and a towel wrapped around her torso. The material just covered from her breasts down to her bum. His gaze followed her into the kitchen.

"I can't seem to take my eyes off you," he admitted.

"That's a good thing. Then your eyes won't be wandering onto any other girls," she said lightheartedly. "Now, what would you like for breakfast? I've got toast and I've got cereal. That's it for the menu I'm afraid."

Kurt sat up and grinned. "You mean I get sex three times *and* breakfast?"

"Lucky boy, aren't you," she teased.

"I'll have toast and the coffee of the day," he ordered. "Please."

Before breakfast was ready, Kurt dragged himself out of bed and into the bathroom. He showered quickly and dressed in the clothes he'd worn the night before. He ran Ellen's brush through his hair, then went out and joined her in the kitchen.

He grabbed her around the waist as she stood waiting for the toast to pop up from the toaster.

"You smell nice," he commented and nuzzled her neck. "And feel nice, and taste nice."

"Do I look nice, too?"

"Of course you do. I said that before."

The toast popped. She removed four slices and dumped them on the plate. "Ouch, that's hot," she complained. She pointed to one of two mugs on the

bench. "That's your coffee there. You can either have strawberry jam on your toast, or just plain butter. That's all I've got."

"Strawberry jam's fine." Kurt took his coffee out onto the balcony. The morning was clear and sultry. There'd be more storms this afternoon, he was certain. The air just had that feel about it. Several varieties of bird chirped in the trees below, their sweet songs combining to form a cacophony of tunes. He sipped his coffee and went back inside. "Matt and Pete will be wondering where I am."

Ellen smiled mischievously. "I think they might have figured out where you spent the night. What did they plan to get up to last night, by the way?"

"When I left them they were talking about going down to the games room to play roulette." Kurt chewed on a piece of toast. It tasted good and he realised he was pretty hungry. Must be from all the sex.

"What are you smiling about?" Ellen asked him.

"Huh?" Kurt didn't realise he had been smiling. "Oh, I was just thinking about the sex we had."

"What's funny about it?" she asked, chewing on her own toast.

"Nothing. I enjoyed myself. It's made me pretty hungry."

She grinned. "For more sex?"

"That too," he returned her grin. "But I was referring to food."

"You want more toast?"

He nodded. "I'll shout you lunch."

"You don't have to pay me back for breakfast. It's only toast and coffee. Besides, I want to do it."

"And I want to shout you lunch."

She shrugged agreeably.

Kurt stared at her for a moment. He hadn't felt this good in a long time. So alive.

"What?" she said self-consciously.

"I was just thinking about what you said last night," he told her. "About falling for me. Well,...I think I'm falling for you, too."

Ellen blushed, but her smile said it all. She'd been wanting to hear that.

Kurt left her after breakfast to check on his friends.

He found them both still fast asleep. Kurt stepped out onto the balcony. In the distance he saw the dive shop. It looked like it was closed. That's strange. He checked his watch. Twenty past seven. Should be open by now.

When he went back inside, he found Pete awake.

"You just get in?" Pete asked groggily.

"Yeah. I spent the night at Ellen's."

"Doing what?" Pete winked.

"I'll leave that up to your imagination," Kurt replied. "How'd you do on roulette last night?"

"I won fifty bucks. Matt lost about twenty and spent another thirty on drinks. He got pretty drunk actually. Virtually had to carry him out of there."

"That won't do his fitness any good."

"I think he was celebrating our good luck yesterday."

"That reminds me. Did you check on the doubloons last night?"

"Yeah. Before I went to bed. All present and accounted for."

Kurt rubbed his chin. "We'll have to find a better hiding place for them. Stuffing them under the

mattress isn't the most original of places."

"Who's going to steal them?"

"I don't know," Kurt said. "I'm just being cautious."

"Keep it down, you guys," Matt suddenly grumbled. "It's only fucking early."

Pete nodded in Matt's direction and said quietly to Kurt, "He's going to be grumpy for a while. What do you say we let him sleep and go downstairs for a coffee." He smiled knowingly. "You can fill me in on how things are going with Ellen."

Downstairs in their favourite coffee shop, Kurt ordered a cappuccino, while Pete decided he needed something stronger and asked for a short black.

"Hard night for you, too, was it?" Kurt said with a wink.

Pete shrugged lazily. "I had a few drinks," he admitted, his small brown eyes tinged with red. "But nowhere near as many as Matt."

Their coffee arrived. Kurt spooned the froth off his cappuccino while Pete sipped on his short black.

"So tell me about Ellen," he prompted.

"We're getting on great." Kurt grinned. "I had a hard night myself last night; but not because I was drinking. More through a lot of physical exertion."

Pete looked both surprised and pleased. "So you and her have....?"

Kurt nodded. "Three times in the one night. But don't let on to her that I've told you. I don't want her to think I was bragging about it or something. Which I'm not. I just feel good. Really good."

"I'm glad," Pete said genuinely. "You deserve all the happiness you can get after all that you've been through."

"Yeah, well I think it's all going to work out fine. And in case you're wondering, Corinne never even crossed my mind last night. No guilt feelings of betrayal or anything."

"That's great."

"Not that I've forgotten about Corinne. I'll always have fond memories of her, and I never want to lose those. But they're going to remain just that - memories; rather than interfering in me getting on with my life."

"It sounds like you're definitely over her now," Pete perceived.

"I'm sure that I am." Kurt drank his coffee. "The only thing that still plagues me is the way in which she died. I still feel like I didn't look after her properly. You know, protect her." He shrugged. "As antiquarian as it would probably sound to all the feminists, I still believe it's part of a man's duty to protect his girl."

"There was absolutely nothing you could do, man," Pete said firmly. "You hear me? Nothing. Your job now is to concentrate on Ellen and look after her. You have to think about the present and the future, and leave the past where it belongs. You sound like you're over Corinne's death, and you've accepted that the relationship is long since over. Why can't you put behind you what happened to her?"

Kurt shook his head, feeling a little frustrated with himself. "I don't know, man. Just something about it still seems to be plaguing me. Like you said, it's not Corinne that's plaguing me anymore, it's what happened to her."

Pete finished his coffee. "You had breakfast?"

"Yeah. I had some toast in Ellen's room."

"You want anything else?" Pete stood up.

"No. You go ahead."

Pete went over to the counter and returned with a croissant stuffed with ham and cheese. He sat down and devoured it quickly. When he'd finished, Kurt made a suggestion. "Let's go down to the dive shop. I want to ask Josh what his problem is with the cave."

Outside, once beyond the shadows of the pool, the sun was already quite hot. Everything was quiet. The only person Kurt saw was a guy fishing with a handline off one of the jetties. When they neared the dive shop, Kurt saw that the place was still shut up tight.

"Must have slept in," Pete commented.

"I don't know," Kurt wasn't so sure. "Something's weird. The way he was acting yesterday. And now he's not here."

"Maybe he's in Nassau?" Pete suggested. "If he called in the police over those skulls, they might have taken him back for a statement or something."

"Maybe," Kurt still wasn't convinced. He decided to take a look around. In order to get onto the jetty without going through the dive shop, he'd have to wade through the water. Kurt slipped off his shoes, rolled up his jeans and walked into the bay. Rolling up his jeans didn't help. By the time he reached the jetty he was in waist deep. He hoisted himself up onto the wooden planking. His jeans felt like they weighed fifty pounds, and dripped water everywhere. He peered inside the dive shop through a window next to the Rolla door. Saw nothing but the usual array of fishing and diving gear. Next he peered around the corner to check on the boat shed. The Rolla door was down. A quick scrutiny of the jetty

told him all the boats were there. At least, as far as he could tell. There appeared to be no gaps in the moorings.

Satisfied that Josh definitely wasn't there, Kurt climbed off the jetty and waded back to shore.

"No sign?" Pete asked.

Kurt shook his head.

"I still say he slept in."

"I'm not so sure. I'm going to go get changed-"

"Hey!" someone yelled.

Kurt looked in the direction of the fisherman, who was leaning over the side of the jetty getting a closer look at something in the water. He looked at them and waved them over. His actions were frantic, and Kurt wondered what he'd found.

Pants heavy with water, Kurt jogged over to the fisherman's jetty, Pete right beside him.

"What have you got?" Kurt asked the man, who was only about their age.

"Take a look at this!" He pointed over the side.

Both Kurt and Pete looked. Neither were sure what they were seeing at first, but then the realisation struck them simultaneously.

"It looks like a body!" Kurt exclaimed, shocked.

"You got that right, man!" the fisherman said, sounding both excited and repulsed by his grisly find. "Or what's left of one."

The body was in about ten feet of water, and drifting towards shore with the incoming tide. The three of them followed its slow journey, walking astride it on the wharf. When it floated into shallow water, ripples washed it quickly up onto the sand.

Kurt jumped down from the jetty to take a look. An arm dangled in the shallows. Instinctively, Kurt

grabbed it and dragged the body up onto the dry sand. He then let go of it quickly as if afraid it might suddenly come to life.

"Jesus," Pete said. "What the hell did that?"

"Shark," the fisherman said knowingly. "I've seen pictures of what they do to people. And that," he nodded down at the corpse, "is definitely a shark attack victim."

Trying to hold back a sudden sense of nausea, Kurt studied what lay in the sand. The body was naked. There was no head. One leg was completely gone, the other bitten off halfway down the thigh. It also had only one arm, and a large, crescent-shaped bite had been taken out of the side of the torso. There was no bleeding. The corpse was lying on its stomach. Kurt flipped it over onto its back with his foot and saw the remains of one breast and the black vee of a vagina.

"A girl," the fisherman said quietly.

A coil of intestine was dangling out through the side where the gaping hole was. Kurt gagged, noticed something strange about the neck. All the other injuries were like tears, tattered flesh hanging off in strips. But where the head had been severed from the neck, the cut was as smooth as a leg of lamb in a butcher shop. That looked familiar to him and sent shivers up his spine.

"That's really strange," Kurt said, mostly to himself.

"What is?" Pete wanted to know.

"Look at the neck. Look how smooth it is."

Pete reluctantly looked closer, didn't see any significance in it. "So what?"

"So," Kurt concluded. "Whatever took her head

off was not a shark. Way too clean."

"We better report this," the fisherman said.

"You stay here," Kurt told him. "Keep an eye on it. We'll go report it to the manager."

"Thanks a lot," the guy said sarcastically and screwed up his nose at the corpse.

"I wonder who that girl was," Pete said as they walked quickly through the resort grounds.

"Gonna be hard to identify with no clothes and no head." Kurt walked through the doors and into the air-conditioned lobby. He went straight up to the clerk. "We'd like to see the manager," Kurt said abruptly.

"He's not yet in his office, Sir." The clerk checked his watch. "I'm afraid he won't be in for another half an hour."

"Well, can you call his room? This is an emergency."

The clerk nodded and reached for the phone, spurred on by the intensity in Kurt's voice. After a brief, hushed conversation the clerk hung up. "He'll be here in five minutes, Sir."

"Thanks," Kurt said and sat down on a sofa by the windows to wait. Pete joined him and they sat in silence until the man showed.

A white man, fifties and balding, wearing a pin-stripe gray suit, white shirt and red tie, and carrying a brief case, arrived at the front counter. The clerk said some incoherent words and pointed to Kurt and Pete. The man nodded and walked over to them, forcing a smile; although beneath it he looked rather irritated.

"I'm Adrian Sloane," the man said in a deep voice, extending a hand first to Pete, then to Kurt. "Operations manager here at the resort. If you'd like

to follow me to my office, we can discuss what's on your minds."

Without giving them any choice, Sloane strode off to a door behind the front desk. Pete and Kurt followed him.

Inside Sloane's office the walls were decked out in teak, decorated with paintings of various sailing sloops. A large mahogany desk sat in the centre of the room. Sloane sat behind it in a high-backed swivel chair. Kurt and Pete were waved into more basic chairs opposite him.

"Now," Sloane forced another smile and folded his arms, relaxing in his big, comfortable chair. "What can I do for you so bright and early?"

Kurt sighed. "We've found a body," he bluntly enlightened the man. "Down on the beach."

Sloane sat bolt upright as if stung by something in his big chair. "You what?" he said, stunned.

"We've found a body," Kurt repeated.

Sloane waved him away irritably and stood up. "I heard you the first time. Take me to it," he said and strode back out into the foyer.

Once again Kurt and Pete got up to follow him.

Outside they led Sloane down to the jetty, where the fisherman stood watch over the corpse. Another interested spectator stood beside him.

Sloane took one look at the corpse and turned his head away. "Oh, my God," he said, his face bleaching quickly to a dull white. He turned to Pete. "Go inside and ask the clerk for a sheet."

Pete trotted off and returned a moment later with a white sheet. Sloane draped it over the corpse.

"Where did you find it?" Sloane asked Kurt. "Just lying here?"

Kurt nodded at the fisherman. "He found it, floating near the jetty. The tide washed it ashore and I dragged it up onto the beach." Kurt looked down at the sheet. "Shark got her."

"We'll let the coroner decide that," Sloane said curtly. "Keep an eye on it until I get security down here. I'll place a call to the Nassau Police." Sloane strode off again.

"Hyperactive fellow," Kurt quipped.

"Worried about the affect this will have on business more like it," Pete pointed out.

"Poor girl," Kurt said and shook his head. "Hell of a way to go. Let's go wake Matt and let him know what's happened."

"Sloane asked us to watch the body," Pete reminded him.

"The fisherman will do it, won't you, mate," Kurt said and the man nodded. As they walked away, Kurt added, "It was his catch, anyway."

"That's a bit off," Pete said seriously.

"Yeah, I know," Kurt admitted. "But if I don't treat it lightly, I'm gonna be sick."

They found Matt still asleep. Kurt roughly shook him awake.

"What the hell are you doin'?" Matt snapped.

"Get up," Kurt said loudly. "We've got some action."

Matt sat up and ran a hand through his tussled hair. "What the hell are you talking about? Can't you see I've got a hangover?"

"Well, whose fault's that?" Kurt pointed out. "There's been a shark attack down on the beach."

Matt looked at him inquisitively, as if trying to decide if he was serious or not. Or maybe he was just

trying to see past his bloodshot eyes?

"At least, that's what we think it was," Kurt added, still a little dubious about the clean cut of the neck.

"It *was* a shark attack," Pete said with certainty.

"I'm not saying a shark didn't take those big bites out of her. I'm just saying that something else may have been involved as well. Maybe even before the shark got her."

"I'll get dressed," Matt said, his hangover dissipating with the news.

Kurt headed for the door. "I'll meet you guys down there." He left them and walked down the hall, knocked on Ellen's door and waited. It opened almost immediately.

When Ellen saw it was Kurt, she smiled and dragged him inside, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. Their tongues entwined, tasting each other.

Kurt reluctantly broke the embrace and told her what had happened. He then took her hand and they went downstairs.

A small crowd had now gathered on the beach, the usual gathering of curiosity seekers that were attracted to death and misfortune. Three of the resort security officers were on the scene, and Sloane was back. As they neared the group, there was a commotion further south along the beach. One of the security officers, along with Sloane, trotted down the beach to where a fourth security man was fishing something out of the water.

Pete spied Kurt and Ellen and waved for them to follow, then he and Matt moved off to see what the man had found.

The small crowd converged on the scene. Kurt dragged Ellen through to the front of the group. There the security guard had retrieved the object. Kurt didn't recognise what it was at first, it was so torn and ragged.

"It's a leg," somebody said repulsively.

The leg had been severed from the hip. And by the condition the limb was in, Kurt determined the shark had swallowed it into its mouth up to the hip, and in its effort to tear it from the body, had shredded much of the skin off with its teeth.

"It's a male's," the security guard said to Sloane. "There are long black hairs in the remaining skin." The man placed it on the dry sand, and everybody stepped back from it as if it were contaminated.

Twenty minutes later, a third gruesome discovery was made. It was the body of a female, in much the same condition as the first, found five hundred yards south of the resort by one of the patrons.

The crowd on the beach had been building all the while, and by the time of this third discovery, there were over a hundred people milling around on the sand.

The first thing Kurt noticed on this corpse was that once again the head was missing, and once more with a clean cut like the first. Between the shredded breasts there was a tiny tattoo of a red rose.

Someone pushed roughly past Kurt and a man stared down at the corpse. "Oh, my God," he said distressfully. "Oh, my God! Darleen!"

The security guards looked at each other, then at Sloane. Sloane turned to the man and said, very calmly, "You think you know this woman?"

He nodded, choking back a sob that threatened to

escape his lips. "She's my girlfriend. She's been gone since last night."

Sloane put a comforting hand on his back. "Now you can't be certain it's her."

The man savagely knocked Sloane's hand away. "The hell I can't! I did that tattoo myself!" He pointed a finger at the dead girl's chest.

Sloane didn't seem to know what to say after that.

During the next half hour, more reports of missing persons came in, though no one could make any solid identification on the other two. One body was merely a limb. With no special marks and most of the skin stripped off it, how could anyone possibly identify that? Kurt wondered.

"I haven't had breakfast yet, but I'm sure not hungry," Matt stated.

Kurt detected a change in the sound of the wind, a barely audible chattering noise. He looked northward and saw two dark specs in the distant sky. The specks grew rapidly larger and took on the form of helicopters.

"About fucking time," one of the security officers grumbled.

The choppers landed in the field south of the resort. Several police officers, the coroner, and a man armed with a number of cameras, filed out of the machines. The rotating blades whipped up a sandstorm before they finally came to a stop.

The police and the coroner conferred with Sloane and the resort security men. For the next hour and a half they were busy photographing the remains and interviewing witnesses and those with missing person reports. Kurt, Pete, and the young fisherman who'd found the first body were briefly interrogated.

Afterwards, Kurt overheard the coroner talking to the policeman in charge.

"The decapitation on this victim was not done by a shark. Not unless he's got a very sharp knife blade for teeth. Look, it's way too neat. A shark did the rest, but this cut was done by either a knife or similar implement, or a very fine saw blade."

"So you think she was murdered?" the police officer asked.

"Looks that way," the coroner replied grimly.

Kurt looked at the corpse, then at the coroner and the police sergeant. He walked away, dejected.

No, not again, he thought in despair. It can't be happening again.

Twelve

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

"Go back to Nassau, get a warrant that enables us to search every room in this resort," Sergeant Raynard barked out orders to two of his men. "Bring back a boatload of patrolmen. Nobody's to leave this island until we've sorted this out."

The two men fired up one of the choppers, the blades once again whipping up the sand. It rose slowly. When it was clear of the resort, it angled towards Nassau and flew away like a huge metal bird.

Kurt noted that Josh still hadn't surfaced. He decided to speak to Sloane about it.

Sloane's answer was honest and grim. "It's believed he was taken by a shark yesterday out near Hollow Island. At least, that's what the police think. Damn it!" he said in obvious frustration. "We don't have shark attacks here. Never." Sloane then wandered off to talk with Raynard some more.

Despite the gore they'd been viewing all morning, the four decided they should try and eat lunch. They chose the restaurant on the first floor, and despite his earlier words, Matt ate garlic bread, an entree, the biggest steak he could get for a main, and then dessert. This was all washed down with four glasses of orange juice.

"What happened to your hangover?" Pete asked him.

"Nothing like the discovery of some bodies to

cure that," Matt replied.

Kurt, drinking his third bourbon, relayed the information he'd heard when the coroner and Raynard were talking.

"So you were right," Pete said in astonishment.

Kurt nodded. He felt tense and ordered another bourbon.

"I asked Sloane about Josh," Kurt said. "They think Josh was taken by a shark out at Hollow Island yesterday afternoon."

"Oh, no," Ellen said.

"Also," Kurt added, "the police are going to conduct searches of everyone's room. And nobody's allowed to leave the island until they figure this thing out."

"That might be never," Matt stated.

"Well, at least until they've cleared certain people, anyway," Kurt told him.

"How did you find out all this information?" Pete wanted to know.

Kurt shrugged. "I'm a journalist. I find out information like every other journalist does; by eavesdropping, interrogation, and basically not minding my own business."

When everyone was finished eating and drinking, Kurt suggested, "Let's get back to the room. There's something I want to do."

Upstairs, Kurt removed the doubloons from under the mattress. They were still in the plastic bag, but he slipped another plastic bag over the first for added strength and protection.

"What are you going to do?" Matt asked him.

Kurt looked at Ellen and winked. "I'm going to bury them."

"What for?" Matt questioned further.

"For one, so nobody steals them. And two, so the police don't find them in here and start asking awkward questions."

"We've done nothing wrong," Matt pointed out.

"No, but the police might view things differently. They might consider this gold as some sort of a motive for murder. Which is what we're dealing with here," Kurt said flatly.

"Always thinking," Pete noted.

"Where are you going to bury them?" Matt quizzed.

"I'm not sure," Kurt admitted. "Let's just take a look around outside until we find a good spot."

Downstairs, to avoid the crowd and the police, Kurt led the others around to the back of the resort and over to the eastern beach. There was no one around on this side of the island, which is what he'd hoped for.

"You going to bury them on the beach?" Pete asked.

"No. Too hard to find again, unless you mark the spot with something obvious. And that might prove obvious to anyone else roaming around here. No, I'm going to bury them in the jungle south a bit."

They walked south about half the length of the island. Kurt saw a palm overhanging the beach on a forty-five degree angle. That would make a good landmark, so he decided to bury them in the jungle in a line with that palm.

About ten feet into the jungle the sand was covered in dead leaves. Kurt dug a hole at the base of a tree that was in a direct line with the overhanging palm on the beach. He dug the hole about two feet

deep, removed the doubloons from his backpack, placed them in the hole and filled it in. He then covered the sand over with leaves and the job was done.

That afternoon, Sergeant Raynard and two of his men searched their room. They found nothing of interest.

"Word is," Raynard said to them, "you guys have been nosing around Hollow Island lately."

"Yeah. So what?" Kurt replied.

"What have you been doing out there?" Raynard wanted to know.

"Diving," Matt answered.

"In the cave?"

"That's right," Kurt confirmed, seeing no harm in admitting to it.

"Looking for buried treasure?" Raynard smiled.

"There's no treasure left in that cave," Kurt lied this time.

"Maybe not," Raynard said. "But that *is* what you were looking for? And you forced the cave open to get inside?"

"That's right," Kurt said.

"Did you use explosives?"

"Explosives? No, we used a crowbar."

Raynard rubbed his chin. "I found an explosive device down by the cave entrance yesterday. You guys didn't place it there?"

They all shook their heads.

"Must have been Josh," Raynard said to himself.

Josh? Kurt thought. Why the hell had he been trying to seal the cave shut again? It didn't make any sense.

"Okay," Raynard said, waving his men out.

"That's all for now. Don't go wandering the grounds at night." He paused at the open door. "And by the way, no one can leave the island until we say they can."

The sergeant vanished down the hall.

Kurt spent the rest of the day in a morose mood, preoccupied with bad memories and the possibility of a serial killer at large on the island.

"What's up?" Ellen asked him, lying beside him on her bed.

"Nothing," he told her.

At dusk on Hollow Island, with a storm building in the south, two patrolmen wandered the clearing.

"What does the sarge want us out here for?" one of them, a young black constable named Sam, complained. He lit a cigarette and offered the pack up to the other patrolman, a white Bahamian.

"Hell knows," the white man said and drew on his cigarette.

"What do we do when this storm comes through?" Sam complained some more. "Stand here and be struck by fucking lightning?"

The white man stood over the remains of the scarecrows, smoking and contemplating them. "I was here yesterday and had to dismantle these freakin' things. What kind of a sick bastard kills people to build scarecrows with their fucking heads?"

"The same sick bastard the sarge is trying to find in relation to these murders last night, probably." The black man, feeling restless, decided to take a walk down to the cove. "I'll be back in two shakes," he told the other one and walked off.

Twilight had deepened to dark blue on the western horizon. Night was falling fast. Sam wandered across the rocks and stood at the edge of the channel and smoked.

Something latched onto his right ankle. Startled, the patrolman tried to shake it loose. But with one mighty heave, whatever grabbed him hauled him into the water. He hit his head on the rocks on the way in and blacked out.

The white patrolman heard a splash and he went to investigate. Down on the shore he saw a silhouette of a figure standing on the rocks. "Sam?" he called to the figure. When the figure didn't answer, but just slowly walked towards him, the patrolman felt tingles of apprehension crawl through his veins. He pulled his police issue revolver from its holster and aimed it at the advancing figure. "Sam?" he said again.

The figure suddenly collapsed to the ground and lay still.

Cautiously, the patrolman moved toward it, keeping his gun trained on it. He stepped over something shiny that lay on the ground near the sprawled out figure. Next thing he knew he was lying flat on his back on the rocks, his legs having been scooped out from under him. His gun clattered to the ground out of reach.

The figure was on its feet in a flash, the object it had used to trip the patrolman raised up high in the air. Terrified, the patrolman recognised it as a scythe and attempted to roll out of the way as the blade came down. But the figure adjusted its aim almost as if it had read his mind, and still managed to pierce the policeman's ribs. The patrolman felt the point of the blade enter his lungs, and instantly breathing became

difficult. He sucked in a wheezing breath, only half filling his collapsing lungs, pain searing his side. Then he let out a scream of agony as the figure roughly pulled the blade back out of his flesh. The patrolman searched frantically for his gun. Couldn't locate it.

He didn't have time for a second search. He saw the blade dropping towards his throat and raised an arm to ward off the blow. The scythe sliced his hand off at the wrist. Blood gushed from the pulsating stump. The tip of the blade cut his throat and blood leaked down to join the pool already forming in his lungs.

The patrolman gagged. Couldn't draw a breath. Gagged again, then passed out.

When he was dead, the scarecrow severed off the head and stripped the patrolman of his clothes. It placed those clothes and the head next to the others it'd stripped off the first man, then dumped the headless body into the channel. The scarecrow jumped in after it and went back to the cave. It returned to land, armed now with the canvas bag and a new bag it had stolen from the fisherman last night.

It went into the clearing and set to work resurrecting the scarecrows. The skulls had been stripped of their skin, tissue and brains and hair. It placed these on top of each scarecrow frame, then dressed them in the clothes it'd taken from last night's victims. The clothes were stuffed with straw and sea grass. It had no hats to place on their heads, but that didn't matter.

The scarecrow erected each of its offspring, then set to work on some lumber it had left over from the other evening and constructed two more frames.

These it dressed in the uniforms of the two dead patrolmen, then went to work on cleaning their skulls.

Before it did this, it thought some silent words in a strange tongue, touched its forehead to the forehead on each of the heads in turn, then cleaned them of all flesh. The skulls were placed on the two new scarecrows and they were erected in the clearing with the other six.

The work had taken several hours, and by the time it was complete, the first drops of rain began to fall.

Lightning flickered in forks out to sea, drawing nearer. The scarecrow concentrated on that lightning, summoning it closer.

With the sound of a thousand whips at once, thunder cracked overhead, lightning illuminating the night with a blinding flash. The thunderbolt hit the ocean fifty yards out from the island.

Closer, closer, the scarecrow thought, concentrating hard. Come closer.

A lightning bolt hit the beach on the southern side, only about thirty yards from the clearing. Sand exploded with a *boom!*

Rain came down in a torrent now. The clothes of the eight scarecrows hung limply, quickly saturated.

The scarecrow kept summoning the storm nearer. Lightning flickered across the sky like a spider spinning a web, but no bolts descended from the heavens.

Come on. Come on, the scarecrow willed the storm.

There was a brilliant flash of light. A bolt streaked down from the black clouds above. It branched off into eight talon-like fingers and struck

each of the eight scarecrows between the eyes. A tremendous thunderclap followed. The rain increased. The air crackled with static electricity. The rancid stench of ozone permeated the night.

An aura of white light surrounded each of the eight scarecrows. Their empty eye sockets came alive with orbs of red. The scarecrows filled out, took on more human shapes. Hands grew on the ends of the arms, and slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the eight scarecrows began to move.

They uprooted themselves from the ground and walked stiffly over to their master.

Lorenz' skull of a face grinned. It'd felt elated with triumph and anticipation of the carnage to come.

Mentally instructing its offspring to remain where they were, Lorenz went back into the cave and emerged with an armful of scythes. It'd taken a boat from the resort last night to nearby Rogue Island. The island was inhabited by natives who ran a vast sugar plantation. Scythes had been there in abundance.

It gave each of the scarecrows a scythe, and there were some left over. Lorenz then picked up its own old, trusty scythe and summoned four to come with it. The others it sent over to Fishhook Island. Lorenz and the first four climbed into the boat left behind by the patrolmen, and they motored off in the direction of Rogue Island to the south-west.

Corinne lay on the madman's bench. She was screaming and trying desperately to break free of the bonds that held her firmly in place.

"Scream, baby, scream," the maniac crooned. "I love it when you do that. It gets me reeeal horny."

Corinne screamed again at the wicked look on the madman's face. "Shit! Shit! Shit!" she cursed as she tried again to break free of her restraints. "What do you want with me, you bastard?" she yelled at him.

"Tsk, tsk," the maniac said calmly. "There's no need to be so polite. You're welcome to call me names if you want. Dirty talk also gets me really horny."

"You're going to rape me, aren't you?" Corinne said with resolve.

The man looked obviously surprised. "Rape you?" he shook his head incomprehensibly. "Rape you? Oh, no. I'm not talking about that kind of horny, honey. I'm referring to a totally different kind of a desire. Something much more satisfying than sexual intercourse."

He stood beside her. "You see, I have this fetish, if you like. An obsession, really. I don't know why I have it, or what drives me to do it. Maybe I'm just special. Who knows? You see, my desire isn't for sex. Instead, I prefer to do something else." He turned and picked up an electric circular saw from a bench by the wall. "I like to cut my women up into itty...bitty...pieces."

Corinne screamed as the saw burst into life.

"Keep screaming, honey!" the madman yelled above the raucous saw. "It's getting me really in the mood!"

Torturously, the man moved the lethal blade ever so slowly closer to Corinne's left knee. "Tell me if it hurts," he said and jammed the blade into the flesh.

Corinne's scream of excruciating pain was barely audible above the sound of the saw and the splintering of bone. Ligaments snapped like cracking

whips and blood flicked across the ceiling in a wide crimson arc.

Kurt stared through the window, watching in horror as the man sliced both of Corinne's legs off at the knees. He hammered frantically at the glass, trying to smash his way inside. Corinne looked at him with an expression of not only pain, but of sheer desperation.

"Help me!" she screamed at him. "For God's sake, help me!"

Kurt tried again to break the glass, but it refused to shatter. His actions slowed, and suddenly it was like trying to strike at the glass through water. His attempts became more and more feeble.

Corinne still cried out to him, tears flowing in rivers from her eyes, make-up running down her cheeks in black streaks.

The maniac brought the saw up to Corinne's neck, his crazed eyes glittering with exhilaration.

Kurt's heart ached as Corinne waved goodbye to him. Then the blade bit into her throat, severed the jugular and sprayed the window so thick with blood Kurt could no longer see.

Kurt sat bolt upright in Ellen's bed. He was breathing hard, sweat dripping from his forehead.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Ellen asked and sat up beside him. Lightning flickered outside, temporarily illuminating the room. "You're crying," she said, seeing tears running down his face.

Kurt wiped the tears away. "Can I have one of your cigarettes?" he asked her, his voice croaky.

Ellen got up and turned on the light. She brought her cigarettes and an ashtray over to the bed, then she

climbed back in with him, leaving the light on. Kurt removed a smoke from the pack and lit it, sucking on it tenaciously.

"You're shaking all over," she noticed.

"I had a bad dream," he told her. "A nightmare." He turned to Ellen and caressed her soft cheek. "I think it's time I told you what happened to my fiancé."

Ellen lit a smoke and nodded. "Okay."

"Do you remember that maniac who was terrorizing Miami a few years ago, running around abducting girls and dismembering them? The guy who was dubbed "The Carpenter"?"

Ellen looked at him with a horrified expression.

"Corinne was his last victim," Kurt said flatly. "The police found her remains in an abandoned warehouse down by the bay." He puffed nervously on his smoke. "Both her legs were severed off at the knee joints, and her head was cut off as well. All done with a circular saw."

"Oh, my God," Ellen exclaimed and placed a reassuring arm around his shoulders.

"Don't worry," he said to her. "It's not going to affect us. I'm over her now. The thing I'm not over is the fact that I didn't stop this guy. I didn't do a thing to help her."

"She just vanished after work one evening. She'd done some overtime, according to her boss, and left later than usual. Her car was still where she'd left it in a car park. The police believed she was abducted from there. They found her in that warehouse a few days later. The guy had been careless this time, left fingerprints behind. They traced him on the police computer and discovered it was a guy out on parole

after serving ten years for attempted murder. They found him within a week."

Kurt stabbed out the cigarette. "I went to the trial, but got thrown out for causing a scene. I wanted to tear the bastard apart for what he'd done.

"The judge gave him a hundred and fifty-seven years in prison. If I had my way he would have been tortured, or severed apart limb by limb like he'd done to Corinne and the other girls." He wiped more tears away.

"Anyway, I still feel guilty that I hadn't looked after her properly. Didn't protect her like I should have. And I fear the same thing happening here." He wrapped his arms around Ellen and tried to force back more tears. "I fear the maniac that's on this island is going to get to you. And the worst part about it is we can't even leave. We're stuck here to hope for the best. I just hope my best is good enough this time around."

"Listen to me, and listen to me good," Ellen said with conviction. "What happened to Corinne was not your fault. You had no control over it."

"I realise that now," Kurt said seriously. "And that scares me even more."

Thirteen

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

Sergeant Raynard had been dozing on a sofa in the foyer when the sound of a gunshot woke him.

He sat up, immediately alert, trying to figure out which direction the shot had come from. Not sure. Removing his gun from a shoulder holster beneath his jacket, Raynard went outside. He scanned the pool area. Saw nothing but empty deck chairs and a deserted pool. He had several men stationed down by the jetties to make sure nobody tried to leave. The shot must have come from one of them.

Moving stealthily through the shadows, Raynard approached the boat shed and dive shop. There was supposed to be a man stationed there, but he saw no one. Raynard sniffed the air, detecting a strange smell; a coppery odour. It was coming from around the side of the dive shop. The sergeant moved around the side, saw dark stains in the rain-damp sand. He knelt and scooped up some of the stained sand with his finger and smelled it. Blood, and fresh. He stood up and saw there were more splatters of blood on the wall of the shop.

Very concerned now, fearing the worst, Raynard scanned the water with a penlight he took from his pocket. And there, floating aimlessly in a few feet of water was the headless corpse of one of his men.

"Oh, shit," he cursed softly.

He looked over towards the other jetties where he

had placed more men. Although the rain had stopped, it was still cloudy, blotting out the moonlight and rendering it too dark to see. Raynard shone his penlight in the direction of the nearest jetty, but the feeble light wasn't powerful enough to reach it.

Raynard crossed the sand to the next jetty and walked along it, the heels of his boots making hollow thuds on the wooden decking. As he neared the end of it he detected that same coppery smell. He shone the light on the boards toward the end. They were splattered with blood. He checked the water, fanning left and right in short arcs. There was a splash behind him on the opposite side. Raynard shone his light that way and saw another headless policeman floating in the bay. As he watched, the water swirled up around the corpse. The point of a huge nose rose up out of the depths, and as he looked on in horror, saw the jaws of a monstrous shark latch onto the side of the corpse and, thrashing its head from side to side, tear the body in half.

"Holy shit," he said and threw up over the side. He gagged a couple of times, spat some stomach acid from his mouth and staggered off down the jetty. He paused at the end of it, waited for his nausea to dissipate, then shuffled through the sand over to the next one.

Penlight leading the way, Raynard walked along the wooden platform. His light picked out a figure in a police uniform at the end of the wharf. Glad to see one of his men still alive, Raynard hurried up to him.

"There's been some trouble," Raynard said as he approached. "Two of our boys are dead."

When the figure didn't move, and didn't answer, Raynard shone the light on the man's face. Only it

wasn't the face of a man anymore. A grinning skull with two red eyes stared back at him. The look in those eyes was one of pure and utter hatred. The thing cowered away from the beam.

Stunned, Raynard couldn't move for a second. That proved one second too long. When he rose his gun to blow the thing away, the scythe was already completing its deadly arc towards Raynard's neck.

The sergeant's head came off with a thud onto the wooden planking. His body teetered a moment, then toppled over into the sea. The scarecrow scooped up the head with the point of its scythe, moved off along the jetty and disappeared into the night.

At the edge of the jungle, an old man looked on. Then he scurried off through the bushes.

Lorenz motored the boat into Rogue Island. It would have been marvelous to have a craft like this back in its days as a pirate. So powerful and fast. So sleek and smooth. Not like the slow old pigs it used to sail the oceans in.

The five scarecrows climbed out of the runabout onto the beach. The clouds were just sliding back now to allow the moonlight access to the earth. Lying before them was a vast field of sugarcane. To the south was an empty field that was being rested for a season. That would make a fine place to erect more offspring, Lorenz mused.

It summoned its four friends to follow it to the village at the north of the island. Lorenz had decided on its visit last night to collect scythes, that it should take over this island, kill all its occupants - which weren't many - and make scarecrows out of them. That would then give it a formidable army with which

to attack that vast structure over on Fishhook.

The tiny village was quiet, everyone asleep.

A sudden ferocious bark erupted from near the first hut. A Rottweiler came charging at them, teeth gnashing, drool flicking off its savage jaws. Lorenz swung at the dog with its scythe and sliced into the side of the dog's head. The dog collapsed and died instantly.

Its barking was enough to alert the occupants of the first hut, though. A shadow moved past the window and opened the door. But Lorenz was ready for the man as he stepped out. It jabbed the handle of the scythe into the man's testicles. The man grunted in pain and doubled up. When he did so, one of the other scarecrows took his head off in one clean slice.

They stormed the hut. Another black man and two black women were inside. The women screamed. But their screams were short-lived as the three were hacked apart by the five creatures. They placed the heads of the four victims in a pile on the bed, planning to collect them all when they were through.

Lanterns burned in several of the shacks now. They entered the next one, and the first scarecrow inside was greeted by a shotgun blast that shattered it in two. The creature collapsed to the ground. Before the man had another chance to use his gun, Lorenz knocked it out of his hands. Scythes hammered the man to pieces.

A woman and three frightened teenage boys cowered in a corner inside. Lorenz, not liking the light, turned down the wick in the lantern and extinguished the flame. Its first impulse had been to smash it, but that would have proved foolish. Not

only would the flames have consumed the heads it wanted to keep, it would also have destroyed the wood it planned to use. It didn't like fire, anyway.

The room was dark now, but the scarecrows could see. Lorenz could see clearly the four cowering on the floor in the corner. They could no longer see it. One swoop, it thought, if it aimed carefully, and it could slash all their throats simultaneously.

Lorenz took aim and arced the blade across their exposed jugulars. Its aim was perfect. The four figures sat there clutching at their throats as the life-sustaining blood oozed out between their fingers.

Off with their heads, Lorenz mentally instructed the other three. The heads were promptly decapitated and placed on a bed, just as three armed men came crashing into the shack. They couldn't see and were afraid to shoot for fear of hitting the innocent.

Easy targets, Lorenz thought and swung its blade at the first one's head. It came off as easily as a carrot top. Two more blades swung out of the darkness and three more heads were placed on the bed with the other five. Lorenz then removed the skull from its shattered scarecrow and placed it with the others. It could be rebuilt.

The rest of the village consisted of a few unarmed men and their wives, two teenage boys and a girl. They offered little resistance and the scarecrows steadily finished them off.

When they were done, all the heads were collected. Lorenz counted them. Twenty-five in all, plus the skull of its offspring.

Lorenz performed the ritual with the skulls, then it and the other three worked on stripping them of flesh and brains. Once that was done, tools were gathered

from around the village, including several sledge hammers. These were used to knock planks of wood off the shacks. The planks were loaded onto the back of a rusted old truck found by one of the creatures on the village's far side. Hammers and nails were placed in the truck also, along with a mountain of clothes and boots, and more scythes. The skulls were placed into bags and treated with more care. These rode in the front of the truck with one of the scarecrows behind the wheel. Lorenz and the other two rode in the back, and the truck chugged off in the direction of the barren field.

Kurt woke up at six the next morning. Eventually he'd gone back to sleep after his nightmare, but it took a long time to be able to relax enough to do that. Ellen had stayed awake with him for an hour, but she was tired and eventually fell asleep long before he did.

He shook Ellen awake.

"I'm awake," she grumbled when he kept on shaking her.

Kurt got out of bed and boiled the kettle, put together two mugs of strong coffee and brought them over to the bed. Ellen sipped at hers. Kurt gulped his down.

"You want me to hurry up?" she asked.

He nodded. "I want to go downstairs and take a look around. I thought I heard a gunshot last night."

"Really?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it was. I want you to come with me, because until we're off this island, I don't want you leaving my side."

"How romantic," Ellen said with a smile and

finished her coffee. Kurt then had to wait patiently while she took a shower and dressed. When she was ready, they went down the hall to Kurt's room. He let himself in with his key, and their entrance woke up Pete, who was generally a light sleeper.

"Everything okay in here?" Kurt asked him.

"Yeah," Pete said and slipped into some pants under the covers. He got out of bed and woke up Matt.

"Did you hear that shot last night?" Kurt asked them both when Matt was fully alert.

Pete replied, "Yeah, we heard it."

"We went out on the balcony to take a look," Matt told him. "Couldn't see anything, though. It was too dark. You could see around the pool, but that was all."

"I want to go down and look around," Kurt said.

Matt nodded and got dressed.

They rode the elevator down to the ground floor. The doors slid open and they stepped out. Everything was silent.

"What's that smell?" Ellen asked, sniffing the air as they walked into the reception area.

Kurt sniffed, could smell it too. A sort of metallic odour. He couldn't place it.

When they reached the reception desk, however, he discovered what it was that was causing the unpleasant odour. The headless corpse of the night clerk, still dressed in a tuxedo, white shirt now the same colour as the red carpet, lay slumped over the granite desktop in a pool of congealed blood.

Ellen put her hand to her mouth to stifle a scream. Matt stared at the corpse with fascination. Pete threw up in a corner, while Kurt moved over to take a closer

look. He gagged a couple of times because of the smell, but controlled his nausea to the point where he wasn't sick.

"Who the hell did this?" he said softly. "Who the hell's doing all of this?" he said more loudly.

On a hunch, he moved in behind the desk and thrust open the door into the manager's office. And there was Sloane, reclining in his big, comfortable chair. Sloane didn't look his way. He couldn't. In order to perform that function he would need a head, and he no longer had one. The headrest of the chair was now coloured with a dark-red blotch.

Kurt closed the door to the office and walked towards the front doors. He paused there and waited for the others to follow. Ellen responded first. Pete, when he was finished throwing up, joined them. Eventually Matt was able to peel his eyes away from the corpse at the reception desk and walked outside.

"Sloane's dead, too," Kurt reported.

They walked down to the dive shop where they were greeted with another surprise. All the boats had been stripped of their outboards. Kurt waded through the water and climbed onto the jetty to make sure he was seeing clearly. But his check of every boat confirmed that none of them any longer had an outboard motor. More confused than nauseas now, Kurt jumped off the jetty and waded back to shore. His leg nudged something in the water, and up bobbed the headless body of a policeman. He scurried out of the water as if it were a shark.

The others had seen the body, too, but said nothing.

"None of those boats have motors," Kurt filled them in. "But that's not all. The radio in every boat

has been smashed beyond repair."

"Sounds like someone doesn't want us to leave," Matt perceived. "And this time it's not the police."

"I don't think it's just one person doing all this," said Kurt. "It's got to be a few. I don't know who or why they're doing it, but it's definitely more than one. It would take one person all night just to strip off those outboards, let alone smash all the radios and commit a few murders all in the deal."

Pete noted something else and pointed. "There was a police launch moored over at that jetty. Now it's gone."

The others looked. The jetty was empty.

"And where are all the cops?" Matt pointed out. "They brought about a dozen in on that thing. Where the hell are they all?"

He was right, Kurt observed. There wasn't one police officer anywhere in sight.

Ellen screwed up her nose. "They probably all ended up like that one over there in the water."

"Probably," Kurt agreed grimly. He spied something lying in the sand about a hundred yards south along the beach. He set off in that direction and the others followed. As they neared the figure, Kurt thought that it was another corpse, but this one appeared to still have a head. Something looked strange about the shape of it, though. When they were right upon it, Kurt saw that it wasn't a human figure at all. The figure was dressed in civilian clothes. The hands that jutted from the shirt sleeves looked to be a mixture of wood and...flesh. For a head it had a skull.

"It's another fucking scarecrow!" Matt exclaimed.

"A scarecrow with a bullet wound in its chest,"

Pete observed.

Kurt knelt down beside it and examined the wound in the thing's chest area. Some sort of greenish fluid had congealed around the edges of the wound. And tufts of straw protruded through the hole as well.

He then became acutely aware of another presence nearby. He looked up sharply and saw, standing not twenty feet away from the beach, an old man. The man had absolutely no hair, was at least eighty years old and looked every bit of it. Kurt had never seen a man so wrinkled before. This guy had wrinkles upon wrinkles. He wore no shirt, had blotchy black skin and looked surprisingly fit.

"You must get away from here," the old man croaked out a warning.

"Why?" Kurt said, standing up. "Who are you?"

The old man didn't answer either question. He just repeated his warning.

"Do you know something about what's going on here?" Kurt asked him.

The man remained silent.

"You do, don't you," Kurt stated this time. He pointed at the lifeless scarecrow. "Do you know what this is?"

The old man moved no closer, but his eyes roamed over the inanimate figure on the ground. "It's just a scarecrow," he said simply.

"No," Kurt shook his head. "It's not just a scarecrow. It's a scarecrow with a human skull for a head and a bullet hole in its chest. Why would somebody shoot a scarecrow?"

The old man stood there for a moment, contemplating something. Eventually he nodded

towards the jungle and said, "Follow me."

Kurt, Matt, Pete and Ellen all looked at each other.

"There's four of us," Matt said. "It'll be safe."

They followed the old man through the jungle and arrived at the rambling old hut that was his home. Inside the gloomy hut, the old man sat in the only chair. The others stood there waiting for him to speak.

"I'm Jake," the man croaked, his voice like a rasp on metal.

"The sole resident from the island's former inhabitants," Kurt said knowingly.

"No, there are two of us here. Young Josh at the dive shop is the other."

"Not anymore," Pete said soberly. "He was taken by a shark two days ago."

Old man Jake looked visibly pained by this news. "That is a sad thing," he said. But then it suddenly seemed forgotten. "You four and everyone else left alive must get away from this place. There is evil lurking here; an evil that comes out in the cover of darkness."

"What?" Matt smirked. "Scarecrows?"

"Yes," the old man said seriously.

"Bullshit!" Matt challenged.

But the old man glared at Matt with such intensity that it forced him into submission. He didn't dare disagree again.

"I saw the first one come to life," Jake explained. "More'n twenty years ago out in the old field near that fancy resort of yours. It used to be a cornfield then. That scarecrow was placed there by the farmers to keep the crows away. And it did a damn fine job, too."

What, with a skull for a head, no bird came within miles of that corn.

"During a storm one night back then, I saw lightning strike that scarecrow right between the eyes. You would have thought a lightning bolt would have destroyed it, but it didn't. Instead, that thing glowed with a power like you've never seen. I watched it as it uprooted its legs and began to walk. Then I ran off."

"Excuse me if I sound just a little skeptical," Kurt interjected. "But how can that possibly happen? How could a scarecrow, hit by a lightning bolt, come to life?"

"There is much you don't understand about these islands, my boy, and its past inhabitants. This very island was occupied by hougans for hundreds of years."

"Hougans?" Kurt was puzzled. "What are they?"

"Witchdoctors. People who practice voodoo and black magic. I, myself, was one once."

Ellen spoke. "So you're saying witchdoctors brought that thing to life?"

"In a sense," Jake replied patiently. "You ever heard of Louis Lorenz, the pirate, who inhabited this island more'n three centuries ago?"

Kurt nodded. "I also know it was his skull on that scarecrow in the cornfield."

"That's right. When the witchdoctors settled here some years after Louis Lorenz' demise, they found his skull where the Spanish soldiers had left it; stuck on a pole on Hollow Island. The witchdoctors used it as an object with which to work magic, and when they did, they discovered that a spirit still dwelled within it; a spirit that refused to let go of this earth and this

life. They worked with that spirit, taught it things like spells and the art of witchdoctory. But that spirit was filled with hate and vengeance, so they let it be.

"The skull was handed down from generation to generation until finally it finished up in my hands. I didn't want anything to do with it, so one of the farmers here thought it would be a useful thing to keep the crows away. He took it and did just that. Now I realise sadly what a mistake that was. I should have destroyed it while I had the chance."

He paused for a moment to rest, then went on, everyone listening intently to his intriguing tale.

"The scarecrow, with Lorenz' mind, armed itself with a scythe and went on a bloodthirsty rampage of the villagers, taking them in ones and twos. He killed six in all, until some of the men and a policeman from Nassau chased it out to Hollow Island where it dwelled in the cave. They sealed the cave shut with a blast, trapping it inside for more'n twenty years. But now it's escaped again."

"So that's why Josh was so annoyed we'd reopened the cave," Kurt understood, although he still couldn't quite grasp all this voodoo stuff, and living scarecrows going around slashing people to death. But for the moment, he couldn't come up with any other explanation regarding what's been happening.

"Josh, when he was a boy, found two of the victims when it went on its first rampage," Jake told them. His expression darkened. "And now it's started all over again because you fools let it loose! He paused. "But then, you weren't to know."

"We've dived in that cave," Kurt objected. "And we never saw anything."

"It would have been hiding in there somewhere,

lurking in the darkness," Jake assured him.

Kurt shuddered and thought about that second tunnel they'd never ventured into; the one where he'd thought he'd seen two pinpricks of red light staring at him. He asked what he thought might sound like a stupid question. "Does this thing have glowing red eyes?"

Matt, Ellen and Pete all shot him a quizzical look. Kurt ignored their dubious stares.

Jake smiled knowingly. "You have seen it, too, haven't you, boy?"

Kurt nodded. "I think so. Once in the cave I saw what looked like two red eyes, but thought I was imagining it. And a few days earlier," he turned to Ellen, then back to Jake, "when my girlfriend and I were in the resort pool one night, I saw this odd-looking guy walking around the grounds down near the boat shed. Then I thought I saw two red eyes as well."

"I saw that guy," Matt piped up. "When I was down the beach that night with....What was her name?" He shrugged. "Can't remember. He was sort of stumbling along the edge of the jungle. Looked kind of old and arthritis ridden." He looked at Jake. "I thought it might have been you."

"Lorenz was probably stiff, then," Jake said. "From all those years cooped up in the cave. But he would be moving more freely now. He has two missions. One: to reproduce himself so he has an army to aid him in his quest. And two: his quest itself, to destroy mankind. That was his constant desire when the witchdoctors spoke with his spirit all those years ago. That's why he hangs onto this world. Vengeance, pure and simple."

"Vengeance against who? Us?" Kurt said incredulously.

Jake nodded. "Everybody. Whoever's human."

"But we're not the Spanish Army who took away his life," Kurt insisted.

Jake said, "Who can rationalize a crazy person. Lorenz isn't even a person, just a spirit trapped in that thing it uses as a body. He was crazy when living. He's still crazy now."

"We found some scarecrows over on Hollow Island the other day," Pete informed the old man. "They were torn down by the police."

"He's managed to make more," Jake said with certainty. "That one on the beach was not Louis Lorenz. I also saw several lurking about last night."

"Why didn't you stop them?" Ellen asked.

"Me? A feeble old man? I wouldn't have lasted a second. But you young people. You might stop them. But you're best to forget about it, take everybody and just leave this accursed place behind."

"We can't," Kurt told him. "Somebody or something stripped all the boats of their outboards and smashed all the radios."

"Then telephone for help," the old man suggested. But then he considered those words for a moment and shook his head. "No. He's crazy, but he's smart. Plus he has modern minds working for him now. Minds that understand modern technology. He's probably had the phone lines severed as well. He wants to keep everyone here, reproduce even more. Expand on his army before tackling much greater targets."

"Great," Kurt said. "We're stuck here."

"That leaves only one option," the old man stated.

"To fight for your lives."

Fourteen

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

"How do we kill the things?" Kurt wanted to know. "Guns and knives? How can you kill something that technically isn't alive?"

"That one on the beach was dead," Pete pointed out.

"No, not dead," the old man said with certainty. "Merely waiting to be resurrected by its master, Lorenz. Lorenz is the one you have to destroy. He controls all the others. While his spirit remains alive, the spirits of the others remain alive. Kill Lorenz' spirit and the spirits of the others will pass through to the other world."

"All right. Then how do we kill Louis Lorenz' spirit?" Kurt wanted to know.

Old man Jake stood up and rummaged around on a shelf. He removed an ancient-looking book. "The answer to that I don't yet have." He blew dust off the cover. "But it will be in this book somewhere. It'll take time to find it. Come back and see me this evening. By then I should have your answer."

"But what do we do in the meantime?" Matt asked.

"Prepare yourselves for tonight. They won't attack until nightfall. They don't like the daylight."

"What's the book about?" Matt popped another question.

"Black magic spells and rituals. It also tells how

to undo something another has done."

"You mean we have to cast some sort of spell on Lorenz, or that scarecrow, or whatever the fuck it is?" Matt said.

"Maybe? Maybe not? It could involve something much simpler. Something physical rather than spiritual. Something to break its earthly bonds. But rest assured: Whichever way it works, the others will protect Lorenz with their lives." Jake opened the book and was soon engrossed in it. He looked up at the four still standing in his home. "Come back tonight," he repeated. "This will take some time."

They left Jake to dwell on his ancient book of witchcraft and walked along the beach back to the resort. On the way, Kurt ducked into the jungle to check on the doubloons. Despite all that was happening, he still maintained an interest in the gold. He reached the tree in line with the overhanging palm, where he'd buried the coins. The earth remained undisturbed, just damp from last night's rain. He then rejoined the others on the beach in time to hear Ellen ask, "Do you guys believe all that stuff?"

"I don't know," Pete admitted.

Matt said, "Do we have a choice?"

"I guess we'll find out tonight if it's real or not," Kurt put in. "If we see a bunch of scarecrows roaming the island, we know it's for real. If nothing happens, we know that it was just all bullshit."

"Whatever's the case," Pete pointed out, "something is definitely going on here. We have a whole bunch of headless corpses lying about the place. And you said yourself, Kurt, that you think there must be more than one...whatever, doing all

this. We have sabotaged boats and radios, scarecrows dressed in wetsuits out on Hollow Island, and a scarecrow lying on the beach with a bullet in its chest."

"All facts that support what the old man was telling us," Kurt confirmed. "Not to mention Josh trying to seal the cave shut again with explosives. Let's get back and check if the phones are still working. With a bit of luck we can call for help and get off this Godforsaken place."

"So much for our vacation," Pete said.

As they reached the resort grounds, Kurt's watch chimed seven o'clock. The place still seemed deserted. Inside, the clerk was as they'd left him, dead and headless on the desk. Kurt moved over beside the clerk, breathing through his mouth so the smell didn't make him sick. The problem was, the stench was that rancid he could virtually taste the coppery odour that permeated the air. Kurt tried to put the clerk out of his mind and checked the telephone. It was still intact and plugged into its wall socket. He picked up the receiver, placed it to his ear and listened. Nothing. No dial tone. He hit some digits on the push button panel. Still nothing. Frustrated, he slammed it down into its cradle. "Dead as," he reported. "Jake was right."

"Have you ever thought that maybe Jake's behind all this?" Matt asked him.

"No, I haven't," Kurt conceded. "But how could he be? He's just an old man."

"No," Matt reminded him. "An old witchdoctor. Who knows what he's capable of?"

"I don't know," Kurt admitted. "Why would he tell us everything he just did if he was involved? And

even if he was somehow involved, what can we do about it? Kill him, or something? Then what? If these things exist like he says they do, we'll still have them to deal with." He looked over at the closed coffee shop, then at the closed convenience store and the closed souvenir shop. "Is everyone dead in this place or something?"

But then they heard a stereo burst to life upstairs somewhere, and could hear the rumble of heavy metal music pounding out a raucous beat.

"Somebody's still living," Ellen said quietly.

Kurt paced the foyer, thinking about what to do next. There appeared to be no police left alive, and definitely no manager to run the place. He and his friends were the only ones who had an inkling as to what was going on, or about to happen, so he decided it was up to them to take charge of the situation.

He stopped pacing and turned to the others. "As much as I don't like the prospect of handling bodies, let's take him," he nodded at the desk clerk, "and Sloane outside, then gather up all the other bodies we can find. Maybe we can bury them on the beach or something. But I want to clear this foyer out, clean up the blood over there, then call everyone downstairs and hold a meeting in here." He glanced around the spacious foyer. "Hopefully it will be large enough. If not, we can hold it outside. But we've got to let everyone know what's going on, and make some plans."

Kurt took a fat bunch of keys from the desk clerk's belt. He moved down the left hand-side of the foyer where there was a hallway. Along the right wall of the hallway was a door. He tried the knob. Locked. Fumbling to find the right key, Kurt

eventually got the door open. Inside, on the wall, he located a light switch and turned it on. The room was full of cleaning equipment, chemicals, and shelves stacked high with bed linen. He grabbed a handful of sheets, and several thick synthetic blankets with which to transport the bodies. Then he left the room, leaving the door ajar, and rejoined the others in the reception area.

Pete and Ellen were sitting on the sofas by the doors, while Matt was peering into the coffee shop.

"We'll organise food later," Kurt told him. "Once we've disposed of the bodies and rekindled some sort of appetite." Kurt laid the blanket out on the floor behind the reception desk. "Give us a hand with this, Matt."

Together they laid the dead clerk on the blanket and folded the thick material over him. They got a good grip on each end and heaved. The body had some weight to it, but it was manageable enough.

As they passed Pete and Ellen, Kurt said, "Get something to clean up that blood over there. Down the side there's a room full of cleaning stuff." Pete and Ellen obeyed without question.

The electronic doors opened automatically as Matt backed over the sensor pad. They struggled down the stairs and walked past the pool. The clerk was getting rather cumbersome now, and Kurt could feel his grip on the blanket beginning to slip. "Put him down for a second," he suggested. His arms ached with relief once the clerk's weight was rested on the ground.

"What do you wanna do with him?" Matt asked.

Kurt looked around, and then shrugged. "I don't know. Let's just dump all the bodies on the beach for

now."

They picked up the corpse once more and walked across the grass and onto the sand. There they placed the blanket on the ground, unraveled it and rolled the clerk off of it. They went back for Sloane. He was a little heavier, and twice they had to rest on the way to the beach. But they eventually got him there, and Sloane joined the company of the desk clerk.

While Pete and Ellen continued to clean up inside, Kurt and Matt searched for bodies on the beach and around the grounds. The patrolman in the water by the dive shop was still there. Grabbing an arm each they dragged him out and placed him with the other two. Next they lugged the scarecrow back to the pile of corpses and dumped it there face up.

"Maybe we should smash the thing to pieces," Matt suggested.

"Not yet," Kurt told him. "I want to show others what we're up against."

A search of the grounds led to the discovery of two more bodies. These were dressed in the uniforms of hotel security guards. That was all the bodies they could find, and they covered them over with sheets.

"If there are any more, and there probably are," Kurt mused, "considering the number of police they had here patrolling the grounds, then they're most likely floating around out there somewhere." He swept his arm in a wide arc across the bay.

"I'd say you're probably right."

Kurt started back towards the hotel. Matt fell in stride beside him. "Next step in the plan," Kurt said, "is to get everyone downstairs and tell them what's happening. Out of five hundred odd people, maybe a few of them will have some good ideas."

They entered the foyer, where Pete and Ellen were cleaning up the last of the blood in reception and Sloane's office.

"How's it goin'?" Kurt asked.

"About as clean as we can get it," Pete informed.

Ellen appeared in the doorway to Sloane's office, her face set in a grim expression. "That was awful doing that," she said to Kurt and hugged him.

"I know," Kurt commiserated with her. "None of this is very pleasant."

"That's an understatement," she replied.

The four of them replaced all the cleaning utensils back in the maid's room and washed their hands in a sink. Kurt then locked the door, pocketed the keys and headed for the elevators. They went up to the first floor.

"Time to wake everyone up," he said.

During the next hour they knocked on every door in the place, telling everybody to get dressed and that there was to be a general meeting downstairs in the lobby. Some people readily agreed to meet them downstairs, others were indifferent about it, but said they would come anyway, while a number of people point blank refused and couldn't be bothered.

"That's their problem," Kurt said to Ellen when another door was slammed in their faces. "They can look out for themselves. We can't force anybody to do anything."

That was the last of the suites, and the four of them went back downstairs to await the gathering of the patrons who agreed to come down.

When they reached the foyer about thirty people had already gathered, milling around with expressions that said: What the hell's going on?

Kurt took up a position behind the reception desk, which was virtually free of all blood now, bar a few stubborn stains on the carpet, and waited for more people to arrive. Ellen smoked, looking nervous. Kurt, himself, felt a little apprehensive about addressing this crowd. He wasn't exactly sure what he was going to tell them, or if they'd even believe what he had to say. But there was no real choice. He had to try.

Another group of about ten or twelve exited the elevators into the lobby. Groups of twos and threes came down the stairwells. This pattern continued for half an hour, the lifts whirring as they constantly rode up and down. Eventually the influx of people subsided. Kurt waited for a further ten minutes, and when nobody else appeared, decided no more were coming.

He gazed out over the crowd of three hundred or so patrons. The foyer was crammed full like a church on Sunday. There was a lot of chattering going on in the crowd and he raised his voice above them. "Can we have some quiet, please!"

When that proved ineffective, Matt let out an ear-piercing whistle that got everyone's attention. The nattering eventually dwindled.

"Thanks, Matt," Kurt offered. "This isn't going to be easy."

"Just give it your best shot, buddy," Matt encouraged. "We're here to back you up."

So people could see and hear him better, Kurt climbed up onto the desk. "First I'd like to ask if there are any of the police present?" He waited, got no response. "What about those from hotel security? Any of you here?"

"All our security staff were out patrolling the grounds with the police last night," a black man, with gray flecks in his wiry hair, said from near the front. "I'm the nightclub manager," he explained. "All my boys were outside, too. Had the waitresses trying to control the crowd."

"So!" Kurt bellowed. "We've got no police and no hotel security!"

A few catcalls and wolf-whistles erupted from some of the males in the audience up the back. But others responded in a different way.

"Where are they all?" one women said.

"Most likely they're all dead," Kurt told her. "We found some of their bodies around the grounds this morning."

"What the hell's going on here?" a man wanted to know.

"Who are you, anyway?" someone else asked.

And pretty soon it was one big rabble again.

Matt let out another whistle, and the talking ceased.

"Do you want to hear what's going on or not?" Matt yelled. "Let the man speak!"

"Go fuck yourself!" some guy called from down the back.

Kurt saw Matt tense up. "Forget jerks like that," Kurt whispered to his friend. "We'll just worry about the ones who are interested." Matt nodded, his expression still mean.

Kurt spoke again. "We have reason to believe there is going to be some serious trouble here tonight." He paused, stuck for words. This was damned hard to explain. He wasn't even sure yet if he believed it. It sounded too incredible. "Tonight,

we're going to be attacked by a number of...." He paused again. What do I say? Scarecrows? He chose, "Things."

"Things? What things?" a young woman tossed at him.

Kurt hesitated, feeling everyone's eyes upon him. "Scarecrows," he said eventually and held his breath awaiting their response.

It came in a barrage.

"What kind of shit is this?"

"What in Christ's name are you talking about, man?"

"Who the hell are you, anyway?" someone repeated their earlier remark.

"The guy's nuts," Kurt heard someone nearby say to a friend.

"You got that right," the friend replied. "Let's get out of here."

"No cops! No security!" a guy yelled from down the back. "Let's sack the joint!"

Kurt watched the man and his group of a dozen friends move off toward the coffee shop. Two of them picked up one of the sofas and hurled it through the glass doors of the shop. The group then scrambled inside in search of money and who knows what else.

Others were shouting in the crowd; some abuse, some questions he couldn't hear, and most of them were now moving back upstairs or outside.

Kurt stood on the desk shaking his head, watching the crowd disperse. This was useless. Totally and utterly useless. Must be what a politician sometimes feels like, he thought. And soon, apart from the rioters, the foyer was empty.

Pete tapped Kurt's leg. "You tried," he said.

Kurt got down from the desk and slumped in defeat into the desk clerk's chair.

Ellen knelt beside him and kissed him. "You can't help those who don't want to be helped," she reminded him.

"I can't really blame anybody," Kurt said. "It does sound totally ridiculous."

"Ridiculous, maybe," she replied. "But also possibly true."

He stood up abruptly, frustrated. "I mean, what the fuck do they think's going on here? People are dying, losing their heads and being fed to the sharks. Don't they wonder who or what is doing that?"

"I don't think people want to know," Ellen perceived. "They just want to bury their heads in the sand."

"Well, I'm not going to take responsibility for their deaths, if it comes to that," Kurt said with resolve. "I already carry enough guilt around on my shoulders." He paused and took a deep breath to calm himself. "We'll help all those that we can, but basically it'll be every man and woman for themselves. Let's just look out for each other. But dammit! We'd have a much better chance if we all banded together."

"True. But these people aren't sheep. They're goats. And goats don't look for a shepherd," Matt said with an air of wisdom.

"Come on," Pete suggested. "Let's see if we can find a radio or phone that works."

"Or maybe an outboard for one of those boats," Matt said hopefully.

Ellen looked at Kurt with an expression that said:

Forget these people. Let's do something constructive.

Kurt nodded. "Okay. Let's start with the phone in Sloane's office."

But Sloane's phone was as dead as the manager himself. There was a row of public phones in the lobby. They each tried one. All were silent. No dial tone.

"Obviously the main communication line had been cut somewhere," Pete deduced.

"If we can find that," said Kurt. "We could wire it up again and call for help."

Pete shook his head doubtfully. "It could be cut anywhere. In the wall somewhere. Underground. Down in the basement levels."

"Maybe someone has a cell phone?" Ellen suggested.

"Unless they have a satellite phone it won't do us any good," Kurt informed her. "There's no cell phone transmitter tower on the island...For some unknown damned reason."

Around them, the looting continued. The souvenir shop was next on the hit list, followed by the convenience store.

Kurt was still frustrated, didn't understand the reaction of these people. "What are they going to do when they finish their rioting? Just sit here on the island and rot? What?"

Matt clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Forget trying to figure out human nature. Let's just concentrate on things we *can* control. Like ourselves."

"The best way we can help everybody now is to find a way off this island," Pete said. "Or find a way to stop these things."

Kurt nodded and moved outside. The others followed.

Several people were swimming in the pool, acting as if they didn't have a care in the world.

Kurt walked purposefully toward the dive shop. He broke out the ring of keys, picked one and inserted it into the lock. It slid in, but wouldn't turn. He tried another, and another. Most of them wouldn't even fit into the lock. He found another that did. He tried to turn it. It moved a little.

"I don't think this is the right key," he said to his friends. "But it might work." He jimmied the lock, rattling the key around, trying to get it to bite. Eventually he succeeded. The lock clicked. He slid the door open and they entered the gloomy interior of the shop.

"What are we going to do in here?" Matt wanted to know.

Kurt didn't answer. He weaved through the piles of diving gear to the doorway that led into the boat shed. What he'd hoped to find inside was a nice, shiny outboard in working condition. What he did find was an old, tired-looking outboard pulled apart into a thousand pieces.

"Shit!" he uttered in disappointment. "Anybody know how to put one of these together?"

Matt shook his head, so did Pete. Ellen shrugged.

Kurt eyed the outboard with contempt. Every part of the guts of the engine was dismantled. It would be an impossible task for someone who didn't have a clue as to what they were doing to be able to reassemble that and get it operational.

"It was a good thought," Matt offered in consolation.

Kurt moved back out to the dive shop. He grabbed a handful of diver's knives in sheaths from a container. "Let's all strap one of these to our leg. I don't know what good they will do, but maybe something."

"Maybe we should hand some around to the others?" Ellen suggested.

Kurt considered it, then shook his head. "The rowdy mood that crowd's in, they'll probably just turn them on each other."

Kurt strapped a knife to his calf. The others emulated.

"Before we go," Kurt said. "Let's just double-check those boats and radios. Maybe I missed something."

He and Matt opened the Rolla door leading out onto the jetty. The mid-morning sun was oppressive. Kurt found himself sweating profusely and knew, feared, a big storm was brewing in the south. The four of them methodically checked each boat for an outboard, or radio that was still intact. None were.

"The other night," Pete said to Kurt, "you told us about those big storage areas down in the basement levels. Why don't we check them out and see if we can't find something useful down there."

"Yeah! There might be a radio, or some weapons or something," Matt added.

Back in the lobby, the looting continued. People were helping themselves to free food and cappuccinos in the coffee shop. Kurt ignored them and made for the elevators.

The doors to one of the elevators opened immediately when Kurt pressed the call button. They got in and rode it down to the second basement level.

There they exited into a dimly-lit corridor. Nobody was down here. All was silent except for the distant droning of the diesel-powered generator down below.

"At least we still have electricity," Pete said, his voice echoing down the corridor.

The doors along the corridor were numbered, but none had a sign indicating what was inside. Kurt tried the knob of the first one. Locked. "Here I go again," he said and inserted key after key until finally one of them unlocked the door.

It swung open silently, revealing a pitch dark interior. He fumbled inside on the wall for a light switch. His searching fingers located it and switched it on. Bright light instantly lit up the room, revealing cases upon cases of liquor and beer, boxes of spare glasses, napkins, straws, coasters and cigarettes; everything used to run the bars.

"Can't see anything of use in here," Matt quipped. "Not unless we want to drown our sorrows."

They closed the door and relocked it, then moved on to the second door. Kurt went through the usual procedure of inserting keys until one fit. He found the right key after three goes, opened the door and switched on the light.

This room obviously served as a storage area for the catering outlets. Shelves were stacked with dinner plates, coffee mugs, boxes of biscuits, sacks of flour and coffee beans, sugar, cutlery, a cappuccino machine. Kurt closed this door and moved on to the next, which revealed shelves full of sheets and towels.

He sighed and prepared to open the door to the final storage room on this side of the corridor. There was a deadlock on this one, as well as the standard

door lock in the knob.

"I wonder what's in here?" he said, pointing out the deadlock to the others. He searched for a deadlock key on the keyring. Found two. He tried the first one. It worked. The lock clicked back. The procedure for the normal lock took longer. Finally he found a key that opened it and the door swung open. Kurt turned on the light.

This room was a lot less cluttered than the other three. The first thing Kurt noticed was a large safe at the far end. That would account for the extra security on this particular door. But that wasn't all he found that warranted the added security measures. The room was reminiscent of a large walk-in robe, and hanging from racks on either side, covered in clear dust jackets were spare, brand new uniforms for the hotel's security staff. But what interested Kurt the most was a shelf below the uniforms where, laid out neatly, were a number of Smith & Wesson automatic pistols in shoulder holsters.

Kurt slipped on a shoulder holster, removed the pistol and checked the magazine. Empty. He gave a holstered pistol to Matt, Ellen and Pete, then searched for ammunition. He hoped it wasn't kept in the safe.

"Here," Pete said, discovering a box the size of a large shoe box filled with eleven shot clips.

Kurt jammed a clip into his gun, then showed Ellen how to load hers. Matt and Pete slotted clips of ammo into their own guns, then each of them stuffed as many clips as possible into the pockets of their clothes.

"I feel like I'm in a Terminator movie," Matt said.

"I only wish we were just acting out a movie," Kurt replied, although, deep down, he was aware of a

strange sense of excitement; an adrenalin rush that even topped the rush he'd felt when they found all that gold in the cave. It's probably just fear, he thought, though he wasn't sure. In any case, the adrenalin rush might prove useful in fighting these things off.

The storage rooms on the other side of the corridor produced nothing useful, just more of the usual hotel paraphernalia. They went back to the elevators and rode to the top floor.

"We should eat something," Ellen suggested when they were in the guys' room.

"I don't know if we've got anything," Kurt said, moving towards the kitchen.

"I bought some stuff the other night," said Pete. "When I came out of the nightclub. There's some bread and butter, some milk, and a coupla packets of biscuits."

"That sounds better than nothing," Matt said and started hauling the goods out of the cupboard and refrigerator.

Kurt boiled the kettle and made four cups of coffee while Matt cooked up a mountain of toast.

"Good mix, really," Kurt said between chews of toast. "Bread for energy. Coffee to keep us alert." He devoured about six slices, realising he was hungry, and drank two cups of coffee.

"So," Matt began when they'd finished. "What do we do now? We've eaten, got ourselves some weapons. We've searched the place for outboards, radios or phones that work. Found none. The only way off this island is to float one of those runabouts out and row it all the way to Nassau. Which would be impossible with the current running in the opposite

direction. Plus, we'd probably just end up getting lost at sea. So, I guess the old boy was right. If we can't leave, we've got no choice but to fight. And I sure as hell ain't gonna sit on my butt and wait for those things to come and lop my head off."

Kurt paced. "If what old Jake says is correct, nothing's gonna happen until sunset at the earliest. The things apparently don't like daylight. So I guess in the meantime we just bide our time until nightfall. No. On second thoughts, let's go see old man Jake again. Maybe he's found an answer by now."

"He told us not to come back until this evening," Pete reminded him.

Kurt smiled. "Since when do I listen to what other people say." He winked at Matt.

They rode the elevator down to the lobby. As they were walking towards the entrance, a young Latin-American boy of no more than seventeen came out of the ransacked coffee shop.

"Hey! What's with the holstered pistol, man?" he said sarcastically to Kurt. "You gonna blow away them fucking scarecrows with that?" The boy stood there, arms folded and smirked.

"Go back to your playmates, jerk-off," Matt growled at him.

The boy shoved Matt and Matt shoved back. From a pocket the kid whipped out a switchblade and feinted at Matt's throat with the point of the blade.

Kurt drew his pistol and aimed it at the boy's head.

The boy saw it out of the corner of his eye and slowly put the knife away. He raised his hands in supplication and let them drop to his sides. "Hey. Just foolin', man."

"I'm not," Kurt said seriously.

The boy backed away into the coffee shop.

Kurt moved outside and was joined by the others. "Stupid punk," he said. "He was one of the jerks up the back giving us a hard time of it this morning."

"You wouldn't have really shot him, would you?" Ellen asked him.

"Nah. I was just scaring him off. Mind you, if he had have tried anything serious with that knife I might have been tempted."

They moved to the back of the resort and along the beach to Jake's place. When they got there the door was shut. Matt knocked on it. They waited. No answer. Matt knocked again, louder. Still no response. He tried the knob. It was unlocked. The door creaked as it opened and Matt slipped inside. Kurt followed him in, trailed by Pete and Ellen.

They found Jake slumped in the chair, the ancient book closed in his lap. Matt tapped him, then felt the bare flesh of his shoulder. "He's as cold as," he said in surprise. "Been dead for hours."

Kurt shook his head, the frustration he'd felt earlier surfacing again. "That's great! That's just fucking great! The guy's lived for who knows how many years, and as soon as he's about to give us the answer to this mess, he goes ahead and dies on us!"

Ellen shot him a reproving look.

"I know," he said to her. "Not very sympathetic, am I." She touched his arm. He shrugged, calming down. "Maybe we can work out the answer ourselves. Let's take a look at that book."

Pete picked it up, skimmed through a few pages, then tossed it resignedly onto the floor. "No good. The thing's written in some weird language. Nothing

that I recognise."

Kurt sighed heavily and started to pace. That proved infectious, and soon all four of them were pacing around the dead old man as if performing some strange native dance.

Pete stopped pacing first. "So how are we going to put a stop to these things? The old man said we have to destroy Lorenz in such a way that his spirit is destroyed. That, apparently, will also stop the others. And who knows how many more there will be now? More people have been killed for their heads. We've had thunderstorms. There could be twenty or thirty of them by now."

"Could be," Kurt agreed. "But we'll just have to do what we can, I guess."

They left Jake and moved back out onto the beach. Kurt looked south, where clouds were gradually forming to compress into one hell of a storm.

Fifteen

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

Kurt stood on the balcony smoking one of Ellen's cigarettes.

Twilight had come early due to the storm which was blowing up from the south. The wind whipped at his hair, increasing in tempo with every passing minute. Lightning cut dazzling paths across the black horizon, and the distant thunder sounded like a death knell.

He watched that storm coming for half an hour, knew what it would bring with it.

Ellen joined him, cigarette in her hand, still wearing the knife and holstered pistol. The wind tore at her flowing dark hair, wrapping strands of it around her face. She brushed it aside and drew on her smoke.

"You okay?" she asked. "You've been standing out here for ages."

"I'm all right," he replied, feeling the first fine spray of rain in the wind hitting his face.

Ellen put her arm around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder. "We'll get through this."

"I know we will." He'd tried to sound positive, but deep down he wasn't at all sure they would. They didn't even really know what they were dealing with.

"Nothing's going to happen to me," she assured him. "And if it does, it won't be your fault." She kissed him on the cheek. "Just remember that."

Ellen went to go back inside.

"Ellen?" Kurt's voice stopped her.

She turned and looked at him.

"I love you," he told her for the first time.

"And I love you." She smiled a rather grim smile and went inside.

Kurt once again turned his attention to the storm, where the clouds were advancing rapidly on the island. The thunder was much louder now, the lightning closer. And soon the first heavy drops of rain stung his face.

Two figures ran naked through the rain and dived into the pool.

Steve broke the surface and let out a whistle. "This is nice," he said to Monique who rose beside him. She reached immediately for the flaccid tool that hung between his legs and squeezed it, then raked her fingernails across his testicles. "That feels good," Steve told her.

"It's supposed to," she replied. Monique temporarily let go of his manhood and gazed up at the sky, the rain stinging her eyes. It was dark out here, the only light coming from those lampposts placed at sparse intervals around the grounds. "I hope we don't get hit by lightning," she said warily, watching a bolt streak across the sky. Thunder boomed a second later.

"Nah," Steve assured her. "Too many trees and buildings for it to hit." He wrapped his arms around her from behind and cupped her huge breasts in his palms. "Have you ever made love outside in a thunderstorm before?"

"No," she replied, enjoying the feel of his hands

all over her tits. "Can't say that I have."

"Well I have. And I tell ya, it gets you really excited. Must be something to do with the negative ions in the air, I don't know. But it's really stimulating. Even the rain hitting your skin is a kind of a turn-on."

Monique reached behind her and felt his balls again. Her hand touched his erect pole and she inched her fingers along it, trying to determine how long it was. It was big. At least eight, eight and a half inches, she decided. Maybe nine.

Steve said, conceited, "You like feeling that, don't you, babe?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I'm sitting here fantasizing about what it's going to feel like inside my pussy."

"It's guaranteed to please," he assured her. "If not completely satisfied, feel free to search for a replacement."

"I don't think that will be necessary. This certainly feels big enough and fat enough to do the job. Though I must warn you, it takes more than mere penis size to please me. You have to know how to use it, too."

"I do," he assured her again. "I've had plenty of practice and no complaints yet."

Monique turned to face him. "Well, let's see if you can keep up your hundred percent record." With those words she slipped into the water and took his cock into her mouth. She sucked and licked at the head with her lips and tongue, then had to come up for air. "How did that feel?" she asked him, a lewd smile splitting her face.

"Not bad," he replied, stirring her. Steve propped himself up into a sitting position on the edge of the

pool, his dick angling out a long way in front of him. "Now taste it above the water," he instructed her.

Still smiling, Monique knelt in the pool, put her left hand behind his ass and gripped his rod at the base with her right. She lowered her head towards his penis and paused with her mouth open just inches from the tip, breathing on it with her hot breath. "Are you ready for this?" she teased.

"Always ready."

She dropped her mouth over his meat and drove it deep down her throat. Steve gasped and clutched her head, helping her to drive onto him. She swallowed it as deeply as it would go, but only managed to swallow two thirds of it.

Fuck this dick's big, she thought and tried to swallow the entire length. This time she succeeded in taking in about seven inches of it, and she still had an inch or two to go.

Her throat getting sore from the constant pounding, she decided to just concentrate on sucking the head. Rainwater was running down her face in rivers, causing her mouth to make loud slurping sounds as she worked away on him.

"I like that sound you're making," Steve said. "It's a real turn-on."

Monique abruptly pulled away from him and kicked backwards into the pool. She lazily backstroked to the other side and got up onto the edge. She parted her legs, exposing her glistening valley. "You're turn to eat me now," she invited.

Steve needed no further persuasion and swam over to her. He rose out of the pool and dived for her pussy, burying his head between her thighs and taking her outer and inner lips into his mouth all at once and

sucked.

"Ooh," Monique swooned.

Steve darted his tongue in and out of her tunnel, then flicked it across her clitoris a number of times.

"That's the way," she encouraged him. "Keep doing it like that."

Her lover alternated between tonguing her vagina and lashing her clit, every now and then sucking her sweet juices into his mouth.

His mouth left her pussy and his tongue traced a path up through her pubic hair, along her abdomen and up to her enormous breasts. He squeezed one with his left hand and sucked on the other.

Monique felt tingles run through her body. Her pussy was squirming, begging to be fucked. Steve read her mind and guided his generous length into her. It filled her to bursting point, and she decided that she could never go back to an average size dildo again. Big just felt too good, massaged every crevice of her moist tunnel, stretched her lips apart to the point where they felt like they were getting a good feed.

She caressed the wet muscles of Steve's chest and arms as he thrust into her relentlessly. He was nicely muscled, she thought. Though nowhere near as big as the guy she'd fucked on the beach the other night. He was really big, muscles upon muscles. But Steve's muscles felt good, and the feel of them beneath her fingertips stimulated her. She felt herself quickly reaching a climax.

"I'm going to cum soon," she panted.

Steve increased his tempo, wanting to reach his crescendo the same moment she did.

The rain stinging her face, Monique grabbed the

cheeks of his ass and ground herself against him. She was close, closer. Almost there. Her body tensed up like a contracting muscle. The tension suddenly burst and exploded in one of the most intense orgasms she'd ever experienced, heightened by the fact that Steve was squirting in her at the same time.

Just as he was pulling out of her, Monique saw a shadow rise up above them on the right. Two horrid red eyes stared down at them. And as the shadow moved a step closer she saw its face; not really a face, but a skull. It lifted a crescent-shaped object attached to a handle above its head. She tried to scream, but it came out in a whimper.

Steve had pulled out now, noticed her staring at something above him, her eyes wide and horrified. He looked up, saw something from hell standing there.

When the blade pierced Steve's back he let out an agonized howl. As his back arched in response to the pain, another figure appeared and slammed the point of its scythe into the side of Steve's head.

Monique watched the blood oozing down her lover's face, saw his eyes roll back in his head and watched, as if it were all happening in slow motion, as he toppled backwards into the pool.

Now she found her voice and screamed so loud it would wake the dead. Her legs were still parted from the sex she'd just had, and before she could close them, the business end of a scythe penetrated her vagina, slicing it up through the clitoris and cutting a path into her pubic hair. The pain was excruciating. What had been sheer pleasure a moment ago was now replaced by an unbearable, burning agony.

The creature thrust the blade in further and

Monique felt it sever her uterus. Blood was gushing from her vagina, far, far worse than her heaviest period. The rain washed it into the pool. She couldn't scream anymore. The pain had taken her breath away. Monique gasped for air, couldn't get any.

Her last thought before the second creature took her head off was: I've died and gone to hell.

The bedside lamp burned with a seductive glow, a red shirt draped over it to subdue the light.

Dean Perry climbed out of bed and prepared to dress in a pair of jeans. He was on his honeymoon and had just made love to his wife, Crystal, for the second time in the past hour. He staggered as he tried to put his other leg into the jeans and fell forward onto his face on the carpet.

"You're drunk," Crystal said and giggled. "Where are you going, anyway?"

Dean got up and tried again. This time he successfully negotiated his leg into the jeans and zipped them up. He ran a hand through his tussled hair and looked, a little blurry-eyed, at his naked wife who lay on the bed.

"I'm going downstairs to find more booze," he told her.

"You don't need any more," she teased.

"Yes I do."

Dean walked over to the door. It suddenly burst open, the edge striking him hard on the forehead. He fell to the carpet and blacked out.

When he awoke, he couldn't feel any pain in his head, just a dull numbness. Dean sat up, realising he'd been lying on the floor, and looked dazedly

across the room to the bed.

What he saw intrigued him. Two scarecrow-like figures with grinning skulls for heads were hovering over his wife. And oddly they were wearing sunglasses. Crystal wasn't moving. She was covered in blood. As, too, were the sheets and the wall behind the bed.

What's going on? he wondered. He didn't feel too concerned. It was just an hallucination from the acid they'd had before, he was sure of it. He grinned, enjoying the macabre scene. This was better than a horror movie.

Both the figures were carrying implements with wooden handles and long crescent-shaped blades. Scythes, he realised, still grinning.

The grim reaper has come to take us away.

One of the creatures went to the kitchenette, searched the drawers, and returned with a long-bladed carving knife. Dean watched as it commenced cutting Crystal's head from her body. Blood gushed from the jugular and squirted a crimson line across the ceiling.

Wow! This is really impressive shit, he thought. I didn't know my imagination was this powerful.

The thing finished cutting and held up Crystal's head by the hair. It placed her head into a bag, then the things turned their attention to Dean.

They moved slowly across the floor towards him, walking a little stiffly. The one who'd severed Crystal's head still brandished the knife, which dripped blood along the carpet. The one with the knife knelt down in front of Dean and stared at him with glowing red eyes from behind the dark lenses.

Dean smiled at it. He wasn't afraid, didn't feel

any fear as the scarecrow brought the knife up to his throat, preparing to cut it. Why should he be afraid? It was just an hallucination. He thought he would feel no pain.

But he was wrong.

Sixteen

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

Kurt, Matt, Pete and Ellen rode the elevator downstairs. It stopped at level one and the doors slid open.

A scarecrow stood there, dressed ridiculously in a dress. And what was even more ridiculous were the pair of Ray-Bans that rested loosely on what was left of the bridge of the nose. The thing had no ears, and the arms of the glasses were pushed up high onto the sides of the creature's head where they gripped the wide part of the bone. It raised its scythe, ready for a strike, the blade dripping fresh blood.

They're definitely real, Kurt thought and quickly hit the *doors closed* button. The elevator responded. The doors started to slide shut. The scythe came down and was sandwiched between the doors and jammed, the point of the blade stopping just inches from Pete's forehead.

The elevator doors opened again and the scythe was withdrawn to prepare for another blow. Kurt was ready for it though, had his pistol out and aimed at the thing's abhorrent head. He pulled the trigger, felt the gun kick in his hands, heard the resonant boom as the bullet was ejected, and at the same instant, saw the scarecrow's skull explode into a thousand fragments of shattered bone. The body fell back into the corridor and lay still.

"They can be killed," Ellen said in surprise.

"Maybe?" Kurt said with some doubt. "But until Lorenz is dead, he or the others will just keep producing more of the wretched things."

Matt chanced a glance out into the corridor, looked left and right. "No more of them," he reported.

Ellen hit the **G** button and the lift continued its descent.

As the elevator came to a stop on the ground floor, Kurt trained his gun at the doors as they parted.

No scarecrow stood there to greet them.

Pete volunteered to step out first. "I've always wanted to play Miami Vice," he said dryly and stepped cautiously out into the foyer with his gun in his hand.

Matt followed him out. Kurt gripped Ellen's hand tightly with his left, and kept the gun in his right. They joined the others in the lobby. All was silent. Together the four of them moved down the hall to the reception desk. No one was in the lobby. No one was in the darkened coffee shop or the other ransacked stores.

"Let's get out to the pool," Kurt said softly. "See who made that scream before."

They paused at the hotel entrance. The rain was still coming down steadily, the wind howling from the south.

Matt held up his gun. "Will these things work in the wet?"

Kurt shrugged. "I haven't got a clue."

Staying close together they moved out into the rain.

The lights illuminating the grounds were rendered less effective due to the downpour. The pool area lay

in misty shadows.

"This is really creepy," Ellen whispered to Kurt, clinging to his arm.

"At least we know now the old guy wasn't bullshitting us," Matt said. "I've never seen anything fucking like that thing you blew away upstairs, Kurt. A walking skull was what it was."

"I wonder how many there are," Pete muttered as they picked their way cautiously through the deck chairs.

"No idea," Matt answered. "But I guess we'll be finding out soon enough."

Ellen tugged at Kurt's arm. She pointed into the pool. Kurt looked, saw something floating in the water near the edge. He bent down to check it out.

It was the corpse of a naked man. He still had a head, or what was left of one. It was all caved in on the left-hand side. "Holy shit," he remarked in a whisper.

A rough, scaly hand with twig-like fingers burst out of the water and latched onto Kurt's wrist. With a tremendous jolt, Kurt was flung into the pool. He landed on top of the corpse, bounced off and sank beneath the water. He felt something entangle itself around him. The surface of the thing was spongy, but was hard underneath. The thing forced him to the tiles on the bottom of the pool. Kurt hadn't managed to get a breath before being dragged into the water and was nearly out of air already. He wrestled with the thing. It was strong, but he was desperate. Kurt pushed the thing off him and rolled with it in the pool. The action flashed the ridiculous image of Tarzan wrestling with a crocodile through his mind. The image, however, reminded him that he had a

knife. He reached for it, and the moment he did, the creature turned him onto his back again.

Kurt's brain was numbing, a pulse pounded at his temple. He reached again for the knife, unsnapped the restraining strap but couldn't quite grasp the handle. The creature was thrashing him about.

Get the knife out or you're dead! he told himself.

Kurt reached again for the blade, gripped it in his fingertips, pulled it out. The creature slammed him into the tiles, knocking the last of the breath from Kurt's lungs. The knife was jolted from his grasp. Frantically he searched the tiles for it, grazed it with his fingers. The thing commenced pounding his head into the pool bottom, the blows softened somewhat by the resistance of the water, but still hard enough to make him dizzy. Kurt felt for the knife once more, found it, got it in a good grip and jammed it into the creature's side. The thing stopped pounding his head. Kurt drove the knife in relentlessly, inflicting as much damage as he could, his lungs as tight as a drum from lack of air. The creature weakened, released its grip on him and floated away down the pool. Kurt sprang to the surface and sucked air into his lungs.

He looked up and saw Matt's gun pointed down at him, just in case it was the scarecrow that surfaced and not he. Matt holstered the pistol and dragged Kurt out of the pool. "You okay, buddy?" he asked anxiously.

Kurt went into a coughing spasm and ejected water from his lungs. When he was through, he nodded weakly. Gradually the throbbing in his head subsided and his brain cleared.

"I thought I was gone then," he said, his throat feeling raspy.

Ellen gently brushed the hair from his face and kissed him.

Kurt smiled. "I'm okay," he assured her and got to his feet. "They're not gonna take me out that easily."

"I was going to shoot the fucker," Matt told him. "But I didn't want to hit you."

"Where's my gun?" Kurt asked, looking for it at the edge of the pool where he figured he'd dropped it.

"Here," Pete said and picked it up from the concrete.

Kurt holstered the Smith & Wesson. He spied what looked like another corpse over on the far side of the pool. With the rain still pouring down he moved over to it. This one was naked and headless, and obviously a woman.

"Look what they did to her," Ellen said, shocked, eyeing the dead girl's butchered vagina. She turned away abruptly and looked out to sea, tears in her eyes.

Kurt stared at the corpse, thought about how he'd feel if that were Ellen lying there. He'd seen Corinne's body. Had to identify the remains. He shuddered and vowed to himself that he wouldn't let that happen to Ellen.

"We know now who did the screaming out here," Pete said solemnly, his wet black hair clinging to his face like a drowned rat.

"Come down here," Kurt said and walked off toward the dive shop. It was darker down this area and he had a good look around in the shadows before fumbling around trying to unlock the door again. "I'm surprised no one's tried to break in here yet," he mentioned as the others joined him. "Keep an eye out while I get this thing open."

Eventually he found the key he'd used earlier in the day and jimmied the lock. Inside he flicked on the light and moved to a shelf where he knew Josh had kept the waterproof flashlights. He picked one up, tested it. Nice and bright. He gave that one to Ellen, tried another one. The beam was a bit yellow and dim. Forget that one. The next two produced good solid beams. These he offered to Matt and Pete, then had to go through several more flashlights before finding another with fresh batteries for himself.

"What are you planning on doing?" Matt asked him.

"We're going to take a walk down the beach," Kurt told them. "See if we can spot any of the things entering the island. Pick them off before they can reach the resort." He paused and shrugged. "I know half the people in the place are jerks, but the other half probably are not. I can't just stand around protecting myself and not giving a shit about anybody else. I couldn't live with myself if I haven't tried. Besides, we inadvertently set Lorenz loose to begin with. It's kind of our responsibility."

"I hear where you're comin' from," Matt assured him. "But you did try to warn them this morning." He considered Kurt's plan for a moment. "Okay. We'll see what we can do."

They moved back out of the dive shop. Kurt didn't bother to lock the door again. He just slid it closed.

The rain was easing to a drizzle now, but the wind still tugged at their wet clothing and rustled the branches of the many palm trees. Kurt aimed his torch over one of the jetties as they approached it along the sand. He ran the beam the length of the

jetty but saw nothing. Matt flashed his beam behind them, making certain nothing lurked in their wake.

They were beyond the resort now and its comforting lights and were immersed in almost total darkness. Ellen and Kurt swept their lights along the next jetty. Nothing moved on there. Together they scanned the water on the way to the final jetty while Matt and Pete alternated their lights between the jungle and what lay ahead on the beach. None of them saw a thing.

"Maybe they're all gone?" Ellen said softly.

"Not bloody likely," Kurt replied.

The rain had all but ceased now, leaving behind the gusting wind. Kurt saw stars shining in the southern sky. Hopefully a moon would be out before too long.

Matt played his light along the edge of the jungle. Kurt glanced that way and saw two red eyes staring down at them from amid the trees. Dropping the flashlight, Matt whipped out his gun and fired at the eyes. The eyes vanished. The bullet whined through the jungle, and they all heard the thing crashing through the bushes as it fled.

"Damn it!" Matt cursed and picked up his flashlight.

"It was a tough shot," Kurt consoled him.

They put that missed opportunity behind them and moved on, continuing south along the beach.

As they neared the end of Fishhook, what had once been the cornfield, now barren, lay on the left. Kurt stopped and pointed to the field. "That's the field old man Jake was telling us about; where Lorenz' scarecrow was."

The four of them shone their lights across the

field. Kurt's light struck something solid, the remains of what looked like an old farmhouse nestled back into the trees.

"Want to check that out?" he asked the others, keeping his light trained on the ruins.

"Forget that," Matt said emphatically.

"Let's just stick to the open beach," Pete advised. "At least that way nothing can surprise us by jumping out from behind something."

Kurt nodded and moved forward.

A few minutes later they'd reached the end of Fishhook Island. The rain had cleared now, stars shining overhead. To the east, the moon shone dully from behind some thin clouds. These were quickly being wisped away by the southerly wind. Hollow Island loomed before them across the channel, a dark silhouette out in the water. Kurt made out a large shape in the cove over there. He shone his light in that direction. The beam barely reached. It was difficult to determine what the shape was from this distance, but Pete figured it out.

"It looks like the police launch that went missing from the resort," he said.

"So the things have been using it for transport," Kurt presumed. He saw some other smaller shapes beached over there. "Looks like they've got themselves a few other boats as well. I wonder where they've been going in them?"

"Maybe one of us could swim over there and get a boat?" Matt suggested.

"Are you volunteering?" Kurt asked him pointedly.

"Me? No. Fuck that. Likely to get eaten by a shark."

"And apart from that," Kurt added, "those things can survive in the water. Lorenz proved that. No, it'd be suicidal."

As they looked out over the water, something stirred in towards shore.

"What's that?" Ellen said, pointing to where some concentric circles had formed and rippled out from a centre point. They watched, expecting any second now a scarecrow to rise from the depths of the sea. Instead, a fish leaped out of the water, passed through the beam of their lights and splashed back in, forming more concentric circles.

"It's just a stupid mullet," Matt said in relief.

"Let's keep following the beach and make our way back to the resort on the other side," Kurt suggested.

He led the way, with Matt and Pete right behind him. Ellen dropped her torch in the sand and stopped to retrieve it. She didn't hear the rippling in the water behind her. The torch had dimmed from the impact and she was tapping the casing to try and get the connection working better. She didn't notice the two scarecrows that rose up out of the sea until one had grabbed her from behind, wrapping stiff arms around her in a bear hug. She let out a scream of surprise. The second scarecrow moved around in front of her and prepared to slam its scythe into her neck.

The others heard her scream and turned. Matt got his pistol out and aimed it at the scarecrow in front of Ellen. Kurt knocked it away and ran for the thing, unclipping his knife as he went. He leaped onto its back and drove the knife down into its chest. He stabbed it repeatedly as the creature twisted from side to side trying to throw him off. The other scarecrow

backed away into the water with Ellen still in its clutches.

Kurt leaped from the back of his scarecrow and went after the other one. He reached Ellen just as the thing was about to drag her under. He dug the point of the knife into one of the arms that had his girlfriend tightly bound up. The thing didn't let go. He dug it in again, slashing the arm to ribbons. Still it wouldn't release its grip.

The creature dragged Ellen under the water. Kurt went with them. He re-sheathed the knife while clinging to one of the creature's arms with his other hand. Kurt pulled the gun from the holster under his left arm. They were down in about seven feet of water now. The thing tried to wrench free of Kurt's grip. Kurt hung on tenaciously. With the gun in his hand, he wrapped his right arm around behind the scarecrow, sandwiching Ellen between them, gripped the thing's stump of a neck with his left, placed the barrel of the pistol into one of its demented eye sockets and pulled the trigger.

The gunshot was deafening. Bone exploded in the water. Kurt felt one of the bone splinters cut his face, and he hoped Ellen wasn't seriously hurt. The creature convulsed, let go of Ellen and dropped away to the sea bed. Kurt grabbed Ellen and made for the surface. He gasped for breath and kicked for shore. Ellen was limp in his arms. He dragged her up onto the sand, feeling panic grip him in its iron fist. "No," he said despairingly. "No."

Don't panic. You know what to do, he told himself. Learnt this in school.

He tilted Ellen's head back, opened her mouth, checked it with a finger to make sure the tongue

hadn't blocked the air passage, pinched her nose, cupped his mouth tightly around hers and blew air down her throat. He then put his ear to her mouth and listened. The air he'd exhaled into her came back out of her lungs with a wet hiss. But she failed to breathe on her own. Kurt wiped blood from his face and tried again, but with the same result. Her chest still didn't heave to bring in air of its own accord.

"Shit!" he said and tried several more times, panic threatening to burst forth inside him like a broken dam. On the fifth attempt there was a cough from Ellen's throat and water dribbled out of her mouth. A few seconds later she coughed again and started to breathe. Kurt turned her on her side and squeezed up under her sternum. She coughed some more and spewed up water from her lungs.

Kurt swept the hair back from her face and gently stroked her cheek. He only realised then that he was shaking. Hell that was close! he thought, relieved beyond words.

"How you feeling?" he asked her.

"Sick," she croaked. "Just let me rest a minute."

Matt clapped him on the back as Kurt stood up. "You know what you just did, don't you?" Matt said to him. "You just saved her life. And you know why? Because you could. No more guilt feelings. You've just proven something to yourself."

Kurt pondered Matt's words as Ellen got her breath back and waited for the nausea to pass. His friend was right. It was like a tremendous burden had suddenly lifted from his shoulders. It wasn't his fault Corinne had died. He couldn't have done anything to save her. He looked down at Ellen, who was breathing steadily now. But Ellen was alive because

he'd had a chance to help her. He realised he'd done his best on both occasions. The only difference was the circumstances.

A certain air of confidence pulsed through his veins. It filled him with a rare determination. "We can beat these things," he said out loud to no one in particular.

"Damn right we can," Matt agreed.

Kurt saw the second scarecrow lying motionless on the sand, its body riddled with bullet holes and its skull cracked apart like an Easter egg.

"Pete and I shot the crap out of the thing," Matt explained.

Kurt told them what had taken place in the water, how he'd managed to blow the scarecrow's head off.

Ellen was still sitting on the sand. She grabbed Kurt's arm and pulled him down to her. Then she wrapped her arms around his neck and said, "Thank you."

Kurt just nodded, kissed her and helped her to her feet. "Let's get back to the resort."

"You're bleeding," Ellen noticed the gash on Kurt's face.

"It's not much," he reassured her. "Just a scratch. Happened in the water when I took that thing's head off."

They moved up the eastern beach. Kurt's clothes had been starting to dry out before. Now they were saturated again and cumbersome. He felt his wet pants rubbing a rash on the insides of his thighs.

About halfway up the beach they passed the dark form of Jake's house. The old boy would still be sitting in there dead in his only chair. They'd really needed him for the answer, but now that avenue was

lost. However, Kurt vowed he'd find a way to kill Lorenz and get rid of his spirit.

The moon had cleared the clouds now. It was only a half moon, but provided a little light. Kurt switched off his torch to conserve the batteries. He figured he should be able to see the lights of the resort by now.

"We must be getting close now," Kurt said to the others. "But I can't see any lights."

A dark bulk materialised above the trees. It was the hulk of the resort, Kurt was sure, but not a light shone in the place.

They entered the jungle and moved cautiously through the trees, training their guns on every shadow in case it moved. The problem was they all moved due to the wind blowing the branches around. But the jungle was only thin in this part and soon they were free of it and entering the resort grounds. The place was in darkness, all the lights around the grounds now just dead poles of uselessness. They had arrived at the resort on the southern side and they moved in towards the pool area.

Several shadows appeared around the pool. More rose up from the darkness on the right and he left. Kurt looked nervously behind him and saw what he'd expected to see: More of the damn things circling in from the rear. Beady red eyes glowered at them from all around. They were trapped in a circle of the things.

The scarecrow dead ahead loomed taller than the others. Its eyes shone brighter and a deeper shade of red than the rest. Kurt aimed his light at the creature, saw that it was wearing very old tattered clothes, much older than the other scarecrows were wearing,

and it had on its head a battered straw hat that had seen better days. This one had hair, too; hair that looked like the tendrils of an old mop. The thing turned its head away from the light.

This particular creature had an air of authority about it. It had to be Louis Lorenz.

Seventeen

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

Kurt felt sheer hatred burning into him from a dozen pairs of eyes. This didn't look good. For four people who had spent as much time shooting guns as man had spent on Pluto, the odds weren't in their favour.

"Try and keep them all in your sights," Kurt said to the others. He glanced around him, saw them moving in, closing the circle. "Ellen, shine your flashlight into their eyes. They don't seem to like that. Matt. Pete. Get ready to fire some shots."

Kurt stuffed his flashlight into his pocket and gripped the pistol in both hands.

Ellen shone her light on several of the things behind them, temporarily halting their progress. The ones outside the range of her beam appeared as spectral shadows in the moonlight. Kurt leveled his gun at the one he was sure was Lorenz, took careful aim and fired.

The shot missed and struck the bar in the centre of the pool. Lorenz vanished, disappeared into the shadows.

Damned fast for a wooden man, Kurt thought. He fired at another that moved in from the right. His aim was off again and the bullet crashed through one of the resort's ground level windows.

"Shit!" he cursed. "Is this barrel bent or something?" Kurt pumped several shots at the same

creature. One of them ripped through the sleeve of the thing. A second window smashed in the hotel. He shot round after round in the thing's direction. A hole pierced its stomach. Another bullet knocked the skull from the body. The skull tumbled backwards, the body fell forward and was still.

Ellen blinded one that came up beside her. Kurt aimed at it and pulled the trigger. The gun clicked, but no shot was fired. "Shit! Clip's empty. Keep that light on them while I reload." He reloaded quickly and fired off six or seven rounds into the thing. But it refused to die and still advanced on them.

Pete and Matt were firing off rounds at those that came up from the cove. The air reeked of gunpowder.

The scarecrow that refused to die turned its face away from the light but continued to walk towards them, its scythe glinting dangerously in the torchlight. Kurt waited until the thing was almost upon them, aimed the gun at its skull of a face and pulled the trigger. There was a satisfying sound of splitting bone and Kurt sighed when the thing finally came to a halt.

"A couple of them have bolted!" Matt yelled out. He fired some more shots until his gun was empty. "Shit, that's two clips I've been through already!"

Kurt spun around to check out the situation. He saw only two shadows. The others had either fled or were *dead*. Matt shot several bullets in the direction of the two remaining shadows and they fled into the night. Kurt took the opportunity to catch his breath and wipe the sweat that dripped from his forehead.

Their reprieve was short-lived, however, when more scarecrows appeared on the beach.

"There's too many of the damned things!" Matt exclaimed in frustration.

"This way," Kurt said and trotted off towards the hotel stairs. Just as he reached the stairs, he saw two red eyes glowing in the darkness down by the equipment shed to the north of the resort. He whipped out his torch, aimed both it and the gun in the direction of the eyes and switched the flashlight on.

Temporarily stunned by the light, the scarecrow didn't move. Kurt saw the tendrils of a mop under the ragged hat and knew it was Lorenz. He didn't hesitate and fired three shots. They all missed Lorenz, who still stood its ground, and hammered into the equipment shed. Gasoline, or some other flammable substance that was stored in there, erupted in flame.

Lorenz stared at the flames, mesmerised by them. Then it let out a shriek - the first time Kurt had heard one of the things make a vocal noise - and cowered away from the fire.

Kurt was momentarily stunned and didn't shoot again. He just watched, intrigued by Lorenz' reaction to flame.

And then the realisation struck him.

Of course! I should have thought of it before!

He knew now how to kill Lorenz; or at least drive his tormented spirit over the edge into the afterlife.

When he went to take another shot at the former pirate, the scarecrow had vanished into the darkness.

He ran up the stairs where the automatic entrance doors were frozen open. Shining his light into the foyer, Kurt waited for the others to join him. He turned to see Ellen fire off the first shot from her gun

and watched the head explode on one of the scarecrows that advanced up the beach like a bizarre army.

"What are we going back in here for?" Pete quizzed and squeezed off another shot down towards the beach.

Screams echoed along the hallways and down the stairwells from upstairs.

"I know how to kill Lorenz...and the others," Kurt told him.

"How?" Matt wanted to know.

But before Kurt had a chance to answer, something hit him in the left shoulder. He felt a searing pain and blood spattered his face. The scythe was drawn back into the darkness for another swing. Kurt acted reflexively. He dived at the thing's legs and brought it down in a tackle on the carpet. The action sent pain ripping through his wounded shoulder. He tried to ignore the pain and continued to grapple with the creature on the floor, desperately not wanting it to get another chance to swing its malicious weapon.

Kurt fought his way up its body and pinned its arms to the floor. The creature heaved upwards with tremendous strength and flung him onto the carpet. His eyes adjusting to the darkness, Kurt saw the scythe raised up above him. It dropped. He rolled to one side. The scythe was swung again. Kurt rolled the other way, felt it graze his side as it severed through his shirt and embedded itself into the carpet. Kurt fumbled for his gun, removed it and fired. There was a dead click. The magazine was empty.

He heard a continuous barrage of shots being fired by the others as the scarecrows advanced up the

beach, knew they would be too busy to come to his aid.

When the scythe crashed into the floor again, Kurt grabbed the handle at the junction of the blade. He figured if he hung onto it, the thing couldn't swing it. The scarecrow tugged on the scythe, hurling Kurt to his feet. Kurt used the momentum to slam the blade into the thing's jaw. He heard bone snap and felt a tooth hit him in the face. The creature fell backwards onto the floor. Kurt quickly slid a full clip from his pocket, dropped the other one out of the magazine, slammed the fresh one home and fired several shots point-blank into the scarecrow's head.

Didn't miss that time, he thought.

Matt, Pete and Ellen were backing inside now. Kurt went to the door and fired some shots into the midst of the army of scarecrows. He was surprised at how many he saw. They were only shadows in the moonlight, but he quickly counted at least twenty of the things.

"This way!" Kurt ordered. He found his torch on the floor, switched it on, saw several headless bodies lying in the foyer, stepped around them and made his way to the maid's cleaning room. The other three stopped firing and joined him. Kurt fumbled with key after key trying to find the right one to unlock it.

The scarecrows, instead of coming their way, made for the elevators and stairwell.

Kurt got the door open. "Keep an eye out," he instructed and went into the room. He searched with the flashlight and found what he was looking for; a four litre container filled with methylated spirits. "You still have your cigarette lighter?" he asked Ellen.

Ellen rummaged in her pockets for it, found it and handed it to him. Kurt flicked the lighter. It was wet and wouldn't ignite. He gave it back. "No good. I'll have to find another one."

"Try in the bar," she suggested.

Kurt went across the hallway to the bar, where the glass door lay smashed in pieces from the reveling earlier in the day. He went inside, stepped carefully around the broken glass as he had no shoes on, and moved in behind the bar. Empty liquor bottles and glasses littered the counter. The shelves behind the counter had been ravaged. He searched the mess on the shelves, found several packets of cigarettes and cigars, a few boxes of matches and a couple of cheap plastic cigarette lighters. He tested one. It ignited first go and produced a good flame. Kurt went to slip it in his pocket, but his clothes were still damp. He located a plastic bag used for placing liquor bottles in when bought by takeaway customers and put the lighter inside it, then slipped it into a pocket of his shorts.

Matt was standing in the doorway. "You okay in there, Kurt?"

"Yeah. On my way out," he replied. He found a bottle of Jim Beam which had somehow survived, unscrewed the lid and took a swig. It burned his throat and fired him up. He left the bottle on the bar and joined Matt at the door.

"All those things have gone upstairs," Matt told him. He noticed the blood dripping down Kurt's arm. "What happened to your shoulder?"

"Scarecrow out in the foyer. I was wrestling with it while you guys were shooting at the beach."

"Can you move it?"

"Yeah. It's painful, but it works."

"So what's this plan of yours?" Pete asked him.

"We've got to burn Lorenz," Kurt said simply.

"We've got to set him on fire, torment his spirit and send it over to the other side."

"What makes you think that'll work?" Ellen queried.

"Lorenz was burnt alive by the Spanish soldiers before they beheaded him and stuck his head on a pole. Lorenz vowed revenge while he was burning up. It was obviously the fire that tormented him in the first place. And fire again is gonna torment him right out of this world."

"What made you suddenly think of that?" Matt asked him.

"When I shot at him by the equipment shed and something in there burst into flames, he was terrified of it. "It'll work," he said confidently. "Besides, we don't have any other ideas."

"So now all's we have to do is find Lorenz and set him alight," Pete mused.

"But he could be anywhere," Ellen pointed out.

"My guess is he'll be keeping a low profile," Kurt said. "He ran off as soon as he saw we had guns and left the others to do his dirty work. Figures he's too important to be risked in the line of fire. The lives of all the others depends on his staying alive. I think I have a hunch where he might be. But first I want to go downstairs and get more ammo. I've only got one clip left."

"I'm already using my last one," Matt reported.

Pete checked his supply. "I've got one full one, and whatever's in the magazine."

"I've got three," Ellen said.

Lighting the way with the four flashlights, they made their way around to the elevators. Kurt eyed the doorway leading to the stairwell. "Let's use the stairs," he suggested. "Might be safer."

They walked down the stairs to the second basement level and didn't encounter any of the creatures on the way. Kurt got his keys out and unlatched the deadlock. He then probed with key after key to open the second lock. Eventually he found the right one and the door swung open.

Pete located the box of ammunition he'd found earlier in the day. There were only a dozen clips left. They each took three clips and went back to the stairwell.

At the top of the stairs leading out to the foyer they were greeted by three scarecrows with scythes, six eyes burning like red-hot coals in their demented heads.

Matt, who had been leading the way, fired point-blank into the first one's face. It fell backwards into the other two, knocking them off balance. To help them in their effort to fall over, Matt slammed into them with a powerful shoulder charge and knocked them flat on the floor. When Matt was clear of them, Ellen peppered one with bullets, while Kurt and Pete shot rounds into the other one.

They quickly made their way through the foyer and outside. Kurt led them down to the beach, gun in one hand, methylated spirits in the other. Ellen came up beside him and guided his path with her light.

"Where are we going?" Pete asked, keeping an eye out on the left while Matt guarded the rear.

"To the old cornfield," Kurt explained. "I have a hunch Lorenz will be there somewhere setting up

more scarecrows while his buddies do the killing for him. It'd be safer for him that way. Plus he'd be doing something that's important to him; constructing more scarecrows so he can reproduce even more. He's building an army bit by bit. He doesn't need to hole out on Hollow Island any more. This used to be his haven in his days as a pirate. He'll be there."

Ellen's light played on a young woman leaning over a corpse on the beach. She saw them, screamed and ran.

"Hey!" Kurt called after her. But the girl kept running and screaming.

Kurt looked at the corpse on the ground. It was a young guy about his own age with a stab wound through the heart. Probably the girl's boyfriend or husband. He felt deeply pained for her, knew exactly how she'd be feeling at this moment.

The touch of sorrow fuelled his determination. They could stop these things. Put an end to the carnage.

Kurt's wounded left shoulder was aching and drooling blood from the weight of carrying the metho. He could feel his entire arm going numb. And if that happened, his left arm would be rendered useless in the final fight. He swapped hands and carried it in his right, with the gun in his injured left. He probably couldn't shoot to save his life with his left hand. He had enough trouble with his right. But he had no choice at the moment. The shooting would have to be left up to the others for now.

They encountered no scarecrows on their way to the cornfield, and kept their flashlights off as they approached. In the faint silvery glow of the moon, Kurt saw several figures standing about seven feet tall

in the barren field. One of them moved, the others remained stationary. They watched while the moving figure raised something into an upright position and commenced patting down earth with its feet at the base of the thing.

"You were right," Pete whispered hoarsely.

Kurt handed the metho bottle to Pete and put both hands on the gun. He took aim at Lorenz, the tendrils of a mop falling out from beneath the battered straw hat. This is going to be easier than I thought, he realised and pulled the trigger.

Lorenz bent down at the same moment the gun went off. The shot missed and took off the head of the scarecrow Lorenz had just erected.

Startled, Lorenz scampered across the dead cornfield in the direction of the run-down farmhouse.

"I'm going after him," Kurt announced and set off in pursuit.

Lorenz was fleet-footed with long strides and kept a respectable distance between itself and Kurt. Lorenz reached the old farmhouse with its roof collapsing and walls caving in. Kurt ran past a pile of rubble on the ground as he neared the house and figured they were the remnants of a barn. He reached the farmhouse as Lorenz disappeared inside.

Kurt walked insidiously up the dilapidated steps onto the porch. Sweat dripped from his face, his breathing heavy. He ducked in through the open front door, which hung loosely from one hinge. He searched his pockets for the flashlight with his left hand. Couldn't find it.

Damn! Must have fallen out when I was running.

He paused in the doorway, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness. He heard gunfire erupt from the

cornfield. Glancing back that way, he saw his friends confronted with a number of the creatures already coming to Lorenz' aid.

Kurt walked into the house, stumbled on something that lay on the floor, fell, got quickly to his feet. His nerves were tingling all over, his hands shaking in the darkness. He tried to summon up that courage and confidence he'd felt after saving Ellen's life. It was still there, but lessened by the fact that Lorenz had a distinct advantage in this situation. He could see in the pitch dark. Kurt could not.

Gradually, very faint outlines of objects materialised. He could still barely see a thing, but the outlines were better than nothing. He tripped on something else on the floor, stumbled, regained his balance. Kurt felt the object. It was the crumbled remains of an armchair, most of the fabric and stuffing ripped away to leave bare frame and coils of springs.

Must be the living room, he figured and moved on down what looked in the darkness like a hallway. He caught a flash of red eyes up ahead. They quickly vanished. Kurt felt his way along the wall, came to an open doorway. He peered inside. Saw nothing but blackness. If there had ever been a window in this room, it had been boarded up.

More pistol fire cracked the air outside. Kurt involuntarily jumped when he heard it, his nerves on edge. He jumped again when Lorenz leaped out from behind something he couldn't see in the darkness of the room. The eyes stared at him with pure detest. Kurt heard something slicing its way through the air towards his head. His nerves may have been jingling, but the adrenalin they pumped through his veins

rendered him swift enough to duck out of the way. The scythe embedded itself into the wall. Lorenz didn't bother to try and get it out. Kurt went for his gun but Lorenz was all over him in a flash.

They fell out into the hallway and rolled along it like a tumble-weed into the living room. Kurt reached for his knife as Lorenz clutched his throat in a death grip, trying to strangle him with his twig-like fingers. Lorenz had Kurt's legs pinned to the floor. Kurt couldn't reach the knife. Instead, he gripped Lorenz' arms and tried to reef them away from his throat. The old pirate was too damn strong. He tried for his gun, couldn't reach past the scarecrow's body to get to it.

Shit! he thought and frantically searched his shorts' pocket for something else he could use. His hand touched the plastic bag and he remembered the cigarette lighter.

Gasping for air and feeling himself losing consciousness, Kurt managed to free the lighter from the plastic bag. His arm brushed something on the floor. He felt it. The old armchair he'd tripped over. Kurt flicked the lighter on and touched the flame to the ragged material. It caught readily, and soon it was a burning ball of flame.

Lorenz stared at the fire, its skull-like face glowing eerily in the firelight. The thing's jaw dropped open.

"You don't like fire, do you, you bastard," Kurt croaked through his constricted throat.

The fire quickly spread to other old furniture in the room, and in a matter of seconds, the entire living room was ablaze.

Lorenz let out a shriek. Kurt felt the grip released

on his throat and he sucked hungrily for air. He didn't get much. The room was filling with smoke. Lorenz got up and bolted through a gap in the flames and raced outside. Ignoring the pain in his throat and his light-headedness for lack of oxygen, Kurt scrambled to his feet, took a flying leap through the flames that were closing the path to the doorway and ran out onto the porch. He leaped down the stairs and collided with a scarecrow that stood at the bottom. The thing fell flat on its face. Kurt rolled over the top of it, unholstered his pistol, bounded to his feet and fired at the retreating Lorenz.

He shot off an entire clip, watched as bullets rippled up Lorenz' back. The scarecrow staggered, fell, got up, then fell again. This time it lay there motionless.

There was a circle of scarecrows forming around Pete, Matt and Ellen, who continued to fire shots into their midst.

"I'm out of bullets!" he heard Matt yell. Ellen handed him one of her clips.

"That's the last one I've got," she told him, frantic.

Kurt reached Lorenz, saw in the firelight greenish fluid oozing out of the numerous wounds in the thing's back. Lorenz' makeshift body may be immobilized, but its spirit was obviously still active. The scarecrows kept coming.

He spied the bottle of metho over by Pete's feet. He scurried over and seized it, then quickly poured the fluid all over Lorenz, paying special attention to the skull.

With a sudden flurry of activity, the scarecrows ignored the gunfire and converged on Kurt.

Kurt got the lighter out and prepared to set Lorenz

on fire, but it was knocked from his grasp when a scarecrow scooped his legs out from under him with its scythe. He felt a new pain in the back of his right calf and groaned in agony. The pain caused rage to rise up inside him, and as another of the creatures came towards him, Kurt blew its head off with the Smith & Wesson.

He fired at a second, was about to reload when the gun was knocked from his hand by another of the things. Blood oozed from a severed vein in his right hand. He ignored it, picked up the scythe the headless scarecrow had dropped and swung it randomly at the things as they tried to get close to him. He took another's skull off with the blade, jabbed one in the chest, knocked the legs out from a third. A scythe grazed his back and he lost count of the number of pains he could now feel all over his body.

Ellen was out of ammunition and he saw her grappling with one of the creatures as it tried to rip out her throat. He looked down at Lorenz, saw the lighter lying on the ground a few feet away from the metho-soaked figure. A scarecrow leaped on his back. Kurt savagely twisted and threw it to the ground. Matt was out of bullets as well. A scarecrow raised its scythe to take his head off. Pete blew it away before it could inflict the fatal blow.

Kurt weighed up his options between seizing the lighter or helping Ellen, who was in desperate trouble. He chose Ellen, kicked at a scarecrow that got in his way and slammed the scythe he carried into the back of the thing that tried to tear into Ellen's throat. It let go of her and fell to the ground.

Fighting his way back to Lorenz, Kurt looked

back and saw that Ellen was already having to fight off another creature that came at her. She continually sidestepped its awkward blows with the scythe. Matt and Pete, who were both out of bullets now, were encountering similar situations.

Kurt reached for the lighter, got it in his grasp, hoped no blood from his bleeding hand leaked onto the flint. Before he had a chance to set Lorenz on fire his legs were taken out from under him, a scythe inflicting yet another pain on his now-battered body. Two creatures leaped on top of him, hammering savage blows into him with flesh-covered wooden fists.

He felt his nose burst forth blood, and blood filled his mouth from a bleeding lip.

One of the things commenced hammering his head into the ground. The earth was soft, cushioning the blows. The other continued to pound his body. Kurt flexed his stomach against the blows, could feel the flesh bruising.

To his left he saw Ellen in desperate trouble with two scarecrows upon her. She was bleeding from the neck and arm, but she fought on.

He couldn't let this happen again, couldn't let her die. His strength was ebbing from the beating he was taking. To the right he saw the motionless form of Lorenz lying only two feet away.

Kurt still clutched the cigarette lighter in his right hand. He moved it towards Lorenz. One of the scarecrows stood on his wrist to halt his progress. Kurt flicked the lighter and the flame set the thing's trousers alight. But the scarecrow refused to get off his wrist. Instead, it applied more pressure, and Kurt realised now, with their master in danger, that they

would fear nothing and stop at nothing to safeguard him.

The scarecrow on his arm lit up like a torch, but it refused to die. The flames were scorching Kurt's skin, could hear and feel and smell his own flesh sizzling.

Kurt summoned up all the strength he had left. The second scarecrow was still hammering his head into the earth, which was compacting harder now with every blow.

He inched his hand along the ground, willing it on in spite of the pain and the weight of the creature on his arm. He was beginning to see black motes forming before his eyes. Knew he was close to blacking out.

His hand continued its slow, tedious progress towards Lorenz. Only inches away now. Three inches. Two inches. One inch. Kurt flicked the lighter. Nothing. He flicked it again. A spark, but no flame.

"Don't dare fuck up on me now!" he cursed the thing and tried a third time as he quickly lost consciousness.

The lighter caught, a feeble flame rose from the nozzle. It gasped for air, almost died, then came to life. Kurt touched it to Lorenz' clothing and it quickly burst into flames.

Kurt blacked out.

Eighteen

<http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002F5G1VU>

With the refreshing sensation of water pouring over his face, Kurt's eyes fluttered open. His mouth and nose stung from the salt water. He quickly turned his head to the right where the charred corpse of Lorenz still smoldered on the ground.

Matt, a gash on his face and holding a rusted old tin can, was grinning down at him. "You did it, buddy," he said. "They're all dead."

Pete came up beside Matt. He, too, was battered and bruised.

Kurt sat up abruptly, felt a sharp pain in his head. He looked all around, saw scarecrows lying motionless everywhere.

"Where's Ellen?" he asked anxiously.

"I'm right here," he heard her sweet voice say from behind him. She rested his head in her lap and bent down to kiss his scarred lips. Her face, despite some cuts and blood, still looked as beautiful as ever.

He let out a huge sigh of relief and relaxed, with the sound of the burning farmhouse crackling in the background.

Together the four of them staggered back towards the resort, each of them carrying numerous wounds.

"Aren't we the fucking walking wounded," Matt remarked with his usual sarcasm. "Sure has been one hell of a vacation. A real break from the every day." He turned to Kurt. "You were right, mate. This place

certainly isn't boring."

Kurt smiled and shook his head to clear it of a fog that still floated around in his brain. "So what happened back there? The last thing I remember before blacking out was setting Lorenz on fire."

"As soon as you set him alight," Pete answered, "all the others started screeching like wild animals. Within seconds they'd all collapsed and were dead. Your plan worked."

They eventually reached the resort. Kurt went inside, stepped around some headless bodies, got that bottle of bourbon from the bar, some cigarettes for Ellen, cigars for himself, a new lighter, then rejoined the others outside. They went and sat on one of the jetties and smoked and drank until the first pink rays of sunlight formed on the eastern horizon behind the resort.

As the sun rose higher, survivors of last night's rampage began to emerge from the hotel.

Matt, Pete, Kurt and Ellen all heard it at the same time; a motor approaching on the water from the north. And a few minutes later they were surprised to see a Nassau Coast Guard vessel pull into the cove.

Kurt smiled and shook his head. "How on earth are we ever going to explain all this?"

"You're the writer," Matt reminded him. "You can tell the story."

Kurt drew on his cigar, his arm protectively around Ellen. "Somehow I don't think anyone's going to believe this one."



There are no more gripping and engaging stories than those that are true....Real life encounters, situations and dramas that involve real people. Real Life Dramas is a collection of nine factual accounts experienced by real people in authentic situations. These accounts have been related to the author in detail, who has then dramatised these actual events in story form. Stories of tragedy, triumph and survival. Read them if you dare....

Available at:

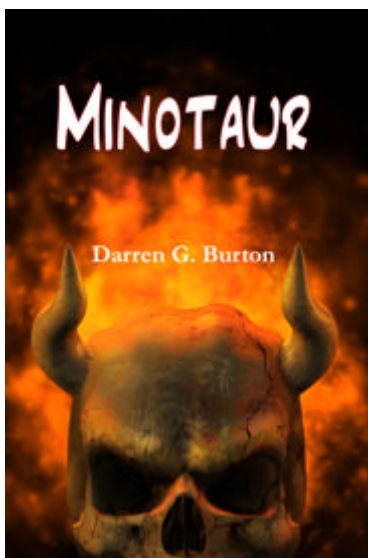
www.amazon.com/dp/1409200779



A ship sinks in a storm off the east coast of Australia, unleashing its deadly cargo into the sea. American tourists, Gene and Sheridan McCabe, are scuba diving in the area the next day when Gene is brutally attacked and killed. Dissatisfied when the incident is written off as a shark attack, Sheridan enlists the services of government secret agents and private mercenaries, Ben Logan and Gus Edwards, to track down the mysterious thing that killed her brother. Logan finds himself enmeshed in an intricate plot that goes far deeper; a sinister plot of a crazed American billionaire who has a thirst for global power...

Available at:

www.amazon.com/dp/1409207307



The minotaur; ancient mythical beast or a deadly reality? This is the question that confronts private investigator, Jerry King, as he delves into the mystery of a series of recent murders. What he discovers astounds him, and the more he digs the further he is thrust into a world of horror he never dreamt could ever really exist!

Available at:

www.amazon.com/dp/1409207315



Private detective and bodyguard, Ashlar Roman, is commissioned to protect Miss Universe contestant, Silhouette Havana, after an attempt on her life is made. The pair are thrust into a deadly world of betrayal, where they learn some people are willing to win at any cost.

Available at:

www.amazon.com/dp/140920782



Whether you are male or female, flirting plays a major role in attracting and dating the opposite sex.

Do you know how to flirt successfully? What signals are you sending out?

Can you interpret and understand the flirtatious behaviour of another person? Do you know what it's telling you?

Dating and Mating: The Power of Flirting provides a brief, but intuitive overview of this all important topic; a topic and art form that is essential to your dating success. Communicating with the opposite sex is made up of some very important elements. Conversation. Body Language. Flirting. Learning how to flirt effectively and to read another person's flirt signals will give you great insights into a person's intentions, and whether they are attracted to you. Every man and woman should learn and master the art of flirting.

Available at:

www.amazon.com/dp/1409288595



There is nothing more compelling than the power of attraction between men and women. But what is attraction and how can we radiate more of it? *Dating and Mating: Attract the Opposite Sex* unlocks your powers of attraction and personal magnetism. Whether male or female, learn how to increase your sex appeal and master the art of magnifying your attraction factor. Become highly irresistible, admired and desired by the opposite sex.

Available at:

www.amazon.com/dp/1409283267



Whether you are male or female, body language is everything when it comes to attracting and dating the opposite sex. What body language signals are you sending out? Can you interpret the body language of another person and understand what it's telling you? Is he interested in you? Is she inviting you to hit on her? *Dating and Mating: Reading the Body Language Signals* provides a brief, but comprehensive overview of this all important subject that is essential to dating success. Conversation is but a small component of communication. Body language plays the dominant role. Body language doesn't lie. Learning how to read it will give you insights into a person that their words cannot. Expressing positive body talk and learning how to accurately interpret another person's body language signals is a dating art form that every man and woman should learn.

Available at:

www.amazon.com/dp/140926498X



What is the Attraction Factor and what is its secret? What draws a woman to a man and what repels her? What is the key to captivating women and making them ache for you? Chick Magnet: The Secret Of The Attraction Factor is the key that unlocks the answers to these questions and more. Solving the mystery of the female mind, this book teaches you how to attract her interest, get her attention and set her hormones ablaze. You will learn how to become highly irresistible to women; to be sought after, admired and desired. You just need to know how. Unlocking the secret of the attraction factor gives every man the power to become the ultimate chick magnet!

Available at:

www.amazon.com/dp/1409226379



What is the Attraction Factor and what is its secret? What draws a man to a woman and what repels him? How can a woman become so irresistible that men will be lining up to meet her? Turn Me On: How To Attract A Man is a book that has all the answers to these questions and more. Learn how to become a highly desirable woman; how to capture his attention, his hormones, and ultimately his heart. Every woman has the potential to become highly irresistible to men; to be sought after, admired, desired and loved. She just needs to know how. From getting to know yourself, learning what you want, building your self-confidence and developing the all powerful attraction factor, you too can become the ultimate woman!

Available at:

www.amazon.com/dp/1409221822



Most of us have been through it, or are going through it right now. None of us like it. It can be a very frustrating, confusing and painful experience. The break up of an intimate relationship. *When It's Over: How To Mend That Broken Heart* addresses some of the most important concerns when a relationship ends. It also covers what people can do to get through the grieving process and emerge to face a brighter future; with renewed hope and fresh confidence. A break up is not the end of the world. It can be a new beginning.

Available at:

www.amazon.com/dp/1409214761



Much has been written about how to attract a man. But once you have your man, how do you keep him? What will make him loyal, happy, contented and always with you? *How To Keep Your Man* is your guide book to absolute happiness with your partner and relationship bliss. It is a must read for all women who desire a fulfilling and everlasting relationship. You will ignite the fires of his passion. He will see you as the girl of his dreams. He will desire no other woman but you. Written from the male perspective, this book will not only help single women attract the right man into their lives, it teaches women how to keep their man, and keep him for good.

Available at:

www.amazon.com/dp/1409203786



Shut the Fuck Up!: Every Man's Key to Happiness.

This is a novelty book that takes a humorous look at what drives men nuts when it comes to women and what they say to men.

Chauvinistic?.....Probably!

Controversial?.....Yes!

True?.....You be the judge!

Available at:

www.amazon.com/dp/1409211673

