***Deep Salt***

Chapters 1-4

The dimly lit waterfront bar was the kind of sleepy, timeworn place where Parker did his best thinking. He had found the thatched roof palapa under the shadows of a grove of coconut palms a few minutes earlier. It was well hidden behind a boat yard and a long defunct sail loft at the end of a sand alley. There was no sign. You either knew how to get there or knew someone who did.

A conch diver had told him, other than cold beer and a hot barmaid, it wasn’t much. The man was right; there was nothing here that could easily break, or mattered much if it did. Dark, until your eyes adjusted. Smokey, unless you were one addicted to second-hand tobacco rank. Quiet, but for a constant stream of canned calypso and a sultry eyed girl who had yet to utter a word. It was just what Parker had been looking for, the perfect hide-a-way.

He had detoured into the dingy oasis while on his way back to his salvage vessel, Narwhal, anchored nearby in the commercial harbor. The old wooden trawler was idly hanging on her hook here in Nassau, the capital of the Bahamian island chain. It was past two weeks now since his being queried by the local Port Authority office. He had motored down from Miami on the strength of his low-ball bid to determine the feasibility of salvaging a small harbor ferry sunk in a recent hurricane. And minutes ago his thus far futile attempts to get the necessary final government dive permit had again been forestalled.

For the sixth time. Unbelievable.

In honor of today’s scheduled meeting he had even condescended to wear long pants and shirt with a collar in order to show proper respect to the harbor official stoically guarding his sweltering, paper-stacked domain. However, even this concession to local protocol hadn’t worked. And the collar itched. Parker was by now fed up with the whole process. He knew he was being stonewalled, but not having any money to wave in front of the ill-tempered Bahamian, he was at an impasse.

It seemed obvious that someone was gumming up the paper trail. Perhaps a competing local ferry company was blocking any work on the proposed salvage job. Island politics? Payoffs? Somebody’s cousin? Something. As a stateside outsider, there wasn’t much he could do about it. Except leave. Parker had resisted the temptation to stuff the pompous ass into a waste basket and had left the office.

Now it was decision time. Feeling discouraged, Parker had found this dark place in order to quietly contemplate his next move. His usual solution after each frustrating meeting was to find the closest bar and cool off with a brew. After two weeks he was getting to know Nassau’s waterfront bar scene…intimately. And they were definitely getting to know him.

All he wanted to do now was sit here and quietly sulk. He needed time to seriously contemplate his lessening fortunes and figure out what the hell he should do tomorrow. Stay and fight it, or give it up and leave the Bahamas? Parker recognized his increasingly short-fused attitude to be a result of his struggling business life. Not much different than his inept love life.

But, still. The whole quasi-official thing pissed him off. Dealing with corrupt clowns was not his forte, as his unexpressed anger and resentment invariably spilled over into the mix and screwed up any possibility of compromise.

And now three loud-mouthed sports fishermen with mainland attitudes stumbled in. The interruption quickly derailed Parker’s frustrated train of thought. Their raucous laughter filled the otherwise quiet bar. He didn’t need this. Not now. Not here. One man’s loud, garrulous blather was especially jarring. A voice straight out of the Texas oil fields competed with the radio’s tinny scratch.

Well, hell. Parker thought about leaving.

He set the now empty bottle on the bar and let out an impromptu sigh. The Bahamian bartender, well aware of both the big man’s wide shoulders and the lost look on his craggy, well-used face sidled over and set another icy Heineken under his chin. Parker picked up the green bottle and smiled back at her. “Thanks.”

“We been wondering when you be coming round, mistuh salty man,” she said, matching his smile.

“Oh?” he said, taking a sip while eying the pretty face. Maybe he would stay.

“Oh, yeah,” she said, leaning over the bar, her breasts straining against a thin blouse. “Been hearing bout you. Talk is, way you going, you be runnin’ out a watering holes pretty soon.”

He raised his eyebrows in response.

“Figured you be here sooner or later. Don’t seem to stay long most other bars.”

“What, I’ve got a sign on my back?” he grinned.

“No, it be on your face, sailor man,” she said and reaching up to his eyebrow, gently touched a still bruised remnant from his last encounter.

“I’m not too good at ducking,” he said, setting the fresh beer back into its glistening wet ring. Her comment reminded him of his father’s oft quoted mantra. When in deep shit…git. But, on the way out, make the bastards pay. She had him pegged. But he didn’t need the local notoriety. Not now.

An elbow jostled his shoulder. Rude. He glanced up.

It figured.

The loud one; A sun-burned, brush-cut, beer-bellied hulk with garlic breath and a backward Houston Oilers cap had stepped up to lean heavily over Parker’s frosty green bottle. The man poked a sausage-like finger at the barmaid and, nodding at the Heineken slurred, “Hey, Missy. What the hell kind a pussy beer you serving here?”

The nasal Texas twang grated like broken chalk. Parker felt the fuse begin to sputter.

The man reached over, grabbed the offending bottle for emphasis and waved it in front of the harried woman’s face, splashing her blouse. She lurched back out of range.

“Don’t you got any Bud fer crissake?” He then flipped Parker’s bottle over his shoulder to shatter in a spray of foam on the stone floor.

Sitting at a nearby table, the big man’s mirror-imaged friends both thought this was the funniest act since one of them had tripped flat on his lumpy face when attempting the step down into the dim bar a few moments earlier.

Here we go again, Nassau. Swiveling on the bar stool to look up at the man, Parker casually arranged his feet and said, “I wasn’t finished with that.” The man leaned close and laughed all the harder, his breath causing Parker to wrinkle his nose in disgust.

The young islander quickly set another ice-dripping bottle in front of him and said, “No problem, suh.”

“Oh, there’s no problem, Miss,” Parker said, “as long as this ignorant redneck picks up the tab…for both beers.”

The girl quickly stepped to the end of the bar. The two large friends abruptly stood, their chairs clattering on the floor behind them. In the sudden stillness the calypso beat pounded on. The Oilers cap loomed over Parker and, raising a ham-like right fist, spat, “What the fuck did you say, asshole?”

Parker, both arms hanging slack to his sides, said, “Pay the lady, lard boy.”

As the beefy man flexed his right shoulder back, Parker instantly snap-slapped the back of his flattened left hand into the crotch of the man’s baggy shorts. It was all wrist, as if competing in an international ping pong tournament. A back-hand slam shot. The man’s eyes bulged as he grabbed at his privates and doubled over onto his knees like a collapsing lawn chair. Assuming the fetal position, he wheezed out a hog-like grunt.

Rising to his full six feet five inches, Parker moved off the stool saying, “You might want to work on your people skills, slugger.”

The barmaid, lifting a phone, ducked below the bar. The two cohorts, one behind the other, charged from around their table. Parker arm-whipped the first man’s telegraphed hay-maker to the side, while grabbing the back of his neck with a right hand. In the same practiced movement, he foot-swept the man’s legs out from under, bringing him down onto the bar’s edge­­­―face first.  He dropped, like a loose sack of bowling balls, on top of his groaning friend.

The third man, seeing the disaster awaiting him, tried to stop his headlong bull rush, only to skid in the beer suds, broken glass and cigarette butts. He landed on his own well-padded butt, slid into his two friends and stared, bewildered, up at Parker.

“I suggest you stay down there with your good buddies until we straighten this out,” Parker said, looking down at the wide-eyed man. “Agreed?”

“Yessir,” the sun-pinked face sputtered, stunned at what had happened so quickly to his two fallen comrades.

“You have twenty bucks on you?” Parker added.

“Yessir,” the man said struggling to pull out his wallet.

“Give it to the nice lady,” he said.

“Yessir.”

The girl had hung up the phone and was now peering over the top of the bar like a treed cat at a dog fight. “Are they on the way, Miss?” Parker asked.

“Yes, suh,” she said. “I think they be here in bout a minute or two. I figured maybe you be in trouble with three a them. Sorry. I should a knowed.”

“Not a problem. But I’d appreciate your not mentioning my presence when they get here. We’ve probably met before.” He pushed the man’s slightly soggy bill across the bar to her and said, “I hope this doesn’t create a problem for you.”

“Ain’t no problem, salty man. Rule is: no breakin,’ no problem,” she said, taking the twenty. “And don’t you worry none,” she added, tucking it into her bra. “Like I said, we bin hearin’ bout you. Was hopin’ maybe you come by. I’m only sorry you best leave now. You do work it sweet, mon.”

 He looked once again into the girl’s dark eyes before checking his Timex. “Well, I would like to stay. But…”  Parker shook his head in resignation and with a warning look to the men on the floor, turned to the door.

 In fact, it was past time.

**Chapter 2**

Back out in the sultry heat and long evening shadows, Parker listened for any approaching sirens. He kept to the alley’s dark edges, working his way past the intervening warehouses toward the beach and his waiting dinghy. The last thing he needed now is another Bahamian bureaucracy to deal with. The distant siren would probably bring the same policemen that had been called in two nights ago when he was forced to finish what a different idiot had mistakenly started. Parker had long ago disavowed any ‘turn the cheek’ attitude, but it did have its downside.

He hurried on.

Until this moment he hadn’t thought much about what and where he would go next. A local mariner had mentioned an outfit down in the Virgins that might be interested in chartering his trawler for some wreck diving off Anegada Island further to the east. It was rumored treasure was involved. God knows he could use some of that. Especially now, considering his looming zero balance.

It might be worth the three or four day passage down to St. Thomas to find out. Narwhal had just about enough fuel left in her tanks to make it; and there sure wasn’t anybody else yearning for her services. Besides, he hadn’t been there for over a year. He knew a great bar near the yacht anchorage.

The uniquely British heehaw sound of a police claxon echoed close. Red and blue strobe lights began splashing into the upper palm fronds above the tin-roofed buildings. So much for quiet contemplation. His father’s tired axiom skittered across his mind again. When in doubt…get out. Okay, pop. I’m on it.

The evening’s moon was rising bright and clear to the east. Outside the harbor, trade wind clouds scudded steadily across the soon to be full lunar face. Below, the trailing shadows spread westward over the dark shoals and coral heads of the Bahamian banks toward the massive deep currents of the Gulf Stream. A fresh, sea-tanged breeze brought the promise of a good night out on the salt.

There was no further reason to stay, and a good one for leaving. The garish alternating red and blue lights continued to flash upward into the palm fronds as he pushed his dinghy off into the shallows. Rowing out to Narwhal, he quickly hauled the small skiff up onto the deck and began making the stout trawler ready for sea. A large, ear-torn, ragged black cat appeared from an open cabin port hole and padded over to give Parker a stony look.

“Well, you’ve done it again, Cebo. Your barbaric attitude has got us kicked out of another anchorage.”

The cat stared up at him.

“Your attempts at diplomacy fell flat, fur ball…again.” he added. “We might as well go piss ‘em off down on Anegada Island as Nassau.” he continued. “That’s one place you haven’t been yet.”

The big feline yawned.

“Hate to interrupt your cat nap, scar face," he said. “But due to your well documented anger management issues, we’re forced to leave on a Friday. And you ought to know what that means. Bad Juju. So hurry up and go haul in the anchor.” Turning, he walked into the pilothouse and started the diesel engine.

The cat followed. “The anchor capstan is out on the foredeck, fuzz nuts. Not in here.”

 Cebo looked up and yawned again. “Some kind of useless third mate you are.”

 Parker went forward to raise the anchor.

 “Stupid cat.”

**Chapter 3**

The trawler had kept to the deeper outside route south down Exuma Sound all night long and slipped through the wide passage between Rum Cay and the northwest tip of Long Island that morning.

“You can breathe a little easier now, scaredy-cat.” he said turning from the chart table to the furry black beast lying on top of the engine control console. The cat licked a paw. “I knew you were worried.”

All during the long day, Narwhal sailed more open, less congested waters. Less danger of bumping into any roving island craft, charter sailboats, Nassau based sports fisherman…or pirates, as the drug runners could occasionally be a problem. It paid to keep a sharp eye. As his father cautioned: an empty ocean is a safer ocean. Except of course, when a lone boat needs help.

It’s the perennial blue-water cruiser’s ‘what-if’ dilemma.

Parker’s response to possible problems at sea has always been to prepare for and take care that he doesn’t incur any problems…and have the spare parts and ability to fix it, if and when he does. He long ago learned that if you have a boat…you’ll eventually have a boat problem. Something or other is bound to happen. Ergo the ancient definition of a boat being a hole in the water into which one pours money.

Stuff breaks. Shit happens.

And except for liability claims from others, Parker couldn’t get hull insurance on Narwhal at any price. They won’t insure old wooden boats or single-handers, in spite of his claiming the scruffy third mate as crew.

“Screw ‘em. Right Cebo?”

His one way conversations continued throughout the day. Later with night approaching, Parker changed the auto-pilot course a few degrees. This would take them past Crooked Island while maintaining a safe bearing well away from a dangerous reef area further south to port as he exited the Bahamas. He checked over the chart as he prepared to sail through another long moonlit night.

The following morning would see them well out of the Bahamian island chain’s aqua blue seas. Dawn should reveal, far to starboard over the horizon, the towering cumulus build-up covering the mountain-backed windward reaches of both eastern Cuba and the western end of Haiti. Both of these star crossed countries had dangerous, rock-strewn northern shores.

Their interiors were worse.

Haiti was mired in perennially corrupt political dogma, desperate poverty, fear, chaos and apathy. Cuba had its own huge problems topped off by the threat of the United States government confiscating his boat and throwing him in the can for even going there. Each was a hapless place. Parker had learned the hard way to stay well away from both.

A wide passage separated the two island countries. The now deep purple seas seemed to reflect its fathomless depths. At five or six miles deep, it was one of the world’s deepest ocean trenches. This chasm personified the phrase, out on the deep salt. Parker could never prevent a shiver of awe rise through his body every time he sailed across it. This almost bottomless, current-lashed abyss has never been fully explored and no one could say with authority what kind of monstrous beings lived down there.

 For all anybody knew, Jules Verne probably had it right.

“This is not a good place for skinny-dipping, Cebo. Don’t go tempting any deep salt denizens. You wouldn’t even be a mouthful,” he said, observing the depth sounder blinking in a futile attempt to find the bottom.

This evening’s sunset would see Narwhal on course to stay below the low lying island of Great Inagua just ahead to port. All that would remain to be leery of were the notorious islands and shoals south of the Turks and Caicos island group further on to the northeast. But he would stay well below them tomorrow as he traversed further eastward, against the winter trade winds. He knew to stay far enough off the lonely northern shorelines of Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico because of the unlighted, unmarked drift nets that the local panga fishermen set. Often these gill nets were over a mile long and impossible to see at night. One of those damn things wrapped around a prop meant a dangerous dive over the side with a knife and bolt cutters.

He hated gill netters. And he hated more the sharks that fed at night.

The salty trawler had maintained a steady ten to twelve knot speed all through the previous night and into the afternoon without a hitch. Everything worked as it was supposed to work. All her systems did what they were supposed to do. Parker took pride in her business like demeanor.

Several years ago he had found the abandoned old fishing trawler lying in the low tide mud of a dead end Galveston salt water slough. He bought her for a buck. The city made the deal with the proviso that he removed the wooden hulk within a week.

The boat was a mess, the engine a rusty useless weight, the ancient mechanical systems inoperable. But he found that the hull, frames, bulkheads, decks, cabin and pilot house were sound. In fact amazingly so, as she had been masterfully built up in the North West of perfectly seasoned, close, fine grained ancient old-growth woods that probably don’t even exist today.

He had fallen in love with her classic lines and spent the next year and all of his savings scrounging through Gulf of Mexico boat and salvage yards to find good solid used parts and pieces to bring her back to life.

He had rebuilt the aft fish hold to become a dive equipment, machine shop and stowage area.  He scrounged a lifting crane off the back of a wrecked tow truck.  The almost new diesel engine came from a Caterpillar bull dozer that some incompetent operator had accidentally tipped into a nearby slough.

The ground tackle and anchors were of a size and plentiful enough to keep the trawler safely and solidly positioned over a selected dive site in all but the worst of weather.

He found used side-scan sonar, radar, navigation and radio equipment from various boat yards and weekend marine flea markets. All the while lovingly restoring the below decks wood to a beautiful luster.

The end result was a forty five feet long, comparatively shallow draft for inshore waters, completely self-contained salvage vessel that can exist without re-supply for long periods in remote places. And perhaps the biggest plus was that there was ample head-room for his solid six feet five inch frame. He named her after his grandfather’s first WWII submarine command, the Narwhal. She was his home and Parker’s pride. And tucked way down in his subconscious was the feeling that she represented his image of what a loner, ‘my way or the highway’ relationship refugee could ever hope to have.

As dusk fell on the first full day at sea, Parker turned on the navigation lights and settled in to his normal single-handed standard watch practice. He made another careful visual check of the moon-splashed horizon before peering over the radar scope in the pilot house. And would all night long every fifteen minutes or so. A radar detector in theory, assuming other boats had their own radars running, would also detect any vessels nearby and set off an alarm. He could then wake up and determine if there was a risk of collision and any need to change course. However, the radar could never take the place of a periodic careful visual 360 scan of the horizon. A sailor’s worst nightmare was to hear and feel the horrifying crunch of a huge object against the hull in the black of night.

Bad juju.

And out here on the deep salt there is no easy fall back. No helpful next door neighbors. No instant 911 response. No neighborhood firehouse. No beat cop. No local emergency ward. You got a problem? Deal with it.

Or die.

He had long ago mastered the ability to catnap for a brief fifteen minutes in strange, dangerously uncomfortable environs. Not so long ago, his life and those of his Marine Corps Force Recon fire-team buddies had depended on it. Now it was second nature.  He accepted his ability to reach the next morning’s daylight well rested and alert, as long as there was a catch-up day not too far in the offing to re-set his inner clock.

He glanced over the engine panel, checking for any anomaly while listening to the steady thrum of the throaty diesel. Taking a long look around the darkening seas, he went below to his cabin’s waiting bunk, dialed his ex-wife’s abandoned kitchen stove timer to fifteen minutes, and tucked it under his pillow.

Parker had discovered his wife’s cheery little red timer perched on top of a large stamped and addressed envelope in the middle of their apartment’s kitchen table. He had just been released after months of surgery, recuperation and rehab from the Portsmouth Naval Hospital. It was her divorce papers. Her unsigned note said, “Please sign the enclosed and mail. I’ve had enough. Anything here is yours.”

 It was the first communication from her since he had left the states for a Middle East assignment seven months before and was badly shot up on the first day of contact. The wounds ultimately ended his combat career, as he refused the option to spend the rest of his Marine Corps days pushing paper at a Pentagon desk. It was the sudden termination of the only established way of being that he had ever known for most of what she had ultimately referred to as his, ‘So-called adult life.’

He had read the note and surprisingly, felt a confusing, guilty weight lift. They had married under a line of crossed Naval Academy swords the day after his graduation, but probably hadn’t spent a total of a month or two together in the three years since. Long distance Marine Corps relationships are not made in heaven. Not that he saw many others having much of a chance either. Jarheads or not. Maybe she had fallen in love with his dress white, shiny-buttoned Navy uniform. She never did accept that he had opted for the Marine Corps’s drab green.

Whatever.

He didn’t blame her. He stuffed the timer in his sea bag, mailed the envelope and headed for Texas. Parker took the only position he felt he knew plenty about and had any confidence in―a demolition job diving for an off shore drilling company. He definitely knew how to blow shit up. As his father used to say, do what you’re good at, kid. It was his standard precursor to: When in doubt…get out.

Parker had achieved excellence at both.

The warm night crawled forward in fifteen minute intervals of, rising majestically out of the east, moonlit splendor. Overhead clouds cast black shadows across the silver-tinged sea. Occasional larger waves sent a veil of spray shimmering across the forward decks, lit in shards of red and green by the running lights. The thud and clatter of a flying fish hitting the cabin sides and fluttering its life away in the scuppers was occasionally heard, marked by Cebo’s instant dash out a porthole.

Snack break.

An unseen tanker passing five miles further to the south and later, the sounds of an upwind whale blowing nearby, accompanied by its nose-crinkling exhaled fish breath, were the only traffic he encountered during the long star-spangled night.

Then, just before first light, out of the corner of an eye, he saw something.

It was while taking a final look aft as the full moon was about to set quietly below the western horizon. He caught a glimpse of the distinctive shape of a coconut floating in the water. It was silhouetted for a moment against the moon’s face at the top of a heaving swell fifty feet astern.

But something about it seemed strange.

Different.

The coconut was floating too high, too separate. Not the way he has seen hundreds of them floating in lagoons and off beaches far and wide, from the Pacific and South China Seas to the Caribbean. Even if all dried out, it wouldn’t ride that high in the water. He grabbed the binoculars and looked again. He had to wait until it appeared once more at the crest of the following swell.

There.

It was the same coconut.

But, this time he could see it had ears.

Ears?

Parker immediately dropped the engine RPMs and reversed course. Switching on the bridge deck searchlight, he motored back to try and find the mysterious object.  The cresting swells made it difficult to see anything in the few seconds available between the dark-shadowed, marching wave sets.

Then he spotted two big fins slicing toward a white shape. There, just two boat lengths away, he saw a half-submerged white box with the same round, black coconut shape perched above it. Turning the trawler to port, he closed the distance and soon perceived…not a coconut, but the head of a small black child, both arms wrapped tenaciously around a Styrofoam ice chest. His eyes were clamped shut.

The two fins were circling. Then a third sliced near.

Quickly laying the trawler upwind of the little figure, Parker created a comparatively quiet lee of downwind calm and stopped the boat. He was about to reach for his stand-by shark repellant, his father’s old M-1 rifle kept loaded in a pilothouse cabinet. Then another sleek, dark shape came rising and twirling out of the black water in a graceful arc of moon-sparkled spray, as if to say, “About time you got here, Parker. We’ve been waiting long enough.”

It was a trio of dolphin. Big, tough bottle nose dolphins. Shark killers.

Not daring to get too close for fear of crushing the child under the surging hull, he quickly launched the dinghy and rowed toward the half submerged white box. Parker shouted to hold on, he was coming. Pulling near, he shipped the oars and managed to grapple the boy by the seat of his tattered trousers with a stout wooden handled boathook. He carefully yanked him next to the skiff and shouted, “Grab my hand!”

But the boy’s eyes remained tightly closed and his arms stayed wrapped desperately to the still buoyant foam chest. The boat hook clattered into the bottom of the skiff as Parker reached down and, grasping the boy’s arm, lifted him easily up and out and onto his lap.

The sodden child, salt-encrusted eyes squeezed shut, still held on to his savior, the ice chest, with a death grip. The boy’s sea-wrinkled mahogany skin sparkled under diamond-like droplets of salt water.  He was trying to speak past trembling lips, but all that could be heard was a strangled whisper.

“It’s okay boy. You’re safe now,” Parker said, wondering if the salt-soaked lad was attempting to tell him who else might be waiting to die in the empty blackness. But all he could hear were the boy’s unintelligible sobs.

Where did he come from? How did he get way out here?

Parker settled him into the bottom of the dinghy between his feet and gathered up the oars. Rowing back toward the drifting trawler, reaching the top of another swell, Parker swept his eyes all around the black, lunar-tipped waters. Were there others?  But no other living thing was seen. No overturned hulk. No flares. No floating debris. No cries for help. Nobody. Nothing but the vast, heaving emptiness of a silent, uncaring sea returned his gaze.

You’re all alone, kid.

The moon now completed its descent below the far western edge of the world and instantly plunged the scene into a dark void. Securing the skiff’s bow painter to a cleat, Parker lifted the boy onto the safety of Narwhal’s lighted deck and climbed aboard.

Now what?