

**DEEP
BLUE**



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SITTING IN HIS LAB, MARION D. FORD ENTERED A NUMERICAL password and watched a hooded man execute three hostages with a ruby-handled knife. Different victims, different locations, and months apart, but always the same knife, never pausing to sharpen the blade.

How could that be?

The video had been edited by a pro, that's how.

The knife was of interest. He zoomed in. It had a curved blade like an antique sword, with a single ruby embedded in the hilt. On the pommel was a crowned triangle of silver, the symbol of Persian assassins from the time of the Crusades.

Ford opened a second link, entered a series of codes, and this time watched raw footage of the first two executions. This video

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wasn't available to networks or politicians—possibly, not even the White House, but Ford wasn't sure about that. He concentrated on the man wielding the knife: he was tall with corded forearms, but not muscular, his technique honed by video games and religious fantasies. He was a Muslim convert via Chicago, no name provided.

An egomaniac, Ford thought, who played to the cameras but revealed himself in scenes that would be omitted—one where he used a cleaver. Another: an adolescent yowl when he lofted his trophy, a severed head. Weird, the sound he made. A wild warble produced with a fluttering tongue. Like crows trapped in a cave.

There were two cameras from different angles, video rolling throughout.

The third video was different. The cameras had been paused several times, yet their POV remained unchanged. The scenes were choppy and sometimes blurry, which wasn't typical of raw footage. That struck Ford as odd. Digital cameras had autofocus. The hostage behaved differently, too. He was an aging Caucasian male, professorial-looking, who had to be dragged to the chopping block, unlike the others who had shown no fear.

Why?

Ford hadn't been supplied with his name either. That would come later—or wouldn't. It wasn't his job to care. He opened a notebook, pocket-sized, and wrote, in cyphered shorthand: "Victims #1 & #2 believed they were participating in a rehearsal."

He erased and revised: ". . . believed they were participating in another rehearsal," then paused to reflect before adding, "Victim #3 might not be dead."

He made more notes while he watched the footage again.

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The link was time-sensitive. When the screen went blank, he rebooted his computer—a security precaution—before exiting the room, which contained rows of lighted aquariums, a microscope, shelves of beakers and chemicals, and, on the counter, a cylindrical Plexiglas tank in which a dozen sea jellies pulsed.

It was a moonless night on Sanibel Island, Florida, and breezy on this first eve in December. A good place to stand on the deck of a house built on stilts and piss over the railing into the water—a glittering stream that connected him, briefly, with the bay ten feet below.

Back at his desk, he sent an encrypted message that read When?

For the next several days, Ford began each morning with a long sunrise swim and sprint intervals on a butt-kicking machine called a VersaClimber. Pull-ups usually came next, but he'd broken a hand and torn his rotator cuff on a recent trip to Cuba. Only a partial tear, but he couldn't do the job he'd been assigned if it got much worse.

Still no word on Wednesday, so he tended to business, which included signing documents that made him half owner of a small seaplane, a Maule M-5 with a four-cylinder turbo. The fuselage was blue on white; leather seats and Plexiglas doors. The co-owner was an old friend, and, to celebrate, they flew to Shark River in the Everglades and caught snook.

There was another good low tide on Thursday. He was wading the flats with a fly rod when he finally received an encrypted reply to his question via satellite phone.

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That night, on his bed, while his dog watched, he laid out two passports, an olive drab travel kit, a bug jacket, a hammock, \$15,000 in cash, and some other things, including a knife, a laser pointer, and a small pistol, a Sig Sauer P938.

He'd returned from Cuba with that, too.

There were other weapons in a safe built into the floor—esoteric items, but better to travel light.

Ford was cleaning the pistol when a knock at the door shifted his reality from the covert life he had led for many years to the realities of a small marina, on a small island, where oddities (such as the odor of Hoppe's Gun Solvent) became an eager topic of gossip. So he stashed the pistol kit and offered his friend Mack, who owned Dinkin's Bay Marina, a chair and a cold bottle of beer.

Mack had some gossip of his own to share: a story that, under different circumstances, might have earned Ford's full attention.

"Our mystery Santa struck again," Mack said. He held the bottle to the light, then took a drink. "This time, he left five hundred bucks under the console of Eddie's boat. No idea who did it."

"Our Eddie?" Ford was dubious. Eddie DeAntoni, from New Jersey, was called Fast Eddie for a reason.

"I'd think it was gambling winnings, too, or somehow illegal, if it wasn't for the money Marta's little girl found on their houseboat. Same thing: a red candy cane sort of box filled with old bills. Stacks of hundreds; all of them stiff, like they'd been soaked in water, then bleached. Nothing written on a card, just money. It's no accident, Doc. Sort of an early Christmas present, that's what Eddie thinks."

Everyone at the marina, and all of his friends, called Marion D. Ford "Doc."

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The story about Marta Estéban and her daughters was true. Ford had helped the family escape from Cuba, which was why, two days ago, he'd been their unanimous choice to arbitrate on what ten-year-old Sabina had discovered in an anchor well and claimed as her own: \$1,000 in cash. A big boost for a family in a strange country, not that their adoptive marina family wouldn't have looked after them anyway.

"He didn't make up a story just to con the IRS," Mack added. "There's a lot of eccentric rich folks on these islands. That's why I always tell our guys, 'Be nice even to the assholes, 'cause you never know who they'll mention in their will."

"Bleached bills left in the sun," Ford mused. "Or hidden underwater. Someplace shallow. I figured Sabina found a stash of old drug money."

"Bloody well possible," Mack, who was from New Zealand, said. "It couldn't have come at a better time for Fast Eddie. The fool gave away most all his lottery winnings, and his dive business has gone to hell 'cause of Hello, Dolly! Another few weeks with no charters and a cracked power head, he'd be bugger all."

Ford touched the stem of his glasses. "Dolly who?"

"Are you kidding? They quoted you in a newspaper story about her last week. Dolly, the shark. Some are calling her Hello, Dolly! like you're in the water, look around, and there she is. What are you gonna say? It's all anybody talks about."

"Why people need to give animals names—" Ford shook his head, mystified. "It's no different from some poor dog wearing a hat or scarf or sunglasses. I probably blocked the stupid name on purpose."

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Dolly was a twenty-five-hundred-pound great white shark who'd been named by the biologists at Ocean Search who had tagged her. Ocean Search had tagged dozens of great whites with satellite chips that could be tracked via the Internet. Three weeks ago, the shark had surfaced off Sanibel Island, and might still be in the area, but sightings had not been confirmed. National headlines about her presence had affected tourism, and all but put local dive operators out of business.

Normally, Ford would have been happy to spend a beery evening with Mack discussing the subject. The marina's day-to-day problems—even when they included a great white shark—seemed sunny and manageable when compared to the cutthroat realities of the outside world.

He had a lot to do, though, so dropped a hint, saying, "I'm leaving for a conference in the morning or I'd offer you another beer."

"Anyplace interesting?"

Ford's eyes landed on the marina's black cat, curled in the corner, then moved to the cylindrical Plexiglas tank. "I'm presenting a paper on sea jellies. Near Orlando at one of those big no-name hotels that have a name. If you think about it, remind Jeth to tend to my aquariums after you lock the gate tomorrow. He's been more forgetful than usual."

"Jellyfish, that's what you'll talk about?"

"It's a misnomer. They're invertebrates, not fish."

Mack's expression asked *Who could possibly care?*

"Worldwide," Ford explained, "there've been mega-blooms of sea jellies and no one has figured out why. They thrive in polluted

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water, so that might have something to do with it. I can show you the data, if you're interested."

Mack's eyes dulled. He got up. "A hotel full of scientists," he said. "I've seen those female academic types. Like talking to textbooks with tits. But then, no one goes into your line of work for the excitement, do they?"

"I'll be back in a few days," Ford said, "but don't worry if I'm not." He got up. "Oh, and Hannah might stop to check on things. I told her she's welcome to overnight, if she wants."

Captain Hannah Smith, a top fly-fishing guide, was Ford's on-again, off-again lover.

Mack felt an obligation to remind him, "I hear she's been dating someone. Understandable, of course. That girl's a tough one to read—but aren't they all?"

Ford, moving toward the door, told him, "I've got to find my dog," and went outside.

The next afternoon, he landed in Mexico, near Tulum on the Yucatán Peninsula, and traveled south to where a resort the size of a cruise ship was anchored to a silver beach. A Florida biologist wouldn't be noticed among the eager tourist throngs, even if he loaded camping gear into a boat and didn't return for several days.

Ford paid cash for a locally built dugout—a *cayuca*—with an outboard. He pushed off before sunset.

South of the resort was the Bay of Ascension, a small inland sea pocked with islands and blue craters called cenotes that were

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openings to underground rivers. The craters tunneled far into the earth and exited—if they did—no one knew where.

Ford liked that. Along with sea jellies, he had been researching cenote formations in the Gulf of Mexico. Next week, he planned to dive a spot called the Captiva Blue Hole with a hipster friend of his, a boat bum mystic named Tomlinson, who was among the smartest men he knew. Also among the wealthiest, which is why some at the marina believed he was the mystery Santa.

Cenotes were a pleasant coincidence that Tomlinson would have interpreted as a karmic omen.

Good luck or bad?

Marion Ford didn't believe in either, for the same reason he had never believed in Santa Claus.

The resort was a five-star destination, a white concrete bluff encircled by bamboo-shack poverty where its employees lived—Mexican peasants the resort depended upon to keep tourists smiling. A typical worker-to-guest ratio was three to one. A typical income-to-income ratio wasn't available, but probably obscene.

Ford made use of the inequity, and the cash he'd brought, to create a loose safety net of goodwill. A very loose net, true, but worth the effort in an area where the resort was an island unto itself. Beyond the eastern fence was a hundred miles of jungle. Forty kilometers to the south, through littoral swamp and withering poverty, was Belize, once called British Guyana. Lying between was this shallow bay, with its islands and blue holes, where he had fash-

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ioned a remote base camp, as well as a separate spotting post, only a quarter mile from the hotel and beach.

Ford had done some exploring. He knew more about the area, he suspected, than the corporate bosses who'd built the place. But the bosses, by god, knew their clientele. The wealthy jetted in from around the world for the sun and sex and gambling, and the illusion of limitless excess, which, in the minds of some, equaled freedom. What the guests didn't realize was, despite the fixed smiles and amenities, the resort was an isolated outpost; a fragile life-support system for those who could not, would not, survive for long outside the property's gate.

Why would they bother? There was a long list of organized activities: yoga, golf, horseback riding, scuba trips to nearby atolls, billfish charters, and day trips to archaeological sites.

There were many such ruins. This was Mexico's ancient region of Quintana Roo, home of Mayan kings and gods, and temples that, amid choking vines, mocked them both, but were still worth the hundred-euro excursion fee (with a "traditional" lunch included).

Ford was more interested in solitary activities. Hopefully, the man he'd been sent to find would not be afraid to go out alone. There was unsupervised snorkeling, kayaks and paddleboards for rent, a two-mile "nature trail" that featured caged toucans and monkeys, and a lookout pavilion over a pond where caimans—a variety of alligator—waited patiently to be fed.

The pavilion was an ideal spot. Better yet, catch the man alone while he was snorkeling the reef that lay midway between the beach and Ford's spotting post hidden by trees.

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It didn't happen.

He had been assigned an anonymous assistant; a “facilitator,” housed somewhere on the resort property. By the third day, he or she was getting antsy, too. Via encrypted phone, Ford received a text in Spanish: Máx is leaving Wednesday, not Thursday. What now?

Máx, as in Máximo, the maximum bad guy. It was code for the man he had been sent to find. Three days ago, more information had been provided about the videos, including details about the victims and their killer. The man with the ruby-handled knife was a failed actor named David Abdel Cashmere, who'd converted to Islam in 2010 at a Chicago mosque and was considered “home-grown.” It was an important distinction to law enforcement and terrorist organizations. *Homegrown* meant his conversion was so profound, he would do anything, including harm his own country, to advance his cause. He attended training camps for Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Pakistani militant group, and for the Islamic state of Iraq and Syria—ISIS. By 2013, he had emerged as an occasional spokesman for an al-Qaeda cell in the UK. ISIS came to power at about the same time.

In 2014, the FBI added Cashmere to the Most Wanted list, citing his involvement with a dozen bombings. They included Marriott hotels in Bali and Singapore, and several Christian day care centers in the Middle East—346 children killed.

In 2015, ISIS amped up Cashmere's status by naming him “American Senior Operative and Media Advisor,” but under the name of Máximo al-Ameriki. Soon afterward, the group began to release videos of far superior quality to the cell phone variety the group was known for. Beheadings took on a Hollywood polish.

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Cashmere, the anonymous assassin, was becoming a star.

No surprise there, but the news about Cashmere's schedule change gave Ford only two more days.

He was sitting, cross-legged, in muck and mosquitos, across from the beach, binoculars nearby. It was noon; had to be eighty in the shade. He threw back the hood of his bug jacket and jabbed a question into the phone: What's his afternoon schedule?

His ally, who went by the initials KAT, replied, Golfing w/financial backers. Tonight SOP: gets drunk, gambles, gets drunker, hires whores.

SOP stood for "standard operating procedure." KAT's meaning: *The man was never alone.*

Ford asked, Tomorrow?

Breakfast meeting; massage; lunch meeting.

Booked sunset parasailing; cocktail reception,
more whores.

The unnecessary use of the word *whore* suggested either disapproval or contempt. Ford already suspected his ally was female, not that it mattered. He'd never worked with an assigned "facilitator"; didn't trust the concept nor the judgment of anyone naïve enough to be involved. For that reason, he had led KAT to believe he was thirty miles north, staying in the touristy village Playa del Carmen, awaiting more intel before showing his face at the resort.

Now this.

The obvious move: wait until Cashmere was drunk, then pay an early-morning visit to his room. He would need a key and a diver-

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sion of some sort . . . And what else? While he considered that, he reread the text. A phrase jumped out:

Booked sunset parasailing . . .

Hmm . . .

Ford mulled that over. All day, every day, a twin-engine boat towed a steady stream of thrill seekers belted to a parachute that soared two or three hundred feet into the air. One solitary person at a time. The boat was out there now, making the same damn boring circle, taking care not to stray too close to the bay, where there were shoals and reefs and thickets of mangrove trees laced into limestone.

Ford typed Stand by and picked up the binocs. The boat was the go-fast variety, a yellow V-hull with twin inboard engines built for ocean racing or running cocaine. It would be useless in shallow water.

Aboard was a crew of two, a Mexican driver and a spotter, and several European-looking passengers whose eyes were fixed on the sky. They reminded Ford of happy children flying a kite.

He swung the binoculars and tracked a hundred meters of yellow rope upward to the parachute. It was a massive scarlet umbrella attached by threads and a harness to a miniature person, who, when the binocs were focused, became a laughing blonde in a bikini. Laughing because she'd removed her top to taunt her male companions far below.

Ford lowered the binoculars but continued to observe. He'd been wrong about the boat steering a circle. It followed a triangular

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course because of prevailing winds; a steady northeasterly breeze. Steer downwind, even for a minute, the parachute might collapse. Apply too much throttle while steering across the wind, the rope might break

He got to his feet, ducked through some brush, and exited bay-side into quiet sunlight. The water was gelatin green, seldom more than a meter deep, and formed a waxen bond with distant islands and nearby hedgerows of rock and mangroves that separated the bay from deeper water.

No breeze here on the leeward side. At his feet was the spiraled egg casing from a whelk shell, dried and brittle. He returned to his spotting post; waited until the parasail swung to within a few hundred meters, then used segments of the egg casing to gauge the wind. One after another, he tossed segments into the air and watched them flutter to earth like miniature parachutes. With his boot, he marked off a grid. With his index finger, he measured variations of descent. All proportions were rough estimates, but close enough for what he had in mind.

His shoulder pack was a high-tech tactical bag, made by Vertx. In a hidden pocket, next to the Sig Sauer pistol, was the pocket laser. It resembled the gadgets used by college professors but was thicker, heavier, constructed of military-grade aluminum and carbon fiber. More like an LED flashlight, but with a security lock aft because it was to be used only in an emergency. The laser was powerful enough to signal an evacuation chopper, or even a satellite, sixty miles overhead, although it was designed to pinpoint targets for high-flying planes.

But was that all it could do?

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Ford flipped up the tiny peep sight, twisted the lock to activate a sizzling green beam, and experimented on a nearby twig . . . then a mangrove root twenty meters away.

“Geezus . . . thing’s dangerous,” he muttered, then engaged the lock and hid it away.

Ford sent two messages, one to a man he trusted; another to his facilitator, which read Must meet tonight.



2

THAT EVENING, KAT, WHOSE LAPEL PIN SAID HER NAME WAS Astra, sat within a circle of tiki torches, legs crossed, silky blouse buttoned, waiting for him at the pool bar. All guests wore green wristbands. Hers was black or dark blue. She was an *Ecotour Advisor*, according to the badge over her breast.

Ford, thirty meters away, was hidden by bushes and shadows. They had agreed to meet at eight. It was now eight forty-five. Using binoculars, he watched KAT check and recheck her watch. Watched her drum glossy fingernails on the table. She signaled the waiter and ordered another daiquiri. The bartender poured double strength and served it without making eye contact.

The woman, an exotic-looking brunette, was accustomed to third world deference and other perks of the ruling class. But she was not accustomed to being stood up. She opened her purse, re-

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trieved what appeared to be an iPhone but wasn't, and typed a message in Spanish. The satellite phone in Ford's pocket vibrated in response. He read, *You're late. I have a car if you need transport.*

Instead of responding, he continued to observe, no longer using the binocs. Between the hotel and patio bar was a courtyard where, on this tropical night, small brown men on ladders wove lighted icicles through the palms, a shimmering umbrella effect. It was a reminder that even here, near the equator, Christmas was only a few weeks away.

Ford changed into tourist garb and hid his bag and swim fins in the bushes while the woman finished her drink. When she left in a huff, he followed. She made two stops before returning to a row of luxury cabanas that overlooked the beach. She was in Cinnamon Cottage—the buildings were named after spices or flowers—and her movements inside the cottage could be tracked by the lights she switched on. When he was convinced she was alone, he responded to her last text in English.

Mission scrubbed.

Through the window, he saw her hurry into the kitchenette, blouse unbuttoned, hair wrapped in a towel, and pick up the phone. Frustration; disapproval. It was in her mannerisms. She used her thumbs to type, *Why?*

He didn't respond.

She demanded, *On whose authority?*

Ford wrote, *End contact*, and powered off his phone. A satellite log, which she might be able to access, would confirm that he could

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no longer receive messages. The same satellites would also confirm his location was in Playa del Carmen. He had stashed a little GPS transmitter behind the bumper of a public bus after syncing, then disabling, the GPS in his own phone.

Security cameras were a concern. In his pocket was a night vision monocular or NVG, the newest incarnation made by American Technologies Network. Generation 4. No more halo glare around lights, and precise resolution. From his hiding spot, he could see details of the woman's face that weren't visible even after cleaning his glasses. Also visible was the until now invisible strobe of an infrared camera in the courtyard. Two more cameras were mounted high atop an inland wing of the hotel.

A wall of jasmine separated the pool bar from the beach. Ford used the cover to move to an unlit shuffleboard court beyond the view of the cameras. From there, he could see the front entrance of the woman's cottage. Giant moths beat themselves against a porch light. Bats carved meteoric shadows; the siren throb of frogs registered in the brain as silence.

KAT stepped out, wearing a white skirt and blouse with sandals, and walked briskly toward the main building, which housed the reception area, shops, and a restaurant. In her rush to leave, she failed to lock the cottage door. Ford slipped inside the room with its ceiling fans. The air smelled of shampoo and wicker. He planted a stickpin transmitter in the bedroom, another in the sitting room, where KAT's laptop was on a table but closed. Next to it was a pad of paper, with the resort's logo, the top sheet blank but veined from previous notes.

He tore off the top sheet, left the cottage, then jogged to catch up.

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The woman was just entering the building, up the steps through the double doors and past a security guard. A minute later, she reappeared on the terrace of the main bar. Soon she was joined by a tall man, wearing a white dinner jacket, no tie, and wire-rimmed glasses. A wisp of hair was combed across a head that was bald and unusually large.

The guy was a moneyed businessman, Ford guessed, but looked more like a professor from some elite liberal arts college. Twenty years older than KAT, which would have meant nothing under different circumstances, but the timing and contrast set off alarm bells.

There was something familiar about the guy.

He retreated to a safe place and used Gen-4 optics to confirm what his instincts wanted to deny: the man in the dinner jacket bore an uncanny resemblance to a kidnap victim in the videos, an Australian named Shepherd.

Unlikely, but a closer look was required. Twice, he moved to get a better view; used optical contrast and focus to study facial features that are difficult to disguise: earlobes, chin, eye sockets. Without digital analysis, there was no way to be certain, but the guy sure as hell looked like the aging Caucasian who had been dragged, kicking and screaming, to the executioner's knife.

Why would a kidnap victim conspire with terrorists to fake his own death?

Ford let the question go and skipped to something more important. If it was Shepherd, this was a set-up and there could be only one reason: days ago, in the lab, he had written, "Victim #3 might still be alive."

That observation had been shared with only one person. Not that that meant too much. Procedure required the information to

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be passed along to at least a few others for analysis. If true, someone on the inside had leaked his notes about the videos. Or . . . their communications had been hacked.

That's what Ford wanted to believe, but, either way, this was serious.

He switched off the NVG monocular. In his career, no assignment had gone exactly as planned. The need to adapt was a Darwinian component that, in his mind, vindicated whatever action was required. If war—or life—were easy, the weak would have been eliminated from the gene pool eons ago. But this was *different*. This was the first assignment that had the feel of an elaborate trap.

The man in the white dinner jacket was laughing, a wineglass in his delicate hands. Ford watched them interact until he was convinced they shared a professional bond and, if they hadn't yet shared a bed, they soon would.

That was a plus. Emotional ties were a potential weakness. The bedroom required an investment of time. People talked. They let their guards down. And the stickpin transmitters he'd planted in the cottage were all but invisible.

He grabbed his bag and slipped away. If KAT and her colleague—or colleagues—hadn't figured out he wasn't in Playa del Carmen, they soon would.

The question was, should he run? Or sidestep the trap and kill the bait?

At ten p.m., security lights dimmed when the resort's generators switched to eco mode. Ford headed for the bayside marina, indif-

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ferent to the few vacationers who roamed the docks where yachts and trawlers were moored. His tourist disguise consisted of baggy shorts, sandals, a wristband fashioned from tape, and a golf visor, even though he didn't play golf and hoped he never would. The effect was as expected: security guards and guests ignored him.

Near a boat ramp where Jet Skis and paddleboards were stacked, a sign read

PARASAILING ADVENTURES CONTACT OUR RECREATION SPECIALISTS!

Ford allowed the sign to lure him closer to the twin-engine go-fast boat that was empty but uncovered, afloat in a sheen of oil. A storage shed was nearby, door ajar: a room crammed with parasails and rope. Atop the mess, rolled into a ball, was the scarlet canopy he'd seen earlier. The parasail's harness, however, was still on the boat, looped over a winch that held several hundred yards of yellow braided nylon.

Ford didn't risk stepping aboard. There were rope samples enough in the shed.

His attention moved to the Jet Skis, then a stack of paddleboards. None of the boards approached the quality of his own favorite, an 11-foot carbon fiber Avanti, but there was a decent touring board hidden off to the side that was probably used by instructors. Ford claimed it with his eyes and did the same with a paddle.

He waited. From the direction of the pool bar came laughter and the tentative notes of a steel drum. A party was getting started.

Good timing.

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When the docks emptied, he traded his tourist disguise for khaki shorts and paddled the board to his little dugout, anchored two hundred meters off the beach. He secured the board lengthwise, with barely room to sit.

The *cayuca* had a quiet little two-stroke kicker. A simple crank start, like an old lawn mower's, but powerful enough to rocket him back to camp through the silence of stars.

Behind, in the boat's wake, reggae music thrummed. The resort became a balloon of light that gradually deflated and was soon consumed by nightfall in Quintana Roo.

Ford's base camp was miles from his spotting post—a cave of buttonwoods and palms up a winding creek where the Maya had quarried limestone.

In the morning, when the sun was high enough, he carried snorkel gear into the creek to an abrupt drop-off and spent half an hour exploring the walls and bottom—uniformly fifteen feet deep, squared like a box. He saw pottery shards and at least one unbroken bowl that, beneath a film of algae, was decorated with designs of deepest azure. It had been a thousand years, perhaps two thousand years, since a human hand had made contact. Tempting, but he left the bowl and pottery shards undisturbed.

What he could not resist was retrieving what had been recorded in KAT's cottage last night. He dialed a thirteen-digit number, entered a code, and stared into the ancient quarry while the data was downloaded onto his phone. Ironic, the contrast in time and place and technology.

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KAT had not brought the man in the white dinner jacket home, but she'd made a phone call. Perhaps to him, but maybe not. Ford listened to the one-sided conversation several times. It was only a minute long, but packed an emotional punch.

"Bitch," he said as he put the phone away. It was a word he seldom used.

Using the broad edge of a pencil, he shaded the sheet from the notepad he'd taken from the woman's cottage. Words began to emerge, amid much doodling, and sketches that might have been self-portraits.

Winslow Shepherd 802

Okay. This was proof. The man in the white dinner jacket was the Australian who'd supposedly been executed.

Pieces were taking shape.

Breakfast: wild bananas, instant coffee, and military lasagna from a box of MREs. While his jungle hammock and clothes dried in the sun, he experimented with the laser and lengths of rope he'd stolen the night before. What was the maximum distance a six-watt tactical laser would burn nylon? How long would it take?

After that, there was time to rig the paddleboard for an extended trip and hide it. He hoped the board wouldn't be necessary, but success favored those who devised options in advance of need.

The wind was of constant interest. At first light, it had freshened from the northeast, steady and dependable. Far out to sea, though,

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perhaps over a coral bank, or some unknown island, clouds of violet threatened rain before the day was done.

A storm would change everything, but it was pointless to fret. Around noon, he puttered to an isolated cenote; a black hole in the Earth sealed beneath luminous turquoise. The water was so clear, he tensed when he nudge the dugout over the lip of the crater, as if gravity would suck him downward.

He felt the same pleasant tension when he slipped over the side and jackknifed toward the bottom, but there was no bottom, only carousels of fish—barracuda, giant pompano, amberjack. They parted with predatory indifference to reveal limestone walls that spiraled into the inner blackness of the Earth.

At twenty feet, Ford latched onto a chunk of rock and gauged its weight before dropping it into the abyss. The rock tumbled in slow motion, with the resonance of skulls colliding, and started a brief landslide.

He looked up and imagined the little boat's anchor hooked to a larger boulder, the bitter end lashed to a dead but buoyant body. How far would the boulder tumble? At what depth, and for how many days, would a man's body dangle in suspension before predators reprocessed protein into fuel?

Adrift at the edge of the cenote was the largest predator thus far. It was a translucent blob the size of a garbage bag rooted to the tide by venomous strands, some of them twenty feet long. To sailors, it was a Portuguese man-of-war, but only a "jellyfish" to those who had not experienced the animal's sting. Each drifting filament was an arsenal of microscopic harpoons. They fired upon contact with living tissue, injecting doses of neurotoxin

RANDY WAYNE WHITE

Sea jellies of all types were common here: bell domes and thimble-sized dwarfs called sea lice, because they could slip under a swimsuit and cause a maddening rash. The animals—and they were *animals*—had no head, heart, eyes, brain, or ears; they were seawater-fueled by hunger and light, all highly efficient hunters. Man or beast, if sufficiently entangled, would soon be consumed.

In the afternoon, Ford dozed, or tried to, with the bug jacket pulled to his knees, hood drawn with only his nose protruding. Heat was a vaporous weight. It herded insects into the shade, so he zipped himself into his jungle hammock. His fear of being without reading material bordered on phobia. He had allowed himself only one sodden paperback, *Sea of Cortez*, by John Steinbeck. When he skipped to the part about biologist Ed Ricketts, a swatch of onion-skin paper dropped free. Unfolded, he saw that it was a page written by his boat mystic pal, Tomlinson, who, apparently, had used it as a bookmark. The man's elegant nineteenth-century penmanship was unmistakable.

What a goofball, Ford thought. The page was from the original manuscript of Tomlinson's best-known book, *One Fathom Above Sea Level*. The book had earned his pal an international following and a limitless supply of fawning devotees, many of them the bespectacled, pottery-throwing Berkeley types who were prone to sunburn yet seldom wore bras.

Ford had time on his hands. It wasn't his kind of book—he'd tried to wade through it before—but, what the hell?

He read:

DEEP BLUE

My inner voice tells me I have no worth beyond the kindness I show strangers. It claims I make clown faces, and have no power to escape the puppeteer's strings.

Bullshit. The truth is this: my inner voice lies to me. The same is true if yours whispers that you are not worthy of happiness, or sufficiently attractive, or smart enough, or lack the strength to live without fear.

All lies.

Deep in the brain is a coward's crevice that values safety above all else. Why try? Why bother? Why risk any small success if failure is guaranteed?

Our silent voices are more trustworthy guides—bell note sounds that favor action over inactivity, and a life fully lived rather than a life of gray complacency.

How do I know this? Three weeks in an insane asylum have erased all the murky lines regarding life, death, shit, and Shinola. Thus I take rubber pencil in hand . . .

Enough. Ford slapped a mosquito; yawned while refolding the page and stored it in a hammock pocket provided for personal items. Another high-tech anomaly in this ancient place was googling the name Winslow Shepherd.

There was much to learn.

He broke camp long before sunset and policed the area until he was certain no modern spore was left behind.

The little motorized boat—or the stolen paddleboard—would be his last base camp before he fled Mexico.