

MARSHA & DANNY JONES THRILLERS



RETURN OF THE SEA EMPRESS



KEN ROSSIGNOL

Return of the Sea Empress

Marsha & Danny Jones Thriller

The Trans-Atlantic Voyage That Changed Cuban-American
Relations

KEN ROSSIGNOL

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The Marsha & Danny Jones Thrillers

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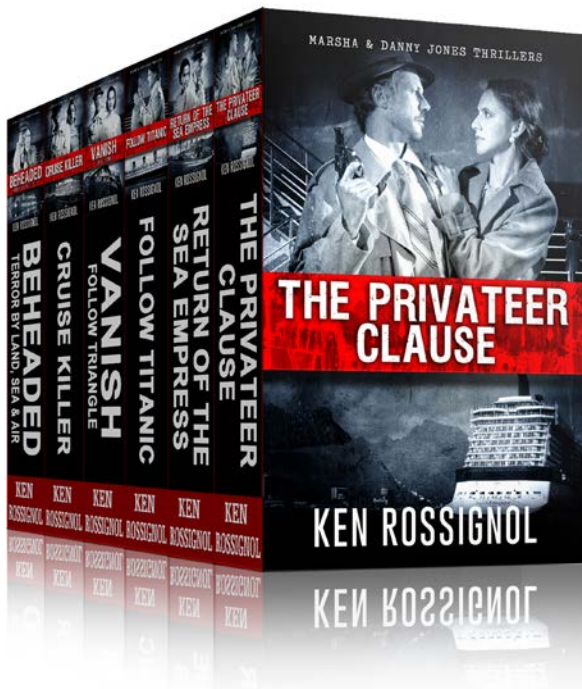
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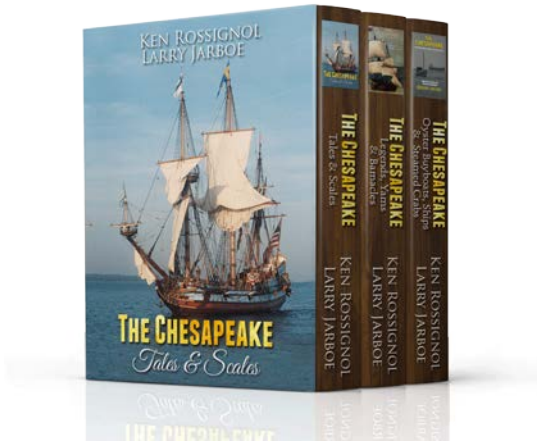
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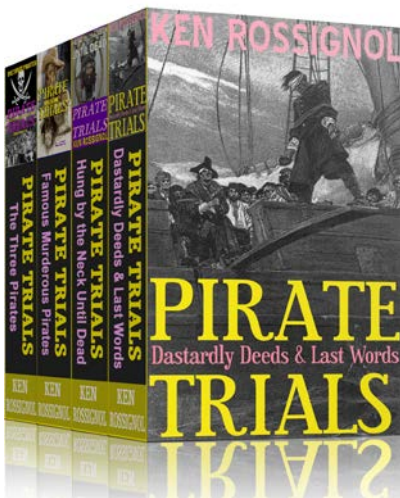
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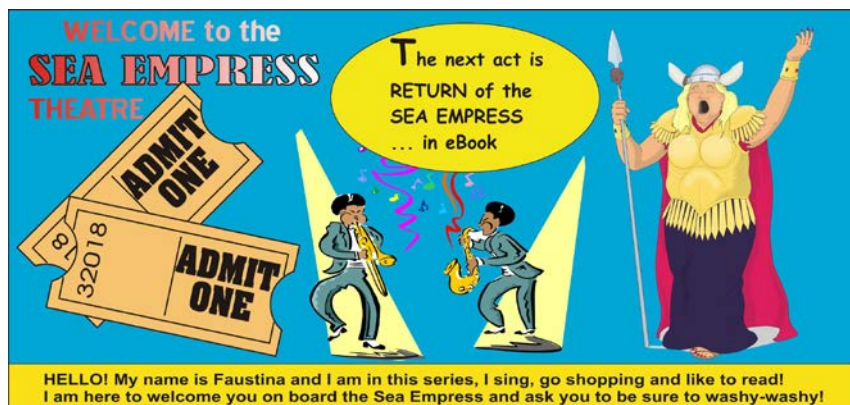
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Chapter 1

The long and cramped flight from Philadelphia to Rome was delayed by bad weather. Danny and Marsha Jones had seats in coach among fidgeting passengers attempting to get some shut-eye on the overnight flight.

They were supposed to take a connection from Baltimore Washington International to Philadelphia, but a big storm system tied up all flights. Danny and Marsha felt lucky when US Air put them in a car to make it to Philly on time.

An attractive flight attendant remarked that, had they been waiting for a domestic flight, they would have had an overnight stay in the terminal instead of a trip by limo to another airport. "They take good care of you on international flights," Sally Ann Dumka said as she flicked a lock of hair off of her forehead. "That's where the airline makes their best profit, so they treat you like royalty."

Upon arriving in Rome three days early so they could get in some sight-seeing, the couple rode to their hotel in a Black & Perkins car. The driver, Tom Walsh, had been a New York City detective until retiring in 1997. He then provided protection for Merrill Lynch executives, until the great implosion on Wall Street.

"It's really great to meet you both," Walsh said. "After reading about your adventures on the *Sea Empress*, I decided I'd had it with boring executive work in New York City and that it was time to go where the action is."

"Be careful what you wish for," Danny said. "I understand you will be joining our team on the *Sea Empress* as a threat analyst."

"Yep, I can't wait! My wife arrived with me last week, and we've visited all the museums and restaurants anyone can in a week. She'll cruise with us back to the states," Tom said.

"Tom, please join us for dinner tonight," Marsha said. "We'll be stuck on that ship for months, and I would love to take in a few sights and eat out where no one is shooting at us."

“That’s fine with me. I know my wife will be anxious to meet you,” Tom said.

At eight o’clock that evening - a little late to be eating dinner, as far as Marsha was concerned - Tom pulled up to their hotel in a car. Danny and Marsha were waiting at the door.

The car took them to a side street a block from the Plaza of the Republic. Tom had heard about a restaurant from staff members in the B & P office in Rome. The group entered *Giovanni’s* through a green doorway and walked down several steps to a foyer which led to two dining rooms, both below street level. The large rooms were packed with tables. Paintings and shelves adorned with small sculptures and bottles of wine lined the walls. Marsha, who understood Italian, was able to pick up conversations from nearby tables.

“This is a local favorite,” Marsha said. “The couple next to us says they hope more tourists don’t discover it.”

“We’ve been here twice in the last week, and it’s the best little dinner spot we’ve found in Rome,” Tom said. “We’ve had full dinners and two carafes of wine, and never had a bill go over fifty Euros.”

“We had an uneventful flight,” Marsha said. “It was really nice to have a boring start to the trip.”

“Well, dear, the British did intercept a dozen package bombs going to Chicago by way of Brussels,” Danny said. “The Brits found that the packages originated in Yemen and they stopped them cold at Heathrow. Our intelligence guys won’t say what tipped them off, but it appears that the Israelis broke the code used by Islamic radicals.” Marsha suspected that her husband knew a lot more than he was telling. She would do her own research when she got back to the hotel, as Danny knew she would.

Danny knew he had said enough, and didn’t bring any other details to the dinner table. He saw no sense in scaring the wife of the new guy.

Danny ordered the homemade spinach ravioli, while Marsha decided on linguini with clam sauce. Tom and Joyce both had lasagna. They followed the waiter’s recommendation of the house red wine.

Tom’s conversation at dinner revealed that he’d had a career rich with the proper background for a B & P operative, and that he was

well suited for the *Seven Seas Company* security team.

Danny and Marsha toured Vatican City for three days, along with some of the other historic highlights of Rome. They were soon ready to return to the newly-refurbished queen of the seas, the *Sea Empress*.

The Mercedes van arrived at the cruise terminal with Tom and Joyce. A hotel bellman loaded the bags Marsha had brought with them; she had sent their other bags directly to the ship. Joyce had found packing for three months to be fairly easy, given the laundry service on the ship.

As the van turned into the port at Civettichia, about forty-five miles from Rome, the ship came into view.

The results of the second refurbishment in two years for the multi-million dollar vessel were stunning. Not a bit of the damage inflicted to the aft end of the ship was visible, and the improvements included a row of aft balcony staterooms going up eight decks.

Danny and Marsha were shown to their suite. Tom and Joyce began to tour the ship, which would leave port for the Mediterranean prior to the trans-Atlantic crossing.

Seven Seas CEO Henry Boston had turned the *Sea Empress* into the flagship of the *Seven Seas Company*, including all of the latest technology available into every aspect of the sailing experience. Passengers could order tours, wine, room service, or movies on large flat screens in their staterooms, or watch shows and activities they missed while busy in the casino, pool, or spa. A Remembrance Chapel was dedicated to those seventy souls who had died in the attack off Antigua. Their names were listed on a plaque.

After Antigua, the ship's return to the fleet was not only a high priority for the company, but also for the United States president, whose brother had been on the ship when it was attacked.

Actor Leopold Bryan was back for the inaugural cruise of the refurbished ship. He felt the terrorists needed to be shown that the United States was not going to bow to those who wished to break the nation and hurt its people. Leopold had transformed from a Broadway and B movie has-been to a top-dollar performer able to command a

high tab for an appearance, plus his choice of movie roles. For the next three months, he was booked as the star of the ship's production of the musical *Chicago*.

One month after Queen Elizabeth had christened Cunard Lines' *Queen Elizabeth* at Southampton, President John Hanson Bryan was going to be on hand to rededicate the *Sea Empress* when she arrived in Fort Lauderdale.

"We've had everyone on the passenger list and all of the crew and staff scrutinized by our best teams and the Secret Service," Black & Perkins president Kevin Clinton said on the phone to Danny. "You will find their report in your suite."

"I wasn't expecting a vacation," Danny said. "I'm anxious to get to work. When will you get here? I know you wouldn't miss this show."

"I'll meet you in the Canary Islands and finish the crossing with you," Clinton said.

Chapter 2

Days later, a van pulled up in front of the Manhattan Café in Tenerife as Danny and Marsha enjoyed a cheese tray and a round of Dorados, a local beer. Clinton got out of the van, and the driver continued on to the ship with his luggage.

“I understand you had a tough time in Barcelona,” Clinton said, joining them at their table. “With the president meeting the King of Spain and the Pope at the Royal Palace in Seville the day after the cathedral dedication, it looks like security forces really got a workout.”

“It was nice for us to be on the sidelines,” Danny said. “We made sure our folks got as close as they could to the tourist sites and safely back to the ship, but I have to admit it got a little dicey with that grandmother.”

Every security officer’s worst nightmare took place in Barcelona when a five-foot, two-inch grandmother, a rotund woman of about sixty, showed up for the cathedral ceremonies and the Pope’s arrival.

The sidewalks across from the cathedral entrance were closed, but the balconies over them had been rented out for large sums of money. Spanish security officials didn’t want to cross swords with the owners of the building, who profited from selling choice views of the Pope.

The grandmother, packed with explosives around her ample waist, was intended to be a surprise for the Pontiff.

Just as the woman was about to enter one of the apartment balconies, an alert Spanish police officer decided to pat her down. Her indignant cries failed to stop him, and the cop had only a split second to grab the first wire he saw, defusing the belt of bombs before she could pull the trigger wire.

The woman was wrestled to the ground, stripped of all her clothing, wrapped in a tarp, and hustled out to a loading dock behind the building, screaming, “Allah is great!” all the way.

As she had never made it into the apartment overlooking the cathedral, there was never any interruption to the ceremonies.

“Well, I have to let you in on a little secret,” Clinton said. “Just after we leave this port, we will take on a new group of passengers.”

“Are we stopping at one of the other Canary Islands?” Danny asked.

“Nope,” Kevin said. “Leopold’s brother is going to arrive by barge. The president left Barcelona and took a decoy flight to the USS New York. The New York has shadowed the Sea Empress since she left Cadiz, and is about three miles from us now. The world thinks the president flew back to Andrews Air Force Base and is at Camp David for vacation, but he is enjoying a holiday at sea.”

“Wow, how are we going to sneak him aboard? We can’t let the passengers know he is here, they’ll broadcast to the world that the president is on a cruise,” said Danny.

“The White House has it all planned,” said Kevin. “As deputized U.S. Marshals, we are an important part of the president’s security.

“We have had a story formulated to conform to the White House plans. The ship had a row of suites on the top deck that have been vacant since leaving Rome. That is where the president and his family and security teams will be housed,” Kevin said. “We have brought a set of White House staff to serve the president and he will be included in the Aqua class. All of the aides, Secret Service, and staff will be dressed in typical passenger garb. The president intends to masquerade as a regular passenger. The electronics on the ship will be under the control of the National Security Agency, so communications will all be one way – open coming in and restricted going out. Once a ship leaves the port of call and turns on its sea system, phone reception and internet access are usually hit and miss, anyway.”

“You mean to say that no one will be able to call out or send email or videos or photos from the ship?” Danny asked.

“Yep.”

“Wow, we are going to have a bunch of pissed off people – especially the Republicans.”

“The brains in the White House anticipated that,” Kevin said, “And the president is going to meet with the passengers in two

gatherings in the theatre, according to their seating times for dinner, to apologize for impacting their cruise. The Seven Seas Company is going to offer each passenger fifty percent off their next cruise, and all passengers who wish will be able to get a complimentary photo with the president on Wednesday. How does all that sound?"

"Well, most everyone will like it. The Republicans can use the photos on their dart boards, and the Democrats can frame the picture in their living rooms. Everyone wins," Danny said.

"As a retired Secret Service agent, enjoying fine parmesan cheese in the Canary Islands, at a curiously named café on my third bottle of Dorado, may I venture an opinion?" Marsha asked.

"Sure, Marsha. You know that the president, Henry Boston, and I all value your opinion," Kevin said, curious.

"Who came up with this cheesy plan?" Marsha asked. "We are going to keep the lid on a presidential visit simply by asking 4,000 passengers and crew to keep it secret?"

"You don't think it will work?" Danny asked.

"Come on, guys. The president had one damn secret trip on my watch, when he went to Iraq at Thanksgiving to see the troops," Marsha said. "That was a miracle and we only had to trust six reporters. Of course, that may have been more difficult than trusting four thousand passengers and crew, so perhaps this plan does have a chance. The press really thinks the president is at Camp David?"

"Yep, they are camped out in Maryland with satellite trucks. Tell me how to make this plan work," Clinton said. "We leave port in an hour and its time to get to the ship."

"Okay, I'll meet you in our security office on board," Marsha said. "Come, dear, we can share Clinton's van. As much as I would like the extra walk, we have a few things to check out on the ship."

In the security office, which contained navigational charts showing the Atlantic Ocean from Africa to Fort Lauderdale, there was a direct video link to the White House situation room and another to the Joint Chiefs at the Pentagon. Seven military and Secret Service staffers were already in the office when Marsha and Danny entered.

The most innovative vacation ever attempted by the leader of the free world was underway, and the Sea Empress was the backdrop.

Chapter 3

The *Sea Empress* sounded blasts to signal its departure from Tenerife in the Canary Islands. The ship pulled away from the harbor entrance, the pilot boat came alongside the starboard side, and without the ship losing any speed, the pilot crossed from the boarding platform on the deck 2 over to the bow of the pilot boat, which then took the pilot back to the terminal.

As the *Sea Empress* glided out of the busy port, a Fred Olsen ocean-going ferry swept in. With passengers from among the more than seven hundred thousand inhabitants on the chain of islands, the ferry made trips several times daily.

The passengers, glad to leave the chilly Mediterranean, were making the most of the wonderful November weather. When the cruise had departed Rome, it was only fifty degrees; their stop in Livorno found the typical bad weather common for that region – rainy and gusty. Most of the passengers had stayed on the ship rather than take tours to Florence or Pisa.

When the *Sea Empress* stopped at Cannes, the second stop in the ship's itinerary, the weather had made a big improvement. By the time they got to Barcelona, a typical day saw crisp mornings and warm afternoons – great weather for touring the landmarks of Spain.

The *Sea Empress*, along with about two dozen other large cruise ships, would make the Atlantic crossing from mid-October through the first part of December. During the winter, the Caribbean market was flush with vacationers wishing to leave the cold and snow of North America.

The ship settled into a steady pace as sundown approached, while passengers enjoyed the view off the port side of the large ship.

The next island which came into view was as foreboding as Tenerife was attractive. If the near side of the island was inhabited, it didn't show. All that was visible to the ship's passengers were a series

of mountain peaks which closely resembled the island used in the filming of the original King Kong movie from the 1930s.

The *Sea Empress* continued on, and passed a much more welcoming island, with lights illuminating a village spreading up the side of the hill overlooking a harbor.

As the Canaries, Spanish territories, were probably best remembered for a tragic collision on the runway between two 747s in the 1980s, the plan of the day on the *Sea Empress* instead focused on the the island chain as being home to the tallest mountain peak in Spain.

While the passengers shared their experiences and rested their weary bones from walking tours of landmarks, wineries and museums on Tenerife, the Black & Perkins team sat down with the presidential security teams.

It was going to be one of the most difficult tasks the private security firm would face. For the presidential protection group, on the other hand, it was just another trip. In fact, the Secret Service agents began to count up the advantages.

They had a captured audience, pre-screening access to every passenger, and security screenings and metal detectors comparable to those at an airport for anyone boarding the ship. The heightened security settings had detected many bottles of wine being brought aboard, and the security staff had orders to let them through, in the interest of keeping the passengers happy. The usual process was to keep any alcohol brought aboard to be returned to the passengers the night before they disembarked. Some lines carried their policies out to the letter, while others had liberal or no enforcement.

As the security teams met to go over preliminary data, they shared information about the passengers.

The lineup included retired teachers, local government officials, a husband and wife who both worked for the IRS in Chicago, and a Florida EMT and her husband. One passenger was a Wall Street banker standing trial for securities fraud, who had been given permission by a judge to attend his daughter's wedding in Rome. He was safely back on the ship and headed to the states for trial.

A union leader on the lam after embezzling a quarter of a million dollars in Washington, D.C. was on board. She would be allowed to

enjoy the rest of the cruise, but would be escorted off the ship by police in Fort Lauderdale.

A member of Congress was on vacation with his wife and, remarkably, had paid for his vacation himself. He was a conservative Republican from Maryland, and had just won reelection after first being elected two years earlier.

The list went on and on. It would take hours for the team to group them by interest and risk.

After they devoured a tray of sandwiches and pizza, the group came up with a short list of a dozen persons of interest.

A Saudi national traveling with a student visa was accompanying his parents on the Atlantic crossing. His background check revealed he had spent time in Yemen and Somalia. His father worked with a Saudi company and had an apartment in New York City. Since he was only twenty-two, Mohammed Hussein hadn't left much of a trail for Homeland Security to follow. Hussein was at the top of the danger list on board the Sea Empress. He would be at the head of the class once he arrived in the U. S., as well.

The next person of interest was a former college professor who had ties to the Weather Underground. Dr. James Rosen, a professor emeritus at St. John's College, Maryland, had been part of a group that set off bombs in downtown D.C., the Pentagon, and a police station in Baltimore in 1973. Dr. Rosen was initially charged, but prosecutors dropped those charges because they didn't have enough evidence to convict him. James Rosen had been lucky – his six co-conspirators were sent to prison for twenty-five years. He spent the next thirty-five years on the public payroll teaching English, and all of his contacts were being scrutinized to see if he still had friends like he did back in the early seventies.

"We can continue to go down this list, but how about the security of the ship itself?" Danny asked.

"There was a full underwater sweep by an Israeli dive team employed by the cruise line," Clinton answered. "Before we left the port, a Navy seal team did a thorough second sweep of the underside of the ship, and then swept the harbor with a mini sub to make sure there were no underwater bad guys waiting for security to finish."

“We have the aircraft carrier *USS George H. W. Bush* following us about seven miles away – just out of sight over the horizon, but in position to control the area for five hundred miles,” said Admiral Huey Watson, the lead representative for the Commander of the U.S. Navy’s Atlantic Fleet. “In addition, there are four submarines shadowing our transit. Included with the carrier is an amphib with a detachment of eight hundred marines and six helicopters ready to respond to anything. The *USS New York* has another eight hundred Marines and half a dozen helicopters.”

At this point the communications liaison officer, Lt. Cmdr. Tom Ridgeley, reported to the security office on the *Sea Empress* that the *USS New York* had launched the admiral’s barge with the president onboard, and they should pull alongside in about fifteen minutes. The *Sea Empress* would not slow down and the transfer of the presidential party would take about five minutes.

Chapter 4

“This is your captain speaking. We are experiencing moderate seas with a gentle wind of about ten knots from the East, and we are three hundred twenty-six miles west of the Canary Islands.” The captain’s daily report was broadcast to the passengers at noon. “I have the honor of making a special announcement to you. The *Sea Empress* will be hosting the president of the United States for the remainder of our trip. The president and first lady are joined by one of their sons, his wife, and their two children, as well as some of the president’s staff. In the interest of security, you will find that all internet and cell phone communications are restricted during the remainder of the cruise. You will find a letter in your staterooms offering a special accommodation for each of you from the Seven Seas Company to mitigate this inconvenience. Those who choose to take advantage of the offer may book any future cruise at fifty percent off the ticket price. Those who wish to meet the president may do so tomorrow and Wednesday in the *Sea Empress* Theatre at one o’clock p.m. President Bryan will be available for photos. Those with early seating may meet with the president on Tuesday, and those with select and late seating, on Wednesday.”

“Wow, did you hear that?” Ben Mayflower said to his wife Faustina as they sat on their balcony.

“I did, but I swear this must be some sort of joke. Is there an international joke line we crossed, kind of like April Fool’s Day?” Faustina asked.

“The president asks everyone to treat him like any other passenger. He would like to blend with daily life aboard ship,” the captain continued. “Therefore, expect to see him standing in line behind you for ice cream, drinking next to you at the Martini Bar, or sitting behind you in the theatre. The Secret Service has already cleared everyone to be near the president, so there should be no extra lines or metal detectors to inconvenience you.”

“What a load of crap that was,” Danny said. “What about our dirty dozen, are we supposed to lock them up?”

“They are already on restriction and need an escort to move about the ship,” Agent Sam Austin, head of the president’s detail, replied. “We also have restricted two crew members to the brig. They were wanted on prior charges and they will be turned over to Interpol in Florida.”

After the Captain’s surprise announcement at noon, the ship was buzzing with talk about the visit. A few disgruntled passengers were concerned about not being able to send emails or make phone calls, but the letter sent to each stateroom made it clear that incoming and outgoing emergency messages would be allowed, although monitored to make sure that news of the president’s presence aboard was not revealed.

Most of the passengers were delighted. There was a rush for hair appointments at the spa, and the cosmetic and jewelry stores in the ship’s shopping plaza began to do a land office business. The next two days were going to be formal, as the passengers wanted their photos with the president to be family heirlooms. Many of the men were grumpy over the prospect of dressing up for another formal occasion. A few saw the photo op as a business opportunity, but most men were simply accommodating their wives. The president soon got the word that the passengers had upped the ante on dress, and he would be well advised to dress up as well unless he wanted to tick off the women who didn’t mind in the least showing off their formal attire an extra time.

The one person at the top of his game was the president’s brother, Leopold Bryan. The actor had been a celebrity since he was shot at several times during his first engagement on the *Sea Empress*.

While the ship was being refurbished and repaired, Leopold did two stints on Broadway – a production of *King Lear*, and a revival of *The Phantom of the Opera*. Leopold appeared on all the morning talk shows and all the late night entertainment shows. He was even a guest star on *Saturday Night Live*.

Leopold met with his brother as soon as the president boarded and he was escorted to the presidential suite to see the President.

“Well, Leo, I hope I don’t steal your thunder at the show tonight.” President Bryan laughed.

“Jack, I have been used to playing second fiddle to you for a long time, so I am just glad to have you show up for a performance. It’s been a long time since you were in the audience.”

“I would have come to see you in *The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*,” President Bryan said, “but I sure as hell wasn’t going to go to a play at Ford’s Theatre – It’s not exactly a lucky place for American presidents.”

Chapter 5

The FBI and the Secret Service discovered that Mohammed Hussein had spent time in Al Qaida training camps in Yemen and Somalia, and confined him to his cabin for the balance of the Atlantic crossing. There was a guard at his door, and room service brought him meals. Once he got to Florida, he would be imprisoned at Guantanamo or deported, depending on whether another country would take him.

Hussein's laptop, iPad, and cell phone had all been seized by the Secret Service. His records of emails, websites and phone calls gave them a virtual treasure trove of information on the young and radical Islamic terrorist.

President Bryan, the number one target of half the world, strolled around as if he were on a lark, while Hussein stewed in his cabin, unable to do anything about it.

After the first day, Hussein developed a plan to escape. The room service attendant who brought in his meals was a young Turkish waiter of the same size and hair color as Hussein. At dinnertime, as the door closed behind the waiter, Hussein quickly clasped a hand towel over the young man's head and slipped a butter knife into his temple. The struggling waiter slumped downward, and Hussein slid him into the bathroom and stripped off his jacket. He left the cabin, nodding to the guard who sat on a chair next to the door. The Yemeni lessons in quick kills had prepared Hussein well, and he headed to the crew quarters.

Hussein slipped out of the waiter's jacket and went to the large buffet on deck fourteen of the Sea Empress. Picking up some dinner and a cup of juice, he went over to a corner table. He slipped the bread knife out of the napkin and into his pants pocket. He put the fork into another pocket and ate while he considered his options.

It took two hours for anyone to miss the young Turkish waiter. The ship's staff notified the Black & Perkins team, who called in the Secret Service.

The computerized listing of room service deliveries showed that Hussein's cabin was the last completed delivery of the waiter. Secret Service found his body in the bathroom, Hussein loose on the ship.

President Bryan and his detail were walking into the Sea Empress Theatre for the night's show with Leopold. Hussein bounded from a shadow, slashing with his butter knife.

Secret Service Agent Austin saw Hussein flying toward the president and nailed him in the groin with a kick, leaving the would-be assassin lying in the middle of the floor, bent over in pain. The butter knife had flown out of Hussein's hand and hit the president in the ear, causing a minor cut.

Austin quickly called for assistance on the radio concealed in his sleeve, and the president moved to a nearby chair. His doctor soon arrived and applied a Band-Aid to the edge of the top of his ear. The president was in fine condition and immediately proceeded to his seat in the center of the sixth row from the stage.

An evidence assessment team, including Danny and Marsha, quickly wrapped up the scene. Hussein would be kept in shackles in the brig and fed morsels for the rest of the trip. The agent who stood guard outside Hussein's cabin while the waiter was being killed would soon be tracking counterfeiters in Des Moines.

President Bryan excused himself as he entered his row, and the audience of mostly Americans, with a few Europeans and Canadians, stood and gave him an ovation. A spotlight pinpointed the president, just in case anyone hadn't noticed him — not exactly what the president had in mind.

Elaine Gray of Atlanta sat between her husband, Alan, and the president.

"What happened to your ear, Mr. President?" Elaine asked.

"I had a close brush with a butter knife," the president said, still rather stunned. "I'm sure my brother will think I was trying to upstage him, but I promise you, that wasn't my intent."

Chapter 6

The Black and Perkins security team sat in their office while the president attended the evening's show. The first reports of the extent of Hussein's involvement with terrorist groups and planned attacks on U. S. targets were now available. It was clear that he was planning numerous Christmas season attacks in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Danny, Marsha and Kevin Clinton led the staff update.

"We are all stunned at the velocity of this newest incident – from escape to a close encounter with the president within two hours," Clinton said. "We have a federal responsibility to assist the Secret Service, and we have failed to do our jobs. We didn't prevent the attack, but Agent Austin prevented it from being mortal. That was a good thing, but we had this guy in custody after identifying him as a target, and he was still able to get near the president. I would say that was a bad day, and it shouldn't have happened."

Marsha nodded in agreement. She told the assembled B & P agents, Secret Service, and military intelligence that, as a long-time agent, she had seen few penetrations of the inner defense lines, and this was one of the worst.

While the group worked on their security plans, a Navy launch came alongside the ship and deposited an additional half-dozen Secret Service agents who immediately dispersed to the cabins of those under guard.

The meeting broke up, and portions of the group went to get some sleep, while an overnight shift kept vigilance.

Marsha and Danny went to their veranda stateroom, where Danny pulled a bottle of wine out of the refrigerator, uncorked it, and joined Marsha on the balcony. The warm breeze off of the Atlantic was soothing, and the air was warmer than inside the ship.

"What in the world is wrong with so many of these sociopaths that, given an opportunity to get within striking distance of the president, they want to take him out?" Marsha asked.

“You want me to explain these lunatics?” Danny asked. “After thirty years of tracking killers and locking up wife-beaters and child molesters, you expect some sort of reasonable explanation as to what makes these sick bastards tick?”

“I guess not. But here we are, retired, trying to enjoy our first cruise, and you get us into this. It’s just like being back at work in the Secret Service. The only thing that’s changed is that we’re working together, and I’m not halfway around the world while you chase dirt bags in Maryland.”

“Well, they’re still dirt bags, and we are still seeing the world – while dining out every night. You don’t have to put up with my culinary masterpieces, chiefly macaroni and cheese. This Cabernet is a California wine, not too tart and it’s strong, which makes me drink it slower,” Danny said. “Our sommelier in the main dining room recommended it when we got on the ship in Rome, and I asked our butler to stock it in our refrigerator.”

“Well, I will take another glass, and then I am going to set our wakeup call for six o’clock,” Marsha said. “I realize we’re living in exciting times, but sometimes I wonder what it would have been like to simply follow the routine of other passengers on our first cruise. I could lay out by the pool and read the latest thriller on my Kindle – you know, the book by that Maryland author who lives down our way. I know it’s really pulp fiction and pure escapism, but spending the afternoons reading, taking naps, and then getting dressed for an evening of dining, dancing, and pulling slot machine handles seems like a lot of fun.”

“Clancy’s last book seemed a little wild, but, heck, look at everything that’s happened to us,” Danny said. “It makes the book seem kind of possible.”

“Our net worth went up last year, so long as we can keep those yahoos in Congress from finding a way to take it from us,” Marsha said. “I don’t like it when our money is ripped away from us to spread around to others who won’t or don’t work.”

“If you think too much about these things you will get worry lines on your beautiful face. Just have another glass of wine and then we can slip beneath the covers for some blissful slumber.”

“I hope that’s all you are expecting, dear.”

Danny poured them each another glass of wine and hoped for the best.

Chapter 7

On the fourth day of the crossing, the weather turned stormy. An unusual front had peeled off the east coast of the United States and plunged downward, pushing high seas and strong winds into the path of the *Sea Empress*. The captain announced to the passengers that he was going to divert to a more southerly route, one that would take the ship into the strait between the Bahamas and Cuba.

The next day and a half saw moderate to heavy seas, but, for the most part, the ship avoided the unusual fall storm. By the evening of the fifth day, the weather broke. The passengers were getting bored with the president and his party, and were crowding the upper pool decks, shows, and casino. Leopold's shows were sold out every night, and those who wanted to attend had to place an order for a ticket over the interactive televisions in their staterooms. The dining room's menus were astounding, and the meals were the talk of the ship. Cruise veterans attributed the high quality of the food to the presence of their important guest.

By the time the ship neared Cuba, the oddest weather event in living memory took place. A late fall hurricane off the coast of Florida developed out of the storm system that swooped down from the U. S. mainland, instead of following the usual path of storms that roll off the coast of Africa. The captain called the ship's security office and gave the news to the presidential security team, but the White House situation room had even worse news for the *Sea Empress*. Another tropical storm had formed south of Cuba and was picking up steam with amazing force. The National Hurricane Service expected the two systems to unite into a powerhouse storm, perhaps reaching Category 5 within two days.

When the winds reached gale force, the Pentagon weather team had but one recommendation for the captain of the *Sea Empress*: to seek shelter immediately in Havana, in Fidel Castro's communist Cuba.

Danny and Marsha arrived at the security office just after breakfast. When they saw the looks on the faces of the assembled staff, they knew there was new trouble.

"It is serious trouble. Two big storms are swirling toward us, and there is no way to reach Florida in time. We need to duck into a safe port," Clinton said, "and you will never guess where that port is located."

"Where?" Marsha asked. "And don't tell me Havana."

"Okay, I won't tell you."

"We can't dock at our own Navy base in Guantanamo?" Danny asked.

"Nope, wrong side of the island," Clinton responded. "We won't have time to get there, or San Juan, or even Haiti. We have to haul for Havana, and we will barely make it there in time. Going back where we came from isn't in the cards as we would run low on fuel."

"The State Department is working with Canada to iron out the details, but as you know, no one, not even the Secretary of State, knows that the president is on this ship," David Jenkins, the White House Chief of Staff, said.

"Are you going to let the cat out of the bag?" Clinton asked.

"We will have to decide," Jenkins said. "We can't jeopardize the president's safety by taking him to Cuba, but we can go to Cuba. There is plenty of precedent for rescues at sea and weather events. This wouldn't be the first time a cruise ship had to duck into the Havana harbor to miss a storm. Even though it violates the embargo on trade with Cuba, exceptions can be granted by the State Department in times of emergencies."

Within an hour, the storm clouds grew black and the seas even rougher. There were no other options.

"Can't we get the president onto a submarine?" Danny asked.

"Nope," Admiral Watson said. "The sea could smash the sub or launch against the ship, and the wind is too strong to risk a transfer by helicopter."

"The Cuban Government has told Seven Seas that the entrance fee to their harbor is half a million dollars, and needs to be wired to their account prior to entering the harbor," Clinton said. "Henry Boston says the fee will be paid in about twenty minutes. The Seven Seas office should have all clearances completed within the hour. We told them to hurry up as the weather is degrading."

From the navigational bridge, the captain viewed all of the electronic tools that let him know the ship's precise position and speed, along with the sonar that confirmed water depth and the positions of other ships. The crew of the Sea Empress had already lashed down or removed all outside furnishings to prevent loss or damage. The ship's doctor advised each passenger to fill up on saltines to protect against seasickness. Many passengers had seasickness patches behind their ears, while others sought a shot from the doctor.

In the presidential suite, the national security advisor, the president, and the joint chiefs were on the secure phone. The joint chiefs knew the president was not at Camp David, but on a cruise ship ready to enter a harbor in the control of the Castro regime with only a dozen Secret Servicemen, two military advisors, and three U. S. Marshals. The U. S. carrier group had orders to back off and skirt the storm, while the subs remained close, all of them equipped with Patriot missiles capable of reducing Havana to ashes.

"This could have been the advent of a new dawn of international relations," Secretary of State Warren Tydings said. "The president of the United States is entering the Havana harbor and will remain in Cuban waters for up to forty-eight hours, and no one except us anywhere in the world knows. I say we should take this unexpected opportunity to have the president invite Castro to the ship and offer to alter the trade embargo."

"There is no time to plan such a move. It would look as though we formulate foreign policy as we wake up each day – as though we were playing pickup sticks," National Security Advisor Colonel Durwood Fowler said.

"We are risking the president's capture," Marine General Joseph Kachmar said. "I think this is a big mistake. We should let the Marines at Gitmo launch a rescue and snatch the president off the ship before it enters Cuban waters."

"I'm afraid I agree with Colonel Fowler," President Bryan said. "I would just as soon we weather the storm with no one the wiser and continue the trip to Florida. The passengers will love talking to all the TV cameras when we get back, and someone on board will be publishing a book about all this within a month."

At fifty-two, President John Hanson Bryan was as tech savvy a president as had ever held office. He knew the lid couldn't be kept on his presence for long. Certainly by the time the ship reached Port Everglades, there would be an outflow of information from the ship's passengers. President Bryan had known he was taking certain risks with the adventure, but he had not counted on an assassination attempt and a forced stop in Cuba. He had come to understand why every president up to and including Kennedy had a presidential yacht to cruise on the Potomac and Chesapeake Bay. Nixon ordered the presidential yacht sold after Texan LBJ had shown no interest in sailing.

Aside from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's meeting with Churchill and Stalin on a battleship during WWII, there were no records of a president joining three thousand passengers on a ship. It had sounded rather benign to begin with, but the trip turned out to hold serious consequences.

The president stood on his balcony looking out the window as the *Sea Empress* entered the Havana harbor and proceeded to Pier Three.

Chapter 8

Admiral Watson had hoped to retire last year, but Jenkins, the Chief of Staff, and General Kachmar, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, had prevailed upon him to remain the White House military liaison for another year. The last Democrat in the Oval Office, Bill Clinton, had horrible relations with the military, and Jenkins was intent on having the military treated with respect. It took but three months for Jenkins to fire the first White House staffer for being obnoxious toward a naval officer. The incident was covered on Fox News, and the Pentagon began to hold the administration in higher regard.

The *Sea Empress's* weather reports and military communications were as yet undetected by the Cuban government, but Admiral Watson worried that passengers or crew would break the veil of secrecy. The military's ability to control communications was absolute at sea, but once the *Sea Empress* came into port, the situation changed.

However, the *USS New York* had two very useful capabilities, and General Kachmar ordered the two accessories to be employed immediately. First, the *New York* threw up an electromagnetic screen which killed all radio communications other than those of the *Sea Empress*. The Cuban government blamed the loss of communications on the storm. The other unique, top secret technology was the ability of the *USS New York* to cover itself with a stealth blanket to conceal itself from view, as well as disrupt radar and sonar to prevent tracking.

Chapter 9

“This is your captain speaking from the navigational bridge,” Captain Constantinople said. “We are now in the quiet waters of Havana, Cuba, where we will dock and take on fuel. No one may leave the ship. This is an emergency stop due to an immense weather system that makes a trip back to Fort Lauderdale dangerous. I urge all passengers to take part in our on-board activities and entertainment. The ship will be offering free wine and champagne at all bars from four to six this evening. The cruise director will be available to give you an update on all ship activities, or you may check channel two on the television in your stateroom. I know many of you were looking forward to contacting family, but we can assure you that authorities have contacted the media to let all those who have friends and family on board know that the *Sea Empress* is safe.”

The rain beat down on the *Sea Empress* as a fuel tender came alongside the docked ship. A few Cuban officials conferred with the captain at the gangplank, but none boarded. After checking the ship’s papers, the officials were happy to head back to the safety of their van as lightning flashed and the wind nearly blew them off the pier.

At the moment, the *Sea Empress* was safe from the storm, and the *USS New York* would keep the Cubans from being alerted by passengers that the president was on board.

The huge cruise ship loomed over the dark harbor, which had lost power due to the storm. The contrast between the well-lit *Sea Empress* and the darkened windows of the city which swept down the hillsides to the port was stark. The bleak day turned to night, and the *Sea Empress* blazed with lights – the shining city on the hill, surrounded by the dreary and darkened capital.

The feeble Cuban leader sat in his palace at the top of a hill overlooking the harbor and stared at the *Sea Empress*. Told that it hosted over four thousand passengers and crew, Castro wondered what the per capita spending was every time the ship docked in a Caribbean port.

“We should be able to have that trade. Why do the Americans keep punishing my people?” Castro said.

As Castro talked, Marsha thought of a Cuban couple she had met on the ship and wondered what this detour meant to them.

For Manuel and Gertrudi Orlando, pulling into Havana was more emotional than they could imagine. Manuel had been eighteen years old when he and his mother fled with his three sisters after their father was murdered by Castro. His father had owned a hotel, and resisted the takeover by the Communists. He and many others who owned property were taken into the street and shot dead, no questions asked. Manuel's father was killed in front of his family, who had been upstairs in the owner's quarters of their hotel. They watched in horror as the Cuban dictator's soldiers executed him.

The Orlandos were deathly afraid that Cuban agents would storm the cruise ship and seize them and other Cuban-Americans.

It had been easy to transfer the property of Cuban citizens to the State with bullets.

Every time that Orlando heard politicians mouthing off about opening trade with Castro, he felt a shiver run down his spine. What about accountability to families who had suffered like his? Would his father be brought back to life? Jews were successfully acquiring property stolen by the Nazis and confiscated by Allied forces at the end of WWII – Orlando wondered if there ever would be any reparations for Cubans as part of the end of the trade embargo. He didn't have much hope, and, looking out from his stateroom window at the rain swept Cuba, he wanted to leave Havana as quickly as possible.

Chapter 10

"The worst of the storm passed overnight," Captain Constantinople said in his morning report.

"We expect to set sail at one in the afternoon, and we hope to arrive in Fort Lauderdale by six in the evening."

A waiter set a tray down on the dining table in Danny and Marsha's suite, and Danny began to sort through the breakfast items. This was often his favorite time of the day. Danny tried a curious rendition of Eggs Benedict, with green sauce on the eggs. Later, he

learned it was a Mexican version with guacamole sauce. He also had Belgian waffles, French toast and a big onion bagel with lox and cream.

At ten o'clock in the morning, the security crew received bad news. The Cuban president wanted to board the ship.

"Absolutely not," the White House Chief of Staff said. There was no way in hell that he would allow the president would be on the same ship with Castro a year before mid-term elections.

"The Cuban Government says that El Presidente has learned that the president's brother is on the ship. He intends to welcome such a notable person himself, as no one of such high station has ever before visited from the United States," Clinton said.

"Tell those morons to go to hell," Jenkins said. "We can't let him on the ship. That's final."

"Mr. Jenkins, perhaps we can allow Leopold to go ashore to meet with Castro," Admiral Watson said.

"Admiral, what if they don't want to give him back? Then what?" Jenkins asked.

"If they get to know him, they will give him back," Marsha said. "Really, it's a lot better to let Leopold go ashore, so long as he keeps his mouth shut about his brother."

"Isn't today Friday the thirteenth?" Danny asked.

"Don't bring it up, dear," Marsha said. "We can't believe that all these things going wrong have anything to do with superstition."

"I suppose this is all good luck?" Danny said.

"Maybe Marsha has something there. We would never be able to get all the people on this ship to keep President Bryan's presence secret. If we send someone who can handle Leopold, it would be a lot less risky. How about you, Marsha, will you go?", asked Jenkins.

"Sure, I haven't been to Cuba before – at least not officially," Marsha said.

The Cubans were told that the President's brother would be pleased to meet with Castro, but in his palace. The cruise ship was not a worthy place for the brother of the American president to meet the Cuban president.

Marsha accompanied Leopold down the gangplank to the dock, where a Cuban honor guard saluted them as they walked to a waiting limousine.

The weather was clearing. The limo whisked them to the presidential palace. Traffic lights were still out due to the power failures, and the three block trip was marked by blaring horns from a parade of 1950s vintage American autos and trucks.

As Leopold and Marsha got out of the limo at the palace, no one other than the Cuban President himself greeted them and escorted them into his grand reception hall. They were seated and offered cigars and brandy. They engaged in greetings with the aide of an interpreter.

"I would like you to tell your brother that continuing the trade embargo against my nation," Castro said, getting right to the point, "is keeping us from changing our relations."

"You have to understand that, while I will be happy to relay your concern to my brother, being related to the president isn't that important in my country. He has a Cabinet and a Congress, and I am just an actor," Leopold replied.

"Yes, your Excellency, I know. But you are an imposing actor and a legend around the world," Castro said. "I know that you have no official position in the government, but you can obtain the president's ear."

"May I tell him what reforms you intend to make to bring about an end to the trade embargo?" Leopold asked.

Good God, Marsha thought. *We have ground-breaking foreign policy being negotiated by two nitwits.* Not prepared for policy to be at the center of their social visit, Marsha interrupted the little summit.

"Perhaps we can take a letter to President Bryan," Marsha said.

"I have prepared such a letter already," Castro said. "It is time for our nations to be friendly, and it's time for there to be four or five cruise ships in our harbor every day. We are broke, and I will have to fire government workers. Tourists could save my country."

"Thank you for your time, El Presidente," said Marsha, "but now we must go. The weather has cleared and we have a lot of passengers on the ship who have to meet flights and keep appointments. They are thrilled to be here and if we can work things out, you can bet lots

of them will want to visit again. But it wouldn't be good to irritate them by making them miss their flights back in Fort Lauderdale."

"I have also prepared gifts for all your passengers," Castro said. "I have a truck ready to load a bottle of Cuban rum and a cigar for each passenger onto your ship."

"Really, a cigar too?" Leopold asked. "I am sure we can make some headway here."

Marsha wondered how they would ever clear this stuff through customs in Florida, but decided to act grateful.

"Thank you for these thoughtful gifts," Marsha said.

Leopold was more direct.

"If you make reforms, allow freedom of speech, hold elections and institute honest courts, you can expect a big difference. My brother has to deal with the relatives of a lot of people you have murdered, brutalized, and imprisoned," Leopold said.

Marsha was stunned. A has-been actor was upbraiding a Communist dictator in a way no one had done in fifty years. She was expecting to be thrown in leg-irons. Castro just stood still.

"We have had much water go under the bridge," Castro said, finally. "Times are very different now, and my people look to me to help them. What I have been doing has not worked, and it's time that I copy the Chinese to make my nation an economic miracle. If that means making reforms and allowing elections such as Russia has done, so be it. My intention is to let Cuba flourish like other nations in the Caribbean, not to lag behind."

"If you will do these things, I can tell you from what little I know about international relations, that the ship I am on will be allowed to visit many times. I look forward to you visiting as a guest on the ship to see my performance," Leopold said.

"No, Mr. Bryan, you will be my guest here in my palace within the next year," said Castro. "Since I turned over the reins of power to my brother, I can't speak for him, but I am confident of what I say."

Marsha and Leopold were both silent on the drive back to the ship. When they got out of their limo, Marsha turned to Leopold and said, "Sir, you realize I have to give a detailed report to the White House staff of all that was said, and I just want to tell you that you were very brave. He had no idea who was waiting for us on the Sea

Empress or that his government could have been wiped out in about thirty minutes if he made the wrong move. You were great.”

“Hah, my dear, it was just an act. My brother told me what my lines were and I simply recited them,” Leopold said.

Marsha was stunned.

President Bryan had taken advantage of the unexpected visit to Cuba by using his brother to close a horrible chapter in the life of the Cuban nation, and to let a brutal dictator choose a new path which would benefit many before the end of his life.

The USS New York slipped out of the Havana harbor as soon as Marsha and Leopold were aboard the Sea Empress. The cruise ship left the harbor and soon both vessels were in international waters. The New York pulled about five miles ahead of the Sea Empress and then removed the stealth shield.

A Cuban fishing boat, back to work after the storm, was about a mile from the New York. When the ship appeared from nowhere, the fishing boat captain took one look at the warship and grabbed his bottle of rum and threw it overboard.

Chapter 11

The Sea Empress arrived at Fort Lauderdale without the President, who was picked up by a launch from the USS New York about a mile from the port. The evening before, President Bryan had attended his fourth session with the passengers. He met them in the theatre, answered their questions, and posed for photos. Every passenger who wanted to meet and take photos with the President had done so.

Secret Service switched off the secure systems as the Sea Empress neared the port, because the President was no longer on board. A blizzard of emails, phone calls, and photographs were sent to media across the nation and around the world. Soon Fox, CNN and major news operations around the world were displaying photos of President Bryan with passengers on board, and the story of the Sea Empress's refuge in the port of Havana dominated the news.

In the offices of the Cuban president, the Castro brothers turned from their television to look at each other. An aide flicked through the Fox, ABC and BBC channels. None of the news outlets spoke of the visit by Leopold.

"My God," the communist dictator said. "We had the president of the United States in our port and we didn't even know it."

"You can bet that Leopold's words were the words of the president," Fidel said.

Headlines blared the sudden end of Cuban-American confrontations and the end of the economic embargo which had been in place since the Eisenhower Administration. The news channels went berserk with the story. Some of the talking heads said the president was a coward for not visiting with Castro, others condemned him for being on a cruise, and others banded him for taking a trip to a nation which has murdered thousands of its own people.

The White House situation room and the national security group, however, assessed the meeting between Leopold and Fidel to be a breakthrough. President Bryan ordered Secretary Tydings to

immediately appoint an ambassador to Cuba and make arrangements to take over the old American embassy in Havana.

But after a few days the photos and video taken by passengers began to be played over and over on the news, leaving the old-line press harping about whether it was appropriate to open relations with Cuba. The assassination attempt by the radical Muslim was downplayed by the mainstream media.

Danny and Marsha slumped in front of the large flat screen TV in their suite.

“What do you say we stay on the ship for a few weeks? They have a couple of interesting itineraries,” Marsha said.

“We can do anything you want,” Danny said. “How about we order dinner in our suite?”

Danny looked around him at the large suite, equipped with a king size bed, a dining area, a small kitchen, and a hallway leading to their bath suite with an oversize Jacuzzi, and then out to the veranda next to two comfortable lounge chairs. He thought back to the days when the two of them hauled in cinder blocks and boards to create bookshelves, in their low-rent apartment in Langley Park. Now they had a home on the water on the Patuxent River which they seen only once in the past year. They flew on a company Gulfstream, and lived in suites on luxury cruise ships. Once in a while, when getting ready to eat a fantastic meal in his suite, his wife dropped a waiter with a shot between the eyes. All in a day’s work for two career gumshoes.

At least, Danny thought, my wife hasn’t killed anyone on this cruise...yet.

Marsha went into the bathroom to freshen up while Danny ordered dinner.

Franklin, the butler, appeared to take their order.

“Sir, you must consider the Beef Wellington, it’s a great cut and the chef encases the filet with a puff pastry and bakes it. I also recommend the Colorado rack of lamb,” Franklin said.

“Franklin, why don’t you bring us one of each? Put a baked sweet potato on the side for Marsha and let me have a regular potato,” Danny said.

“We will set your table and serve dinner in about twenty minutes,” Franklin said. “Can I suggest a nice bottle of cabernet?”

“Sure, why not — it works for me,” Danny said.

He wasn't sure he wanted to know what the price was for the wine, even though there was no charge. He thought back to their old apartment near the Tick Tock booze emporium in College Park. Once a week he would stop off at the liquor store on the way home from class and buy a bottle of Matusé. The Portuguese rose wine came in a small bottle or a large one – when he had enough money he got the large one.

The budget for a cop in Prince George's County in the early seventies didn't leave too much for luxuries. With Marsha going to school full time, they were living on his salary. He took classes part-time using his VA benefit.

Working hard for thirty years let both of them leave their jobs with pensions. Marsha retired from the Secret Service and Danny from the police department. Both rose to mid-level ranks and became supervisors. Aside from a few hunting trips, vacations at Cape Hatteras, and borrowed cabins in West Virginia, they had never really traveled until Kevin Clinton convinced Danny to take a job with Black & Perkins last year.

That day in St. Martin's, Danny underestimated the work for which he was signing up. It was typical security work – prepare for anything and hope to God nothing happens. As they soon learned, there was plenty of action in store for them on the *Sea Empress*.

There are risks everywhere, Danny thought as he pondered the waves from the balcony.

Danny had known friends on the job who were cut down in a hail of bullets as they worked part time guarding liquor stores, or were shot breaking up fights outside bars. Others were fatally shot or stabbed when responding to domestic fights. Danny's detective partner was killed on the Washington Beltway when a drunken diplomat cut off a tractor-trailer, causing the big rig to slam into the police car.

Compared to the life of a cop, the *Sea Empress* security job had its appeal despite all of the mayhem. Now, the president had joined them for a transatlantic crossing, and they ended up witnessing history. Not bad for a former Marine who grew up in Poolesville,

dodged bullets in Viet Nam, and survived an entire career as a Prince George County cop.

Marsha emerged from the dressing room fresh from her bath, and he was amazed as always at her ability to transform from country casual to dazzling dinner attire in such a short time. She said it was all about being a Secret Service agent — one had to be able to adjust quickly to fit in with any event.

“Dear, you need to shower and get dressed. We are going out after dinner to see the new circus act. I hear they are not to be missed,” Marsha said.

Danny wondered what happened to staying in their suite after dinner to relax, but it was simpler to go along with her ideas.

Franklin made quite an entrance, with three assistants all loaded with fresh flowers, wine, and their meal. A violinist joined them, walking out onto the balcony to play dinner music on the high seas. *Life is good even if it is brief*, Danny thought.

The evening went well after dinner. The ship was full of passengers enjoying the meals, the shows, and the casino. The Sea Empress came out of the shipyard looking like a new ship, with 85 percent of the rooms having ocean views and most of them sporting balconies.

The Seven Seas Company hadn't planned to refit the Sea Empress and was concentrating on their next class of ships, but for Henry Boston, it was a matter of pride to restore the company's flagship to being the true empress of the seas.

Now the Sea Empress had a new itinerary planned: it was to be the first American-owned ship to visit Havana and it was on its way.

Chapter 12

The casino was busy as Danny and Marsha strolled in to try their luck. Women with destiny on their side roamed the aisles of slot machines while men crowded the black jack and Texas hold-em tables. Eight to ten well-dressed women and men were packed around the roulette tables.

“Do you see who I see playing the slots?” Marsha asked.

“Holy cow,” Danny said. “They are with us again.”

Danny and Marsha walked up behind April and Vito playing “Lucky 7” machines. Nearby, Ben and Faustina were pushing buttons on a “Little Green Men” machine.

“Well, we aren’t surprised to see you here,” Faustina said to Danny and Marsha. “I was offered a contract with the ship to perform in Leopold’s new play. He’s doing an adaptation of *Phantom of the Opera* and I couldn’t turn it down. Besides, I would pay Seven Seas Company to let me travel on this gorgeous ship.”

“That’s the way I feel about it...almost,” Danny said.

Vito moved down the row of slots to one marked “Bacardi Rum” and began to roll. He began to hit one win after another, first for thirty-seven dollars and then for seventy-five. He won three more times inside of ten minutes and then hit the jackpot, winning twenty-five hundred quarters and a free bottle of rum.

Faustina and April screamed and laughed as the bell rang on Vito’s machine, and a crowd gathered to watch the machine bang quarters into the tray below.

“Holy cow,” Vito said. “I have never hit a machine for this much money.”

“How much is it?” Faustina asked.

“It’s six hundred and twenty-five dollars,” Vito said, with the sharp mind of a former math and science teacher.

An attendant came up and, when the machine stopped at five hundred quarters, he gave Vito a slip to cash in for the remaining two thousand.

“I am quitting right now,” Vito said. “This is a lot of money to me and I know what I am going to do with it when we get to Cuba.”

“Dear, don’t forget you will have to pay the duty on cigars and rum,” April added.

“Why don’t you put it down on a future cruise?” Faustina asked.

“We have already booked a cruise from Florida to Europe next spring,” April said. “We watched the news coverage of the *Sea Empress* crossing the Atlantic from Rome and we were really excited at the idea, so we are going to do it in reverse.”

“We are going to book it too,” Faustina said. “What about you and Danny, Marsha?”

“We will be with the ship for the next year,” Marsha said. “We made a commitment and I decided, why not? We have done more traveling in the past year than in our whole lives, if you don’t count my Secret Service job. God knows it was never relaxing for me then, and nothing has changed now.”

“Marsha, we pay to go on these exciting trips, but you get paid to go,” Faustina said.

“You are right—and once in a while I get to take out a bad guy, so this isn’t that bad a gig,” Marsha said.

“Since we are the first U.S. ship to visit Cuba, are there any bigwigs on board?” Ben asked, who always liked to be up to date on news.

“You know we can’t tell you, but I know you can keep a secret,” Marsha said, “but you will be informed at the beginning of the show tonight that we have a member of the president’s cabinet aboard.”

“Well, I did see Senator Emily Fountain on board. I remember her from our first trip on the *Sea Empress* when that Rabbi from New Jersey was murdered,” Ben said.

“I read they are going to open up Cuba to civil aviation,” Ben said. “I am filing for permission to fly my plane there. It’s just a short hop from Key West. I hope the paperwork doesn’t get hung up.”

“Don’t worry, Ben, I’ll bet they make it really easy to get a permit. Black & Perkins is bidding on a security contract with the Cubans to handle entrance visas for Americans with private boats and planes. They want the tourists and need the cash, so you can bet it will be easy to get a visa and an aviation permit.”

“I read somewhere that the average tourist on a cruise ship spends one hundred and ten dollars a day in a port, so I guess when

three thousand people get off in Havana it will make the cash registers sing," Ben said.

"My guess is that the average will be higher in Havana, as passengers grab cigars by the box and buy jewelry and rum," Marsha said. "Cuba is lobbying the Bryan administration for duty free status and the Virgin Islanders are trying to block it, as they don't want anyone competing with them. It's all about politics and money."

As the group watched April play a machine with part of Vito's winnings, a B & P agent came up to Danny and asked to speak to him.

"We have a problem. Kevin Clinton wants you, he is waiting for your call," the agent said.

Danny stepped out on the deck just off of the casino and called Clinton, who answered on the second ring.

"The idiot in Venezuela doesn't like the Castro boys making peace with America and is flexing his muscles," Clinton said.

"What is that bozo up to?" Danny asked.

"President Perez is saying he will blockade Cuba just like the U. S. did in 1962 to prevent this 'new invasion' of his communist brethren," said Clinton.

"What kind of crap has this guy been smoking?" asked Danny.

"Perez has announced he has six destroyers and three submarines in his blockade and will stop and board any vessel approaching Havana harbor," said Clinton. "The Cubans are furious and they said this violates all international law and are asking the United Nations Security Council to take immediate action, while Ahmadinejad in Iran says his country and North Korea are joining in with Perez to enforce the 'protective zone' around Cuba."

"Peace can get complicated," Danny said. "So what is President Bryan going to do?"

"He will make an announcement tonight, followed by a televised statement from the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense," Clinton said.

"With Secretary Tydings on board the *Sea Empress*, we will be on live satellite from here," Danny said. "Is there an expectation of what the administration's position will be?"

"Yes. We have a civilian ship with the Secretary of State on board steaming for Havana," Kevin said. "I think the President is going to say

that Perez is interfering in the normalization of relations between the U. S. and Cuba, and that any provocation against American ships will be dealt with quickly.”

“Holy cow,” Danny said. “We are cruising right into the middle of an international confrontation with three thousand civilians on board.”

“Don’t expect the U. S. or Cuba to back down. I guess we’ll be sinking a few Venezuelan ships.”

The news cycle cranked out the demands of Venezuelan dictator Humboldt Perez overnight. The Castro’s were furious with the threats, the Cuban people were angry at the prospect of their long isolation being endangered, and the Cuban American community was concerned about Cuba’s future move from Communism toward capitalism and a free society. Predictably, the left-wing press of America was sympathetic with Perez, and commentators on MSNBC driveled on about how the American takeover of Cuba was going to upset the balance of power.

Other countries weren’t upset. Russia had long ago tired of subsidizing Cuba and was no longer sending money and goods to the regime. China, like Russia, had abandoned their support to the Cubans. Perez had his own economic troubles as he moved his nation toward the communist model, which really had never worked anywhere.

Chapter 13

“Okay girls, my husband won’t go to cha-cha lessons,” Marsha said. “Something new came up, and I haven’t been included yet, so let’s go ahead.”

“My husband says he will come along,” April said. “I don’t know what he’s up to but at least I won’t have to dance with another woman.”

“Faustina, I’ll be the guy and we can dance together,” Marsha said. “Where did they say the lessons were being held?”

The women found their way to the Palladium Night Club. On the stage, a member of the dance troupe adjusted the music system and welcomed the one hundred and fifty or so guests. Most of the students were women. The guys who showed up to learn to dance with their wives were clearly being the object of envy of most of the other women.

The dance instructor and her co-instructor were enthusiastic and authoritative. The young woman was in her early twenties and had been conducting dance classes on the ship for a while. Her partner was always in step with her – both were members of the dance troupe on the ship. After about forty-five minutes, the group began to go to the right, to the left, forward, and backward more or less in unison. The students’ awkwardness was soon replaced by the beginnings of dance legs, mixed in with occasional sea legs as the large ship moved with the sway of the seas.

At the rear of the seating area one terrifically attractive woman, endowed with full and long blonde hair, a slim body with well-formed hips, and a gracious smile finally coaxed her husband up off a lounge seat and onto the dance floor. She was soon guiding her dance partner, a tall fellow with spiked hair. He was quick to catch on to both the dance lessons and the fact that the blonde liked him giving it a try. He sat down for a minute and she began to sway alone with the call of the dance instructor, moving her hips in a gentle roll to the one-two-three chant. The guy watched the woman’s hips roll as if

they were alone in their honeymoon suite. She turned slightly and caught his admiring gaze, whereupon she added some swish to her steps.

The young couple were really enjoying the mid-afternoon dance, and soon the entire class applauded the blonde. She was embarrassed to realize that everyone, including the ship's videographer, had been entertained. Soon, everyone on the ship would be watching this dance through the ship's entertainment system and buying the impromptu routine on a CD available at the end of the cruise.

April and Vito had been doing the cha-cha together for years and had learned from two experts, Vito's first cousin and her husband, who put on a great show at every family wedding. As they left the night club at the end of the dance, they walked near the young couple.

Vito winked at the guy and said: "You will be rewarded handsomely later tonight for your efforts at accompanying your woman to dance lessons — it's something I learned long ago."

The young fellow laughed and so did Vito.

Chapter 14

While the life on board the ship was routine for the passengers and crew, the security office was a bee-hive of activity. It had been designed during the retrofit – when the President had boarded for the trans-Atlantic crossing, the equipment was upgraded even more. It operated in synch with the situation room in the White House. With the Secretary of State, fourth in the line of succession of the Presidency, aboard the ship, the Black and Perkins security team, Secret Service and U. S. Marshals left nothing undone to prepare for threats.

At the Revolution Air Base located on the coast of Venezuela, the chubby president sat down with his Air Force commander and several Syrian, Iranian and North Korean military advisors to plan their blockade of Cuba.

“We need to show these Americanos we mean business,” Perez said. “But what we really need to do is to show OPEC that we can take on America. After that, we will control the price of oil.”

After an hour long session in which Perez confirmed the Sea Empress was located one hundred miles from Havana, he gave the order for his jets to launch when the cruise ship got to twenty miles from Cuba. At four hundred and fifty miles per hour, the Venezuelan planes would be but two hours from the strike point north of Cuban waters. Iranian engineers had equipped all of the Venezuelan planes with GPS technology obtained from various American companies during the previous ten years, in defiance of various American sanctions to prevent such transactions.

The attack was led by a Cuban-trained commander, Major Ivan Soto. His orders were to strafe the cruise ship and to avoid collision, but to scare the ship’s captain into turning back.

President Bryan met with his Joint Chiefs and he gave explicit orders: if any Venezuelan warplane or ship came within fifty miles of the Sea Empress they were to be eliminated. This terse message was sent to the Venezuelan Ambassador and delivered to the president’s palace in Curacaos.

When Perez got the warning from the American president, he looked at his Air Force Chief, General Jonathan Rivera.

“Ha, this makes it all the better. If they shoot down our planes in international waters it will make them the aggressor, not us,” Perez said.

Not one to disagree with the boss, Rivera nodded. The six pilots in the old Russian MIGs were doomed. The attack flight was composed of pilots with limited training. They were taught to use GPS, and they simply set their coordinates for twenty miles north of Havana to coincide with the route of the Sea Empress.

In the Pentagon Special Warfare Section, Lt. Commander Roger Tudor set down his coffee and watched his computer track the Venezuelan planes. He put in a quick call to the JC command center.

“Sir, we have an opportunity here. The Venezuelans are flying old MIGs and they have five-year-old GPS guidance systems. If we hack into the satellite guiding them, we won’t have to shoot them down, we can simply send them out in the Atlantic where they will run out of fuel and just disappear.”

“Do it,” the word came from the Joint Chiefs, and within fifteen minutes the attack squadron was on its way to Africa, never to be seen again. Various radio transmissions between Soto ranged from disgust with the GPS system to confusion, desperation, and finally panic.

After the flight disappeared from radar, President Perez was told that the six planes were missing.

“Ah, those Americans have struck – this is war,” Perez said.

Within fifteen minutes Perez had taken to the airwaves. He quickly learned it was easier to command air waves than it was to command air raids.

Cuba issued its own blast at Perez, suggesting that the prospect of Cuba becoming prosperous was causing jealousy. Cuba took credit for blasting the Venezuelan planes out of the sky when Perez blamed their disappearance on the Americans. The Pentagon made no statement in response.

The White House Press Office gave a terse statement to the press stating that there were no hostile actions involving American forces. The White House did not say was that it was a shame that the Venezuelan pilots were overly dependent on GPS.

The *USS New York* was in stealth mode and escorting the *Sea Empress*. Three U. S. submarines were also within five miles of the cruise liner.

“This is your captain speaking from the navigational bridge,” Captain Constantinople said. “We have confirmation of safe and clear sailing on our way to Havana. The U.S. government has given us a green light to proceed and we are under the protection of both the U.S. and Cuban military. We expect to dock at six in the evening and our port visit will last three days.”

Chapter 15

Marsha Jones entered the security room. Monitors showed live shots of the ship, various news stations, and radar of the entire Caribbean. Danny brought her up to speed on the threat level, and told her that a flight of six Venezuelan planes had veered off course and disappeared in the Atlantic.

“Perez is now claiming that that U. S. and Cuban planes shot down his jets, and that we are at war,” Danny said. “Three subs and the USS New York are escorting us to Cuba. The Cubans said they will handle any attack by the Venezuelan destroyers, which are presently passing the western end of Cuba.”

“So who will hit them first?” Marsha asked. “At this point the Cubans seem pretty happy to take the shot, but who knows if they can bring it off? The blockaders might want to back down, but they can’t hit us from the air. By the time their ships get to the north side of Cuba we will already be in the Havana harbor, and they won’t be able to strike us there.”

“That’s what Clinton says,” Danny said. “I hope he’s right. In any event, we have the prospect of hostile subs here in the Caribbean. Sub-hunting P-3s are on the lookout. Meanwhile, our civilian ship is bait for a bunch of crazies.”

“Now that the news has picked up the story,” the B & P security chief Oliver Ross said as he walked in the door, “can we expect the passengers to panic?”

“Heck no. Given our past trips, these people will likely be asking for guns so they can shoot back,” Marsha said. “They will be ten deep in line at the future cruises desk – this ship will be booked into the next decade.”

As the Perez regime had declared war, the Bryan administration sent a terse message to the Venezuelan government. “Stand down at once. If your ships continue on course toward Cuba they will be sunk within one hour.”

The Cuban government, which had looked forward to the end of the long period of economic and cultural isolation, was furious with Perez. However, Cuba didn't want to be seen to be quarrelling with a long-time ally.

The Risk Assessment Desk at the CIA sent an update to the Situation Room in the White House.

The message was written by Analyst Clare Klear, who had returned to work on a contract basis after retiring to the Caribbean three years earlier.

"If Cuban patrol boats launch torpedoes at the Venezuelan warships, and our subs just happen to launch at the same time, the credit can be given to the Cubans for defending their home waters from the Perez intrusion," Klear wrote.

Her assessment quickly gained acceptance from the Joint Chiefs and the NSA chief. The scenario was the best anyone could hope for under the circumstances. As each of the Venezuelan destroyers came around the western-most point of Cuba and headed toward the capital, steaming through new oil fields leased out by the Communist regime, each ship exploded with fireworks. Their sudden and final end was captured on video and broadcast on Cuban television, then picked up by news networks throughout the world.

The *Sea Empress* plowed through the moderate seas and entered the Havana harbor surrounded by a fleet of patrol craft, fireboats streaming large plumes of water in the air, and a flyover by a team of Cuban military jets. She glided to a gleaming pier on where a brass band was playing in a long tent, with a chorus of school children holding flowers. The Secretary of State was the first to alight from the gangplank, and was met by none other than the old Cuban dictator himself. The press, contained in a nearby roped-off area, strained for the best vantage points for video and photos.

After the ceremonies marking the first sanctioned visit by an American cruise ship were concluded, the passengers began meeting tour buses and taxis, and walking toward the downtown area. A few dozen miles from the harbor, a grim task was underway. Cuban patrol boats were fishing survivors and body parts from the debris field left by the six Venezuelan ships. The ships, all with four hundred or so

officers and men, had been consigned to the deep. Only half of the men survived.

Chapter 16

April and Vito Broccoli, along with Faustina and Ben Mayflower, had booked a private tour in Havana via the internet as soon as they knew they were going to be on the ship's first Cuban cruise. The two couples took half a dozen cruises a year, most of them on the *Sea Empress*. They were excited to find a whole new world before them.

Their tour guide stood at the entrance to the terminal holding a sign with the name "Faustina Mayflower".

"There couldn't be two of those!" Vito yelled as he pointed out the sign.

The two couples chatted with the guide as she led them to their van.

"This is my husband, Carlos," Esmeralda said to her new customers. "We are one of the first tourist vendors Cuba has allowed. We have been on a wait list for the last three months to get a small business license."

"Yep, we got a bank loan through the Small Business Administration," Carlos said.

"How did you do that?" Vito asked.

"We only needed enough money for payroll to cover six months," Carlos said, "and of course the Cuban licenses. We also agreed to hire six Cubans as mates. We think we can make money, but if we can't we'll just go back to the Keys. I hauled our three tour vans over here on a barge behind my boat, and with good weather I can haul it all back in about twelve hours, or just sell it."

"I have two questions," Vito said. "Are Carlos and Esmeralda really your names? You talk like Americans. Secondly, where do I get Cuban cigars?"

"Well, my name is really Johnny Black and this is my wife, Sophie. Our Cuban names sound more realistic for offering Cuban tours, snorkeling, and charter fishing," Carlos said. "Second, you can buy Cuban cigars anywhere – after all, this is Cuba."

Sophie's work as an accelerated Spanish teacher at a community college back in Maryland had prepared her well for her present gig as a tour guide in Cuba. She had spent three months in Central America as a college student and had learned conversational Spanish. She led the women to the main street just off of the port terminal for a shopping trip, while 'Carlos', the Captain Johnny Black, led Vito and Ben to a few cantinas and cigar shops.

When the group met two hours later, the women were burdened down with packages, and the men were buzzing from a moderate amount of rum consumption.

"I have to say, the cigars tasted better when they were illegal!" Vito laughed.

Most tours of ports in the Caribbean start with gates at the end of a pier, which open into several blocks of stores, bars, casinos, shops, and open air markets. Havana was no different, but here was a sight no one had seen at other ports. Cubans were walking up to the Americans in tears, hugging and thanking them. They handed the tourists letters addressed to family members in the U.S. and asked the Americans to mail the notes when they got back to the mainland.

The tearful greeting continued all day. As Americans walked into stores, down streets, through parks, and into museums, they heard continuous crying.

"We hoped for years to be invaded," one Havana resident said to Vito, "but you never came. Now you are here, we surrender to you our hearts and souls, and beg you to deliver us from these communist masters."

Vito was stunned. He had approached this visit as he had so many other Caribbean ports – eager to bargain with shopkeepers, find deals, look for pretty beaches, and enjoy beautiful weather. He didn't expect such a welcome from the Cuban people.

The arrival of the *Sea Empress* was covered by foreign press, but American media would not be given access to Cuba for another month. But the new phenomenon of the 'new media' --- passengers with cell phones and cameras, bloggers and internet new sites --- had consumed the air waves as passengers took videos and audios of the tearful welcome and were busily sending them back to Fox News and others. The left-wing mainstream media wasn't interested in the

trashing of the communist dictatorship by those oppressed by it for fifty years, so they didn't use too much of the citizen journalism. However, Fox News played it up, and the YouTube clips quickly went viral. The White House was consumed by questions about the tearful welcome and the advance of issues connected with the end of the trade embargo.

Captain Johnny Black told his tourists it was time to head to the boat for an afternoon of snorkeling and sunbathing.

"I could sure use a few more passengers," Captain Johnny said.

"We have some friends who might like to go with us," Vito said. "Our cell phones work here, so we can call to see if they have done enough shopping and want to come."

Within fifteen minutes, two more couples joined the group. The boat got underway to a newly arranged beach on Cane Bay, just north of the Havana port. After a thirty minute run in Captain Johnny's thirty-one foot catamaran, they were tying up at a pier in a little cove.

Johnny and Sophie were both experienced divers, and they split their attention between the two passengers who had experience and the four who were on the trip for fun and sun. Sea Urchins were the biggest danger, and Captain Johnny gave the passengers some pamphlets with tips for avoiding the urchins' stingers. The Lionfish, a native of Pacific waters, had recently invaded the Caribbean and presented another danger for snorkelers.

Captain Johnny took a young West Virginian couple, who had been snorkeling on a few trips and had even taken scuba lessons, out to a reef two hundred yards off of the shore to see some interesting drop-offs and underwater wrecks. Sophie led the other four on a viewing of coral and fish close to shore, until they had their fill and opted for sun on the beach.

Chapter 17

Sophie was busy helping her guests remove their flippers and bring out the lunch from the boat, so she didn't see her husband waving frantically from the sea. As she carried the picnic cooler over to their little foldup table on the beach, a man came up behind her and quickly clamped his hand over her mouth. Another young, dark man appeared from behind Vito, April, Ben and Faustina holding a gun.

"Si, amigos, we will take your money and your cameras, but you can keep your phones – we just want the batteries so you can't call for help," the bandit said.

Captain Johnny saw what was happening on shore. He tapped Doris and Daniel on the shoulders and motioned to them to rise to the surface, holding his fingers on his lips to shush them.

They all surfaced, and Captain Johnny motioned them to follow him behind a rock jetty. Once there, he told them to be silent and not move until he got to shore and waved them in.

Capt. Johnny Having had been swimming underwater for years in the reefs off the Florida Keys, and he swam move swiftly to shore, surfacing on the far side of the boat. He slipped out of the water, pulled off his snorkel and flippers, and quietly walked up behind the armed bandits as they stood waiting for Sophie and her guests to unload their valuables and take the batteries out of their phones.

Vito saw the captain signal silence as he slipped up behind the bandits. Johnny landed a chop to the neck of one bandit, dropping him to the ground. The other bandit whirled when he heard the impact. As he began to swing his gun toward Johnny, the captain lunged for him, digging his fingers into the bandit's eyes while the man screamed in pain. The first man recovered quickly and rose from his prone position to attack Captain Johnny, but received the same treatment.

As the two men rolled in the sand holding their hands to their eyes, Captain Johnny told everyone to stand away. He quickly gathered their guns and sent Sophie back to the boat for some rope.

“On the boat we would call this a *line*,” Capt. Johnny said to the stunned tourists, “but on land it’s still a *rope*.” He quickly hog-tied the two bandits, who were writhing in blood and pain.

“I don’t think they will get airlifted anywhere,” Capt. Johnny said. “They’ll get some first aid and be sent off to prison. The new priority of the Cuban government is to protect tourism.”

Captain Johnny called the police patrol and about a half hour later the bandits were shoved onto a jeep by Cuban soldiers.

“Well, folks, there will be an extra charge for the exciting show,” Captain Johnny Black said.

“Holy crap,” Ben said. “You just took down two armed gunmen with your bare hands. Is this the first time you’ve done that?”

“No, but I hope it’s the last,” Captain Johnny said.

“We couldn’t take any pictures of the takedown,” Vito said, “as we had the batteries out of our phones, but I did get some shots with my camera while you were trussing them up like two turkeys. But I can’t get the photos out of my camera to email to Fox News until we get back to the ship.”

“That’s just as well, Vito,” Captain Johnny said. “We don’t need to scare off the tourists when we are just getting started.”

“Are you kidding? These photos will just get you booked with snorkelers for the next year. Leno will be calling along with Fox and Friends to try to book you on their shows,” Vito said. “And the passengers love the excitement connected with the *Sea Empress*. It’s so boring just going to bingo, seeing shows and shopping. This is the first excitement in my life since I retired. We have it all planned out – April and I have both picked up part-time jobs so we can afford to go on four cruises a year, and we booked in advance on the *Sea Empress* for next year. That’s four more trips! We’ll be in the Cruise Club at the top tier and get free cocktail hours.”

Chapter 18

After giving his customers what they came for – snorkeling and a day on the beach – Captain Johnny Black fixed them the best rum punch they had ever tasted. They were sufficiently lubricated when he dropped them off at the *Sea Empress*. Vito and April scurried off to their room and, with Ben’s help, were able to download the contents of their camera onto their laptop and quickly email the exciting photos to Fox News. April called three of their grown children and told them that they needed to get to a TV set. Faustina and Ben called their families with the newest excitement from the *Sea Empress*.

“Mom, do you think it’s wise for you and Dad to keep sailing on that ship?” April’s son Dominic asked.

“A team of horses couldn’t pull us away from this ship,” April said. “Don’t worry – we were never in any real harm.”

When the news reached the security room, the Black & Perkins team and the National Security Agency prepared reviews – not only for the benefit of the Seven Seas Company, but because the Secretary of State was on board.

“Does anyone know anything about this Captain Johnny Black, the charter boat captain who wrestled two armed bandits by himself using his bare hands?” Marsha asked.

Danny Jones flipped to another screen on his monitor.

“Here it is,” Danny said. “This guy is incredible. Here’s the photo we used as part of his background check for the Cuban government and for NSA. He has been doing charters for the last four years, since he retired. He served in the Maryland Senate for four terms, and his family operated an oyster house until they sold the waterfront land to a restaurant so they could expand.”

The photo showed a smiling face with a broad grin leading up to a completely bald head, shining in the bright flash of the camera. Marsha could just make out a glint of gold on a tooth reflecting back at the flash.

Central Casting in Hollywood couldn’t come up with a better pirate character.

“It says here this guy took down both bandits, gouged out one eye each, and then hog-tied them for pickup by the Cuban cops,” Danny said.

“Gee, it’s a wonder he didn’t just filet them.”

“If they had been any more trouble for him, that would have been next.”

Kevin Clinton buzzed through to Danny on his cell phone.

“Did you see the stuff on this charter boat captain?” Clinton asked.

“Yep, we were just talking about it,” Danny said. “I guess you want us to go talk to him tomorrow?”

“No, I want you to talk to him tonight. Call him and get him and his wife here, and invite them aboard the ship for dinner. Bring him to the captain’s table. I will be there for the late seating – I am flying in now from Miami. We need this guy.”

When Captain Johnny Black and Sophie arrived at the ship, they looked sharp in semi-formal attire. The captain still had one suit with him for church, and Sophie wore a yellow sundress with a string of pearls that provided a stunning contrast to her deep tan.

Once the captain of the Sea Empress joined the group, the talk around the table was limited to the day’s events. Clinton held off from talking business with Captain Black.

“Senator,” Clinton said. “How did you come to change careers from being in the Maryland General Assembly to running diving tours?”

“Heck, I thought I was safer swimming with sharks than spending my time with Maryland politicians,” Captain Johnny laughed.

For dinner the chef had prepared veal shanks over mashed sweet potatoes, or filet steaks, thick, tender and juicy. Other menu options that night included roasted chicken and baked mahi mahi. The star performer for the night was a goat cheese appetizer.

“Might I suggest we retire to my suite?” Clinton said. “I wonder if you all would care to join me on my balcony for an after-dinner drink.”

The ship was at port for three days and two nights, and the freshly re-launched ship was glowing, providing a new and exciting view of the Havana Harbor from Clinton’s balcony.

The sounds of bands both on the ship and ashore gave a feeling of New Year's Eve to the evening, with excitement both on board and across the bustling city. Taxis were driving tourists from the ship to restaurants that had been built before some of the passengers were born. Some tourists were being carted around behind horses in carriages.

"Senator, we could really use someone with your talents," Clinton said.

"What do you have in mind? Will it interfere with my fishing?" Black asked.

"We need more hands to assist with the ships that will be coming here to Cuba. Having someone with your abilities available to protect our passengers is important. You could keep on doing what you are doing while guiding the tours for our ships," Clinton said.

"Careful – if you pay me what I am worth I'll be in trouble with the IRS," Black laughed. "Presently I am paid on a cash basis. It's easier to keep track of things."

"We can make sure your tour business makes a profit, Johnny," Clinton said. "We need to provide better security for our tours. I never figured that armed bandits would be a problem for us in Cuba. Now we are discovering that the bandits get the guns from cops and soldiers, or were themselves cops and soldiers at one time. Guns are now a hot commodity on the black market."

Johnny Black could see that what he had initially viewed as an iffy proposition was a very solid deal. He could pay off his loan from the SBA in short order and be debt-free. After dealing with the big spenders in Annapolis for sixteen years, he had enough with out-of-control spending and was ready to find a way to pay as you go. He had planned on never getting another loan, but the SBA loan was too good a deal. After about fifteen minutes, Black gave his consent to work for Black & Perkins as chief of security for tour operations. B & P would provide him with a fleet of tour boats, each with a captain with a U.S. law enforcement background, and Cuban crews. Black & Perkins also picked up Black's loan on the spot, which was considered a hiring bonus.

The next morning Sophia and Johnny met their tour group at the terminal and took them to the boat for the short ride to the

snorkeling beach. April and Vito were back, along with three other couples, while Faustina stayed on the ship to prepare for Leopold's show that night.

This time Johnny decided to let Sophia take the two experienced divers out to the reef while he stayed on shore and assisted the beginners close to the beach. Sophia had been out to the reef several times before and as both of her two divers were experienced, she decided to lead them down about twenty feet, the maximum depth for a snorkeler. The young guys were in their twenties and eager to find neat fish and strange sights. They thought it was cool that this old woman in her early sixties was showing them how.

Sophia peered through a small cave in the side of the reef and thought she saw a bright object just inside the entrance. She reached her hand in and was immediately caught in the jaws of a giant green moray eel. Lurching in the grip of the antagonized predator, she pushed her flipper against the side of the reef and struggled to free her hand, which was beginning to release a flow of blood into the water.

The two guys came to her assistance and tried to free her, but neither had a knife. Sophia reached into her belt and pulled out her knife as the pain reached levels she had only felt in childbirth.

Her attempts to slash at the seven foot long green moray eel did no good. The two guys were running out of breath and broke off their struggle to surface for air. Once they reached the surface, one said he was going to take air to Sophia and sent the other for help. He dove down to Sophie and blew air into her mouth, which was enough to keep her from passing out. The man took her knife and began to work away at the head of the eel, which had a death grip on Sophie. The other man swam toward shore, screaming for help. Captain Johnny Black knew when he saw only the one diver that there was trouble, and was soon moving through the water with breakneck speed.

When Johnny dove down to the reef, he found the other man working to free Sophie. He gave Sophie the air in his lungs, but she was losing a lot of blood. Johnny knew that time was slipping away. With a deep breath, he returned to the reef from the surface with a fresh supply of air for Sophie, and took another slash at the head of the giant eel. Finally the eel released its grip on Sophie, taking most of

her hand and leaving a gush of blood. The tourist dove down again to help Johnny bring Sophie back to shore.

They swam the two hundred yards to the beach and pulled the limp body of Sophie onto the shore. Captain Johnny Black performed CPR in a valiant effort to save her life. The passengers had used their cell phones to call for help at the first sign of trouble. A Cuban patrol boat roared to the nearby pier where the catamaran was tied. A medic from the patrol boat ran over to where Johnny was working on the love of his life and quickly took over. Johnny worked to stop the flow of blood by applying a tourniquet fashioned from the strap of a beach bag of one of his customers.

The blood flow stopped, but so had Sophie's heart. After about five minutes, the medic gave up, and so did Johnny.

It was a sad day in paradise.

Chapter 19

Black & Perkins took over Captain Johnny's tour business for a few weeks while he took time off to deal with Sophie's death. He accompanied Sophie's body back to Ohio for services, and arrived in Cuba three weeks later aboard the *Sea Empress*.

The sixty-year-old Johnny soon found himself the center of attention from the many widows on the cruise ship, and didn't have much time to grieve, except in private. The best way to keep his mind clear, he found, was to concentrate on his business. The constant swarms of retired women on his cruises were pleasant, but Johnny decided that no one could replace his treasured Sophie.

As the winter months wore on, the Seven Seas Company, which had led the way in bringing tourists to Cuba, was one of many vying for space in the busy harbor. Henry Boston spent two months negotiating with the Cubans for the right to build a terminal at the port, making Seven Seas Company the first line to take such action. Negotiations with cruise lines were just one of thousands of new investments being pursued by American firms. Just as the walls had fallen in Eastern Europe, the gates were open, and the Cubans were demanding new freedoms above and beyond those negotiated by the U. S. president.

As streams of foreigners came, so did plans for new buildings, hotels, and airport expansions. The economies of the former Caribbean hotspots began to sag within weeks. There were only so many tourist and investment dollars to go around.

From not too far away, embarrassed by his recent and crushing military defeat, Humboldt Perez contemplated his next move. His Syrian, North Korean, and Iranian pals had never lifted a finger to support him. The Cubans were given credit for destroying his air force and sinking all six of the destroyers in his Navy. His three submarines had disappeared completely, believed to be sunken, if not scuttled by their crews.

Chapter 20

The *Sea Empress* was now on its twelfth voyage since being restored and refurbished.

The current trip to the Caribbean included three port days in Havana; stops at Santiago, St. Thomas, St. Kitts, and St. Maarten; and a return to Port Everglades at Ft. Lauderdale.

Life on the *Sea Empress* had become pretty routine after the near-war in Cuba and the elimination of Venezuela as a Pan-American power. Perez was making a last-ditch effort at holding on to the reins of power, while Cuba was quickly becoming a new economic miracle.

The Seven Seas Company was rolling out the first in a new class of larger and more posh ships. Security, not ever again to be an afterthought, was firmly intertwined with all aspects of design. Danny and Marsha were now working primarily on advising the ship designers on how to bring the latest in human and technical security features to play on the new class of ships.

The Meyerhof Yards in Germany won the construction bid over the Virginia firm that did the stretch of the *Sea Empress*. Once again the high cost of the union labor in American shipyards had sent another construction of a ship overseas. After working with the design crew to enhance the security on the new ship, Danny and Marsha were glad to return to the *Sea Empress* and their favorite suite, which had become a second home. As the suite was never offered to any other guests, their belongings were in place and they needed only their basic traveling luggage.

Danny and Marsha were on the *Sea Empress* but two days when Kevin Clinton arrived on board, accompanied by his wife and a surprise guest: Marsha's sister. Felicia had been given a permanent invitation to join Marsha — in fact, Marsha had sent travel vouchers for her and her husband Fred to use anytime they wanted. Marsha had told Felicia to take a trip on the *Sea Empress* at any time, and gave her Kevin Clinton's phone number to assist with any and all arrangements.

Felicia had two surprises: one, that she would be joining them on their trip, and two, that she didn't bring Fred. Felicia had caught Fred cheating on her two weeks earlier and cancelled him from her travel plans.

"Hey, I think we should make sure my sister isn't without an escort when we get to Havana," Marsha said to Danny. "Why don't you call Captain Johnny Black and ask him to join us for dinner when we arrive in port? It's been enough time for him to think about going out, and Lord knows Felicia needs to date."

Marsha went to her room and called her sister, who laughed out loud when told about the blind date

"I am 56 years old and you are setting up a blind date for me!" Felicia laughed.

"Heck, sis, you might as well have a blind date, you were blind to the fact your husband was dating his secretary for the past five years," Marsha said.

Dinner went well, and Captain Johnny Black and Felicia took an immediate liking to each other. From dinner they went to the evening's entertainment, and then to dance in one of the lounges. Felicia never returned to her cabin that night.

After breakfast on the Lido deck, Felicia thanked Marsha for setting her up on the date.

"We had a good time, I have to admit," Felicia said. "I can't tell you that this thing has a future or not, but at least it was fun to be with someone."

"Did Johnny tell you how he lost his wife?" Marsha asked.

"No, he said you would tell me, and he would prefer it that way," Felicia said.

After Marsha filled her in, Felicia sat in silence with her eyes drifting over the harbor.

Felicia looked at Marsha after several minutes of silence.

"That is so sad. I can't believe he went through that and yet is still so happy and fun to be around," Felicia said.

"He just accepts it and goes on with life," Marsha said.

The two sisters were able to catch up as they lingered over coffee for almost three hours. The noon sun began to fill the open air deck with warmth as a gentle breeze bathed them in the tropical air.

A string quartet had come aboard from Havana to play for the guests – a welcome from Cuba designed to convince still leery travelers that it was safe and legal to visit.

Chapter 21

Marsha and Danny Jones sat on their balcony after a good night's sleep and enjoyed the beautiful morning in Havana.

"Wow, I can really see why this place was so sought after before Castro came to power," Marsha said. "This city is going to become a boomtown in the next ten years. I hope it manages to hang on to some of its old charm."

"Don't worry dear, these commies are pretty sharp," Danny said. "They have been watching the old Iron Curtain countries and China emerge from the hard-core communist days, and they are fed up with fifty years of deprivation. I suppose the top bananas will still hold on to power, but things are going to be different forever."

Someone knocked on their door and it wasn't the butler.

Danny opened the door to find Kevin Clinton.

"Come on in, I'll order a fresh pot of coffee and some breakfast for you," Danny said.

"Thanks, I've had breakfast but I'll take the coffee," Clinton said. "You know that strife that has been sweeping the Mideast? Well we have had to pull two ships out of the Med in the past week because bookings are soft. People are scared to go anywhere near there, so Henry Boston says it's time to send the *Sea Empress* to where the action is."

"Is he nuts? This isn't a battleship, it's an ocean liner," Danny said.

"I get it," Marsha said. "We are being used as an ad for safety in cruising."

"Let's see if I get this right," Danny said. "You sat down with me at St. Martins and talked to me about doing a security gig which ended up with us nearly getting blown to kingdom come, and then a nice transatlantic voyage nearly ended with the president getting knifed, and then we were in the middle of a war. Now you want us to get in the middle of millions of terrorists who want to set fire to a

dozen countries. Am I supposed to say, 'sure, Marsha and I will be glad to go'? Is that right?"

"That's pretty accurate. The *Sea Empress* will be taking the bookings of the *Sea Urchin* beginning the fifth of September, so enjoy the Caribbean for the next few months. It will be pretty boring for you around here, I suppose," Kevin said.

"I have one condition," Marsha said. "We get to pick the staff we take along with us in the security team. I want this crew we have now."

"Is that all?" Clinton asked.

"No. We need a bonus, and a shopping trip in Rome for a few days," Marsha said. "And we need to bring along Captain Johnny Black and my sister."

"Well, anything you want," Clinton said. "I'll tell Henry Boston to provide someone to take over for Captain Johnny in Havana. I'll email the itinerary of the ship to you, or you can just go online and pick it up from the schedule of the *Sea Urchin*."

"Great, it's set, then. We get to see the pyramids, the Suez Canal, stop off at Somalia and visit some pirates we haven't yet met, and have tea in Casablanca with local warlords," Marsha said. "As long as I can fit in a shopping trip in Rome, I won't mind the distractions."

The End

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