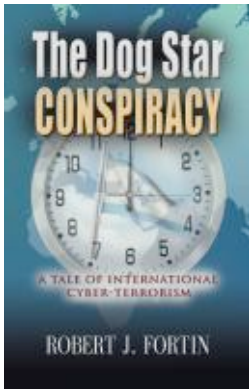


The Dog Star CONSPIRACY

A TALE OF INTERNATIONAL
CYBER-TERRORISM

ROBERT J. FORTIN



An unknown terrorist organization threatens Israel, world oil supplies, and oil platforms off the coasts of Nigeria and the US soon come under attack. Investigation into the attacks leads to a suspicion of all those benefiting from unrest in the mid-East, and brings the area to the brink of a nuclear conflict. A special envoy appointed by the President uncovers information suggesting a conspiracy at the highest levels of Government.

The Dog Star Conspiracy

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**THE DOG STAR
CONSPIRACY**

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Dog Star, Sirius, the sky's brightest star, appearing in the constellation Canis Major. Sirius can be seen from almost every inhabited region of the Earth's surface, with only those north of 73 degrees unable to see it. From the Southern Hemisphere in early July, Sirius can be seen in both the evening where it sets after the Sun, and in the morning where it rises before the Sun.

Sirius rises late in the dark, liquid sky
On summer nights, star of stars,
Orion's Dog they call it, brightest
Of all, but an evil portent, bringing heat
And fevers to suffering humanity.

Homer, in the *Iliad*

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PROLOGUE

The fishing trawler Buena Isabela surfed lazily across the rolling swells of the Caribbean, rocking slowly from side to side as it barely made headway on a meandering course through the light chop. A small flume of spray peeled off the bow from a sea so blue it seemed to bleed from the sky at the horizon. The boat had long since surrendered to the punishments of sea and salt air, evidenced by rust spots erupting like brown, ugly wounds on its once-gray steel hull. At mid-ships on the main deck, a battered hatchway opened to a ladder leading down to the galley and crew's quarters. On the port side of the hatch, a ladder with four worn steps and a weather-beaten handrail led up to the forward deck where the wheelhouse was located. This was enclosed on all four sides by seven-foot high steel panels, sporting many coats of peeling red paint. The upper third of each panel held a reinforced glass window, badly stained with salt, attesting to their long neglect. At the rear of the wheelhouse was a four-foot by six-foot chart table, attached to the deck and holding multiple layers of coffee-stained charts defining the area. Mounted on the helm console at the forward bulkhead were a ship-to-shore radio, a GPS system, the ship's wheel to steer the trawler and various engine, light, ballast and seining controls. Sliding doors on both port and starboard sides of the wheelhouse opened to narrow walkways leading forward and aft. On the aft deck, booms used to drag the huge trawling nets were in the closed and locked position, their large arms poised above the deck in mocked reverence, swaying slowly in tune with the rocking boat. Below the booms, aft on the main deck, sliding hatchways covered the gaping hold below decks to store the day's catch.

The boat was heading generally south by southeast, 30 kilometers off the Cuban coast of Cienfuegos and 250 kilometers from the capital city of Havana. Upon closer inspection of the figures moving about the deck, it was obvious that this was no ordinary fishing vessel. Seven of the crew wore wet suits, partially unzipped

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to relieve the searing heat of the tropical mid-day sun. On the forward deck, a solitary figure sat on a canvas deck chair under a tarpaulin, hunched over the display of an electronic device resembling a fish finder. Despite the confines of the wet suit, it was immediately apparent that she was a woman with extraordinary physical attributes. She wore a headset with black earphones held in place by a headband with a microphone suspended near her mouth. While staring intently at the display, she was slowly turning a dial. After a moment, she straightened, grabbed a towel from the back of the chair and mopped her face while she repeatedly shrugged and then released her shoulders. She stared again at the display and spoke curtly into the mouthpiece as the boat slowly changed course to starboard, responding to her command. A tall, bearded crew member, standing in the meager shade of the wheelhouse, took a final drag on his cigarette, then flipped it over the side as he approached the shade of the tarpaulin.

“Que pasa?” Miguel asked.

“Nada,” replied Niki, turning the small dial while continuing to study the display. “We should be within range, but I have no signal.”

“Perhaps you read the chart wrong,” Miguel suggested. “I’m sure we planted the device at these coordinates in about ten fathoms of water. You should have acquired it by now.”

Niki rose from her deck chair and stretched her arms and legs like a large cat. Her ebony hair glistened and Miguel noted that, despite the shade of the canopy, small beads of sweat covered her face and trickled down her neck, seeking refuge between her breasts. Miguel tried, without success, to ignore the way that she filled out her wet suit and the generous cleavage revealed with the top unzipped almost to her navel. She was nearly as tall as Miguel, with coffee-colored skin and doe eyes that hinted of a Eurasian in the family tree. She gave Miguel a tight smile that displayed teeth almost too white and perfect.

The boat’s Captain rapped loudly on the glass of the wheelhouse and gestured with palms up to indicate his impatience. At that, a yellow hound of indeterminate age and origin slowly rose from a shady spot under the net booms, stretched out its front legs in

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a kowtow and then ambled forward to the shade under the tarp, where it nuzzled Niki's leg while wagging its tail.

Niki bent and scratched behind the dog's ears while staring at Miguel before replying, "No way am I going to screw up on coordinates, Miguel. I've got them memorized and I've rechecked the GPS setting twice. Maybe the batteries in the unit are weak. We've been working it to death lately. Give me a few more minutes and we'll find it, don't worry." With that, she tossed her head, resumed her seat and adjusted the headset while continuing to scan and listen intently.

The other crew members were gathered forward of the wheelhouse, checking over their diving gear and growing impatient. They had left port that morning as the first rays of the sun nudged cautiously over the mountaintops on the eastern horizon and were anxious to complete the next dive so they could return to port.

"I have it! It's here!" Niki shouted while pressing the headset closer to her ear. "I knew we were close. Go to port about ten degrees," she commanded into the headset while pointing excitedly off to the left of the bow.

"Praise Allah," muttered a young, bearded crew member. "A Bedouin does not fare well upon this watery desert. Let us complete our mission and return to solid land."

"Patience, Abdul," Miguel cautioned. "It is better to proceed slowly with no mistakes. When we start placing live mines, great care must be taken."

"Stop here and drop anchor," Niki ordered. The rhythmic pulsations of the propellers slowed, and then stopped, replaced by the throaty gurgle of the exhaust as the diesel engine idled. Miguel strode forward and with a quick motion released the anchor off the bow. Then he motioned to the Captain in the wheelhouse, who slowly backed off until the anchor was set and the slack in the chain taken up. Niki continued to scan and listen intently while the waiting crew gathered under the tarpaulin.

"It's about forty meters off the starboard bow. I've activated the transponder and I'm getting an immediate echo return on my display," she said.

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“Good, very good,” Miguel nodded. “Now, Abdul, you shall lead this recovery dive. The rest of us will swim behind as usual to observe the method of retrieval. Remember, the mine must be slid off to the side and the release plate held in place during removal. Otherwise, a live mine will become armed and explode within thirty seconds unless it receives a disarm signal. Is that clear?”

“Yes, yes, we have practiced this many times,” Abdul fussed. “I know what must be done. Let us get on with it, so that besotted son of a camel driver piloting this miserable ark can return us to your beautiful island.”

After pulling on and then adjusting his swim fins, Abdul duck-walked awkwardly to starboard and zipped up his wet suit. Leaning far over the gunwale, he swished water in his face mask. Another team member helped him with his scuba tank and weight belt as he adjusted the mouthpiece and sat poised on the rail. One by one, the other divers repeated this ritual. After testing his respirator, Abdul muttered “Praise Allah,” and flipped backwards into the water.

Miguel scanned the area around the boat before he turned to Niki and cautioned “Keep an eye out for sharks. There are reports of schools of them in this area.” Then he sat on the railing while Niki assisted him with donning and adjusting a full-face diving helmet with an underwater communicator and a video camera mounted on top. After a moment, he gave Niki a thumbs-up and dropped backwards over the side, leaving only Niki and the Captain behind.

Despite the depth, the water was clear almost to the bottom, except for the minute sea life near the surface which sparkled and darted like fireflies in a brilliant display illuminated by the sun. The small transducer on the dummy mine emitted an intermittent audible beep, but the sound dissipated in the open water, making it difficult to determine its exact direction. The divers turned their heads from side to side while swimming towards the bottom in a zigzag pattern, like a flock of geese, with Abdul at the point, and Miguel at the rear. On the surface, Niki tracked their progress, observing the divers on her video display and giving periodic directions to Miguel through his underwater communicator. After a few minutes, Abdul spotted the pipe section, almost four meters long and over one meter in

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diameter, covered with an anti-corrosion jacket and supported at each end by short steel legs resting on the sea bottom. Motioning to the formation, he swam towards it.

The pipe used in their training simulated the hundreds of pipelines carrying crude oil from thousands of offshore oil wellheads throughout the world. Pipeline length and cross section varied, as did the depth, but all eventually terminated on shore or at the offshore drilling platform where the crude oil was pumped into tankers or into storage tanks for delivery to refineries, either by additional pipelines or by tanker. Now Abdul approached the section of pipe and swam along it while feeling the underside with one gloved hand. He stopped near one of the supports, stretched to reach beneath the pipe, then gave a thumbs-up signal to the other divers. Using both hands, he reached under the pipe and brought out a shiny square box about six inches on each side and two inches deep. The dive team closely watched Abdul as he carefully held the top and bottom of the box in place with one hand while he moved the disarming lever on the side with the other hand. Intent on observing his task, the divers failed to notice the swift shadow passing overhead. Miguel was the first to spot it, a black bull shark about eight feet long, twenty feet above their heads and circling them slowly.

“El tiburón!”, “Shark!” he shouted into his mouthpiece, while reaching to free his dive knife from his leg scabbard and signaling the shark's location to the other divers

Abdul continued to hold the box with one hand as he started swimming towards the boat while the team kept an eye on the passing shark. They quickly moved in unison towards the surface, with Miguel in the lead and Abdul in the rear struggling to keep up, swimming with one arm while trying to place the dummy mine in his belt pouch. The shark turned and circled the group, seeming to be drawn to the straggler and the shiny object in his hand. Miguel looked back and was horrified to see the shark closing in on Abdul, its large mouth open to display rows of menacing teeth.

“It's going after Abdul,” Miguel shouted into his communicator, just as the shark made a pass and slashed at the metal box, taking Abdul's forearm in its gaping jaws. Shaking its huge mouth, it tore

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off a piece of Abdul's wet suit along with a chunk of flesh, then glided past and disappeared behind the pipe section. Abdul was stunned by the attack, and started to slowly sink when his swimming motions stopped as a growing, wispy cloud of dark blood spurting from his torn arm, coloring the water while drifting around him.

Miguel quickly reached Abdul's side and grasped him around the waist while helping him to struggle toward the surface, leaving a pink trail fanning out behind them. It was then he spotted several more sharks heading in their direction, approaching from the far side of the boat's shadow.

"The shark got Abdul, he's bleeding, and more of them are coming from the port side of the boat. We're trying to make the surface, but I don't know if we can get back before they attack."

Niki had been listening to Miguel and monitoring their progress from her deck station, while the ship's dog sprawled lazily at her feet. When she heard Miguel's shouted warning, she sprang to her feet and whipped her dive knife from the scabbard on her calf. She grabbed the hapless hound by the scruff of its neck with one hand and jerked it off the deck while plunging the serrated 3 inch blade of her knife deep into its soft underbelly, driving the point upward into the dog's rib cage. The hound yelped in pain and terror as blood and entrails spilled from the gaping wound and splashed onto the deck. In one fluid motion, Niki tossed the wounded animal off the port side of the boat, where it continued to yelp and thrash about in the water until it sank beneath a swell.

The boat's Captain observed this with an open mouth, and then rushed out of the wheelhouse while shaking his fist at Niki. "Bastardo!" he shouted, "You've killed my dog!"

"No, old man, I'm trying to save our divers," she replied coldly as she ripped off her headset and strode to the starboard boarding ladders. "They're being attacked by sharks!"

The Captain rushed back into the wheelhouse and tore the twelve-gauge shotgun from its bulkhead mount while grabbing a handful of shells from a drawer on the chart table. Niki observed this and quickly moved her knife to a throwing position, prepared to impale the Captain should he aim the shotgun at her.

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Suddenly the dog burst up out of the water as though jet propelled, eyes wide, mouth open and yelping a ki-yap scream, as a large black bull shark rose several feet into the air with the dog's hindquarters in its mouth. In a moment, both the shark and the dog splashed back under the waves.

The Captain ran to the port side and took aim with the shotgun as the returning divers started to climb the starboard boarding ladders. Just then the dog resurfaced, front paws thrashing, eyes wide, mouth open and still yapping in pain and terror as the water around it turned pink. The shotgun blast startled Niki as the Captain fired both barrels and decapitated the hound before it again sank beneath the sea's surface. Several fins converged on the area, and the surface of the water on the port side of the boat turned into a red carpet and boiled with the feeding frenzy.

Niki continued to assist the divers scrambling up the boarding ladder as the Captain reloaded and aimed at a dorsal fin slicing the water towards the returning divers. The blast severed the shark's spine and it thrashed momentarily in the growing crimson foam cauldron, then started to sink as other sharks joined in the feast.

"Eat that, el cabrón!" he shouted.

Miguel arrived at the boat's side with the wounded Abdul, and they were quickly assisted onto the deck, as the Captain returned to the wheelhouse. Miguel tore off his dive helmet and immediately demanded, "What's going on?"

"I threw the hound overboard to attract the sharks," Niki explained. "Captain Ahab up there decided to join in the fun by blasting them with his shotgun."

Miguel looked momentarily confused. "The hound? You killed the dog?"

"Gutted it and threw it over the port side," she explained. "It made a hell of a racket. Kept the sharks off your asses while you boarded. Here, let me get the first aid kit and see if we can patch up Abdul and stop the bleeding."

Miguel suddenly grasped what had happened, and he shook his head in admiration. "Quick thinking!" he exclaimed. "For a woman," he added.

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With all divers boarded, the anchor was raised and the boat quickly got underway as Miguel and Niki tended to Abdul's wound. It proved to be deep, but apparently had not damaged any tendons or muscles, so they were able to slow the bleeding with a tourniquet and pressure pad while the boat labored at full throttle back to port and a doctor's services to sew up the wound.

The trip back to Cienfuegos was subdued. Despite the sobering effect of the shark attack, it had been a productive day. They had set six dummy mines in place, and retrieved six others. They would repeat the exercise tomorrow, and the next day, as had five groups before them. The small group of divers was used to impossible hours, and willingly worked as long as required. The pay was almost non-existent and the food and lodging were barely adequate, but no one complained. They all had been specially chosen as members of Bismillah, the Word of God, a splinter group of the terrorist organization Jund Allah, Soldiers of God. All were sworn to carry out the mission of their leaders, whatever the cost, and were prepared to become martyrs for their cause.

When this phase of their training was completed, there would be thirty-four Murids or Followers under the command of Hamid Asad, the Murshid, or Master who led the Bismillah. They looked forward to meeting with him at the end of their training. He would direct them on the glorious path leading to the ultimate destruction of Israel and the downfall of the infidel West.

CHAPTER 1

Numerous small towns and fishing villages stubbornly cling like barnacles to the Florida Gulf coast, offering home-port havens to those enjoying easy access to the Gulf, a relaxed life style and moderate living costs. The town of Crystal River is located about 80 miles north of the Tampa Bay area, fronted by tranquil King's Bay, a berth for fishing boats, dive boats, manatee tours and pleasure craft. The Bay is fed by the Crystal River, a fresh flowing, broad river whose banks were a favored campground of Native American Indian tribes in times long past. The Tocobaga tribe settled in this area before the time of Christ and established an active trading post with other tribes for furs, pottery and game. Later, before Columbus had discovered the New World, members of the Calusa tribe also found the abundant fish and game to their liking and migrated North onto the banks of the river. Evidence of these early settlements remains today in the burial grounds and pottery shards uncovered during recent excavations. The U.S. Government's Treaty with Florida Indian Tribes of September 18, 1823 displaced many of these Native Americans from their lands and moved them to distant reservations. In order to repopulate the area, the Government, in its benevolence, offered 160-acre parcels free of charge to any settler who would agree to farm the land. Over the following century, settlement of the area was slow and sparse. Few were prepared to endure the heat, humidity, wild animals and teeming insect population in order to coax a meager living from the sandy soil. With the advent of affordable air conditioning, the population grew and flourished and fisheries, small farms and businesses were established. Since the middle of the twentieth century, the number of homes grew, almost overnight, on the banks of the river and bay and a small, close-knit community was established.

Following his retirement from the U.S. Marine Corps, Jake Savidge spent a year in Barbados attempting to set up a charter sailing business before deciding that catering to rich assholes was not

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how he wanted to spend the rest of his life. So he sailed his 39 foot Hunter, *Semper Fi II*, to the Gulf Coast of Florida and settled just outside the town of Crystal River, where he bought over two acres of overgrown riverfront and arranged for a deep-water anchorage for his sailboat in nearby King's Bay. During the next year, Jake lived on his boat while he and occasional hired help cleared much of the slash pine, buttonwood, red cedar, loblolly pine, cypress and oak from his property. He sent the more promising-looking tree sections to a local sawmill for conversion to posts, beams and plank lumber, which he stored in the drying shed he had erected on his property. He then used the seasoned lumber to build a two-story, three bedroom house with a screened-in porch facing the outlet to the Bay, a boat dock, a combination tool shed and garage and a Tiki hut with a thatched roof. He used cypress boards for clapboard siding, which turned a striking silver-gray color as it weathered. One of the surprises Jake received while clearing his property was a large stand of bamboo along a border of his land, apparently planted by a prior landowner. He incorporated the bamboo into his living room door jambs and the Tiki hut, where he used it in a bar, tables and the back wall, which held a sink and counter. He named his property "Nature's Bounty" because so much of the lumber, timbers and sheeting material Jake used came from his land or had been reclaimed from the Gulf where it had washed off the decks of passing ships during storms. When the living area of the house was finished, he built a stairway from the second floor deck to the roof, where he constructed a ten foot square widow's walk with a view of the Bay. Finally, he installed bench seats and a telescope in his rooftop lookout to watch the dive boats, oyster boats, fishing boats, manatee tour boats and assorted pleasure craft as they made their way into and out of the harbor.

With his house near completion, Jake again started taking passengers on occasional sailing charters and dive trips to supplement his Government pension. It was during this period that he found he could "live off the land" by catching his own wild game and seafood. He also found ample opportunity for trading services with neighbors for fresh vegetables, fruits, wild boar, wild turkey, rabbit, seafood and occasional odd jobs and meals. Jake's outgoing

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manner and down-to-earth attitude quickly won him many friends. He knew he had been accepted into the community when they invited him to join the weekly “pot luck” suppers held at a different house each week, where everyone brought food and the host provided the booze. Other than utilities, insurance and taxes, which were minimal, plus fuel and upkeep for his boat, his major expense was keeping a stocked liquor locker for the many friends and neighbors who quickly learned that Jake was always good for a chat and a drink.

At 46, Jake was happy with his life, and ready to put his years of service as a Marine Corps officer behind him. He had graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy and over the course of his career received training in Military Intelligence, Counter-Terrorism and finally rigorous training as a Recon Force Marine. His military service was anything but routine; he had spent many months gathering intelligence and running rescue missions in “unfriendly” territory including Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea and Cuba as well as in terrorist hotbeds in Europe. He was wounded during skirmishes in the Persian Gulf, and had been decorated with a Silver Star for leading the rescue of the crew from an F-16 downed in Iraq by anti-aircraft fire during the Kuwait crisis. After over 21 years in the Corps, Jake retired with the rank of Lt. Colonel. Now, he just wanted to enjoy a simple life - no worries, no responsibilities, no sweat. His health was good, and at six feet, three inches, he was an imposing figure with broad shoulders, traces of a light blond beard and a rapidly-growing blond-gray ponytail that stuck out from under the back of the duck-billed cap he wore when he was on his boat. Jake felt he pretty much had it made.

On this sunny Spring morning, he was returning from oyster gathering in the Gulf of Mexico. He brought his 18-foot skiff alongside the dock and after securing the bow and stern lines to the cleats, he shut off the outboard and hoisted three pails full of oysters onto the dock. He climbed out of the boat and carried the oysters to the cleaning table at the end of the dock, where he hosed them down and transferred them into plastic pails. He took these to his screened porch where he managed to squeeze them into the refrigerator that

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served as the repository for his fresh seafood catches and six brands of beer for his frequent guests.

Jake was in his tool shed searching for a power drill for dock repairs when the phone rang. He decided to let the recording service pick it up until he heard a voice from the past.

“Jake! You there? Pick up the damn phone if you're there. Come on, Jake, get your lazy ass out of bed. It's Chief Scarpone and I need to talk to you.”

It had been almost three years, but the gruff voice of the Navy Master Chief Petty Officer who had been a member of Jake's Recon Force team for four years was unforgettable. Grinning broadly, Jake grabbed the phone.

“Scarpone, you fuck-up! Where the hell are you?”

“Hey, easy on who you're calling a fuck-up, Colonel. You're talking to the Chief Inspector of the Anti-Terrorism and Security Division for the Oil Minister of Kuwait.”

“What?” Kuwait? What the hell are you doing back in Kuwait?”

“Well, you know, we spent some time over here during the Gulf kick-ass and I made a few good contacts. The Navy assigned me to assist with security training for the detail guarding a member of the royal family and when I got out of the Navy, His Highness asked me to stay on to take charge of this group they set up to protect their oil fields.”

“You're shitting me! Give me one good reason would you want to live in Kuwait when you could be chasing round eyes on the beach in the good old U.S. of A.”

“I can give you 200,000 excellent reasons, my friend, all printed on the back of U.S. dollar bills and credited in twelve equal monthly payments to my bank account in St. Moritz. Largely tax free, of course. And I've got good, free, living quarters with hot and cold running water and maids. Hell, I can live pretty well on my Navy pension and bank my pay, so how do you like them apples?”

“Two hundred grand a year? Sounds like you struck the mother lode, Chief. Good thing they didn't check your references or they'd have you laying pipe instead of protecting it.”

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“Yeah, well, after 25 years in the Navy and the SEAL training we went through, I know a thing or two about counter-terrorism and kicking ass, so why shouldn't I get a piece of the pie? I figure in a couple or three years I'll move back to the States and take a long vacation. Really retire. But, listen, I've got something I need to talk to you about.”

“If you want me to help you chase bad guys off oil fields, forget about it. I'm happy here in Florida and enjoying the good life. All that counter-espionage shit is behind me, and good riddance.”

“Whoa! Slow down, Colonel. I've got an offer you can't refuse.”

“Ha! Just try me. I've refused some pretty damn good offers in recent years.”

“Here's the deal, Savidge. The Sheik is worried about keeping the bad guys away from his oil fields, and I'm all over that. But he's also worried about disruption of oil production from his offshore wells and pipelines. He wants to make sure we're taking precautions to stop the bad guys from sabotaging his offshore pipelines and tankers, to prevent the loss of oil and to contain any spills, accidental or otherwise. The U.S. and Britain are his largest customers, so he needs to keep the tree-huggers happy while making sure his oil dollars ain't flowing up shit creek.”

“I don't read you, Chief. I'm no expert on preventing and containing spills. Hell, I can't even clean up the mess I make when I change the oil in my boat's engine.”

“Wrong, Savidge. You *are* an expert on blowing things up, and it takes someone who knows how to blow up things and how the bad guys think to keep other people from doing it. At least, that's what I told the Sheik, so he bought it and wants to hire you.”

“Nope, sorry, Scarpone. I'm retired and enjoying the hell out of it. No more 'Mission Impossible' assignments for me. I'm out of the game, and not interested in getting back in.”

“Jake, Jake, Jake. Listen to me, man. The Sheik needs an expert and I convinced him that ‘you da man’, a munitions guy with a distinguished military career. This ain't no game we're playing here, Colonel. It's heavy shit, and he don't need no college-trained law enforcement guy to handle it. It's going to take someone with big

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cojones who can think like the bad guys and hurt them before they hurt us. Besides, you won't have to operate out of Kuwait. You can call your own shots, so long as you put a plan in place to prevent loss of their pipelines and tankers.”

“Chief, I told you I don't know squat about pipelines and oil spills. Let him get someone who's an oil field guy to set this up.”

“Well, here's the deal, you can bring in anyone you want to help with this, but before you turn this down, won't you at least listen to what he's offering and think about it?”

“I've thought about it, Chief, and the answer is 'No!' Sorry, but find someone else for the job. I appreciate what you're doing, I really do, but I'm just not interested.”

“OK, my friend. I know when I'm beat. It was good talking with you, and I hope you have a great, peaceful and uneventful retirement.”

“Damn straight, I plan to. And let me know how you make out. I wish you well. By the way, who's the Sheik you're working for?”

“Remember Willie Wantanobe that we pulled out of Iraq?”

“The little bearded guy? Sure. But he's no sheik, is he?”

“Nah, but his cousin is. Turns out Willie is really Hashid Akbar, a third cousin of Sheik Mohammed Al-Akbar. Willie put in a good word for me with the Sheik, who requested that the Navy assign me to the security training post. After a while, the Sheik decided to create the job I have now, so I retired from the Navy and took it on. When I told him you led the team that rescued his cousin, he was anxious to personally thank you for saving Hashid and to offer you a job.”

“Well, I'll be damned. Little Willie has connections. Interesting.”

“So do you wanna meet the Sheik and discuss this, or what? At least think about it Jake. It's not a long-term commitment and you could pick up some serious change if you set this up for these folks. Plus, I'd consider it a personal favor for all the times I saved your ass.”

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“Play that again? I seem to remember dragging your sorry butt out of harm's way on more than one occasion. But I guess it wouldn't hurt seeing your ugly face again, even if I don't take the job.”

“Then you'll come to meet the Sheik?”

“Maybe. Let me think about it. Call me back in a few days. If I haven't come to my senses by then, I might give it a tumble.”

“That's all I ask, Savidge. Just listen to his offer. I'll call in a few days, and you can let me know. If you decide to come, I'll take care of booking your flights and have a ticket waiting for you.”

After hanging up, Jake stood staring out the window for a few minutes, then shook his head and resumed searching for his drill.

That evening, it was Jake's turn to host the neighbors' gathering and they started arriving about 6 pm. Jake had set out two wash tubs with ice, one filled with cans of beer and the other with the fresh oysters he had harvested that morning. One of the first friends that Jake had made after settling in Crystal River was Karl Crevatt, a semi-retired tugboat captain and jack-of-all trades. Karl worked the Great Lakes on marine construction projects from late spring until late fall and returned with his wife, Lady, to nearby Yankeetown for the winter months. He was an outgoing, personable and engaging seaman who immediately took to Jake and helped him to get established in his adopted community. It was through Karl that Jake met many of his other neighbors, and Karl was the one who pointed out the bounty of material available for salvaging in the Gulf, since that was how he had built his house and dock a few miles up the road on the banks of the Withlacoochee River where it met the Gulf. Karl and Lady were the first to arrive, carrying a huge casserole of wild turkey stew that they had prepared. Jake greeted them both warmly, and while he was giving Lady a swift hug, a tall brunette approached and stood smiling at them.

“Jake, meet my cousin Misty Howell,” Lady said. “She's visitin' from Atlanta, and I've invited her along, Hope you don't mind.”

Jake had been leading a sedate life and dated only occasionally, mostly women who were visiting the area while on vacation or who had spent time sailing or diving with him. Misty was clearly a knockout, in her 30's, a few inches shorter than Jake and wearing

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white cut-off shorts that emphasized her long, tanned legs. Her orange wrap-around top did little to hide a great figure. She wore huge turquoise bangles for earrings and a white bandana around her neck. Jake gave Misty a big smile and took her hand, holding it a little too long while staring into her eyes and welcoming her to his home.

“Lady has told me a lot about you,” she said, returning Jake's smile.

“How did you get an unusual name like Misty?” he asked.

“My family name is Tovamaresko; it's Slovakian and a little hard to pronounce, so when I came to the States several years ago, my friends and co-workers called me Miss T. It stuck and became Misty. I kind of like it.”

“Then Misty it is,” Jake said, as he spotted other neighbors arriving. “Excuse me for a moment,” as he reluctantly dropped her hand and moved to welcome the new arrivals.

Soon, eight other couples had arrived, each bearing a variety of freshly prepared dishes containing wild boar, rabbit, chicken, wild turkey, garden-grown vegetables or fresh seafood. Jake's yard was filled with talking, laughing and drinking guests, and the tables in his Tiki hut were groaning under the burden of the many dishes that would make up the evening meal. Jake wore a rubber oyster shucker's apron over his jeans and sported a huge grin as he wandered among his friends; he enjoyed these gatherings more than he ever imagined he would.

The meal was informal, and everyone partook of the lavish banquet whenever they got hungry, taking their plates and drinks to picnic tables or onto the porch or dock. After making sure that everyone had plenty to eat and drink, Jake went looking for Karl and Lady, and found them in a small gathering on the dock. Lady stopped him and said, “Jake, Misty asked me to talk to you.”

“Oh, geez, gal, I appreciate it, and she seems nice, but I'm not into dating right now. I may have to do a little traveling soon. Thanks anyway.”

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“Well, ain't you full of yourself,” Lady responded with a grin. “She asked me to tell you thanks for havin' her over, but she had to leave to pick up her boyfriend at the Tampa airport.”

Jake stared at her for a moment, then broke into a big smile. “Boyfriend, huh? Figures,” he muttered as he shook his head. “But tell me about her. Where does she live, and does she visit often?”

“Well, we ain't been particularly close. Her folks were related to my step-sister, and they lived in Turkey, so we never got to see 'em. Misty seems nice, though. We sponsored her when she moved to the States after her parents died and she applied for a student visa several years ago. She don't have much of an accent, and after she took some college courses she found a job up in Atlanta right off. Seems to be doin' okay. We were happy that she came to visit last week, of course. Always glad to see kin, you know.”

“She's from Turkey? Interesting country. I spent some time there several years ago. Quite a hodge-podge of cultures and religions because it's at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. I'd like to talk with her about that sometime.”

“Good luck with that, Jake. Misty don't chat much about her childhood. Seems real secretive about her parents and upbringing and all. Don't know why. Guess she might have some family skeletons in her closet, so we ain't pressed her none.”

“Well, I'll respect her privacy. What was it she wanted you to talk to me about?”

“She said her boyfriend wants to take a sailin' cruise, and I told her that you've got a charter boat available. She said they'd come by tomorrow and talk to you about it. I hope that's okay.”

“Sure, I appreciate the recommendation. I'd like to get out for a sail myself. Been busy with chores around here, and I need a little break. I'll look forward to seeing them tomorrow. And thanks.”

CHAPTER 2

The following morning, as Jake was cleaning up after the prior evening's gathering, a sixteen-foot runabout pattered into the canal and pulled up at his dock. He looked up to see Misty climbing onto the dock, wearing yellow shorts, a low-cut white peasant blouse, a baseball cap and large orange sunglasses. While she secured the bowline to a cleat on the dock, a stocky, balding man of about 40, smoking a huge cigar jumped onto the dock beside her.

"Captain Savidge?" he called out as he approached.

"Just call me Savidge," Jake replied as he admired the way Misty looked.

"I'm Ben Ardagian," the man said, sticking out a big hand, "Misty's friend. Big in office development in the Atlanta area. Maybe you've heard of me."

"Sorry, I was too busy on assignments outside the U.S. to follow real estate. What can I do for you Mr. Ardagian?"

"Well, I'd like to charter your sailboat for a few days. Misty tells me you know these waters and we thought we might enjoy some time sailing the Gulf."

"Bare boat?" asked Jake, "or captained?"

"I could sail her myself, but I'd prefer to have you do it. Give the little lady and me more time to enjoy each other, if you know what I mean."

Jake looked at the "little lady" and was sure he saw a look of displeasure on Misty's face. "And you, little lady? Is that what you wish also?"

"Ben wants to sail, so whatever Ben wants," she replied, "except I think one day would be plenty."

"Now Hon," Ben responded, "you know it's important for us to have this time together. Let's just get the damn boat for four or five days so we don't have to rush back. After all, I took off time from work just to be with you, so loosen up and enjoy it. How much, Savidge? You drive while we play."

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After glancing at Misty and seeing that she still looked worried, Jake replied “\$1250 for the first day, and \$950 for every day after that. Plus fuel, provisions, food, liquor, whatever you need. If you're going to need a cook to prepare your meals, that will be extra. Otherwise I can fix simple meals or we could make stops at marina restaurants along the way. “

“That's a little steep, ain't it? I mean a guy in Sanibel rented me a 38 footer last year for \$895 a day, including food.”

“Yep. It is a little steep, but you get what you pay for. Sanibel is only a few hours from here and I'd be happy to draw you a map if you'd rather go down there for sailing.”

“Naw, that's OK Savidge. It's only money, so no sweat. Made some serious bucks before the office market went in the toilet. We won't need a cook. The little lady here can help with the meals and we'll stop at marinas for the evening chow whenever its convenient. So I'll take 5 days, then. I'll give you a check for six grand, that ought to cover provisions, but let me know if you need more” he said, as he reached in his pocket and pulled out a checkbook. “Let's leave in the morning. I'll give you a list of the food we'd like to have. And booze. Be sure you bring plenty of Chivas Regal.”

“I don't encourage drinking excessively while we're at sea,” Jake replied.

“Excessively? Ha! Ain't no such thing, Skipper. Don't you worry about me being able to handle my liquor, Savidge. You just get us out there and leave us alone. I'll decide how much I want to drink.”

“Wrong, Mr. Ardagian. When you're on my boat, I'll decide how much is enough. I don't want drunks falling overboard on my watch. If you're not okay with that, then go somewhere else for your charter.”

Misty stepped between the two men. “Jake, it will be all right, I promise. Ben usually falls asleep when he's had a few drinks, and I'll keep an eye on him so he doesn't get into trouble.”

“Who asked you?” demanded Ardagian. “I'm payin' for the fuckin' sail, so I can do whatever the hell I damn well please. You won't have to worry about me, Savidge. I used to have my own 48-

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footer, a lot bigger than your little boat, so I've got plenty of time at the helm. Now why don't you just show me your charts so we can plot the damn course."

With misgivings, Jake brought charts out to the porch and laid them on the picnic table and together they planned a course, heading South along the coast and putting into Terra Ceia at the mouth of Tampa Bay the first night, on to Charlotte Harbor near Punta Gorda the second night, then sailing the ten thousand islands the third day before returning to Crystal River at the end of the sail. When they had completed laying out the course, Jake advised them to bring their belongings in duffle bags or soft luggage instead of hard suitcases for ease of stowing on board and safety in case they hit rough weather. Ben made out a list of provisions that he wanted for the trip, then took Misty's arm and led her back down the dock. He jumped into the boat and started the motor while she untied the lines. Jake watched at the seemingly effortless way Ben lifted her off the dock like a sack of potatoes and deposited her on a seat. Jake figured she weighed about 120 pounds, and was impressed. Misty gave a feeble wave as their boat departed.

Later that day, while at the local Piggly Wiggly grocery to pick up their provisions, Jake ran into Lady, and told her that Misty and Ben had come by to charter his sailboat for a five day trip. Lady looked worried.

"Jake, forgive me for sayin' so, but Misty is a dumbass fool." Jake looked confused. Lady shook her head and continued. "She made a big mistake hookin' up with that asshole. He treats her like shit. I've told her a dozen times she should leave him, but every time she puts some distance between them, he comes suckin' around, all kissy-faced and sweet as a jar of fresh honey. She just don't get it. That summabitch is two-timin' her as sure as hell. She oughtta leave him or deep six him instead of goin' sailin' with him."

"Not my call," Jake said. "I get lots of couples that would be better off apart, but they seem to enjoy making each other miserable."

"Well, Misty ain't one of them. Jake, listen, she had a rough time as a kid in her native country. Her folks was killed when she

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was young, so she came to the States on a student visa. She worked her little butt off gettin' an education and she deserves a lot better than that scumbag. I wish you'd talk to her, Jake. Help her to see the light."

"Look, Lady, I'm their boat captain, not their relationship counselor. When she's had enough, it's up to her to make a move. I learned a long time ago not to get involved in other people's problems. Besides, I may be going away for a while myself, so I won't have time to be a peacemaker. I'm sorry, gal, but this is not my worry."

Early the next morning, Ben and Misty showed up in Misty's car as Jake was throwing a spare swimsuit and a few toilet articles into his kitbag. Ben was ebullient, and he shook Jake's hand and told him how much they were looking forward to the next few days. Misty still looked worried, and seemed reserved.

Ben checked the provisions, then sat on the dock fussing while Jake loaded a handcart and carried their luggage from their car to his skiff. Misty sat in a rocker on the porch and petted the chocolate colored part-Lab, part-Shepherd dog that had climbed out from under Jake's deck then wandered over and sat beside her.

"What's your dog's name?" Misty called.

"I call him Tick, but he's not my dog," Jake responded.

"Tick? That's a funny name. Why did you name him that, and just who's dog is he?"

"He just showed up a few months ago when I was working on my house. He was hardly more than a pup, soaking wet, kinda skinny and covered in wood ticks and fleas. I dried him off and fed him some leftovers then took him to Doc Evers in the village. He cleaned him up pretty good, treated the bug bites and gave him some shots. Tick hung around for a few days after that, then disappeared as mysteriously as he came. He comes back every few days when I'm here, and just hangs out, so I guess he has other watering holes in the area too."

"He's a sweetheart. Very friendly."

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Just then, Ben wandered up towards the porch and shouted to Misty to get down to the skiff so they could get on their way. As he approached, Tick suddenly went on high alert and jumped to his feet. The fur on his back bristled and he stood in an attack mode, growling at Ben, teeth bared.

“Whoa. will you look at that!”, Misty exclaimed. “No more Mister Nice Guy, huh, Tick?”

“Hey, Savidge, call off your damn mutt,” Ben shouted to Jake.

“He's not my dog, and he's harmless,” Jake answered. “Never saw him growl at anyone before. Guess he's just trying to protect what he thinks is his.”

“Well, Ben can sure relate to that,” Misty said.

“What the fuck's that mean?” Ben demanded.

“Come on, let's go for a sail,” Jake said, grabbing Ben by the arm and turning him towards the dock. “Skiff's loaded, so everyone on board.”

Misty smiled and gave Jake a meaningful look, then dutifully walked down to the dock and boarded the skiff.

With everyone on board they were ready to depart. Jake cast off the lines and motored out to his sailboat in the harbor. He tied up alongside, boarded first, then guided them up the boarding ladder before going below to give the engine a final check before departure. The helm was located on the aft deck under a Bimini top, where he opened the fuel valve and switched on the ignition, then hit the starter button. The engine turned over and caught, so Jake let it idle for a while as he went back into the skiff, and using a deck-mounted davit with a battery-powered lift cage, he raised the luggage and provisions up to Ben on the deck. Then he secured the skiff to the buoy, untied the bowline leader from the sailboat and re-boarded. After giving them a quick tour of the boat, he helped them to stow their gear and went aft to raise the stern anchor. When he returned to the helm, Ben was standing there with his arms folded, looking impatient.

“Come on, Savidge, let's get this show on the road,” he said.

Jake just gave him a look, then eased the throttle lever forward and they were on their way. They ran down the Bay past several

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small islands and out into the Gulf, with Jake navigating to avoid the shallows and sandbars prevalent in the area. Misty joined Jake under the canopy and told him she would be happy to take on the piloting chore when they were clear of the traffic. Jake showed her the compass, GPS system, depth and speed indicators, and when they had sufficient water under the keel he turned the helm over to Misty while he busied himself with the roller furling to set the foresail and mainsail. They had a strong following breeze out of the northeast and after turning off the engine and trimming the sails, he unfurled the spinnaker and set a south by southwest course to take them off of St. Petersburg.

For the rest of the morning, Jake and Misty took turns at the helm while Ben sat on the bow, swigging from a 6 pack of beer and watched passing ships and dolphins. By early afternoon, they were approaching the Tarpon Springs area, and Jake went down into the galley to set out the lunch of sandwiches and salad that he had prepared the night before and had loaded on the boat with the provisions. After lunch, Ben and Misty went to their cabin, and all was quiet for about an hour until Jake heard some shouting, followed by a banging hatch. Ben stormed up the passageway onto the deck and plopped down on a bench seat near Jake.

“Fuckin' broad!” he muttered. “You try to be nice, and what do you get? Tell you something, Savidge, when I was big in real estate, I had women fallin' all over me. Got me more ass than a toilet seat. Since gettin' hooked up with miss prissy Misty, it's like I've been in the fuckin' deep freeze, you know what I'm sayin'?”

“You're keeping score?” Jake asked, with a puzzled look.

“Fuckin' right I'm keeping score. I gave that broad plenty. Nice apartment she can use anytime, nice car, travel to great places, everything. And what do I get in return? Nothin'! Not a fuckin' thing.”

“Well, I'm no expert, pal, but maybe what you're giving Misty isn't what she wants or needs.”

“Ha! The fuck you know? I don't see you saddled with no millstone broad. I don't need no advice from a fuckin' boat jockey who'll never amount to nothin'. You don't seem to understand that

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when you pay for somethin', it's *yours*, and you can do whatever the hell you want with it. That bitch don't understand it neither. Always bustin' my balls."

"Look, it's obvious that you two aren't exactly enjoying this cruise. Why don't I just come about and head back to Crystal River? We could still make it back tonight under power. I'll refund your money for the rest of the sail."

"Nah, fuck it. Let's do it the way we planned. I'll take her into town for dinner tonight. Maybe a good meal and some expensive champagne will defrost her."

Jake just shook his head and wondered how he had gotten saddled with yet another rich asshole.

The sail towards the mouth of Tampa Bay brought them off Tierra Verde by late afternoon. Misty had donned a white, broad-brimmed straw hat and a coral bikini that left little to the imagination, and was sunbathing on the forward deck. Ben spent most of the afternoon in his cabin below. He reappeared on the deck in the late afternoon, staggering slightly and with two drinks in his hands. "Sun's over the yardarm, Cap'n. Want a little hair of the dog?"

"I can wait," Jake said. "Why don't you bring one to Misty?"

"Ah, she probably don't want any," he said, giving her a disgusted look. "She should be getting my drinks, to make up for the way she's been acting. But does she? Nooo. Just lays on her fat ass doin' nothin'."

"Better go easy on the booze, pal. We're still over an hour out of port, and it may be dark by the time we anchor. How about taking a seat and putting those drinks in the holders so they don't end up all over the deck?"

"S'matter Savidge? Afraid you're going to have to swab the decks?" Ben laughed. "Don't worry, if they spill we can have the broad clean them up."

"Look, Ardagian, I've had about enough of your bullshit and complaining. Either shut up and stop your bitching or I'll drop you off at Gulfport and you can drive back to Crystal River."

Misty had gotten up off the forward deck and was standing near the hatch to the galley, wrapped in a beach towel. When she heard

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Ben's remark and Jake's retort, she walked over and stood in front of Ben with her hands on her hips. "Better listen to the man, Ben. I think he's serious."

Ben scowled, stood up, and threw his drink over the side. "There! You happy?" he shouted, then stomped down the ladder to the galley.

"I'm so sorry," Misty said. "We never should have come on this trip. I didn't want to, but Ben insisted. Said things would be different this time. They never are. We don't belong together, and I've been telling him that for a long time. He thinks he owns me, and doesn't want anyone else to be with me, even though we're both miserable together."

Misty sat down and looked out over the side of the boat. She was silent for a few moments, then continued, "It wasn't always like this. He used to be kind, a good sport, even had a good sense of humor when we started seeing each other. Seems like he can't get over the fact that his big time real estate business has gone belly-up. He managed to put enough aside to live comfortably, but he's angry all the time, and he takes it out on me and on everyone around him."

"Look, I try not to get involved in these things. Maybe you two should seek professional help."

"I've tried, but Ben won't hear of it. Thinks it means he's weak, and God knows he's anything but weak. He's strong, physically, but he's not mentally tough. He tries to make everyone else feel small."

"Be careful; he's got a lot of pent-up anger, and most of it seems to be directed at you. Just what went on in your cabin this afternoon that set him off? I heard shouting."

Misty put her hands to her face as though to stifle a sob, then removed her sunglasses and looked into Jake's eyes. He could see the slight swelling of one eye and that she was on the verge of tears. "Ben came down here convinced that I was going to forgive all his transgressions and come crawling back to him, but that's not going to happen. He was at me again after lunch today, groping and demanding. I pushed him away, and he slapped me, hard, knocked me down, then stormed out of our cabin. I imagine he gave you an earful."

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Jake's expression took on the look of a man suppressing great anger. His jaw tightened and his knuckles turned white as he increased his grip on the wheel, then balled his hands into fists and pounded the helm. "Damn! Listen", he snarled, "that's not going to happen again, not on my watch. If he touches you again, let me know and I'll throw his sorry ass overboard."

Misty smiled a rueful smile and shook her head. "Please don't. I detest physical violence," she said. "I won't have you two going at each other on my behalf. I can put up with him for a couple of more days, but when we get back to port, it's over. I've threatened to leave him more than once. This time I'm ready to say goodbye."

"Ben said he wants to take you into town tonight for dinner, to make up to you. Do you want to go?"

"He'll end up getting drunk, as usual. I don't want to go. I won't be able to get him back to the boat. But if I refuse, he'll blow up, and I want to avoid that. Maybe a good meal will help the situation."

"If you'd like, I'll call ahead and reserve a table for you at the restaurant. They shouldn't be too crowded this time of year."

"No", Misty said, "I'll take care of it when we get there. Ben wants to stay ashore overnight, but let's see how the evening goes."

Jake just nodded and took a deep breath, then peered off the port bow. "Look, there's a storm moving in up ahead. They're common this time of year, but usually don't last long. We're coming up on Egmont Key light and that's Anna Maria Island dead ahead in the distance. The entrance to the Bay will be off the port bow. We have about a ten-mile run to anchorage, and it looks like we may have a little weather before then, so you might want to go below. With this following wind, we should arrive by sunset. If the storm has passed by then, I'll run you both ashore in the dinghy and pick you up when you're ready to return."

An early twilight had crept in behind the storm, and dusk drained all light from the day as the *Semper Fi II* came to anchor at the south end of Tampa Bay. The breeze had dispersed the storm clouds and the few remaining were no longer gray and backlit by the lowering sun, but pink and orange and purple and underlit by a dim

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radiance from the occasional buildings and street lights now lining the shore. When they were securely anchored, Jake lowered the dinghy over the stern. Ben had changed into tan slacks, open-necked sport shirt and a navy blazer and Misty was wearing a pale blue wrap-around skirt. They made a handsome looking couple, and Ben had somehow managed to sober up. They climbed into the dinghy and Jake ran them to a nearby marina dock with a brightly lit restaurant and bar. Ben asked him to pick them up at 9 am the next morning, then Jake watched as they strolled up the dock and disappeared into the restaurant at the marina.

When he re-boarded his sailboat, Jake stripped to his shorts, turned on the ship's lights and checked the stern boarding ladder before diving off the side. He swam hard for fifteen minutes in circles around the boat, checking out the hull. Then he climbed onto the boarding platform, toweled off, and went below to prepare dinner.

It was the middle of the night when Jake was suddenly awakened from a deep sleep by an unusual noise. He was used to waves lapping on the hull and the normal sounds of a boat riding at anchor, but now a sudden calm had descended on the anchorage. And this sound was different. He sat up in his bunk and listened, halted by a crawling sensation on the back of his neck, by a feeling that all was not right. He soon identified the sounds of a small boat approaching, first nudging the port side of the sailboat near the boarding ladder, then leaving. By reflex, he was on his feet in an instant and had slipped a .357 magnum out of the drawer in the night stand next to his bunk. He slid out of his cabin into the darkened galley, grabbed a flashlight from a wall mount and stood by the foot of the ladder to the main deck. Waiting, holding his breath, waiting while hearing only the rhythm of his heartbeat. Then the hatch slid slowly open, and after a moment, footsteps crept down the ladder. Jake pointed his gun at the approaching figure, turned on the flashlight and shouted "Freeze, asshole!"

A startled Misty screamed, "Jake! It's me!"

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Jake blew out his breath and threw on the lights in the galley. "Misty, what the hell are you doing sneaking in here, and where's the scumbag?"

"If you mean *my* scumbag, he's at the police station or maybe the hospital. I'm not sure which, and I don't care."

"What happened? Is he hurt?"

"Another fight. Ben loves to get into fights, especially with someone smaller than him, and almost everyone is. This time he picked on a little guy who had asked me to dance and then he sucker-punched him. The guy's buddy cracked Ben over the head with a beer bottle, then the two of them proceeded to wipe up the floor with Ben. The cops came, and hauled them all off to jail."

"Oh, Christ. I guess I'd better go bail him out. Do you know what jail he's in?"

"No, and I don't care. Let him rot, for all I care. He was okay for the first hour or so that we were together, but after the third drink, he turned nasty and started riding me again, calling me names. That kind of stuff. This little guy saw I was catching hell, so he tried to get me out to the dance floor to give me a break from Ben. He might as well have tried to steal Ben's wallet, or any other piece of his personal property. Ben just lost it. Went crazy. Even after the guy's pal bopped him, he staggered around for a while until the little guy and his friend bounced him off the wall a few times. I guess they were using Karate or something. They sure flung him around a lot. Broke a few tables and chairs. Boy, what a mess."

"I'm so sorry, Misty. This trip's had bad karma from the beginning. I'll take you both back tomorrow."

"No, just take me back. I don't want to see him again, ever. I've spent too much time being degraded by him, and I don't need any more of it. If we take him along, he'll just take it all out on me. Blame me for everything. It's all happened before, so I know what to expect."

"I understand, Gal. You look beat. Can I get you anything? Coffee or brandy?"

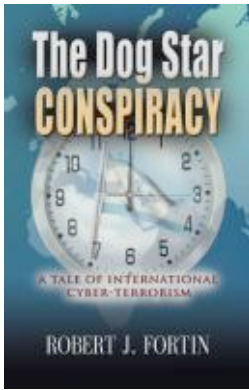
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“Coffee with a splash of brandy if you don't mind. And if you're up to it, I could use a friendly shoulder to lean on. These last couple of days have exhausted me. I'm an emotional wreck.”

Later, they sat side-by-side on a bench in the galley, sipping their coffee while Misty poured out her tale of woe and Jake consoled her. Finally, she was all talked out, and she leaned back, then fell asleep with her head on his shoulder. He carried her to her cabin, covered her with a sheet and returned to his bunk. Before dropping off to sleep, he found himself worrying about this Miss T, and wondering where this was all going.

Early the next morning, Jake called the local police station and learned that Ben had been treated for a head wound and various other lacerations and bruises. He had spent the night in the local hospital, and was being transferred to the jail. He also learned that Ben had called an attorney, but a judge would not be available for a hearing to set bail until late that afternoon, so Ben would spend the day in jail. About 9, Misty awoke refreshed and when she learned that Ben was all right, told Jake that she wanted to go back to Crystal River as soon as possible. He tried to talk her out of it, but finally agreed in order to avoid further conflict.

When they left the harbor, the wind had shifted to a stiff following breeze out of the south-southwest. Under full sail, they made good time returning to Crystal River, taking turns at the helm, and Misty insisted on fixing their lunch. They arrived back at King's Bay by late afternoon and made it ashore before dark. Jake shared some of the leftover bounty from his potluck supper with her, then said goodbye when she left to drive back to Karl and Lady's house.



An unknown terrorist organization threatens Israel, world oil supplies, and oil platforms off the coasts of Nigeria and the US soon come under attack. Investigation into the attacks leads to a suspicion of all those benefiting from unrest in the mid-East, and brings the area to the brink of a nuclear conflict. A special envoy appointed by the President uncovers information suggesting a conspiracy at the highest levels of Government.

The Dog Star Conspiracy

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