



Josh Alexander embarked on a scuba diving vacation in the Bahamas aboard the Sea Explorer, a sailboat used for island hopping and scuba diving. What he didn't know was that the ocean would move the dive boat towards its dangerous destiny. The Final Voyage catapults the casual reading traveler into watery depths only divers could perceive. You won't be able to come up for air.

The Final Voyage of the Sea Explorer

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The Final Voyage of the *Sea Explorer*

Douglas Boren

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Dedication

To Bruce, my best friend and dive buddy. Without you, most of the events in this book would not have happened.

June, 2003

The Third Day

As everyone was eating breakfast that morning, Captain Bill made an announcement. “I know you guys would like to get in as many dives as possible on this trip, and I don’t blame you. But it’s up to me to be sure to give you the best quality dives I can. There are some world class dives up around Grand Bahama that I want to take you to. Therefore, we’ll only do three dives today with no night dive. This afternoon we’ll make our way north and be in Grand Bahama by morning.”

“Sounds cool to me, Cap’n,” Jimmy said.

“Good. We’ll start off this morning with something real easy. See that wreck sitting mostly out of the water over there?”

Everyone turned to look. There was a hulking concrete monstrosity, full of holes and looking more like a bombed out building than a shipwreck. The water must have been shallow there for so much of the superstructure to be showing.

“That’s the *Sapona*,” Bill continued. “Made of concrete and ran aground back in the thirties after an illustrious career as a rum runner during prohibition. It used to sit a quarter mile south of there, until a hurricane moved it a few years ago.”

Captain Bill took a couple of gulps from his coffee mug and went on. “The most interesting thing about the *Sapona* is its role in the history of the Bermuda Triangle. As you know, we are in the Bermuda Triangle. Well, for years the *Sapona* was used for target practice by US naval planes. In December 1945, a training squadron of five Navy torpedo bombers out of Ft. Lauderdale was returning from a bombing run. After radioing a series of distress messages, they simply disappeared without a trace. A seaplane was sent to search for them, and it vanished also. One of the Bermuda Triangle’s biggest mysteries.”

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Josh grinned. He loved the history of the sites they were diving. First Atlantis, and now this. How cool!

As dives go, however, the *Sapona* was pretty average. Max depth was only 20 feet, and the empty shell of the old ship had very little to offer.

There were plenty of fish, though. The two boys discovered their first puffer fish...a Porcupine (or was it a Balloon?) fish slowly swam by them, unconcerned. It was about twice the size of a softball, and was very awkward and slow. Josh came close to it and grabbed it softly in both hands. Jimmy came alongside and started man-handling the creature.

Terrified, the puffer fish did the only thing it could do... its *only* defense. It suddenly inflated, growing at an astonishing rate, its pointed quills elongating. Soon it was the size of a basketball.

It drifted aimlessly through the water, and it's now projected sharp quills made it impossible for the boys to hold on to it. They watched it for some time, and then finally had the mercy to let it go.

About fifteen minutes later, as the two friends were making their way back to the boat, Josh noticed something worrisome. He saw a diver, sitting on the bottom, leaning against a coral head. His arms were across his chest and his head was bowed. That he was still breathing was apparent from the regular puffs of bubbles floating to the surface, but still, he looked like he was in trouble.

They finned their way over to him as fast as they could. To their surprise, they recognized Rick! What was going on?

Josh shook him by the shoulder. Rick slowly raised his head and blinked his eyes. Jimmy gave him the "OK?" sign, and he returned it. Amazing as it seems, Rick had been sleeping! Sleeping underwater! Josh shook his head, and motioned that they return to the boat. Somewhat groggily, Rick nodded his agreement.

Once aboard, Josh exclaimed, "Dang, Rick! Were you *sleeping* underwater?"

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“Yeah, I guess I was. I’ve been so tired these past few days, I couldn’t help it.”

Jimmy said, “Sheesh! I never expected anyone could sleep underwater. I’d think your regulator would drop out of your mouth and you’d drown.”

Somewhat sheepish, Rick agreed. “You’re right. It was a dangerous thing to do. I didn’t really mean to, but it just happened. I’m sorry I scared you.”

Josh said, “Rick, you were dang lucky. You know better than that.”

“I know. It won’t happen again.”

Josh and Jimmy shook their heads in wonder at each other. “Now we’ve seen everything!”

* * * * *

Fifty miles to the north, Maurice Vega was sweating in his sea side home in Port Lucaya. The cool sea breeze coming in through the window did little to improve his disposition. He was scared, and felt helpless to do anything about it.

Although he wasn’t necessarily a bad man, he wasn’t what you’d call a model citizen either. He dabbled a bit in the drug trade around the islands on a small scale, and conned some unsuspecting tourists now and then, but always managed to keep his nose clean enough to avoid the law.

Most of his passion the last three years had been his search for the Black Widow’s treasure ship. Dive after dive had produced nothing. Along the way, many of the local Bahamians he questioned warned him of the “curse” attached to the fabled treasure. It wasn’t meant to be found, they had said. Stories of his predecessors who had tried were filled with gruesome details of their untimely deaths.

He dismissed them with contempt. He was an educated man, after all. No superstitious mumbo-jumbo was going to get in his

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way to become rich. Rich beyond his wildest dreams. That is until...

Bah! He shook his head. Just a bit of bad luck, wasn't it? Yeah, right...bad luck that cost the lives of all of his divers.

He remembered being so *sure*, this last time. After all his false leads and dead ends, this last expedition seemed to finally be the real thing. And when his sonar detected the metal object consistent with the long lost treasure, he was ecstatic. He was sure he had found it! He knew the location was dangerous, but felt he could pull it off. No thoughts of the stupid curse even entered his mind. He was consumed with "gold fever", just as countless others before him had been.

But in the end, his prize eluded him. In the end, he was alone. In the end, he was broke, with nothing to show for it. He barely made it back to Grand Bahama when his boat caught fire, and sank just outside the channel leading into the port. He narrowly escaped death again. Was there something to this curse after all?

And now the authorities were looking for him. What they wanted, he couldn't say. Something from his colorful past was coming back to haunt him. He had to get out of town, and soon.

But that was the *least* of his worries. He'd borrowed heavily from a top underworld figure to finance this last expedition. With nothing to show for it but his own miserable hide, he was sure "The Man" would not be pleased. No sir, not pleased at all. He shuddered at the thought of what he would do to him.

Pacing his small room, he took another swig of Rum right from the bottle. His hands were shaking. What was he going to do? He had to leave...as soon as possible. Get over into the States, and melt away in the masses, where he couldn't be found. But how? He had no money, and felt sure that "The Man" was watching him.

A cold shiver ran down his back. He seemed doomed. Maybe there *was* something to this curse after all. Nothing good ever befell anybody who searched for it, including him. True, he was

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still alive, but for how long? And he had lost everything, hadn't he? He sobbed, and took another swig.

"I'll figure something out," he thought. "Something's *got* to come up! But it better be soon. I'm running out of time."

Outside his window, a solitary figure stood in the shadows, watching him. He would continue watching him until the boss told him otherwise. No, Mr. Maurice Vega wasn't going anywhere without him knowing about it.

* * * * *

The second dive of the morning would have been rather boring, except for one thing. It was their first real shark encounter.

Rock & Roll Reef was so named because at the bottom was a statue which Rick said was Ted Nugent. The boys weren't sure if he was kidding or not, but he was adamant...they'd see when they got down there.

Well, sort of. They found the statue all right with no problem. It was lying on its side at the depth of 25 feet. Its head and both hands were gone. Perhaps a victim of vandalism, but there was no way the identity could be confirmed. Josh thought it was more likely a statue of Christ, but if Rick said it was Ted Nugent, who was he to argue?

The dive site was somewhat barren. There were a few patches of coral here and there, but most of it was open sandy bottom. It was like an underwater desert.

Without much coral, there wasn't much fish life, either. Although they did see a couple of puffer fish, and a couple of Spotted Morays, there wasn't much to hold their interest.

Jimmy cupped his hands in a "V", giving the "boat" signal, as if to ask if Josh was ready to go back. They'd been down about 45 minutes, and Josh would much rather have spent his time with Holly. The dive was pretty much a drag, so he gave the "OK" sign and they started swimming back towards the *Sea Explorer*.

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They'd gotten about half way, when Josh suddenly felt the cold tingle of fear run down his spine. From behind them, and overtaking them rapidly, swam a shark, just 15 feet below. It swam right between the two boys, who stopped, nearly frozen with fear.

They'd never even had a clue that it was out there, sneaking up on them. If it had wanted to, it could have easily taken a bite out of either of them before they knew what happened. They watched, awestruck as the six foot long gray shape silently swam beneath them, then in front of them. His heart pounding, Josh hoped they would be all right. Finally, with just a few swishes of its massive tail, the shark disappeared into the murky blue beyond.

Their adrenalin pumping, the two friends got back aboard ship as fast as they could. Josh was just shrugging out of his BC when he panted to the First Mate, "Jojo...there's a big shark down there. At least six feet long. Should we sound the recall for the other divers?"

Jojo laughed, his white teeth framed by his black face. "No, mon. Dat be just a little Caribbean Reef Shark. Dey be no problem, mon."

"How do you know?"

"I know, cuz dis be de Bahamas, my young friend. No bad sharks live here. Dere may be Caribbean Reef, Blacktips, a few Blues, and mebbe an occasional Bull Shark."

"Bull Sharks?" Josh exclaimed. "Aren't they dangerous?"

Jojo shook his head. "Not usually, mon. Dey not interested in you bubble blowers. Dey be looking for dere own kind of food. Now if you be on de surface...or carryin' fish you got spearfishin'...dat be a nutter story. But *usually*, if you be on de bottom, in mid water, dey don' bother 'wit you."

Feeling himself calm down, Josh said, "I hope you're right. Man that was scary. He came right up behind us, and we never even knew he was there."

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Jojo laughed, "If you 'tink dat wuz sumptin' wait till tomorrow."

"Why, what's tomorrow?"

Jojo smiled broadly. "Tomorrow we be *feedin'* de sharks. You be down dere 'wit 20 or 30 of dem. Now *dat* be excitin'!"

The two friends looked at each other with wide eyes and gulped. They weren't sure about this.

For lunch that day, they had tostadas and tacos. Josh caught up with Holly in the galley just before the lunch bell rang.

"She's beautiful and she can cook, too! What a woman," Josh teased.

Holly smiled and said, "You know it, buster. And don't you forget it, either."

Josh took her in his arms and held her close. They were alone momentarily, and he just needed to put his arms around her. She responded by hugging him close and offered her lips to him. They kissed, at first tenderly, and then passionately. She moaned with pleasure, and he felt his heart melt with desire.

"Oh, Josh...I feel I'm getting so close to you. I'm so glad we found each other."

"So am I," he whispered. "So am I."

They looked deep into each other's eyes, their love growing. For a moment, it was as if the world around them disappeared, and no one, or no thing mattered.

"Okay, you two," joked Jimmy as he came down the galley steps. "That's enough of that."

Embarrassed, they broke their embrace, and Josh said, with a smirk on his face, "You're just jealous."

"You're darn right I am," smiled his best friend.

* * * * *

In retrospect, Josh would realize it was the dive on Cockroach Reef that was the beginning of the sour turn of events that would

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befall them. That was when the happy, carefree holiday began to change into an ominous series of events that presaged the fate of the *Sea Explorer* on its final voyage.

They had started north towards Grand Bahama shortly after lunch, leaving the Bimini Islands behind. By four o'clock, they were in the middle of nowhere, not a speck of land in sight, in any direction. Josh wondered how there could be any dive site in the midst of all this open water.

The sky was overcast, but the seas were calm. Then quite unexpectedly, Captain Bill, using his GPS coordinates knew they had arrived and dropped anchor.

At first, the dive was one of wondrous, impressive beauty. It was a mountain of corals, surrounded by sand, all alone in the middle of nothing else. It was massive. It stretched for about two acres in a circular dome shape, rising from the bottom at 50 feet deep, to a height of 20 feet.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands of coral heads had coalesced into a mound that was honeycombed with tunnels and swim-throughs; crevasses and grottoes. The multiple colors of hard and soft corals were dazzling. Gorgonians and Sea Fans waved slowly back and forth in the slight current. It was one of the most variety laden reefs they had ever seen. Numerous species of fish were teeming on this one spot. Its beauty was unlike anything they'd seen before.

Jimmy was in the lead, shining his dive light into the crannies, when they found the opening to a cave at the bottom, right at the edge of the 'mountain.' It was a coral cave, the entrance just slightly larger than their bodies, and it proceeded deep into the mountain as far as the light beams could go.

Jimmy entered first. It was a tight squeeze, his scuba tank scraping the coral above him. He went in about ten feet, and then the passage took a left turn, and went up at a slight incline as it went on even deeper into the coral.

Josh tried to follow, but the kicking of Jimmy's fins had stirred up the sand and silt so badly, his visibility dropped to zero. He felt the sting of panic trying to creep into his brain, but he fought it off. Feeling claustrophobic now, with the walls of the cave touching both shoulders, and seeing nothing, he stopped. He couldn't chance going any further. He could get lost in a passage, or worse, stuck in a narrow confine and surely drown when his air ran out.

He hollered out for Jimmy to stop, and he clanged on his tank to get his attention, to no avail. Jimmy was far beyond him now, alone.

Josh tried to turn around but the cave was too narrow. Fear rising now, he had one single minded purpose: to get out! He *must* get out of this cave! The silted chamber still blocking his visibility, Josh scooted backwards, pushing himself with his hands. He knew he'd only gone in a few feet and felt sure he would back out into the open water quickly.

As his feet, then his back, and finally his head emerged from the cave entrance, Josh felt reassured when he was at last back in the sunlight. But Jimmy was still in there, and going in even further.

Getting really scared now, Josh swam over the surface of the domed shaped coral, searching. He could see Jimmy's bubbles rising through the coral, getting deeper and deeper into it.

"No, my God, no," he thought as he swam over them. He shone his light down, through the small openings, but could see nothing.

Desperately, he searched across the surface of the mountain, hoping to find another large opening, a place where Jimmy could exit. But all he saw were small pockets, no bigger than a person's head, punctuating the reef, like so many craters on a moonscape. He could see *no* exit for him!

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Still the bubble trail showed that Jimmy was going ever deeper into the maze of the coral cave. Josh just couldn't see how his friend could *ever* find his way out!

Not knowing what else to do, he returned to the cave entrance. He really didn't want to go in. But Jimmy was his best friend; his dive buddy...he had to try something. Perhaps if he went in and found him, he could lead them back before they both ran out of air.

He checked his air gauge and was dismayed to see that he only had 1,000 pounds left. He was breathing much too fast! He tried to force himself to relax.

In terror, he had entered the cave only about half the length of his body when he stopped. The visibility was still zero from the silting that had occurred from their fins. Josh realized that his chances of even finding Jimmy were slim, but with his added silting of the passage there would be no way for the two of them to find their way out.

Feeling a mixture of relief that he wasn't going in, and reluctance at abandoning his only plan, Josh again scoured the coral mountain's landscape. He looked and looked, but no longer could he see Jimmy's bubbles rising through it.

He was nearly consumed with panic now. He felt certain that Jimmy was dead. A shiver of fear and doom rippled through his body. "What am I going to do?" he thought.

Josh had given up hope, and was about to return to the boat, when suddenly, from out of nowhere, he saw Jimmy swimming towards him, free in the open water. He wore a wide grin on his face and appeared not the least bit concerned.

Josh felt a wave of relief wash through him. He didn't know how, but some way, Jimmy had found an exit and freed himself. He signaled to his friend that the dive was over, and headed back to the boat.

As Josh struggled out of his dive gear on the slippery deck, his relief was replaced with anger.

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“My God, Jimmy, I thought you were dead! I couldn’t see any way you could make it out of there.”

Jimmy was putting on a macho front, and said, “It was exhilarating. I loved it.”

“Dang, Jimmy, don’t you remember our training? We are *not* cave divers! No training, no equipment. We were always told never to enter a cavern deeper than the outside light goes in. You broke all the rules.”

“I wasn’t worried. I could still see light coming down from above. I knew there had to be an opening.”

“Yeah, but that opening may not be any bigger than your head. Just because you see light, doesn’t mean you can fit through it and get out!”

Jimmy now turned sheepish and said, “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I wasn’t thinking, was I?”

“No! And you scared me to death! Please...don’t ever do that again!”

Jimmy looked at the deck, unable to meet his friend’s eyes. “Okay. I won’t.”

* * * * *

That night, Holly had made a whopping pot of Spaghetti, which everyone wolfed down ravenously. Diving is, after all, strenuous on the body, and their appetites were healthy.

Josh’s anger towards Jimmy was diminishing and he didn’t feel he needed to say any more about that afternoon’s close call. When Rick heard about it, he also chided Jimmy over it, and Josh hoped the lesson had been learned.

After dinner, the two friends helped Holly clean up the galley so she could spend some time with them on deck. The *Sea Explorer* was underway again, crossing the open sea towards Grand Bahama. There was a nice breeze, not too hard, as the seas were rolling, giving just the right sway for the little ship. The

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afternoon's clouds had dissipated and the night sky was resplendent with the twinkle of a million stars.

As usual, the deck was populated with small groups of three or four people here and there. They were re-living the day's dives, and swapping stories of other trips they'd been on. Rick's guitar strumming provided a peaceful ambiance to the evening.

Holly sat between the two friends on the starboard side bench. She'd pulled on a windbreaker to protect herself from the evening chill.

Jimmy observed, "Man, I just love the Bahamas. There is so much to see, and the diving is even better than I thought it would be. Holly, you're really lucky to be able to live and work down here."

She said, "I know what you mean. When the Spanish discovered them back in the 1400s they named them the 'Bajamar.' It means the shallow seas. There are over 700 islands and cays scattered throughout, most of them uninhabited. Makes for terrific diving and a great place to live a laid-back life style. The Spanish never found the wealth they were looking for, but now we know that the coral is the wealth found here today."

Josh said, "I wish *I* could live here. It has everything I want. I'll be back as often as I can, that's for sure."

Holly took his hand. "That would be so nice. I wish you *could* stay. I like having you around."

Josh squeezed her hand and said, "It's not just the islands and the sea that draws me here. It's you, too."

Jimmy kidded, "All right you two love birds. I can take a hint. I'll make myself scarce."

"You don't have to, partner," Josh protested.

"No, stay, Jim," Holly said.

"Nah, it's getting late, anyway. I'm going to hit the bunk. Big day tomorrow...*Theo's Wreck*, Sharks...gotta be ready."

“Suit yourself,” Josh said. “When you get down there, throw me up my pillow and blanket.”

“Huh? You’re not coming down?”

Josh stretched, looking up at the night sky. “No, I think I’d like to sleep on deck, under the stars tonight. It’s awfully pretty.”

“Okay, buddy. Catch you in the morning.”

Holly and Josh talked the rest of the evening away, long after midnight, long after the other passengers and crew had gone to bed. They learned so much about each other and learned how their feelings for each other were growing, making them even closer.

With the deck to themselves, except for the helmsman at the aft of the boat, Josh stretched out on the deck near the bow, with Holly beside him.

It was a magnificent night, so quiet except for the soft lapping of the water against the hull, and the boat gently rocking in the waves. The night sky was like lush black velvet, with the stars appearing as brilliant diamonds against it.

They lay in each other’s arms, staring at the sky for the longest time, saying nothing. They were content to just hold each other and take in the beauty that surrounded them.

After a while, the helmsman popped in a tape, sending music through the speakers around the deck. It was “Dark Side of the Moon,” by Pink Floyd. It was the perfect touch for such a wondrous night. For such an incredible beauty and feeling.

Josh pulled her close to him and kissed her lips. She responded eagerly, passionately. It was the most exciting, and fulfilling kiss either of them had ever known.

“Holly,” he breathed. “I think I’m falling in love with you.”

“Oh, Josh...I feel it, too. I don’t ever want to be without you again. I wish it could be like this always. I love you, too.”

“Stay with me tonight. Sleep on deck here. No one will mind.”

She hugged him close, and kissed him. “There’s nothing that would make me leave you tonight. This is a special night.”

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“It’s the night we fell in love,” he said.

“Yes...it is.”

So they slept in each other’s arms, lulled into peaceful serenity by the music, the waves, the stars. But mostly by each other.



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