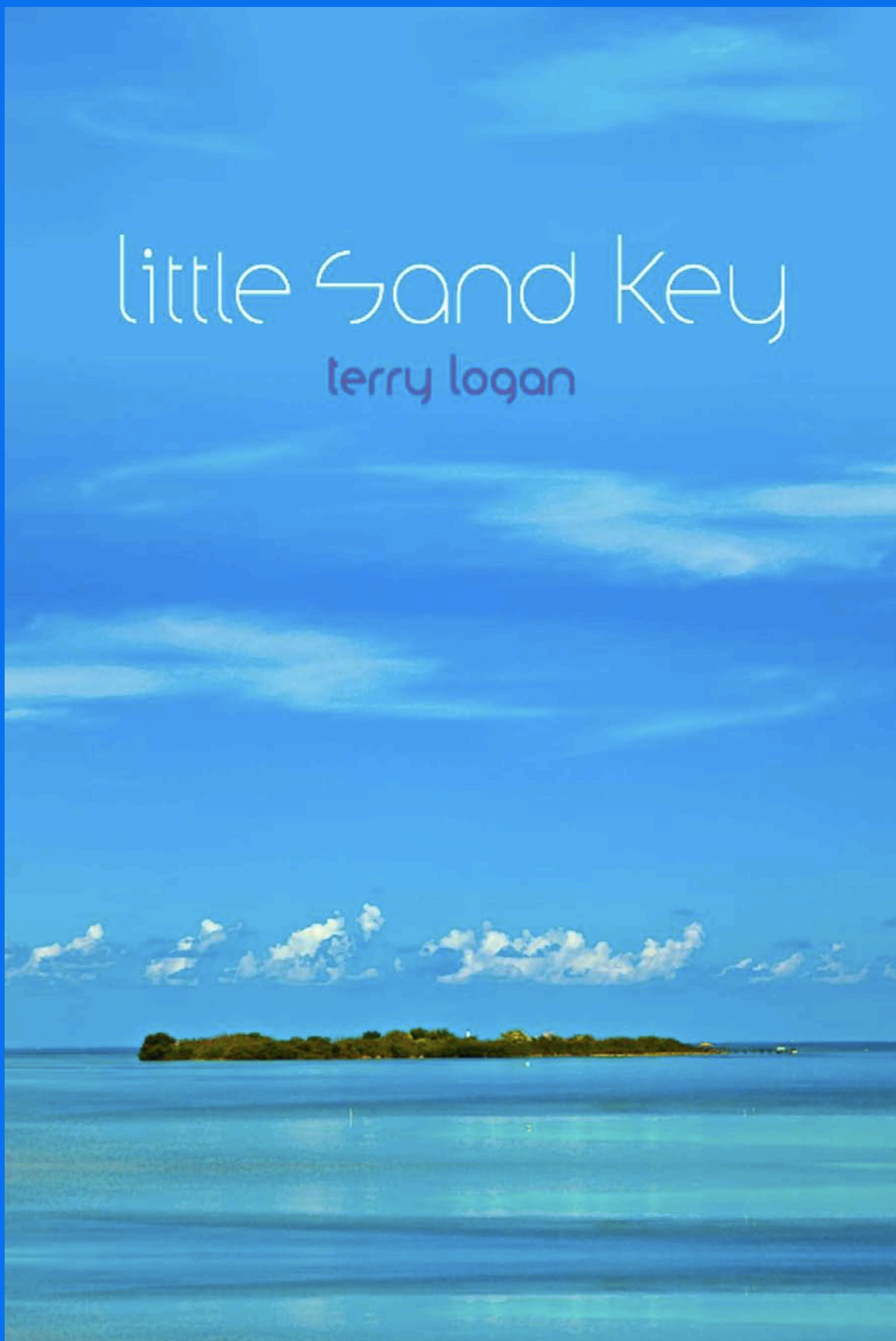


little Sand Key

terry logan





A government environmental scientist, Dr. Jerry Raven, discovers that corals in the Florida Keys are dying. His research as to the cause leads him into the murky waters of illegal offshore dumping of toxic chemical waste. As he gains more insight into what is happening, he becomes the target of the perpetrators who want to shut him up and must defend himself on the small island he calls home. He is a former Recon Marine and skilled in the art of small arms operations, a skill he will need as his pursuers close in.

Little Sand Key

by Terry Logan

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LITTLE SAND KEY

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First Edition

LITTLE SAND KEY

Terry Logan

*This book is dedicated to all the friends I have made over the years in Key West in winter
when the rest of the country was freezing.*

Chapter 1

The Florida Keys are among America's greatest treasures. With the Atlantic Ocean to the south and the Gulf of Mexico to the north, the Keys are a necklace of coral islands stretching west from Key Largo to its terminus in funky Key West. U.S. 1 is the string that holds these pearls together, a slow moving two-lane divided highway that annoys the hell out of visitors on their way from Miami to Key West. The islands and the surrounding waters are rich in biological diversity and the human population is pretty diverse too.

Jerry Raven was on his way home by boat from his job on Marathon Key. It was six pm in December and the sun was already low in the western sky; there was a cool breeze in his face as he headed west at fifteen knots in his eighteen-foot center console fishing boat with a bimini top and two one hundred horsepower four-stroke outboard engines. He kept the boat in good shape although it was his workhorse and transportation rather than pleasure craft.

Jerry worked for the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in their marine research lab on Marathon Key. When he mentioned that he worked for NOAA he was invariably asked if he was a hurricane hunter. He was in fact a marine biologist and studied corals.

Jerry was born in Tampa to the most dysfunctional family he had ever known. And they were poor too. His father was an alcoholic who worked, when he was only mildly drunk, cleaning boats in the Tampa Bay marinas. He had served in the Marines in Vietnam and had picked up a taste there for cheap PX booze. His mother was a waitress in a succession of tourist restaurants in Tampa Bay. She had a hysterectomy a year after Jerry was born from a particularly vicious beating his father gave her when she refused to give up her tips to feed his habit. She left shortly afterward to live with an older sister in North Carolina. She must have gotten on with her life because Jerry never saw her again. He was placed in a series of foster homes after his father was deemed incompetent to raise him. His foster parents weren't bad but they had too much on their hands to pay special attention to a lonely young boy. The other foster kids were another story. Jerry was little and scrawny and the other kids picked on him mercilessly, but they taught him a lesson he would never forget – face whatever is in front of you and never back up. He took his lumps but learned to fight back against the foster kids and the school bullies.

He was one of those kids who spring up overnight and by the time he was sixteen he was six feet five inches tall on a whippy one hundred ninety pound body. He wore his auburn hair long and he had pale hazel eyes that changed to green in the sun. He proved to be a natural athlete and played forward on the basketball team and was wide receiver in football. He was too poor to have hobbies – he worked in the marinas and in fast-food restaurants – but he loved the water and taught himself to swim and free dive in the clear Gulf waters. In spite of a neglected upbringing, he proved to be a natural student, particularly in biology. He was fascinated by the marine life he saw in the Gulf – all

manner of fish, crabs, shrimp, lobsters, clams, and oysters. He hung out with the charter captains, worked his way on board some of the boats as a gofer and absorbed everything he saw or could extract from the sailors.

Jerry's SAT scores were high enough to get scholarship offers to play basketball and football at several state schools but he wasn't ready for that life. As is the case with many children abandoned by their parents, he felt he had something to prove to himself - that he was a person of worth. He enlisted in the Marine Corps immediately out of high school and took the bus north to the Marine Recruit Center on Parris Island, South Carolina. He was a natural soldier. He handled the physical demands easily and relished the solidarity and sense of family that the Marines build in their young recruits. After graduation, he was sent to the Advanced Infantry School at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Because of his obvious physical skills, intelligence and eagerness, he was recruited as a member of the Marine's Force Recon. As a Recon Marine he acquired all of the weapon and tactical skills of a special operations warrior and his specialties were communications and hand-to-hand combat.

His unit was inserted into Iraq in 2003 at the start of the second Gulf War to provide reconnaissance for the Marine expeditionary forces that spearheaded the Coalition advance on Bagdad. His unit stayed in country for most of 2003 and 2004 with only a short respite stateside in early 2004. In November 2004 his Recon company was heavily engaged in the Battle of Fallujah in combat that has been compared for ferocity to that of the Battle of Hue in Vietnam in 1968. He was hit in the face with shrapnel that missed important features like eyes and mouth but left him a scar that gave him a permanent grin. They also dug shrapnel from his stomach and arms.

He left the Marines in early 2005 and returned to Tampa, the only home he'd ever known. He rented a one-bedroom apartment just off the beach and was pondering his next move and recovering from his wounds.

"Mr. Raven?" the well-dressed middle-aged man said when Jerry answered the doorbell.

"Yeah, I'm Raven."

"Jerry Raven?" the man asked politely.

"That's me." Only the Marine Corps knows where I live, he thought.

"I'm sorry to bother you Mr. Raven but I'm an attorney for your grandfather."

"I have a grandfather?"

"Yes Mr. Raven. Your grandfather lived in San Diego and lost track of his son, your father. When he found out his and your circumstances he changed his will to leave you an inheritance and an island in the Florida Keys. It's a very small island and I had difficulty finding it on the map but I was able to secure a copy of the deed in Tallahassee and the

island does exist and he was the owner. I say ‘was’ because he died two months ago and my firm was hired to settle his estate. So, if you will let me come in, we can go over the paperwork and I’ll be on my way.”

Jerry let him in and pointed to the small couch in the living room.

“Can you tell me something about my grandfather?” he asked, sitting in the old rocker next to the couch. “My father never mentioned him.”

“Well, from what I’ve learned, he immigrated from Ireland after WW II and settled in Southern California. He worked in the aircraft factories and saved his money. He brought a young woman from Ireland to be his wife and they had your father who was a wild one and disappeared after high school. He hired private detectives to track your father to Florida. Your grandfather invested in the real estate boom in San Diego and made a small fortune. Your father was their only child but your grandfather was reluctant to entrust him with what they had made. He kept tabs on you though and was proud of your accomplishments. When your grandmother died he decided that you would be his heir. He gave most of his money to charities in San Diego but he wanted you to have the island he bought years ago on a whim and enough money to make a start for yourself.”

Jerry signed the papers numbly and saw the lawyer to the door. The attorney had given him directions and a map to the little island, and the next weekend he headed south on I-75 to Alligator Alley and then south again on U.S. 1 in his ancient Jeep. The island was just off the Gulf side of Boca Chica Key. He arrived in the area in early afternoon after stopping for lunch at a rustic open-air restaurant at the seven-mile bridge. He turned off U.S. 1 onto a side road towards the Gulf and parked in a public beach access area. A couple and their family were picnicking on the narrow beach and a Hispanic man was fishing off a coral shoulder that jutted out into the clear blue shallow waters. The island was about a mile off the beach. It was low, no more than six or seven feet above the water, from what he could tell, and covered in sparse vegetation – mostly sea grape. What the hell am I going to do with an island, he thought. How am I even going to get to it? He had passed a small marina on Boca Chica Key on the way in, on the Gulf side, and decided to see if he could rent a small boat to get to the island.

A deeply tanned older man was hosing down a fishing boat moored to the marina dock when Jerry pulled into the parking lot.

“Excuse me,” he said, standing on the dock and looking at the man with shaded eyes. “Do you have any boats to rent? I only need one for a couple of hours.”

“What kind of boat do you want and what are you going to use it for?” the man asked, putting down the hose and wiping his hands on the back of his shorts.

“It’s a crazy story but I just inherited a little island about a mile off the Gulf side and I have no way to check it out.”

“You inherited an island?” the man laughed, looking Jerry over. “What the hell are you going to do with an island? And by the way, down here they’re called ‘keys’.”

“Mister, I have no idea what to do with it but at least I’d like to take a look at it.”

“I tell you what,” the man said, jumping up on the dock. “I’m done here for now. I’ve got a little fifteen-foot runabout and I’ll take you out there. I’m curious to see what you’re talking about. My name’s Jack Spraul. I charter out of here – I moved down after getting out of the Marine Corps and Vietnam in seventy-two.”

“Jerry Raven,” he replied offering the man his hand, “and I’m ex-Marine too. Just got back from Iraq and moved home to Tampa when I found out about the inheritance. I appreciate you taking me out.”

“No problem kid – we Marines need to stick together. The boat’s over here.”

Jerry jumped in the little center-console fishing boat and sat in the bow seat. Jack pushed off and throttled the fifty horsepower engine.

“Which way Jerry?” Jack asked as they entered the main flats area. The water was an incredible blue and was no more than five or six feet deep. Jerry could see coral heads interspersed with sandy bottoms. Hell, I could wade to the island, he thought.

He located it by the sight of the picnicking family on the shore.

“Right here – on your right,” he shouted over the engine noise. “That’s it, about a mile out.”

“I know this key son. It’s always been deserted but some of the local kids go over there to party. Never knew who owned it but I guess you do now.”

Jack slowed the boat as they neared the island and circled it, looking for the best spot to beach. The island was oval shaped with the long axis parallel to Boca Chica Key and was no more than ten acres in size. As Jerry had estimated, it rose about six feet above the waterline and there was a five foot wide sandy beach on all sides. The surface of the island was broken coral and the area was grown up in sea grape and mangrove. They beached the boat on the Gulf side and Jerry helped Jack pull it up on the sand.

“Well boy, there’s not much here but you could build a cabin if you wanted,” Jack said, looking around. “That’s what most people do with these little keys.”

“Seriously?” Jerry replied dubiously. “How would you get building materials out here and what would you do about electricity and water?”

“The building contractors down here use rafts they power by outboard motor. They use them to build houses and boat docks. As for electricity and water, electricity is the

easiest. In case you haven't noticed, this is the Sunshine state. Solar panels on the roof will provide all the electricity you need and you could even install a small windmill if you wanted - we get good steady breezes here. Water is more difficult. You can catch some rain off the roof in a cistern but you'll need to bring in water by boat unless you can get the county to let you run a water line from Boca Chica Key over here."

They motored back to the marina and Jerry shook hands with his fellow grunt.

"Thanks Jack. I haven't decided what I'm going to do with this place but I'll probably come down from time to time to check it out. Maybe one day I'll build a house here - I'm paying the taxes on it anyway."

"Stop by and see me if you decide to build. I know all the contractors and I can tell you which ones to stay away from."

Chapter 4

The air was cool and the sun was still low in the eastern sky as he turned from Truman Avenue onto U.S. 1 for the short ride to Boca Chica Key. Traffic was light, except near the Catholic Church where cars and pickup trucks were pulling in for the Saturday flea market. What do people do with all that junk, he wondered. He hadn't inherited any family heirlooms from his family and Marine enlisted men don't accumulate much between deployments. He had deliberately furnished his house sparsely with an oriental touch he picked up when he was stationed in Okinawa.

He took the dinghy over, checked his email, fed Lux and headed back to the dinghy, dog in tow.

“I swear to god Lux if you don't get in this damn boat I'm going to turn you in for a golden retriever! They love the water.”

His toe propelled the dog into the dinghy where it cowered as he slipped the line and powered up the little outboard.

“And quit sulking or I'll leave you in the boat.”

He headed north on U.S.1 with the top down, Lux sitting up in the passenger seat and throwing gobs of slobber his way when the wind gusted off the Atlantic. His mind was on his research and the dying coral patch he had discovered off Cudjoe Key. He suspected that some toxic chemical was causing the decline in zooxanthellae in the corals and he wanted to consult with one of his colleagues who was an expert on marine water quality and who, he knew, worked Saturdays.

The NOAA station on Marathon Key was located on the Gulf side and consisted of a half dozen tan-colored one-storey cement block buildings. A dock for research vessels extended from the narrow beach adjacent to aboveground metal tanks of various sizes that held a variety of marine organisms and fish. Three other scientists and half a dozen technicians occupied Jerry's building. His cramped office had a solitary window and was across a long hallway from the labs that housed dozens of aquaria with marine specimens.

He and Lux went looking for his colleague, Dr. Susan Collins, in her lab. Susan was five years younger and three years senior to him. A graduate of Duke University's marine sciences program, her specialty was the effect of anthropogenic chemicals in marine waters on the fragile ecosystems of the Keys. She was married with a young son and daughter, which in Jerry's mind was a total travesty of justice because she was the hottest scientist he had ever met, yet was totally oblivious to the effect she had on him and any other breathing male.

“Hey Sue,” he said, entering the lab. “Working again on Saturday huh? Are you trying to get away from that worthless husband of yours? I would never let my wife out of my sight if she was as hot as you are.”

“Hi Jerry,” she smiled, ignoring his comments and scratching Lux’s ears. “What’s up?”

“Got a minute?” he asked as he pulled up a lab stool to where she sat.

“Sure. What’s on your mind and don’t give me the answer I think you will,” she laughed.

“OK. Here’s the deal. I found a large patch of coral about a hundred acres in size off the Gulf coast of Cudjoe Key about five miles out. It has the most severe bleaching I’ve seen down here and I’m trying to find out what’s happening. Microscopic analysis of individual coral polyps shows that the zooxanthellae are completely absent. So I’m figuring some kind of toxic substance is the root cause. Got any ideas?”

Susan puzzled it over as she continued to scratch Lux’s ears. “If you’re thinking toxic substances that’s the wrong area. It’s pretty pristine and its protected. It could be a natural toxin, perhaps from algae – that has been reported in the literature elsewhere – but those compounds are ephemeral and almost impossible to detect unless you know what to look for.”

“What would you do?” Jerry asked, wishing she were scratching his ears.

“I guess I would start with a priority pollutant scan of the corals themselves and the water column. The scan includes over one hundred man-made toxic organic compounds and about a dozen heavy metals. Get me the samples and I’ll ship them to our lab in Virginia. We should have results in about a week.”

“Thanks Sue. I think I’ll go out and sample today. I’ll have them in your office Monday morning. Do you have time for lunch with an incredibly handsome ex-Marine and an equally useless dog?”

She laughed and rubbed noses with the doting animal. “I’d love to but I really need to get some work done. Maybe next week.”

Jerry went to his own lab and got sample containers that he placed in a nylon duffel bag. I can get out there yet tonight, he thought. The water is only about five feet deep and I can see the coral with an underwater flashlight. He headed west on U.S. 1 with a tired Lux lying on the passenger seat. He transferred his bag to the dinghy and for once didn’t have to urge the dog onto the boat. He hadn’t eaten all day and it would be late when he got back from sampling so he grabbed a beer and some leftover barbecue from the fridge and went out to the patio after feeding the dog. The sun was lying low in the western sky and the blue waters of the Gulf were calm. Good weather for sampling, he thought.

He'd decided to take about twenty samples each of the coral and the overlying water randomly over the affected area and record coordinates of each sample site on his onboard GPS. The Gulf waters were a little cool at this time of year – about seventy degrees – and he decided to wear a light, rubber upper body wet suit. He added flippers, snorkel gear and a high-intensity waterproof flashlight to a nylon-mesh diver's bag. At the last minute he grabbed his old 1911 Colt 45 from a drawer in the kitchen and checked to make sure the clip was full. He almost always carried a weapon when he was out in his boat.

He closed the French doors behind him after telling Lux to stay and headed for his boat. He had recorded the location of the dead zone previously on his GPS and he called the program up as he pushed off from the dock. The course took him northwest and he motored at about fifteen knots with full running lights on. The sky was a deep pink now and the sun had just dropped below the horizon. He saw a couple fishing boats with lights on heading east to Boca Chica Key or maybe even Marathon, but for the most part he had the waters to himself.

He throttled down the boat when the GPS display showed he was in the dead zone. He would make three transects over the area, stopping periodically to anchor, slip over the side with his snorkel gear and flashlight, take the samples and place them in his mesh bag. He estimated it would take about two hours but in fact it took much longer. I should have waited until next week and brought one of my technicians with me to handle the boat while I sampled, he thought, but as a scientist unanswered questions frustrated him and he wanted to get to the bottom of the puzzle that lay beneath the boat.

It was pitch black by the time he reached the northernmost range of his last transect and had only two more samples to collect when he picked up the sound of a boat coming towards him from the northeast at slow speed. He couldn't see it. They must be running without lights, he thought. Who, except an idiot, would do that on a dark night? There's something about this I don't like, he thought, as he doused his own lights and reached for the automatic he had placed on the dashboard next to the steering wheel.

The sound of the approaching boat increased as it neared and then stopped. He still couldn't see the boat but he could hear male voices across the quiet water. They must be about a mile away, he thought, and what the hell are they doing out here in the dark at this time of night? The voices continued and then were joined by the repeated sounds of loud splashes as if something large was being thrown overboard. He counted a dozen splashes. What are they throwing overboard, he wondered, and why? The boat remained in place and the voices continued, but intermittently, as if the men on board were waiting for something. They could be out there all night, he thought, and maybe it's just kids partying and skinny-dipping. He powered the boat up and slowly retreated from the area with his running lights off. He must have been heard because the other boat immediately turned on a powerful light that swept in his direction and caught him in its beam.

Shit, he thought, as he threw the throttles forward. The other boat started its engines and followed, keeping the light beam on his stern. I need to get the hell out of here, he

thought. I have no idea who these guys are but they didn't like me spying on them. I can't lead them to the island but I might be able to lose them if I head for the Refuge and slip under U.S. 1 between Little Torch Key and Ramrod Key. I can get to the marina on Big Pine Key and get help if they follow me that far. I just hope they aren't locals who know their way around as well as I do.

He had a faster boat than they did and moved out of range of their light as he neared Little Torch Key and slipped under the roadway to the Atlantic side. He stopped the boat near a mangrove patch on Ramrod Key and listened for their engines but it was quiet. They must not know these waters, he thought. He waited a half hour then motored west on the Atlantic side before re-crossing the highway at Boca Chica Key and heading home.

He hauled his gear and the samples to the house and let himself in. He was exhausted and unsure what to do next. He sat on the porch with Lux and drank a beer while he contemplated his options. I could call the Monroe County Sheriff's office, he thought, but what do I tell them? I didn't see anything that could be construed as illegal. I could go out there in daylight and see what they may have dropped in the water or I could just forget about it. Yet, he had a nagging suspicion that there might be a correlation between what was going on out there and the patch of dying coral. As a scientist, he was highly suspicious of coincidences. But why dump things overboard that can be seen in five or six feet of water? Or maybe the water is deeper where they were. He went inside to his office, booted up his laptop and opened Google Earth; in recent years it had been upgraded to include topographic features of the world's oceans. He knew the GPS coordinates of the dead zone and figured the other boat had been about a mile north of there. He zoomed in to the general area, looking for underwater features that indicated depth changes. What he found was a trench about two hundred yards wide and five miles long, running in an approximate east-west direction and showing a depth of about one hundred feet. He went to one of the NOAA web sites and pulled up an underwater topographic map of the Keys. Sure enough, there was a trench in the area and the depth varied from seventy to one hundred twenty feet. So, you could hide something fairly big in there and no one would find it unless they knew where to look. OK, he thought, I'm going to check it out but I'll have to scuba dive to get that deep and I'll need a dive partner. He was a skilled scuba diver from his stint in the Marines and he belonged to a dive club on Boca Chica Key. I'll get one of the guys to go out with me, he decided, and then went to bed.

Chapter 6

Jerry was woken Sunday morning by the sun pouring through open windows in the bedroom and Lux nuzzling his hand to go out.

“All right, all right. Give me a minute.”

He threw on a pair of shorts and sandals and opened the back door. Lux shot out and headed for his favorite spot to do his business. He let the dog finish and then walked him three times around the island – a necessary daily routine for a big dog. He returned and made breakfast and fed Lux then went down to the first floor to check out his scuba gear. The tanks were full and he thoroughly tested the breathing gear. I’ll stop by the dive shop later today, he decided. Someone is bound to be there and I can sign up a partner to dive with me next week.

He was restless. Miriam was working and there was nothing he could do about his growing puzzle until the next day. He decided to stop in the Amvets Club on Islamorada where he had made friends with a few ex-Marines, one of whom was Jack Spraul. He threatened Lux into the dinghy and took off. It was a perfect Keys day – the sun was overhead in a cloudless sky and the waters on both sides of the highway were a shade of blue so intense no photograph could do it justice. The abandoned highway bridge was swarming with fishermen and dozens of flats boats and party cruisers were on the water. Traffic was light and the church parking lots were full.

The Amvets Club was in a strip mall on the Atlantic side of U.S. 1. It was windowless and only a single glass door gave entry to a large dimly lit room. The air conditioning was pumping out cool dry air and the long bar was lit by competing Budweiser and Miller signs. The jukebox gave out Johnny Cash and four guys played pool and nursed longneck beers in a corner. The rest of the room comprised wooden tables, chairs and booths, each lit by a hanging lamp. The walls carried the regimental emblems of generations of American warriors, about twenty of whom had decided to spend the day inside. Jerry made Lux sit inside the door and looked around. He recognized several of the men, including Jack, perched on a stool at the bar. He went over.

“Hey Jack,” he said, sitting down next to his friend and ordering a beer. “Get one for my friend too.”

“Thanks kid. What’s keeping you inside on a day like today? I’m surprised you’re not in Key West with that wild thing you’ve been telling me about.”

“I saw her on Friday and once a week is all I can handle with that one. I had a rough night and I thought I’d cool off in here. Doesn’t the Board ever look at the electricity bills and think about turning the thermostat above sixty?”

“What kind of rough night? Don’t tell me you’re risking your life cheating on that hellcat,” he laughed.

“No, nothing like that. I don’t have a death wish. But something weird did happen.”

He detailed the events of the night before and his run in with the mystery boat.

“You’ve been around here a long time, Jack. Have you ever heard of anything like I’ve described going on in this area?”

“Not really. There have been instances in the past when boats from the Caribbean have come into these waters and dropped off watertight packages of heroin and cocaine and bales of marijuana. They leave a buoy that looks like the float on a crab pot to mark the spot and then smaller boats come in to pick up the stash. But nothing recently since the DEA and Coast Guard increased their surveillance.”

“Anyway, I’m going to dive next week in the area I heard the boat. There’s a trench there about a hundred feet deep that you could hide pretty much anything in. You want to come with me and tend the boat? If not, I’ll get someone from the dive club.”

“Yeah, I’ll go. Its nearing Christmas and chartering is slow. By the way, I know about that trench – it’s unusual to have one that deep in these shallow waters. It would be a good place to hide contraband if that’s what’s up.”

“OK. Let’s plan on Tuesday. I’ve got work to do in the lab on Monday.”

Jerry slid off the stool to talk to some of the other Marine vets he knew. He hung around for an hour or so, trading war stories before leaving to get lunch at an outdoor place on the water near the north end of the island. The sun was warm and the place full with locals and tourists on their way to and from Key West, the latter wearing their new Key West tee shirts. He ordered a beer and conch chowder and got the waitress to bring a bowl of water for Lux who was sitting under the table – he was not a sun worshiper. He reflected on his good fortune to live in paradise on his own island, have a sexy though volatile girlfriend and a great job that allowed him to play in the water.

“OK dog, we’re out of here.” He left a good tip and got Lux moving with the toe of his sandal. He eased the Jeep into traffic and pulled behind an RV with Minnesota plates towing a Toyota Corolla. He was looking forward to just sitting on his back porch and reading the latest murder mystery on his Kindle and maybe taking his kayak out if he had the energy. He had put on a couple of pounds since he left the Marine Corps but stayed in shape by working out at a dojo on Marathon. He held a second-degree black belt but had no ambitions to advance despite the urgings of his master. Other than that, his exercise was kayaking, snorkeling and scuba diving.

He had just rolled onto the seven-mile bridge and was taking in the scene that always held his gaze - the Atlantic and Gulf waters mingling across the artificial divide - when

he saw her for the first time, a tall young woman with long blond hair in a ponytail with a lightweight pack on her back. She wore khaki shorts on slender hips that tapered to incredibly long athletic legs and a white tank top. She was striding purposefully on the narrow berm and looking back as if hoping for a ride.

Girl, you shouldn't be on this bridge on foot, he thought, and someone that looks like you shouldn't be out here alone anyway. Drivers in front were slowing down and rubbernecking but not stopping. Jerry put on his flasher lights as he pulled up beside her. She looked startled at first, then stopped.

"Look lady," he said motioning Lux to get in the back seat and opening the passenger door. "It's dangerous to walk on the bridge. The berm is too narrow. Get in and I'll drop you off wherever you're going."

She looked at him for a moment with the deepest blue eyes he had ever seen before jumping in the passenger seat and throwing her pack on the back seat next to a curious dog.

"Where to?" he asked as he slowly picked up speed.

"I don't know," she said nervously. "I'm from Miami and I don't know this area."

Great, he thought, another runaway. Daddy must have taken away her cell phone or some other crisis had caused her to leave home.

"Look, it's none of my business, but did you run away? Are you in some kind of trouble?" he asked gently.

Tears began to form as she held herself tightly and looked down. "I don't know you mister, but I'm scared. I ran away from home and I'm frightened." With that she started sobbing, her head in her hands.

"Don't cry lady. Look, let me pull over and we can talk. There's a parking lot coming up." He gently placed his arm on her shoulder. She didn't resist and he kept holding her until he pulled into a sandy parking area on the Atlantic side with a couple of empty parked cars. He pulled up to the water's edge and killed the engine.

"OK," he said, turning towards her and gently pulling her hands from her face. He gave her a Kleenex from the box he kept in the back seat. "Let's start with your name. Mine is Jerry Raven. I live a few miles from here and I'm a government scientist. I work on Marathon Key – you passed it on your way here. Now what's yours?"

She wiped her eyes and blew her nose before looking at him desperately. "My name is Vera, Vera Makarova."

“That’s a pretty name Vera,” he said trying to calm her down and get her talking. “Sounds Russian or Ukrainian.”

She nodded. “I was born in Moscow and moved to Miami when I was thirteen to live with my uncle so I could attend a tennis academy in Fort Lauderdale. My father died when I was very young and my mother remarried. I last saw her about four years ago when I returned to Moscow for a tennis tournament but she wasn’t very interested in seeing me.” She started crying again.

“But that sounds like a good life to me,” Jerry said, handing her another Kleenex. “You should be thankful to have a relative like your uncle.”

“I’ve lived with him in Key Biscayne ever since I came to America. He’s very rich and he’s treated me well until now. I tried to make it in the pros but didn’t have much success, mostly because I wasn’t that good but I also had a bad shoulder injury. Now I just live in his house and teach tennis to kids on the public courts in South Beach.”

“What’s wrong with that, Vera,” he said. “Why would you want to run away?”

She paused, shaking her head before looking directly in his eyes and whispering.

“Because I saw him have a man killed and he discovered that I had witnessed it! He threatened to kill me if I ever told anyone and has kept me in the home as a virtual prisoner. I had to get away and now I don’t know where to go. I’m sure he’s sent his men to find me and bring me back. I’m so scared.”

“What does your uncle do?” he asked, trying to take in what he’d heard. “Why did he kill that guy?”

“I assume it had something to do with drugs. He’s a dealer. As I grew older I suspected he was into something crooked. We lived in a very expensive house and he was always evasive when I asked him how he made his money – something about real estate.”

“So how did you happen to see this person killed?” he asked.

“It was an accident,” she went on, sitting back in the seat and staring out to sea.

“The house is on a canal and he keeps his boat docked there. It’s big and has three staterooms. Sometimes, after I’ve had a fight with him, I’ll sleep on the boat. Anyway, about a month ago I decided to stay on the boat. He was away from the house and only the maid and one of his goons were around. I snuck on the boat without either of them seeing me. I was sound asleep when I felt the engines start up and the boat begin to move. I didn’t know what to do. I crept to the stateroom door and I heard voices above that I didn’t recognize. We were out about half an hour and I decided I’d better let them know I was there. I didn’t want to be on board not knowing where the boat was going.”

She shuddered and looked at him again.

“I was opening the sliding glass door to the rear deck when I saw two dark shapes wrestling with another and the sound of screaming and yelling. The two men just threw the other guy overboard. It happened so suddenly that I screamed in shock. They turned around and I could see that they were two of my uncle’s men. They grabbed me, locked me in one of the staterooms and held me there until we got home. They hauled me into the living room where my uncle was sitting with another of his men. His men wanted to kill me but my uncle said no, he could handle me. I ran away two days ago and hitched rides until you saw me.”

Jerry’s mind was racing. He had seen sudden and violent death in Iraq but he couldn’t imagine the terror this young woman must have felt, still felt.

“So where were you planning to go when you left? Do you have friends you can stay with? Did you think about going to the police?”

She shook her head helplessly. “I don’t know. I just knew I had to leave. I have tennis friends in Fort Lauderdale and Miami but he knows who they are. I’m sure his men are watching them.”

“And the police? They’ll protect you.”

“No! I can’t go to them. He’s got connections with the Miami police. He gives money to the retired police officer’s association and he hires some of them off-duty for security. Besides, it’s my word against theirs. There were no other witnesses.”

She started crying softly, her hand across her eyes. “You’ve got to help me mister, I don’t have anyone else. I don’t know what to do.”

Jerry debated. The girl’s story sounded real, and if it was, she could be in danger. He had friends at Amvets who were officers in the Monroe County Sheriff’s office but he sensed that if he took her in she would clam up. I’ve got to calm her down and then come up with a plan, he decided,

“OK, Vera, here’s what we’re going to do,” he said, trying on a smile and handing her another Kleenex. “You’re coming home with me. I live alone on an island and you’ll be safe there. Then we can sit down and decide what to do next. How’s that sound?”

She nodded and wiped her eyes. “Thank you, Jerry,” she said softly. “Thank you for believing me.”

He pulled the Jeep back onto the highway and the girl scrunched down in her seat. He pulled into the parking lot and lowered his seat back so Lux could get out. The girl retrieved her pack and got out tentatively.

“How do we get to the island?” she asked dubiously.

“That little dinghy,” he said striding to the boat, Lux in tow.

He jumped in, held her arm as she cautiously put her foot on the transom, and directed her to the bow seat. Unfortunately that was Lux’s seat and he growled his displeasure at that and the thought of another water voyage.

“Get in this boat now! I don’t have time for this, dog,” Jerry yelled as he reached over and grabbed Lux by the collar, hauled him over the transom and threw him on the floor.

Vera watched the scene with curiosity, a small smile playing on her lips. A good sign, he thought.

“What’s the matter with him?” she asked, turning around to scratch the dog’s neck. “German shepherds are supposed to be ferocious and fearless. At least they are in Russia.”

“Well this is America, Vera,” he said as he steered the little craft away from the beach, “and this sad specimen is what we’ve done to a noble breed.”

She laughed. Another good sign, he thought, and the combination of her smile and the melody of her laugh gave him goose bumps. My god, he thought, she is the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. She was unaware of him staring at her as she turned to look for the island.

He grabbed her pack and helped her out, followed by Lux right on her butt.

“Welcome to Little Sand Key,” he said waving in a three hundred and sixty degree circle.

“This is your personal island, Jerry? How is that possible?” she asked, taking in the view and the house.

“There are hundreds of little islands down here in the Keys and some of them, like this one, are inhabited. I inherited mine from my grandfather and I built the house a couple of years ago.”

They entered the back door and Jerry gave her a quick tour of the house. He pointed out the guest bedroom that had never been occupied. The bed, bureau and nightstand were plantation white and the coverlet a bright yellow pattern. The walls were pale yellow and louvered French doors opened to the back patio and a view of the Gulf. The bathroom was high tech stainless steel and granite with an enclosed glass shower.

“There are towels, shampoo, soap and all that stuff in the closet in the bathroom. Let me know if you need anything. That backpack doesn’t look like it could carry much.”

“Thank you Jerry,” she said, starting to cry again as she looked around. “I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t found me.”

“Ssh, ssh,” he said putting his arms around her. “It’s going to be all right. You’re safe here and we’re going to figure out what to do. But right now we need to think about food. I’m hungry and I bet you are too. I’m going to have a drink and sit on the patio for a while and then I’ll make something for us.”

She followed him into the kitchen, Lux happily on her tail.

“What do you like to drink Vera?”

“What are you drinking Jerry?”

“In the evening when I’m home I always have a vodka martini, up, with olives.”

“Wow! That would put me under the table. I don’t drink. I’ll have some orange juice if you have it.”

They took their drinks to the patio and sat next to each other in rockers, Lux at Vera’s feet.

“You’ve got a new friend, Vera. He’s isn’t usually friendly with people.”

“He’s a very nice dog even if he’s a baby.”

“He’s that all right. Now, let’s talk about you. My guess is you’re in your early twenties – certainly not a minor anymore. What’s kept you in your uncle’s home if you sensed he was up to no good?”

“It’s hard to explain Jerry,” she said seriously, staring out to sea. “He’s all the family I have. Yes, I’m an American citizen now but I still feel like I’m a foreigner. I have friends but they’re just that – friends. And I never made enough money on the tour or teaching to live on my own. I guess the good life spoiled me. And I’m twenty-five, since you asked.”

“I guess I understand all that, Vera,” he said looking at her. “I never knew my mother, my father is a drunk who abandoned me, I was raised by foster parents and the only other home I knew until now was the Marine Corps.”

“How come you’re not married, Jerry?” she asked shyly. “You’re not bad looking, you have a great job, I guess, and you have this wonderful home. Every woman’s dream.”

He shook his head. “I was deployed most of the time when I was in the Corps and I was too busy and too poor when I was in graduate school to date. Since then I’ve only met a few women, none of whom rock my boat, including my girlfriend in Key West who is crazy.”

“If she’s so crazy, why do you see her?”

“Because she’s sexy crazy and likes me. But she’s too much for me. She’ll wear most men out. Look, I’m going to go make dinner. I’m starved.”

This I want to see, Vera, thought. Her uncle’s house had several servants including a very good Cuban-American cook. None of her friends’ fathers cooked. Most people in Miami didn’t cook anyway - they just ate out. She followed him to the kitchen, dog in tow.

Jerry showed her how to make a tossed salad and he grilled mahi-mahi steaks he got at the Boca Chica marina a few days before. He made yellow rice and announced for dessert they would have key lime pie he had picked up on Friday at Faustos in old town Key West. He opened a chilled bottle of sauvignon blanc, got more orange juice for Vera and filled Lux’s food bowl. They ate in the dining room and Jerry felt like they were a family, a very bizarre but comfortable family.

She helped him clean up and he suggested they go back on the patio; they watched the moon and stars reflect off the mirrored surface of the quiet Gulf waters. He gave her one of his Marine drab sweaters to wear over her tank top and Lux settled at her feet. She pulled her legs under her and hugged herself and looked out at the spectacular sight. He said nothing - just gazed at this beautiful, sad and scared young woman, looking at her like a father would a child but also like a man entranced by a young woman in full bloom. They sat that way for what seemed like hours, each caught up in their own thoughts.

“It’s time for bed, Vera. I’ve got to get to the lab in the morning. I know you’re scared so I’m going to take you with me. I’ll show you where I work.”

“I don’t know, Jerry. I don’t want to stay here but I don’t have any other clothes. I have a credit card if you can take me to a store.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said pulling the sweater up around her shoulders. “We’ll get you something to wear before we go to the lab.”

“Wait a minute,” he said, realizing what she had said. “Did you say you have a credit card?”

“Yes,” she said. “I took my credit card and cell phone. I never carry money.”

“Vera,” he said, turning in his chair to face her. “Where have you used your credit card since you left Miami?”

“I used it to get lunch in Homestead and I spent the night in Islamorada in a Holiday Inn Express. I paid for lunch in Marathon today. That was the last time.”

“And your cell phone, Vera, have you used it since you left?”

She looked at him, worried. “I called one of my friends in Fort Lauderdale. I told her what I was doing and swore her to secrecy. I had to talk to someone. She won’t tell anyone – I know she won’t.”

“Vera, listen to me very carefully,” he said. He pulled his chair next to hers and held her hands in his while he looked her in the eye.

“You’re now in danger. Your uncle can check your credit card charges in real time online. He’ll know by now that you’re in the Keys and probably heading for Key West. That will buy us some time. As for your friend, I hope you’re right about her but I have to assume your uncle will get to her eventually.”

She curled up in a ball, not looking at him. “Jerry, I’m so stupid. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Vera, it’s OK. This is not your life, but it was mine once. Just do everything I say. We have to keep you undercover, away from the places they would look. Very few people know about this island and who lives here, so we’re safe. I know you’re scared but I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise.”

He held her in his arms and let her cry softly. Lux sensed her pain and nosed under her arms until she pushed him away with a kiss on his face.

“Look,” he said, pulling her out of her chair. “It’s late and we need to get an early start. No one is going to get you here. I keep guns in this place and I know how to use them. Lux may be the wimp he is but he’s a trained guard dog and he’d lay down his life for us. Go to sleep and we’ll worry about tomorrow in the morning. And leave your credit card and phone in your room,” he added.

Jerry had never slept soundly since he joined the Recon Marines where most of their operations were conducted at night and behind enemy lines. He kept a gun on his bedside table and slept in shorts in case he had to get up in a hurry, a carryover from raids in Iraq in the desert heat that never abated much at night. He was amused and a little pleased that Lux chose to sleep in Vera’s room. He hoped it made her feel safer but he also missed the furry ball at the foot of his own bed.

The nightmare was vivid – a young Iraqi girl screaming in the grips of two American soldiers on the outskirts of Fallujah. He had his M-4 pointed at the two men, telling them to leave her alone. The screams persisted until he woke and realized they were real. He reached for his gun and tore into the hallway to the sounds coming from Vera’s bedroom. He burst in to find her sitting up in a sweat and Lux trying to nuzzle her. He ran to the bed and took her in his arms.

“Vera,” he said calmly, rocking her and pushing a keening Lux away. “It’s OK. You’re safe. It was just a dream. I’m here and I have my gun. Look at it. Look at Lux – he’s worried about you. He’ll never let anything happen to you. You’re safe, honey.”

“I’m sorry, Jerry,” she said. She was shaking and holding on to his waist. “I dreamt the two guys on the boat were here in the house. I tried to warn you but I couldn’t speak.”

“Its all right, Vera. Lie down and I’ll get you some water. Lux stay.”

He returned with a glass of water she gulped down. She was sweating but the December air was cool.

“Go back to sleep, Vera. I’ll stay here till you do and Lux won’t leave the room. You’ll feel better tomorrow when we figure out what to do.”

Pale moonlight filtered through the shutters as he settled into the armchair in the corner, Lux lay at his feet with eyes on the bed where Jerry could see the curve of her hips and her long tanned legs. He nodded off with the gun still in his hand.



A government environmental scientist, Dr. Jerry Raven, discovers that corals in the Florida Keys are dying. His research as to the cause leads him into the murky waters of illegal offshore dumping of toxic chemical waste. As he gains more insight into what is happening, he becomes the target of the perpetrators who want to shut him up and must defend himself on the small island he calls home. He is a former Recon Marine and skilled in the art of small arms operations, a skill he will need as his pursuers close in.

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by Terry Logan

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