

## Outerbridge Sound

### Chapter 10 – The Sheffield

**“Sam grinned at Nicki, who grinned back. It really did look like Captain Harrington was going to be on their side, someone they could work with. Coffee arrived, there was even a plate full of biscuits to go with it.”**

Σ

“We had the initiative, Nicki; we controlled the flow of information.” Said Sam Hardwick. “We need to get the initiative back again, or everyone will get their Janssen fix from the evening news. Look at it.....There’s even a dead congressman.”

“It’s just more good publicity for the show.” Said Nicki.

“I’m not so sure.....A fucking dead congressman.”

In a way, Nicki was glad Sam was back to being a selfish bastard again, she was used to dealing with that side of him. No worries about the remains of poor Judy Gosse being found, the waitress from Rum Runners, or the rumours that one of the FBI agents might never walk again. Sam was a typical production company guy with a show to create. A show that might be well be upstaged by a dead congressman. Nicki had spent a good hour that morning, watching the news on half a dozen different channels. As Ilaria had accurately put it at a meeting, in her own unique way.

“Janssen is producing more news than can be consumed locally.”

Ilaria had mentioned taking back the initiative too, everyone knew SHP’s show might well get drowned by the volume of news coverage. As a first step, Nicki had created a small handwritten chart in her notebook.

“About eighty percent of global news is about Ted Miller, the dead congressman. We’re at the everyone saying what a great guy he is, stage. Soon they’ll begin digging out the dirt. He was supposed to be on a working trip to Chicago, not at a party on the Diogenes.”

A dozen people had died when Diogenes had burned, one of them the congressman. Another ten had been seriously injured, mainly horrific burns. The hero of the hour had been a local man on an all-night fishing trip. Gary South had become an overnight hero; the news people couldn’t get enough of him. If he hadn’t taken his boat in amongst the burning debris, there might have been no survivors. It was being put down to a freak accident, a geological event, rather than anything to do with the strange happenings associated with Outerbridge Sound.

“What about the arrival of The Sheffield yesterday ?” Asked Sam. “How are they spinning that ?”

“Very little interest outside the UK, though CNN did mention it.” Said Nicki. “They’re saying a source has hinted that the UK military may investigate the deaths on Janssen, and the attack on the two FBI agents.”

“A hint at a source.....Which means they have nothing solid.” Said Sam.

He’d been like it since the first day he’d arrived, when she’d picked him up from the small airstrip in her Jeep. Sam would have seen all the news on all the channels, he’d more than likely called Denise in London to go through it all again. Sam probably had better notes than her, on which piece of news was trending in what part of the globe. He liked to bounce things off people, it was as simple as that. She was beginning to think it was the only way he really understood things.

“Are you ready for more bad news ?” She asked. “I can leave it until later if you want ? The Janssen police aren’t releasing the information until tomorrow.”

“You mean the extra bones ?”

It seemed the small clearing where the FBI agents had run into the beast, was where it ate the main part of its kills. Almost like a larder, some of the meat had been there long enough to become something most creatures would consider too rotten to eat. Not the beast though, there was evidence that it chewed and ate food a goat would reject. There were no other bones or meat from other animals in the clearing, though there aren’t many indigenous species on Janssen. The local police weren’t keen on saying there was a wild beast on the loose, that only fed on humans. It was worrying enough that despite Bill Carr saying he’d seen the creature die, no trace had been found of its body.

“Yes Sam, there were four bones in the clearing that didn’t come from any of the known victims of the creature. They’re older than the remains of the two tourists. Bones from an adult, most likely male, though they can’t be certain about that. We’re probably talking about another missing tourist Sam.”

“Fuck, that’s it.....We’re screwed.” Said Sam. “When that news breaks the military will be put in charge and I don’t just mean the investigation.”

“My brothers will never stand for that.”

“They’ll have no option, you’re still a British protectorate and need I remind you; the Sheffield has a crew of over two hundred. They can and probably will, lock down most of the island.”

“How about Denise ? Can she lean on her contact ?”

“I think it’s a bit late for that, Nicki. A word with the captain of The Sheffield might help of course, getting him on our side if we can. What was his name again ?”

Sam knew of course, he probably had far more info on the crew of the frigate than she did. It was his thing again, the need to use people as a sounding board.

“The captain is Trevor Harrington, as I’m sure you know. Would you like me to set up a meeting ?”

“Yes please, as soon as you can. Tomorrow would be perfect.”

~ ~

Even the bites he’d suffered were yet another mystery. Bill Carr knew the local hospital would send their medical notes to the FBI, along with a few specimens of his blood and urine, maybe a few swabs of the area around the bites. Medical care on Janssen was famously expensive, though Bill hadn’t found them to be incompetent. He and Stacey were still alive after all.

“Filling you with broad spectrum antibiotics was normal.” The doctor had told him. “Anyone with that many bites and open wounds, would get the same. The interesting thing is that whatever attacked you, had a jaw full of bacteria. We’re talking about everything I could name and quite a few more besides. They were in all the swabs we took from you and agent Tuttle. The typical mouth of a carrion feeder, yet you said it hunted you like a predator. It’s a mystery Bill.....To add to all the others.”

Bill was currently walking besides the wheelchair, as someone pushed Stacey towards the waiting plane. Not a large aircraft, even the FBI couldn’t give Janssen a longer runway and the required equipment to land large jets. The Gulfstream was small, but it would get them both home. Bill had never really liked Stacey. If he was being totally honest with himself, he still wasn’t that keen on her. Not one usually bothered by guilt, he was feeling it like a heavy weight recently.

“I hate going home without finishing the job.” He said.

"Someone else will take over now Bill." Said Stacey. "We did our best.....Now someone else will find it and kill it."

"But I did kill it." He said.

Stacey reached for his hand and squeezed it. Like it or not, something had changed between them. It seemed you couldn't be nearly killed with someone and not bond, just a little.

"I know you did; I saw the damned thing's head come apart as you shot it. Another mystery Bill, another fucking mystery. We've been ordered home though and I intend to forget all about Jannsen. I just want to get back home and have my legs fixed."

Bill knew that giving her working legs again was about fifty-fifty. Stacey had talked about something huge, something picking her up in its jaws and shaking her, before throwing her against a tree.

Somewhere in all the shaking and throwing, something had happened to her lower spine. Another mystery of course, the creature he'd shot wasn't big enough to pick Stacey up in its jaws.

"Do you have a bag with you." Asked the guy at the plane.

"I've got her bag, and mine." Said Bill.

"Fine.....Get comfortable, we'll be leaving right away."

No waiting for clearance and take-off slots, it was one of the nice things about travelling to tiny places like Jannsen, in small private jets. No scanners, no having to remove belts, shoes and anything else they could think of to make you feel uncomfortable. Bill helped Stacey out of the wheelchair and into a very comfortable looking seat. Again, their hands touched. Damn it, he was beginning to worry about her and not just her. He was too old to start growing a few feelings.

"They still haven't released Vince." He said.

"What ? That's crazy Bill, he obviously couldn't have killed the Gosse girl, he was in custody by then."

"I know, I had a long talk with our boss last night. The latest pile of bullshit is that a wild beast found the bodies of the tourists after Vince had killed them. They're still going after a conviction for killing the tourists and the Landry's kid."

"Are they just ignoring the dead waitress ?"

"So it seems Stacey, so it seems. I've been ordered to keep my mouth shut and come home. It seems the bureau trusts the British Navy to take over the investigation. There's the whole special relationship thing and we are, just about, still on the same side as the Brits."

"Forget it Bill, or you'll go crazy. Go home to your wife and forget Jannsen. That's what I intend to do."

"I didn't know you had a wife ?"

"Oh, I won't miss the corny jokes. Sit down Bill, I'm not sure if you get a seatbelt warning in these things."

Bill Carr wasn't sure if it was because of Vince, or Stacey, or simply a guy thing. He definitely didn't like being told he'd missed something he knew he'd killed. There had to be a few of those things, or someone local was covering up the truth. Something in his head made him forget an entire career of obeying the rules and saying 'yes sir' after being given crap orders. He picked up his bag.

"I'm staying Stacey, there are too many loose ends."

"Don't do it Bill, they'll just send someone to take you back....Maybe in cuffs."

He wasn't exactly fighting fit himself, some of the bites had been deep, he'd lost quite a bit of blood. He winced as he strode away from the Gulfstream, just before its steps folded back up into the fuselage.

Even if he resigned and became just another tourist, they might still send people out to make him go home, he knew that. He wouldn't be able to carry a gun without his FBI credentials, it was almost

certain he was bending the rules as things were. His first problem was getting to Tilburg from the airstrip. Nowhere is that far from anywhere else on Janssen, should have been the island's official motto. Only if you didn't have bites that were healing up though. The deep wound in his left arm was beginning to mix a painful ache with an equally painful throbbing. Probably only a mile or so to walk into Tilburg, but Bill wasn't looking forward to it. The police van that had brought them to the plane, was long gone, probably parked outside Rum Runners.

"Ah, a face I know." He muttered.

Darryl, he'd have recognised him anywhere, though the truck with 'Darryl's Tourist Bikes' written across the side proved it. The tall black man was digging in the bushes near where the track from the airstrip, joined another track that led back to Tilburg.

"Damn tourists, they dump my bikes anywhere they choose." Said Darryl. "Every year I think about doubling the deposit. I might just do it next season. Look.....The rich folk are the worst."

The bike didn't look damaged, though someone had jammed it pretty deep into a bush, probably someone leaving by plane. A fifty-dollar deposit probably wasn't much of an incentive to return the bike, to someone who'd left on a private jet.

"At least I'm the only bike hire place in Tilburg." Said Darryl. "How all the guys competing for tourist bike business in Bermuda survive.....They must be working for next to nothing."

"Can I get a lift into town?" Bill asked.

"Yes, sure.....Aren't you leaving? Someone brought back your bikes."

"Change of plans. If you're going back to your place, I'll hire another bike."

"Sure, no problem."

Darryl was tall and wiry, not the sort of build associated with strong guys. The way he picked up the bike and put it in the flatbed truck though....Bill wouldn't have wanted to annoy him.

"Can I hire something with a bit more pep this time?" Asked Bill.

"That's a bit.....You being a cop and all."

"I'm FBI and I don't care if you're breaking every transport law in The Donder Isles."

"In that case I can hire you a bike with more pep than you can probably handle."

"Sounds just what I need." Said Bill.

~

~

Sam had read the information Denise had obtained from Florence Karádi MP, all of it, several times. The vetting on Captain Trevor Harrington had been boring to the point of being a cure for insomnia. Harrington had shot up the ranks after the obligatory training at The Britannia Royal Naval College. One of the youngest men to be given command of a top-of-the-line vessel. Then his career hadn't exactly imploded, it had plateaued. Usually a sign of something happening in a man's life, a potential weakness an enemy could exploit. An affair with someone inappropriate, or an interest in the company of other men, though that one wasn't as taboo as it had once been. Drug addiction maybe, or mental health issues. The vetting people had found Harrington to be the same keen, intelligent and above all, reliable, man he'd always been. Flo had added a few notes, which explained Harrington's flat lining career, in her own way.

'Harrington always wanted to command a warship; the way kids want to be a train driver. It was his life's goal, his over riding ambition. When he was given his first command, he'd achieved everything he'd ever dreamt of achieving.'

They were ushered in to see the man who currently controlled the largest force of armed men in The Donder Isles. He'd wanted to bring Nicki, though there had probably been no choice in the matter, she had arranged the meeting.

“Thank you for seeing us as such short notice.” Said Sam.

“More than happy to help in any way I can.” Said Harrington. “London does realise the export potential of companies like yours and the number of jobs it can create....Please, sit....Can my steward bring you anything ?”

“Coffee would be nice.” Said Sam.

“Coffee for me too.” Added Nicki.

Sam grinned at Nicki, who grinned back. It really did look like Captain Harrington was going to be on their side, someone they could work with. Coffee arrived, there was even a plate full of biscuits to go with it.

“So, are all the rumours about a military investigation taking over from the local police, just that.....Nothing but rumours ?” Asked Nicki.

“You must mean the dreadful deaths, what the press are calling a mystery.” Said Harrington. “There will be a formal notice of some kind, though it may only be published in the UK media. When The Sheffield arrived, the Royal Navy effectively took over the investigation. Only that specific investigation, before anyone gets carried away. We’re not replacing the splendid local Janssen police force.”

Sam felt as though he’d been kicked in the guts, but in slow motion. A kick he hadn’t been expecting, delivered by a size nine boot wrapped in a thin layer of cotton wool. He reacted in the way he’d been planning to react, if Harrington had turned out to be a problem.

“I hope this doesn’t mean you’re going to restrict our movements ? There is such a thing as the public’s right to know. SHP aren’t a news media organisation, but we do feed information to various news sources. I’m sure the UK press would react badly to any kind of restriction on Janssen. We can hardly criticise other nations for restricting press freedom, if.....”

“Mr Hardwick...Sam.....If I can interrupt for a moment.”

“Yes, of course. It’s just something I feel strongly about.” Said Sam.

“As with all naval vessels, probably going right back to the Dutch, who discovered The Donder Isles, we’re here to be seen.” Said Harrington. “Rather than restricting everyday life on Janssen, we’re here to keep everything moving as normal. We can provide a credible military force to look for whoever, or whatever is harming people. The cruise ships are far more likely to keep stopping here, once they know my men are regularly patrolling Outerbridge Sound and other areas where tourists have been attacked. Does that address your concerns ?”

“Somewhat.....Are you saying my cast and crew can carry on as usual ?” Asked Sam.

“I can’t give you anything in writing, but yes, those are my current instructions from London. Things can change of course. At the moment the Royal Navy won’t step on your toes, as long as you don’t step on ours. We will be sending a submersible to have a look at Outerbridge Sound, probably a few divers too. You’re quite welcome to attach a film crew to my people when they do that.”

Sam felt his stomach unknot, though he could still feel sweat making his shirt stick to his back. Janssen was hot, though he knew the heat had nothing to do with it.

“Thank you captain, I’d love to send a crew to cover your people. I’ll send Paris too, to do the background narration.”

There was more coffee and Harrington seemed really keen on meeting Paris Ferland. By the time they were on the deck of The Sheffield and waiting for a launch to pick them up, Sam was actually feeling happy, confident that ‘The Outerbridge Paradox’, another temporary title, would be a success. Or at least it would definitely be filmed.

“You must have heard him talk about divers in the sound.” Said Nicki. “That’s crazy, they’ll stir the creature up and some of them might get hurt. He must have seen our pictures of what happened in Outerbridge Sound.”

The Sheffield hadn’t used the dockyard, or where the cruise ships came close to shore. There was even a decent sheltered harbour on the east of Jannsen. The Royal Naval vessel had shunned them all, probably for security reasons. Like Greta Garbo it seemed that the frigate wanted to be alone. Captain Harrington had anchored his vessel in deep water to the west of Jannsen, quite a distance offshore.

“He has a couple of hundred armed men and a submersible Nicki.” Said Sam. “It’s not our job to tell him to be careful. We’ll definitely attach Paris to his people for a while.....Wow, the view from out here. I keep forgetting how beautiful this place is.”

“I’ve lived here all my life and yet sometimes.....The island takes my breath away.” Said Nicki.

~ ~

Kate Russo had seen Gary South’s face on the local news, he seemed to get the top spot on every broadcast. His telling of the events of that dreadful night didn’t match hers in a lot of key ways, though she didn’t begrudge him his fame. Plus of course, there were those unwritten rules of fishing club again, there had to be one about coveting your fuck buddy’s fame. She was currently watching yet another local news item, complete with Gary telling his story again.

“Actually, Giles dragged most of the injured out of the ocean.” She muttered.

Kate was just glad that neither Mark Coulier or his father had been on Diogenes that night. The only Jannsen locals on the three masted sailing ship that night had been employed as waiters for a bit of a do, the congressman was holding. All three of the local people had been dragged out of the water by Giles, though one of them might not survive. Once burns are that deep and widespread....

‘...Congressman Miller’s family will be visiting Jannsen for a memorial service on.....’

There was a picture of a crying widow to go with the TV news item. Did the wife know about the wild parties and upmarket hookers brought in by plane from Miami ? Kate wasn’t heartless, she’d cried when a woman she’d spent ages trying to get out of the water, turned out to be dead. To her though the congressman was just another congressman. If the Coulier family had lost two key members though.....It could have been the end of Jannsen’s hopes of being a major tourist destination. Her phone rang, she was expecting the call.

“Deb, good news. I got the keys, picked them up this morning.” Said Kate.

“How long are they away for ?” Asked Debbie Hindle.

“Alice Tubman and all the little Tubmans have gone back to Toronto for at least six months. Her husband wanted her back home until the problems here have been sorted out. The good news is that I’m officially house sitting for her. We’ll need to be careful, no breakages. Otherwise, we can have our fishing club nights on dry land. Oh, you’ll love the Tubman’s pool, it’s huge.”

There was even a small house sitting free from Alice, though Kate felt too embarrassed to mention it. She wasn’t short of money, but every little helped. It meant being able to see Gary, now that only crazy people anchored up offshore overnight.

“Great, so next Thursday is on then.....At Chez Tubman ?”

“It is, I’m going to call Gary later on. If Gary wants to mix with the riff raff, now he’s famous.”

“Yeah Kate, he is overdoing it on the broadcasts. You and Giles insisted on getting close to the wreckage.”

Had she insisted ? Kate wasn't sure, it had been a terrible and confusing night. Gary had taken his boat to look for survivors, he deserved his fifteen minutes of fame. He hadn't done it all though, Giles had gone over the side to help people in the water.

"Gary needs to be careful Deb. Have you seen the sailors from the frigate ? I'm told they're all fully armed and will be patrolling the streets. The few I've seen are real hunks."

"Kate....You are terrible."

~

~

"No disrespect was intended sir." Said Bill Carr. "I just need a little personal time. My wounds are still sore and let's face it.....Jannsen is the perfect place to convalesce for a while."

"So, you haven't remained there to continue the investigation ?"

"No sir, I just need a break. I'm at an age when.....Well, can we just say I don't heal as well as I used to."

A regional director of the FBI no less, Bill couldn't remember talking to him, ever, yet he seemed to know all about him. He was even aware that his wife had panicked after he hadn't arrived in America on the bureau's Gulfstream. That had taken a few calls to sort out and quite a few promises to his wife. Poor Kay kept going on about how that sort of thing wasn't like him. It wasn't like him; he barely knew himself anymore.

He remembered reading something once in a training manual. How trauma, really bad trauma, could cause dissociation with a person's normal feelings and emotions. That had to be it, the reason he'd hired an illegally tuned up bike, with the intention of going monster hunting.

"Very well Bill, after all your years with the bureau, we can hardly send the cavalry out to get you."

There was laugh. A quiet laugh, but a definite laugh coming down the phone.

"Thank you sir, I really appreciate that."

"We'll continue to pay your expenses for the hotel, just be back home in two week's time. Someone here will let you know when the plane will be arriving. Be on it Bill, promise me you'll be on it."

"I will be sir; you can rely on me."

"I hope so.....I really do hope so."

After the call Bill realised that he'd effectively given himself two weeks to hunt the beast, find it, and kill it. Guns weren't easy to obtain on Jannsen, especially assault rifles that could deliver the sort of firepower he was likely to need. His handgun was fine for most things, but he remembered watching his shots bounce off whatever the thing used for skin. Luckily, he had a connection in the Jannsen Regiment, one who didn't know he was no longer part of the investigation. He made a quick call to confirm he was on the way.

"Hi Mark, I'll be there in about twenty minutes. Are we still on ?"

"Yes, come to the main gate."

The bike he'd hired was in the hotel's car park, hidden to one side of a dumpster. Brightly coloured with a loud exhaust, the sort of bike he'd have given an arm for when he'd been about seventeen. Over bored and tuned to perfection, he'd be able to outrun anything on the island, which might be useful. He started the bike and actually enjoyed the sound echoing back at him from the nearby buildings.

"Kay is right, this isn't like me." He muttered.

~

~

Dom Trecca was in Ilaria's room and they were both naked, still in that post coitus hour or so, when the entire world feels warm, wonderful and friendly. It was an odd moment to be contemplating

minor surgery. It was just that she'd winced a few times when he'd touched her arm and when he'd looked at where she was hurting.....

"We agreed it had to come out, so stop pulling away from me." He said.

"It'll hurt."

"Of course it'll hurt, but it has to be done."

Ilaria's travelling vanity set had provided the tweezers, which had been cleaned with alcohol, several times. Tweezers that looked perfect for the job, with their long thin pincers. All the drama and preparation was to remove a thorn, that had penetrated Ilaria's arm, just above her left elbow. The thorn had snapped off, leaving just the tip in her flesh.

"It's in deep." He said. "You should have done something sooner."

"We could leave it to work its own way out."

"No, it might already be infected. You did agree to digging it out."

"Alright."

A few of the crew had scars from thorns, it was a job-related hazard when lugging stuff around in a sub-tropical paradise. The orchards close to Outerbridge Sound, seemed to have more thorn bushes than fruit trees. Dom gently held Ilaria's arm against her chair's armrest and moved the tweezers forward.

"Oh, come on honey.....You have to stop moving away." He said.

"Hurt me and I will punch you.....I mean it."

"I believe you. Just keep still."

Being gentle wasn't going to work, though he knew Ilaria was being serious about hitting him. He had weight and strength on his side though. He clamped her arm to the chair with his left arm, using his right elbow to help keep her arm in place.

"Dom.....!"

"Just stop wriggling."

He stabbed with the tweezers, stabbed was the only word for it. Dom ignored the bleeding he'd caused and went in deep, to where he knew the tip of the thorn was lodged in her arm.

"Fuck!"

"Keep still."

It was him and the part of her that knew it had to come out, against the bit of her who didn't like to be hurt. It wasn't much of a contest really. Dom gripped something hard with the tweezers and pulled them out of the bloody hole he'd created.

"There." He said.

Dom winced in expectation of the pain when he saw her arm go back, her fist ready to strike. He closed his eyes and waited for the blow. Ilaria was probably only about seven and a half stones, when fully clothed. She was strong though; he'd seen her carrying boxes of equipment as though they weighed nothing. After a few seconds he opened his eyes. She was glaring at him, though her arm was lowered.

"Sorry." He said.

Her arm had a hole in it that needed cleaning and disinfecting. Dom used copious amounts of vodka to do both jobs. Quite a lot of vodka was also drunk, though the finished bandage on Ilaria's arm looked pretty good. A lot of touching and a lot of drinking, eventually led to a lot of sex. Dom was quite surprised when she prodded him awake in the early hours, with a huge grin on her face.

"Come on Dom, get dressed. I have an idea about the treasure of Jack Benevide."

"Oh, not tonight.....Please....Not tonight." He pleaded.



“Hey, you owe it to a girl you just wounded.”

No use, she had that look on his face, though he wasn't going to get dragged around the villa in grubby clothes again. He kept a clean set of everything in her room now, in case of such moments of lunacy.

“Where are we digging and delving tonight ?” He asked.

“I was thinking about that. Like everyone else we've been searching and digging where people have dug before. Jack left a few hints scribbled into books in his library, which caused a really digging frenzy a few decades ago. Supposing all his hints were red herrings ?”

“Sounds a good working hypothesis.” He said. “As no one has ever found anything.”

“There are a few places no one has dug up and one of those is almost never mentioned in any records of the building. The entire villa was refurbished ten years ago and only one place was left untouched.”

“Alright, I'm convinced. I'll grab my treasure hunting kit.”

Dom had a well-equipped backpack now, it even had a machete in it, just in case. A few tools of course and several flashlights with spare batteries. There was a lot of duplication in the items they lugged about, but as Ilaria often said.

“Better to carry too much, than to not have something we really need.”

As Dom definitely felt like the trusty sidekick to her tomb raider, he never argued with her. Once he was sure he had everything he could possibly need, he followed Ilaria out of her bedroom window and across the grass, before hiding in the bushes near the pool. Just about everyone in the villa knew they were treasure hunting. One or two had asked them about it over breakfast in the lounge, which now doubled as a cafeteria. They still felt a need to be covert though, which proved to be a good thing.

“I heard they used to be a thing.” whispered Ilaria.

“The seem to be one again.”

Dom liked Cormac, even if he was a bit dark and brooding most of the time. The Irishman was a good director and that meant the show was likely to do well. As everyone had some sort of completion bonus tied into results, Cormac was becoming quite well liked. There it was, Cormac's bottom, going up and down. Emily was underneath him on the poolside lounge and judging by her gasps and whimpers, she was enjoying being under Cormac.

“I know another way to get there.” Whispered Ilaria.

Maybe it was because they too, had a relationship they didn't wanted shouted about. Dom followed Ilaria away from the pool and through what was left of what had once been a rose garden. Neither of them would mention what they'd seen to anyone, though that didn't stop them sharing a few thoughts.

“Rumour has it that Emily had a breakdown when Cormac dumped her.” Said Ilaria. “Off work for ages, she even moved in with her mum for a while.”

“She's brave to give it another try.”

“Love does that to people....This way, we need to go way past the outside lighting.”

“Where are we going ?” He asked.

“To the grotto.”

“I didn't know there was one.”

“Exactly.”

The villa's grounds extended a long way past the outside lighting, ending at a track at the bottom of the hill. Ilaria led, using her flashlight to follow a rough pathway down the hill.

“Nicki told me all about the grotto, she used to play here as a kid.” Said Ilaria. “There are grottos at a lot of large country houses in England and Jack Benevide saw one at Heythrop Park. It impressed him so much that he built a grotto for his kids. A cave was dug into the hillside and all sorts of weird and wonderful things were put inside. Nicki said a whale’s jawbone was hung just inside the entrance. Halloween parties were held inside the grotto for years. Then the kids grew up and the grotto was almost abandoned. It’s been neglected for years.”

“Sounds the perfect spot to hide a treasure.” Said Dom.

“My thoughts exactly, though I’m sure we’re not the first to think that.....Here it is.”

The cave entrance was overgrown to the point where if you didn’t know there was a cave in the area, you’d think it was just a shadow among the lush local vegetation. Ilaria went first and there really was a whale’s jawbone hanging up just inside the grotto.

“Wow, this place must have been quite something, in its day.” He said.

“Nicki said all the local kids came to the Halloween parties held in here. They ran electricity down from the house, though Nicki thinks the cables were removed years ago.”

“I’m beginning to think Nicki knows so much, that she might be a treasure hunter herself.” He said.

“That is a problem, knowing if someone is helping, or hindering. Nicki seems legit though.”

The grotto wasn’t huge and it was all on one level. About half the size of the lounge at the villa, just about enough space for a decent kid’s Halloween party. The walls had crystals cemented into the walls. Amethyst and quartz mainly, probably worth something if you fancied breaking them off the wall.

“I am truly impressed.” Said Dom. “If we find no treasure, it’ll make a great place for the wrap party. Everyone will love the spooky atmosphere. Use a portable generator and put in a couple of beer coolers.”

“Focus Dom.... We’re here to find the Benevide Treasure.”

Dom wasn’t into wanton destruction and as for honesty..... He always said he was honest up to the point where someone left a couple of million dollars on a table and left the room. There was something about Amethyst crystals though, he’d been collecting them since he’d been about twelve. They were on shelves right round his workroom at home. When he saw a beautiful geode attached to the wall by such a small amount of concrete.

“Dom.....You can’t steal that. We might all get chucked out of the villa.”

“Oh, come on.....Look at the dirt and neglect. No one has bothered with this place since the eighties. I have a spot in my collection where this will.....”

The concrete piece he’d tried to pull away was larger than he’d thought. A large piece of the cave wall wanted to come with it as he pulled. Dom was left looking into a hole he could just about crawl into, which obviously led somewhere. He shone his flashlight down the hole and saw the top end of a ladder with metal rungs.

“Crap.....I’ll bring you treasure hunting again Dom Trecca.”

“We need to clear out a bit more debris.” He said.

“Not now, we both need to be at work in a couple of hours. I have this weekend off. Can you arrange a couple of personal days or something?”

“Probably, though everyone will think we’re having sex somewhere.” He said.

“Better than them thinking we’re exploring the grotto. Come on.....Push everything back as it was and we’ll come back on Friday night.”

~ ~

