

DARK CARIBBEAN

The adventure begins with killing

Lobstermen at war
Vanishing pirates
Constant gun battles
Drug smuggling
Airboats in the Everglades
Airplane trips under radar
Hell raising swamp cowboys
Tender love story
Unrestrained lust
Murder
Wild men
Wilder women
Prison

An exciting true adventure novel.

By

Rick Magers

© 2007

ABOUT THIS BOOK

For several years, Ray and Roland battle thieves from North Key Largo to the southern end of their lobster trapping grounds, beyond Rodriguez Key. A notorious thief was found dead: his boat's engine idling with his young helper cowering in the bow. A week later Ray pulled 100 empty traps. Thieves had struck again. With two large offshore freezer boats, Ray and Roland head into the Caribbean with traps, hoping to be left alone to fish for their living. They quickly learn that modern-day pirates, who will steal anything; including traps and lobsters, would rather die than work for a living. The pirates soon learn that Ray and Roland will be happy to accommodate them.

With automatic weapons they warn all suspected boats they encounter, but it's a large ocean and traps still disappear—pirates, their boats and crew also begin disappearing.

It seems that Ray and Roland have found a place to be left alone when they begin trapping near Walker's Cay, in the Northern Bahamas. The dream soon turned to a nightmare when hundreds of their 3,000 traps come up empty—thieves again. Both men become licensed pilots and buy a plane to patrol from the air, and also a fast boat to patrol their area...traps still come up empty. When hundreds of traps begin disappearing, war begins again. After much shooting, another thief boat and crew vanish. Nassau issues the White Paper, which forbids all commercial fishing by foreign vessels working closer than three miles from the edge of the banks.

“We can't trap a thousand feet deep.”

Roland agrees with Ray. “Start bringing our traps back to Florida. Becky and I'll get in the plane and find someplace where we can fish for a living without machine guns in our boats.”

The small fishing village they find nestled amongst the Everglades, near Naples, Florida could have been the answer to their problem—except for one thing.

They learn that Everglade's City is not only one of the best stone crab trapping areas in the entire United States, it's also the marijuana import capitol of the south—it's about to hit the fan, and both men's lives will be changed forever.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART ONE

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|-----------------------|-------------|
| Pirates Close To Home | 5 |
| Heading South | 30 |
| Commando Tactics | 62 |
| Problems Revisited | 130 |
| New Blood In The Game | 138 |

PART TWO

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| War | 216 |
| Storm Clouds | 251 |
| New Island-New Adventure | 276 |
| The Nightmare Returns | 345 |
| Galleon Gold-Colombian Gold | 371 |

DEDICATION

This book is for all of the South Florida crawfishermen who pulled hundreds of their traps, only to find them empty—ripped open by modern-day pirates. And to those of you who were regularly pulling those traps, I suggest you thank God that we didn't get you in our sights.

I changed the names of some of the characters, and the locations of some events. Most of the people and places have suffered enough—no sense adding more grief. Changed my name too...don't mind being hung for som'n I did, but I'll be damned if I'll hand 'em the rope.

ONE

Pirates Close To Home

Louis danced with the Devil for a long time, but on this day there was going to be a new fiddler. After the shooting, Jesse turned to Raymond and said, "If he'd thrown those bags of lobster that he stole from us, overboard, we never woulda caught him."

Ten bags of free lobster at a hundred pounds each was just too much for Louis to throw away.

Hell, that's what I'm out here for, he must have thought.

I wonder what kind of future he might have had if he hadn't been so greedy that day. The poor kid though; he thought they were just going fishing.

The gun went off, and this time Ray knew he'd hit the boat. He saw pieces fly off and hit the water. He opened the bolt and inserted another eight-inch long shell. He'd bought the gun from a soldier of fortune in Miami, who said it would 'reach out and do the job.' Ray knew the man was right as he shoved the six-foot-long barrel out through the windshield of the boat. This time he saw the man ahead actually knocked away from the wheel as the huge bullet hit him. Blood flew up into the air, seeming to just hang there. As Ray neared the spot, blood began raining down on him. He leaned out the side of the cabin. Blood was coming down so heavy he could no longer see the thief's boat he'd been chasing.

He leaned so far out of the window that he fell from the bed and awoke with a start as he hit the floor.

Shit, he thought as he struggled sleepily to his feet, *I'm getting sick of that same damn dream*. He flipped on the light and looked at the clock. *Two AM. Damn I'm tired*. He struggled to get his right foot to fit into the left rubber boot. He looked down and slowly shook his head, "Aw damn, not again."

An hour later he was pulling into the darkness of the lobster trap lot on the North Key Largo canal where his boat was docked. Until a few days earlier, a thousand traps had been stacked there; awaiting a new season. The dream was staying on his mind this morning. *Maybe it's some kind of omen?*

Raymond remained in the truck to allow his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He could almost taste the blackness of the traplot, and couldn't see the boat sitting fifty feet away. He fumbled in the darkness of the cab for the thermos. *A little in the cup and a little on my leg*, he thought, as he felt the hot tea go over the edge of the cup.

Raymond James was born with a clumsiness that got worse as he grew older. He had turned twenty-one only a few months earlier and no longer felt self-conscious

about being a clutz. He joked with his few friends, “I don’t think I oughta take up ballroom dancing.” With his unruly, dirty-blond hair, enough eyebrows for three men, and a slightly shy smile, few would guess him to be older than sixteen—Until they looked past his muscular build, stubby neck and peculiar gait, which made him look like a wrestler approaching an opponent. They then found themselves looking into eyes with intensity that few men, and certainly no teenage boy, possesses. Ten minutes later those eyes were ready to carry him through the maze of broken lobster traps, oil drums, piles of wood lathe, and pieces of worm-eaten traps scattered everywhere. He repeated to himself, *Don’t stumble over anything and wake up the whole neighborhood*. This was the result of many weeks of hard, hot, brutal work. Sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, to get a thousand traps ready for the 1967 lobster season. Old timers and trappers in the Florida Keys called them crawfish—Those alive still do.

He reached up and removed the domelight bulb, and hoped no one would notice him out and about in the early morning darkness. He picked up the two boxes of bullets and got a good grip on the old WW II, M-1 rifle. He didn’t close the door, because he knew one trip wouldn’t do it this morning. The rifle usually stayed on the boat, but he’d taken it home to give it a good cleaning. Ray’s buddy, Jesse Finn, had taken his home also. Only two days until the season opened and they could begin pulling their traps. After checking a few here and there, the men knew that they would have a good start this year—many traps were full. The tourists, cruising around in their boats knew it too. A lot of freezers would have free lobster tails in them when this week was over.

One professional lobster thief also knew it. He had worked Raymond James, his dad Bolford, and Jesse Finn over very bad the previous season. Among the crawfishermen in Key Largo, they were the only three that put traps far north, near Pacific Light. They realized that it was risky being so far out of the main stream of trappers, but the crawfish were plentiful in that area, and they felt they could look out for each other. One of them was out on the ocean every day, but it hadn’t worked. This thief was good. His boat was fast and low in the water, so it didn’t show up until you were very close to it. He’d keep pulling traps until you were within a half mile or less before he ran.

Raymond untied the boat, and pushed it away from the dock, before starting the engine. He knew it would start because it was brand new. It was also powerful, and took a solid week of work just to make the engine bed big enough to handle it. When he pushed the starter button, Ray wanted to get quickly out of the canal and into the channel heading to sea. He hoped that the few local residents on the canal didn’t notice him.

Ray and Jesse knew the thief would be pulling their traps this day. Ralph Stoff had spotted him Friday through the powerful telescope he’d mounted on the second story porch of his house, which overlooked the ocean.

The professional thieves did not pull traps on weekends, because they never knew when one of the many pleasure boats might be a crawfisherman trying to slip up on them, while they stole the crawfish from their traps. The thieves had been shot at enough during the previous couple of years, to know that this was a deadly game they were playing.

As Ray left the canal and gave the boat a little throttle, his thoughts were bitter.

We've got a little surprise for you if you're out here today you thieving son-of-a-bitch.

An hour before Raymond James had pulled into the trap lot in Garden Cove, Jesse Finn had pulled away from the dock behind his house on a canal a few miles north. Jesse was nothing like Ray, even though they had become the very best of friends. This six-foot-three-inch beanpole wore his emotions on the outside of his skin. He had left the chicken farms of Ocala while still a teen, and began working on a crawfish boat in Key Largo as a deck hand. It was love at first sight, and by the time he was twenty he had his own boat and traps. He never once considered leaving Key Largo or crawfishing. With his sun-reddened face and constantly peeling ears, he looked like a fisherman. What he didn't look like though, was the deadly serious man he became when he caught someone stealing crawfish. It never mattered to Jesse how many crawfish he was getting out of his traps, or what time of day it was. If he saw someone that he thought was robbing traps: his or anyone else's—the chase was on.

While Ray headed north up Hawk Channel, along Key Largo's mangrove cluttered shoreline, Jesse was passing by the Elbow Marker, a few miles straight out on the edge of the reef. He was ready to begin the long run north. When the sun came up he would be outside Pacific Light, and with the sun blazing behind him, he would be impossible to see.

As Ray and Jesse sipped hot tea, while moving steadily along their pre-arranged individual courses, Louis Pellit was just pulling away from Joey Simm's house in Palm Beach Gardens. Louis had a home within eyeshot of the beach, just north of Jupiter. At thirty, he had it all and was the envy of almost every man that knew him. Six-foot-tall, lean and muscular, one hundred and eighty pounds, surfer blonde hair, with a handsome face; highlighted by eyes like Elizabeth Taylor's. He was very charming when he wanted to be. Louis Pellit had it all—all that is, except the human ingredient that separates men like him from real men like Ray, Jesse, and a lot of other hardworking fishermen trapping the same waters: scruples. Louis had absolutely none. He would steal a cripple's crutch if he thought he could turn a profit.

This would be the teenager's second trip. The previous December, Louis hired him to go along to pull traps belonging to a friend—according to Louis. It had been hard work, plus they had to work very fast to get them all pulled in one day. Louis paid him fifty dollars, which made Joey's Christmas plans come true.

Joey was born in a house in Palm Beach Gardens, where he had lived all of his seventeen years. Ever since he was old enough to earn a few dollars, neighbors saw the redheaded boy going from house-to-house asking, "Got anything I can do to earn my movie money?" When confronted with those enthusiastic gray eyes, even those neighbors who had nothing that needed doing, found something for this energetic young boy to do. Now almost full grown at five and a half feet tall, he only weighed about the same as a croaker sack of crawfish. What he lacked in size and weight though, he more than made up for in energy and ability. Louis liked the way he caught on quick to what needed doing, but the reason he was glad to have him along again was that the kid could pick a crawfish trap clean quicker than anyone he had yet used.

Joey had never been on a boat like Louis' and he loved the roar of the big engine. The boat almost leaped from the water when Louis pushed the throttle forward. The new pickup truck and boat trailer clicked down the highway smooth and quiet. On the trip to Homestead, the small town north of Key Largo, there was little conversation.

Joey didn't know Louis very well, but he knew he didn't chat a lot. Joey kept quiet and enjoyed the ride, plus he was excited, thinking about a day on the ocean.

Joey kept the flashlight beam on the rear truck tires as Louis backed the boat and trailer down the Homestead Marina boat ramp. Louis kept the back-up lights lined up in his truck's rear view mirror, as he eased down the ramp. "Stop me Joey, just before the truck tires go in the water."

"Yes sir," Joey said, but kept his eyes glued to the tire in the beam of light. He wanted everything to go right, so Louis would take him every time he needed a helper. "Okay that's it," Joey yelled, "the tires are about to go in the water."

Louis set the brake and shifted into park. "Hop in the boat Joey, and get the bow line." Louis smiled as he realized that the kid was already up in the boat.

"Here you go Mr. Pellit," Joey said, as he reached down with the coil of rope.

"Louis, Joey, just plain Louis; enough of that mister stuff, Okay?"

"Yessir mister...uh Louis."

Louis removed the safety chain that secured the boat to the trailer, and then pushed the switch on the electric winch that released tension on the cable. He un-snapped the cable from the bow-eye and handed it to Joey, who was already reaching down for it. Louis climbed up in the boat and went straight to the controls. One push on the starter button, and the engine roared to life. He flipped on the running lights and instrument panel lights. His eyes went immediately to the oil pressure gauge. *Good*, he thought as he scanned the panel. "Joey, give the cable a pull to be sure it's running free."

"I already did, and it's free n' ready to run out."

Louis spoke around the cigar that was always sticking out of his face. "Remember to hang onto it as I back off the trailer. Don't drop it till I'm all the way off, cause we wanna be ready to snap it back on the boat when we get back this afternoon."

"Okay Louis, I'm ready." Joey got a good grip on the stainless steel cable and hook.

Louis shifted into reverse and eased the boat off the trailer. He saw Joey drop the cable onto the trailer in the glow of the running lights, and then pulled the boat alongside the dock. In a flash, Joey was on the dock with the bowline, and secured it to a cleat. He then rushed to the stern as Louis tossed the line up, smiling around the cigar.

"You're gonna make a seaman yet, kid."

As the boy secured the stern, Louis hopped from the boat and headed for the truck and trailer. He parked in the closest space to the ramp, and after locking the truck; he shined the flashlight beam on all the tires on one side then went to the other and did the same. He checked the hitch and safety chains, then flipped the power winch into forward and tried it. Louis knew the importance of being able to get the boat loaded, and out of whichever marina he used, within a few minutes of arriving.

Once the previous year, while stealing crawfish near Miami's Fowey Rock Light, two crawfishermen had chased him. He made it back to his truck and trailer at Dinner Key Marina, with little time to spare. Only his fast boat and organized departure, got him on the road before his pursuers arrived.

Louis checked the slack in the stainless steel cable to be sure it would reach the bow-eye. Assured that it would, he laid it in the center of the trailer between the guide bars, which stuck up five feet on each side, to guide the boat on. As he stepped on the boat, Louis said, "Untie the stern."

Joey tossed the stern line in, then went to the bow and removed the line from the dock cleat, and stood awaiting Louis' command.

Louis slipped the gear lever into forward, and when he felt the gear engage, he returned it to neutral. He then tried the reverse gear, and when satisfied that all was working properly, he leaned out the cabin window. "Hold the bow tight, Joey, while I bring the stern around."

"Yessir! Got it," Joey answered eagerly.

Louis put the gearshift into forward with the bow against the dock, and waited for the boat to pivot out forty-five degrees before shifting it into neutral. "Okay kid, let's go."

Joey jumped on the bow, and brought the line down the gunwale with him. Louis backed away from the dock, then turned the boat and headed out into the pitch-black darkness of Homestead Bay.

As soon as Louis swung the boat to an easterly heading, he turned on the Fathometer. As the engine temperature slowly rose, he kept easing the throttle higher. Ten minutes after leaving the dock, the boat was on top of the water at three-quarter throttle. Louis always held the top end of the throttle in reserve for emergencies. He kept the compass on due east, and moved the powerful searchlight back and forth across the dark water ahead.

He shoved the first steel fence posts into the sand at the edge of the channel, five years earlier, when he first began stealing crawfish for a living. At low tide, he pounded them into the sandbars, and a dozen other places between the bay, and the deep water that lay beyond the barrier islands. The reflectors had to be replaced every year, but that was little work, compared to the benefit they offered him. Many others used them too, and often replaced or added reflectors. A few that were in tricky locations, looked like Christmas trees when the searchlight's beam hit them. Near several of them were grooves in the sand and grass, offering proof that more than one wannabe Yacht Captain, had watched the sun come up on his boat sitting in six inches of water.

His efforts paid off, when weather forced him to find his way back in through rain and rough seas. He often told friends, "Don't let anyone tell you that it can't get rough in the bay. I've seen it so bad, that I thought I'd gotten turned around and was heading for Nassau, out across the Gulf Stream."

The powerful searchlight beam finally picked up the first of four markers. He headed straight for it, but at the last second he swung to a 070 heading, and turned off the searchlight. He kept the compass exactly on that heading, and as soon as he turned at the marker, he began the slow count, that he knew would put him a hundred feet from the second marker. He glanced at the Fathometer to be sure the bay bottom stayed far enough below the boat. *Nine feet deep and we're flying*, he thought.

This was thrilling to Joey. He had learned to keep quiet until the sun lit the sky, so Louis could see where he was going. On that first trip, he had asked Louis something, and his reply was a growling, "Shut the fuck up."

At the count of fifty, Louis flipped on the searchlight, and about a third of a football field ahead was the next marker. As he passed it, he began to count again. *Right on schedule*, he thought as the light's beam bounced off the next reflector. When they passed the fourth marker, he counted to twenty, and then brought the bow around to due south.

“Keep your eyes sharp now kid. Up ahead there’s a red light that flashes every four seconds.”

“Okay,” Joey said, “want me to get up on top of the cabin?”

“No, we’ll spot it easy, as clear as it is this morning.”

Joey loved roaring through the darkness, but he was also a little frightened. The windshield was propped open, and except for the slight glow of the running lights, there was solid blackness out in front of the boat. *God*, he thought, *what if we run into another boat, or an island, or something?* He felt his legs begin to quiver, so he forced them hard against the wall in front of him. Just as he considered suggesting that they slow down a little to look around, he saw the blink of the red light ahead. *I better wait till it blinks again, before I say anything.*

“Did you see that red light blink, kid?”

Joey tried to sound casual when he replied, but the “Yessir” that leaped from his mouth sounded more like a cat with its tail stepped on. He couldn’t see the smile on Louis’ face, but he knew it was there. He frantically ran his tongue around inside his mouth, trying to get rid of the dryness before he had to speak again.

More to himself than to Joey, Louis said, “We run toward a point a quarter mile north of that blinker, then we look for my first outer channel marker.”

Joey was much more at ease now, as the blinking red light became more visible. *Boy, Louis sure knows his way around out here.* “Is this the way we went out the last time I went with you?”

Around the cigar Louis mumbled, “Don’t remember, mighta been.” He swung the boat around a little to the left. “That fencepost of mine’ll be right up ahead, so keep your eyes sharp.” Louis had the searchlight on again, and was scanning back and forth in front of the boat. Joey hadn’t seen a thing when Louis said, “There it is,” and brought the boat hard around to the left, then cut back hard to the right. They passed the marker so close, that Joey was sure he could have reached out and touched it.

Almost as if to answer Joey’s unspoken question, Louis said, “Gotta stay close to these markers and keep ‘em on the port side when you’re going out. This is a very narrow channel across these flats and around Adam’s Key.”

“The port side is the left side, isn’t it?”

“That’s right, now be quiet while I get on out Caesar Creek, and into Hawk Channel.” Louis kept the searchlight on each reflector as it was picked up in the beam. He regularly glanced at the Fathometer for added security. He watched the depth vary from twenty-five feet to ten, as they flew along in the narrow channel. He had been through the area many times, and knew that even at high tide, there were only a couple feet of water on either side of the channel. He also knew that in a couple of places, the channel was only a dozen feet wide—little room for error. Ahead of the boat he could see Marker 20 flashing red. He breathed easier knowing Hawk Channel was only a quarter of a mile ahead.

~ had he known what was waiting ahead, he would not have felt so confident ~

Raymond James moved slowly north in Hawk Channel. It was going to be a long, boring trip, and as he sipped hot tea he thought of all the crawfish thieves he’d chased over the years. The anger down deep inside of him began to boil. His dad had practically invented crawfish trapping, but was forced to pull up stakes in Key Largo,

after half a lifetime of trapping, and move to St. Croix, Virgin Islands. His hopes were to get away from trap thieves. *They're like shitflies*, Ray thought, *where there's shit, there's flies—where there's crawfish there's thieves.*

When St. Croix passed through his mind, he thought of Aretha for the first time in a long time, and the pain was still there. It always was when he thought of her, so he made a conscious effort to keep her out of his thoughts. He forced her out of his mind again, but as the boat plodded along, his mind exercised its power, and he began recalling the early days when he and his parents had just moved to the islands. *Wonder if Bangor's still got that old rattletrap motorcycle? Bet all he drives now is the MG.* A sip of tea and he said aloud, "St. Croix; hmmmmmm."

It was a beautiful day in St. Croix, Virgin Islands. Bolford James came off the boat wiping grease from his hands. "Change your oil regular son," he said to Raymond, "it's the cheapest insurance policy there is."

Bolford James wasn't born into a fisherman's family. His father was a plumber and his grandfather was a mechanic, so it wasn't in his genes. Hialeah, Florida was close enough to the ocean that many fishermen lived there, but none of the James men had been commercial fishermen, so many wondered why Bolford had taken to it so readily? An uncle liked to catch his own bait with a cast net, so when young Bol showed interest, he let him try it. With only a couple of lessons, the boy was getting the net completely open, and far enough out into the water that he was actually getting small bait-fish. Uncle was so impressed that he gave the boy the small cast net. "I gotta get a bigger one anyway." That probably started it all, most agreed. By thirteen, Bol was riding an old Cushman motor scooter to the beach, to ply his new trade. At fourteen, he'd caught and sold enough finger-mullet to the bait houses, to buy an old Chevy. At eighteen, he had a boat that was seaworthy enough to take him beyond sight of land, to try for Kingfish and other 'money fish.' At five-feet-six-inches-tall, and one-hundred-sixty-pounds soaking wet, no one would refer to Bol as handsome. But with a full head of rusty brown hair hanging over twinkling brown eyes, he was appealing to the girls. Muscles that rippled along his arms, from hours of pulling handlines up from deep water, made him appear larger than he was. The attitude Bol took into, and brought home from, WW-II made him a man's man, so men also enjoyed his company.

Raymond had been building new crawfish traps since dawn, and the Caribbean sun was directly overhead. He laid the hammer on the trap-jig, and joined his dad under the tree, which hung out over the stern of JUMPIN JEN.

"Hand me one, dad." Ray reached out, as Bol pulled a cold coke from the cooler.

Bol handed him the drink and eyed the stack of new traps. "How many y' got ready to go, son?"

After a long pull on the ice-cold glass bottle, Ray answered. "Three-hundred-and-twenty-five, and I'll have this fifty done, dipped, and tied, by Sunday night."

When weather allowed, Ray and Bol worked side-by-side, every day from daylight till dark. There was always traps to build, traps to repair, traps waiting to be dipped in used motor oil to hold down the marine borers, plus a commercial trap boat required a lot of maintenance. Pulling the one hundred and twenty pound traps, hour-after-hour, day-in, day-out, took a heavy toll on the boats, and the men who worked them. When

everything else was caught up, there was also bait to get for each week's pulling. That was Ray's responsibility.

Each week, he had to dive up one thousand conchs. Once he had them piled up on the beach, he'd knock a hole at the third ring on the end, sever the attachment with his knife, and pull the meat out. This was hung in each trap to lure the crawfish inside. One thousand conchs a week—every week. No conch—no crawfish.

"Here comes mom with lunch," Ray said as he stood and stretched.

"Hope she was able to find some of that Limburger cheese," Bol mumbled.

"Yech!" Ray screwed his face up to a soured scowl. "How can you eat that horrible smelling crap? Smells like somebody's feet that ain't been out of shoes for a month."

Bol just smiled, "Damn site better'n all them sandwiches you eat."

"I won't complain, cause the stuff does keep the bugs away for a few days after you open it."

"Puts hair on you like a man, son."

"I'd rather be a bald kid."

Jennifer James parked the truck beneath the big shade tree, and hopped up in the back, as Ray walked over. "Hand me a box of buoys mom."

Jennifer Plunkett and Bolford James both grew up on the outskirts of Hialeah, Florida. Her father was a horse trainer, and spent much of his time at the world famous Hialeah Race Track. She went with him to the track as often as she was allowed, and developed an intense love of horses. She jumped at the opportunity to walk the racers, to cool them down after a training session. When she reached her teens, she was so good with the horses, and so well liked by the jockeys and trainers, that she was allowed to ride an occasional thoroughbred slowly around the track, to exercise the animal. By fifteen, her dreams of becoming a professional Jockey were dashed against the rocks. She was already five-feet-nine-inches tall, and still growing. She graduated from high school at exactly six-feet-tall in bare feet, and weighed one-hundred-and-twenty-pounds. She was an extremely strong-minded young woman, so rather than develop a self-conscious attitude toward her height; she carried it with pride and poise. Sitting atop an erect spine, was a truly beautiful head, covered with a lush garden of auburn hair, which easily touched her shoulders. Jennifer's beautiful hair complemented her hazelnut colored eyes, which were flecked with green. Many times in the future, Bol would comment, "Don't know if it was that pretty face, the hair, the eyes, or what, but each one of 'em took my breath away, and the whole package left me weak in the knees."

She was born to be a gentleman's lady, but beside her fisherman she was a mate and a mate. She stood beside him as First Mate, and pulled handlines for years, until he was an established crawfisherman. She did everything she could to help her man.

"I'll get the buoys son, while you take this hot stew. You eat too many sandwiches."

"Hey, great! Stew sounds good. Did you find some of that rotten cheese for dad?"

"Didn't you see that cloud of flies following the truck?"

Bol walked over and got a peck on the lips. "You people have no taste for fine food." Bol took the other box of food. "Mmmm, I can smell that wonderful stuff

through the jar.”

Jennifer always put the Limburger in a canning jar and screwed the lid on tight.

“Yeah,” Ray said smiling, “so can those fishermen down on the point, because they’re leaving.” He pointed toward three black men getting in a rusty, old sedan.

Bol grinned, “If they’re comin over here to ask for some of this cheese, they’re wasting their time.”

“Pop, your jar of cheese would probably be safe, even if you sat it on the sidewalk downtown.”

As Ray and Bol settled in beneath the tree for lunch, Jennifer began unloading the buoys. Since the middle of last week she had been painting Styrofoam buoys. Once they were strung between the trees, she would paint one; slide it down to the last one, being careful not to touch them together. Paint a buoy, slide it down—paint another, slide it down. Hour-after-hour, never complaining, but she did occasionally wonder, *is there ever an end to this tedious job? How many thousands of these damn things have I painted?*

When she started feeling sorry for herself, she tried to remember that every one she painted was attached to a trap, which Ray and Bol had to handle many, many times.

Once the line was full of dry buoys, she would begin painting their commercial number on each one. Since they were the only trap fishermen in the Virgin Islands, it wasn’t necessary to number them, but Bol was a man of intense habit, and insisted that every buoy and trap have his number. Every trap also had his commercial number scratched into the concrete, which was poured into each end to keep the trap on the bottom of the ocean.

Once, during the previous year, while he and Ray were returning to Key Largo from a boatyard in Miami, Bol checked a suspicious line of new white buoys. There was over a hundred of them, in what the fishermen referred to as, No Man’s Land. It was a stretch of shallow bottom between Miami and Key Largo. Every trap had Bol’s number scratched into the concrete, so they loaded every one and took them to the traplot in Garden Cove. “Now we know what happened to our two lines of brand new traps that disappeared north of Pacific Light, huh?” From that day on, almost every fisherman put his commercial number in his traps.

“How many y’got, Hon?” Bol spoke around a mouthful of stew.

“This’s the last of ‘em. Let’s hope we still have this four hundred, and the twenty-five spares, this time next year.” Jennifer plopped down on the end of one of the packing crates they had used to ship their belongings to St. Croix.

It wasn’t the first time Ray had looked at his mother and thought, *Good as they come—tough as they come.*

In 1920 Jennifer Plunkett was born in Hialeah, Florida, less than a mile from the small house that Bolford James was born in, five years earlier. The age difference kept them from meeting until a New Year’s Eve party. It was sponsored by the city, and held at the open air Band Shell Auditorium, next to Okeechobee Road in Hialeah. Jennifer was leaning against a palm tree, sipping free lemonade, while enjoying the music. She was completely oblivious to the soldier, who had been watching her for an hour. She drained the paper cup and headed to the trashcan. It took her right past Bolford James.

“Hi” Bol said with a big smile. The tall slender girl stopped dead in her tracks, and stared straight into the stranger’s eyes for a full five seconds. It was long enough to make Bol begin to sweat. He wasn’t a shy person, but he’d never had a girl look at him so directly. He locked eyes with her and kept the smile on his face.

“Hi, what’s your name?” She crushed the paper cup and tossed it in the can.

“Bolford James,” he answered, “Bol for short.”

“I’m Jennifer Plunkett. Call me Jen, not Jenny; sounds too much like an old car.” She immediately liked the easy manner and sincere smile on the young soldier. “How long have y’been in the army, Bol?”

“I joined in June, six days after my boat sunk.”

“What did your boat sinking have to do with the army?”

“I’m a commercial fisherman, and I just wasn’t ready to start building up a new boat. Figured I’d get drafted anyway, with the war going strong.”

And so the conversation went, as they strolled off together toward a half-century relationship that so few are fortunate enough to have.

Ray heard the motorcycle long before he could see it, so he laid the hammer on top of the lid-jig, and covered it with a tarp. He unwrapped a sandwich, from the brown bag that his mom tossed him before she and Bol pulled out a couple of hours earlier. The loud motorcycle rattled to a stop next to the trap he was sitting on.

A tar-black face leaned forward on the handlebars and stared into Ray’s eyes.

“Whacha sellin, boy?” Ray slurred around a mouthful of bologna and bread.

The black face erupted into a wide, white smile. “Damn mon, you callin a fella wit a foot long dick, an fifty bucks in he pocket, boy?”

Ray washed down another mouthful, and shook his head back and forth as he looked at his new island friend’s feet. “They say big feet, big dick, amigo. Them’re about the smallest feet I ever saw on a man your size. I’d say they’re about five-inch pecker boots, Bangor, and I bet you never had fifty bucks at one time in your life. Ray liked the huge island boy very much, so he was smiling now, even though he tried to keep a straight face.

Moses Jerome Nesbitt was born in Trinidad, a couple of years before Ray left one world of water for another. Those who witnessed the birth said the coal-black boy came out smiling. He was a happy little boy, made happier with the gift of a small drum—sticking him forever with the nickname, Bangor.

What he lacked in rhythm, the little five-year-old made up for, with enthusiasm. His father made him a strap to carry the drum around his neck, and the boy would spend hours marching about, beating the drum. “Dot lil fella beatin on dat drum, like he gone have he own marchin band,” an aunt commented.

His mother smiled, “Yes, he sure love dat ting, an he do a better job den dat red rooster. Soon he wake up, he got dat ting roun he neck, an bang, bang, bang, he tryin to wake de whole worl up.”

An uncle looked unsmiling at the loud, marching little drummer. “Doan know bout de whole worl, but he sure wake me ever mornin. Yeah mon, dat boy a real Bangor.”

Moses Jerome Nesbitt was Bangor, ever after.

“Well conch diver, whacha reckon dis be?” He pulled two twenty’s and a ten-

dollar-bill from his shirt pocket.

Ray looked all around quickly, then ducked down behind the lid jig. “Oh shit, the cops’ll be here any minute. Which bank did you hit?”

“Mon,” Bangor said with a loud tssskt, which always ended with a slight pop. He pushed the motorcycle to the big tree, and leaned it over. “You lookin at a professional gambler.”

Ray swallowed the last of the sandwich. “Don’t tell me you hit the numbers again.”

“Yessiree mon,” Bangor answered as he fidgeted with the motorcycle to make it stand against the tree.

“Bangor, why don’t you fix that damn kickstand?”

“Why waste de time mon? Dey be trees ever place you can go on dis island, an a fella only got so much time on dis eart.”

“Yeah! Y’got a point there.” Ray tossed the brown bag to his new friend. The man that caught the bag was no longer the little drummer. He wasn’t a little anything. He still had the ready smile and enthusiasm of the ‘One Man Trinidadian Marching Band,’ but he was now six and a half feet tall, and weighed two hundred and fifty pounds.

Bangor pulled a sandwich from the bag. “One ting I see bouchew when you firse move here, Ray.” He filled his mouth with one of the sandwiches and began chewing.

Ray waited until the sandwich was gone, and Bangor was unwrapping another. “And what would that be?”

Bangor smiled wide again. “You ain workin, you eatin—ain eatin, you workin.”

“Damned if it don’t seem that way.”

Between chewing, Bangor said, “You missin out on a lotta good livin, boy.”

Ray smiled, “Boy huh! Ever noticed the size of my feet?”

Bangor choked on the sandwich, and laughed, as tears streamed down his face. “Yeah mon, you got some big feet. Maybe it bess you keep working, an doan be messin roun wit dese sweet island girls.”

“Well,” Ray said, “I’m about caught up, so pretty soon I wanna see some of these things that you’ve been telling me about.”

“When you ready mon, juss gimme de word, an I gone give you de gran tour of paradise.”

“Not on that thing,” Ray said, pointing at the old motorcycle.

“You fraid dem machine, mon?”

“I’m afraid of anything that growls like that. Hand me one of those sandwiches, before you get to the bottom of the bag.”

Bangor took another sandwich from the bag, and tossed the one remaining sandwich and bag to Ray. “See what I mean mon? You always eatin.”

“Well there’s always a pile of work waiting on me, and I’m still growing.”

“Hell, me too mon, an dey be only so many sandwiches.”

Ray looked at his huge black friend. “If you’re still growing, they better think about sending you somewhere else.”

“Why dat, mon?”

“There’s not gonna be enough food on this island.”

Bangor stretched against the tree, as he unwrapped the last sandwich, and looked at it thoughtfully. “You mama sure knows how to mix all de parts juss right, mon. She

open a sandwich shop downtown she gone get rich, rich. You an you daddy gonna be poor, poor, poor, waitin on dem crawfishes to move in dese wood box you buildin.”

“Bangor, when you see how many crawfish we bring in, you’re gonna be busy building up a bunch yourself.”

“Oh no, boy.” Bangor shook his head. “I seen how you an you daddy always out here workin, workin, mon. I ain seen a dollar yet what lookin so good, I gotta work like dat to get it. Sides dat mon, I gone be hittin de Bolita regular, now dat my system workin right.”

Ray smiled. “You’ve got som’n goin for you, that’s for sure. This’s the second time you’ve hit the numbers since I’ve been here.”

“I juss gittin started, conch diver. You watch me go now.”

“Actually I’m glad to see you hitting big, cause there’s probably only a coupla million bucks worth of crawfish out there, and I don’t wanna share it with you or anyone else.”

Bangor lifted his head up off the ground. “Mon, if dey ten million buckets o’ dollars wort dem bugs, you go git em. While you be countin all dat money, I be cootin one dem foncy Charlotte Amalie chocolate drops.”

Ray picked up the hammer and finished nailing the trap lid that he’d been working on when Bangor roared up. He removed the finished lid and said, “I might find time for that too.”

Bangor muscled the old Triumph motorcycle away from the tree, and after several attempts, it finally started with a deafening roar.

Ray put the hammer down and sealed his ears with the palms of his hands. He watched as his friend pulled the World War One aviator goggles down over his eyes, and gave the old relic just enough throttle to spray a little gravel on Ray as he took off. Ray knew the routine by then, so he had his back toward the departing road warrior. When he turned back, Bangor was hunched over and giving the Triumph the entire throttle. Ray laughed out loud and stood watching until he was out of sight, which didn’t take long. *That old Triumph still has guts.*

Ray turned back to the stack of wood piled next to the lid-jig, and picked through the pile for the right pieces to set up the next lid. As he assembled the wood slats in place, he thought, *Bangor’s right about this trap business, it’s a helluva lotta work.* He picked up the hammer and the remainder of the day faded away in a foggy, repetitious blur of hammer strokes, nails, and small pieces of wood.

The second time he hit his finger because of darkness closing around him, he put the hammer down and stretched his back. “One more day and the lids’re done,” he said aloud. After straightening up the work area, Ray headed for his Dodge pick-up truck. It cost a lot to have it shipped down to St. Croix, but it was worth it. His first vehicle was a Dodge pick-up that he paid three-hundred-and-fifty crawfish dollars for. His dad often said, “One crawfish dollar’s worth three regular dollars, because they’re so much harder to come by.” When Ray bought that first Dodge, on his sixteenth birthday, he knew how right his dad was. He had earned every one of them by pulling his line of traps by hand. He bought this later model pick-up, and loaded it down with trap supplies before shipping it, to offset some of the expenses of moving to the Virgin Islands.

After swinging the gate closed, he stood a moment looking at the stacks of traps and lids. “Lotta work,” he said again, “but at least we don’t have to worry about some

thieving bastard busting them up, or taking them somewhere else.” Ray pulled onto the road and headed for home, and a mile later he laughed out loud. “You’re right Bangor, I just finished working, and all I can think about is what mom might have fixed for supper.”

Another mile down the road, and Ray whipped into the circle drive in front of the small house that his mother had bought. Once Bol had made the decision to move, she made several trips to the island, and made all the necessary living arrangements.

Bol considered the domestic aspects of their life together her area, and preferred that she make all decisions regarding that domain. Whatever she did was fine with him, and he never interfered. Jennifer felt the same about his fishing business. Whatever he wanted to do was his decision. They never bucked each other, and always tried to encourage one another in whatever they were pursuing. It didn’t matter whether she was painting buoys, or he was painting the house; they stepped back and forth in each other’s space easily. All who took the time to get to know them, realized that they had something very special—rare, even in their time.

Jennifer knew the hard work Bol and Ray had facing them in order to make the move to the Virgin Islands. Once the deal was closed on the small wooden house, she hired two women to help get the place cleaned and ready to live in. One lady’s husband was a painter, and the other’s boyfriend was, as she put it, “Ver hondy roun de house wit shovel, hommer, an any ting. Dat boy can make de plummin plum, an de lectric lectrify.” Turned out that she was understating his abilities. Anything that needed repair was soon in top shape under his masterful touch.

Six weeks later, Bolford and Raymond got the last of their traps out of Key Largo waters, and onto the traplot in Garden Cove. While Raymond began getting things in order, Bol caught a flight bound for his new home in the Virgin Islands.

When the taxi pulled up to the address, that Jennifer sent him, he was sure there had been a mix-up of some kind. Sitting under a huge umbrella, attached to the center of a picnic table, sat two black ladies and two black men. As he sat beside the driver, trying to figure out how to locate his new home, Bol wondered if he might be at the right address on the wrong island.

The front door opened, and Jennifer came through carrying a huge platter of food. Bol smiled at the taxi driver. “Ain’t another woman on earth like that, so this must be home.” By the time Bolford got out of the cab, she was beside him smiling. “Welcome home sailor.” She gave him a light peck on the lips then spoke to the driver. “Gerald’s been helping me with the house, and says you’re his cousin.”

“Yes ma’am, he is that, but we been more like brother’s all along.”

Jennifer smiled at the island man, “I just fixed a big cold plate for lunch, wanna join us?”

The huge man already had a suitcase under each arm and one in each hand. He answered warmly, “Yes ma’am, thank you very much. I ain got this size by turnin down food.”

Two other men were soon there to finished emptying the trunk and back seat. The short one spoke while retrieving the last bag. “Look like you plonnin to stick roun awhile, Mister James.”

“Bout thirty years,” Bol said with a big grin.

“That good mon, that real good.” Gerald smiled widely, displaying two gold teeth that he was proud of. “Where you want these bags put down, Miss Jennifer?”

“Right in the middle of the living room for now, then let’s all have lunch.”

After all of the bags were deposited in the house, they all gathered around a picnic table that one of the men had built a few days earlier.

Before Jennifer went to get the plates, she introduced everyone to Bol. “Hon, this is Elaine.” The tiny black woman held out her child-like hand, smiling broadly. “Been hearin bouchew from missus Jennifer, Mister Bolford.”

Bol took the tiny hand carefully, “Not mister anything, Elaine, especially not Bolford; just plain ole Bol.” He liked the little woman’s firm handshake, and he matched her broad smile evenly.

“This is her husband, Gerald.” Jennifer guided him to a small, smiling man.

As they shook hands, Bol was surprised at the strength in the small man’s grip. “You flew in on pretty good weather, huh?”

“It was raining in Miami, but yeah, most of the way was clear and smooth.”

“This is Martha.” Jennifer introduced a tall, light brown woman.

Bol smiled as he stepped forward, extending his hand. *Bet she’s over six-feet-tall.*

“Ver please to meet you Mister Bol.” She also took his hand very firmly, and shook it while smiling sincerely.

Bol returned her smile but refused to release her hand. “Bol, Martha, just plain Bol.”

“And this is her boyfriend, Felix.”

Felix put a work hardened hand in Bol’s, and shook it firmly. “We all glad you make it down for a visit Bol, an hope you likes de way we fixin up you new home.”

“What I’ve seen so far looks great. I love being up on this hill, looking out over the bay.”

“It belonged to Gerald’s uncle, hon: that’s how we all came together; through Mr. Anderson. He sold it to me,” she said, and then reached out toward the taxi driver. “So you’re Gerald’s cousin, what’s your name?”

The very huge, very black man smiled warmly. “Yes’m, my mama an he mama be sister. My name’s Alphonso Ambrosia Anderson, dat how I name de business Triple A Cab Company, but everbody juss call me Phonso.”

Jennifer went into the house then returned with the plates, and interrupted the small talk. “Okay gang, let’s see what we can do with these platters of food.” She passed a plate to each person, “Go for it, and I’ll get us some lemonade.”

Bol sensed that they were waiting for him, so he speared one of Jennifer’s homemade pickles. As he moved around to the tuna salad, he was happy to see the others begin filling their plates.

Half an hour later, there wasn’t enough left to feed a traveling hobo. Jennifer had fixed plenty and these people were not inhibited about accepting her generosity.

“These mangos are as sweet as I’ve ever had,” Bol said. He held up a piece of fruit, “I love this, but it’s a first for me; what is it?”

Felix was the first to speak, “Soursop mon, y’ain ever had any?”

“Never even heard of it,” Bol answered.

“Bess fruit in dis worl mon, an also de bess ting on Sunday mornin for a bellyful of Saturday night rum.”

“Yeah mon,” Gerald chimed in, “soursop ver sweet an delicious, an always fix dat sour belly right up.”

“I wouldn’t know a ting bout dat Ole Mon Rum m’self,” Phonso said in a solemn

Deacon-like voice.

Before anyone could speak, Elaine said, "Boy, you ain learn a ting from dat Pinoccio movie loss week. Doncha know you nose gone be long as a elephant if you keep lyin like dat." With a stern face she pointed a tiny finger at him.

Phonso could no longer keep a straight face. His laughter came out as though it was amplified, and immediately everyone was laughing out of control. It didn't surprise Bol, because Phonso had talked constantly on the ride from the small airstrip that he flew into from St. Thomas. He had figured the huge man to be the kind who enjoyed every aspect of life to the fullest.

"Well, yeah mon," Phonso said after catching his breath, "I take a little taste now an again. He ver correct bout dat soursop. Delicious an cure dem bellywoes quick."

The balance of the day passed very pleasantly. Bol had not been so relaxed in a long time. The Caribbean sun, combined with the rum drinks that Jen had fixed for everyone, went down slowly together, and everyone enjoyed both.

Caribbean people consider watching the sun go down a perfect ending to a good day on this earth, and they participate as often as they can.

A couple of hours into darkness, Bol drifted off to sleep in the canvas lounge chair he had been sitting in. Another round of drinks, and everyone thanked Jen for having them over to Bol's welcome home party. They quietly slipped into their cars, but before pulling away, Phonso stuck his head in Felix's window. "Dot lunch was great mon, but done wore right off my bones. What say we go down de road to Big John's for some hot chicken an cold beer an dominos?"

When Gerald smiled, his teeth almost lit up the dark car. "Mon, I tink you got a great idea. Tell Felix to follow us, an you go slow cause dat fella gittin drunk, I tink."

When the new sun came up, it found Bol still asleep in the canvas lounge. Five miles down the road, at Big John's Chikin Coop, the men from Jen's party, plus two others, were still drinking beer and playing dominos. Their ladies were sleeping soundly on the bench along the wall. The Caribbean had worked it's magic once again.

A few days later, Bol was back in Key Largo putting in long hours. With Ray's help, he was preparing for the move to the Virgin Islands. The traps were sold to Ralph Stoff, who had worked for Bol as mate until the 1958 season. Ralph had bought his own boat, and started the season with two hundred new traps that he built during the summer. Bol knew it wasn't enough, so he gave him a hundred of his older traps. He also rented him the lot on the canal, so he could keep his boat and gear together.

Arrangements were made to have JUMPIN JEN, Bol's thirty-two-foot long, cypress-planked boat, shipped down aboard an inner-island freighter. A trip was made to central Florida to have a load of trap cypress delivered to the freighter. It was always a touchy ordeal to get enough trap wood. Only cypress can hold off the marine borers for five years, and there always seemed to be too many fishermen for the amount of wood the Central Florida sawmills could produce. Bol had visited the sawmill twice and made friends. He brought the owner frozen lobster tails each trip, which now made it possible to get a load of trap wood to take with them, plus three more shipped to St. Croix over the next few months. Everyone in the commercial fishing business knew and liked Bol. He was one of the first men who started building professional traps to catch crawfish as a full time occupation.

On the way back from the trip to the sawmill, Bol stopped by Fishermen's Supply in Miami. He made arrangements to have enough poly trap line, nails, buoys and assorted gear that he knew would be impossible to get elsewhere, delivered to the freighter. Everywhere he went friends asked, "Why are you going all the way down there, when you can catch plenty of crawfish right here?"

Bol had the same answer for them all. "Because I'm sick of splitting my catch with a bunch of lousy goddamn thieves."

When everything was finally done, Bol headed for Miami in the boat, as Ray drove the Dodge pickup to Port Everglades, where it and the boat would be loaded aboard. The two men were also going along on the freighter, because it was cheaper traveling and would let them keep an eye on their gear.

Dawn, two days later, found them at sea heading south. Everything went smoothly and the boat was sitting snugly in adjustable cradles, cabled to the freighter's steel deck. The truck, wood and other supplies were stored in cargo compartments below decks.

Ray was on the very farthest forward point of the bow. This was a great adventure, and he loved every moment of it. Bol was making the second check within the hour, of the cables holding JUMPIN JEN to the freighter. The sea was as smooth as it gets, but Bol knew how fickle the ocean was. She could go from smooth as a millpond to a nightmare in the time it took to get into your foul weather gear. He checked the cables again before dark, and twice during the night. The following morning the sea was still calm, so Bol began to relax, and finally began enjoying the trip. Ray was glad to see it, because he knew what a big move this was for his parents, and the severe pressure his father was under.

No one had ever tried catching crawfish with traps in the Virgin Islands. The accepted method of catching the local lobster was to either dive down and spear them, or use a tickler and gig. Bol went out on one of the local skiffs with an old fisherman, who used this method. When the man got to the place he intended to try, he shut off the twelve horsepower inboard engine, and placed a long sculling oar in a notch on the stern. While holding a box about eight inches square and two feet long, with glass in the bottom, he moved the sixteen-foot-long skiff around coral heads by using the oar. The bottom was fifteen feet below the boat, and as the old fisherman looked down through the box, he eased his tickler over to a coral head. The two poles were the same length, but instead of a five-pronged gig on the end, the tickler had two feet of flexible stainless steel cable attached to it. When he had the spear in position, he held it along side the look box with the same hand. He then begin to 'tickle' the crawfish out from under the coral head. They would move a foot or two then stop. He then switched the look box to the tickler hand and rammed the spear through the crawfish's carapace, so it wouldn't damage the tail, where all the meat was. If he hadn't seen it himself, Bol would not have believed how quick the man could bring the gig pole up, get the crawfish off, and be back down to spear another one.

The most incredible thing to Bol, was how the old fisherman locked his leg around the sculling oar, and kept the skiff in position by sculling with his leg. It was quite a day, watching a man who would never see sixty again, handle a look box, two twenty-foot-long poles, a twelve-foot-long oar, and manipulate each one into a different position. *If I can remember this, he thought, it oughta keep me from bitching when the hydraulic puller isn't working just right.*

The old fisherman was very friendly, and when not busy, he talked a lot. “Bol, I kin tell you right now, when dese local boy fine out you gone put dem box in de ocean to cotch lobster, dey gone loff an loff. Yes mon, dat de nummer one ting dey gone do. Den when dey see you bringin in plenty dem bugs, dey gone be talkin anudder way.”

“Y’reckon I’ll be bringing in some crawfish outa my boxes?”

“Well now, ain any way you can know dat f’sure, till you put em in de water, but I know how dese bugs move roun down dere, cause I watchin dem ting a long time. When dey out an walkin roun, sometime be mebbe a coupla dozen, an dey all time be in a line. One gone have he nose in de udder one oss, an he be puttin he foots in de footprints of de bug in front. When dey comes to a nice cozy lookin place to hole up for a spell, so dey ain gotta worry bout ole grandpa grouper makin him he own lunch, den ever time dat firse bug gone in, dat secon one gone do de same ting. Den de nex, an de nex, an de nex, till ever one be all jam in dere. Doan matter to dem one bit how crowded dey be, cause always room f’one more. When you show me dem box, I figure right away, dis fella gone cotch plenty lobster in dem ting.”

“I sure hope you’re right William, because it cost us almost every dime we had saved to move down here.”

“You gone cotch plenty bug in dem ting Bol, but doan go tinkin you done leff all dem teef you was telling me bout, behine you.”

“You think some of these local boys’ll be pulling my traps to steal the crawfish?”

“No mon, you ain gone fine one boy roun here do dat. No mon, dey too lazy to be out on de water yankin on a rope wit a big ole box on de udder end, dat be heavy as dey ownself. Oh no, not dese lazy boy, but bess you keep a close eye on you gear when you see one dem Rican boats drivin roun you corks. Dem Rican boys all time come nosin roun de island here, juss lookin for what dey can take bok home.”

“Yeah,” Bol answered, “ain’t far from Puerto Rico over to the island here, is it?”

“My boy Artnell say he were finish partyin one time in a town on Puerto Rico, right straight across de water from here. He axe one dem fella to ride him home here, in he boat. He say from de time dey leff de point on dey own island, dey was passin St. Thomas in no time atol, mon. Artnell say he were home here in bout a hour. Mon,” the old man said as he looked hard at Bol, “dem Rican fella got dey ownself some foss boat.”

There would be many times in the future when Bol would think back on this bit of information, passed on to him by a wise old fisherman.

Louis passed the last reflector, and headed straight for the flashing red marker, then flipped on the searchlight. He knew exactly where he was but always played it safe. Sixteen feet above the surface, just below the flashing light, the number 20 glowed in the searchlight’s beam. He ran another fifty feet then idled the engine. Regardless how many times he came out of those tricky channels at night, he always breathed a sigh of relief upon reaching safe water. He tossed the chewed cigar stub out the cabin window and unwrapped a fresh Cuban. As he dug around in his pocket for the solid gold Ronson he said, “Hey Joey, we’re in Hawk Channel, so you can come on in now.”

Joey climbed down from the gunwale where he’d been standing, straining to see through the approaching dawn. “Wow! You could sell tickets to that ride.”

Louis blew out so much smoke that Joey thought for a moment that the cabin was on fire. “Just another day at the office, kid.” After putting the transmission in neutral, Louis flipped on the cabin light, and went forward to get a notebook from one of the bunks below the forward deck. “Get yourself a cup of coffee while I figure out which traps we’ll start on first.”

Joey Simms was a kid that woke up every morning of his life looking forward to each day’s new adventures. Anyone who knew him would later say that they never saw him in a bad mood. Later, a neighbor who paid him to mow his lawn every two weeks said, “I never knew a kid that tried so hard to do a good job of everything he tackled.”

Right now, a hundred miles from home, Joey leaned against the gunwale of the boat sipping coffee. As he watched the sun exploding on the horizon, he was reviewing everything that Louis told him he expected him to do. As the sun rose above the water, he felt certain he was ready to give a good day’s work for the money Louis would pay him. Not three feet away from where he stood, a huge Loggerhead turtle surfaced and blew air from its lungs. Joey’s scream startled Louis for a moment, but then he laughed. “You oughta have that happen to you at night when you’re standing on the stern, handlining for snapper and grouper.”

Joey was red with embarrassment, but glad the coffee had cooled off before he’d splashed it all over the front of his shirt and trousers. “Wow! Did you see how big that turtle was?”

“No, but I’ve seen some that were over three hundred pounds. They’re plentiful around here. Not too far south, there’s an area the locals call Turtle Harbor. You can’t put traps there because the turtles find them and eat the crawfish.”

“How the heck do they get ‘em outa the trap?”

“They put their head against the side and use their jaws to snap the lathe like it’s a toothpick. Then they shove their head in and eat everything, including octopus, moray eels, grouper, jewfish, snapper, or whatever’s in there. It all gets eaten when he comes to dinner.”

“Man-oh-man, that’s like being in jail when Godzilla comes to town.”

Louis took a long pull on the Cuban again, and filled the air around him with smoke. “They probably have a hard time catching them out in the open. Betcha there’s a million crawfish holed up in that area, since nobody traps there.”

Louis went forward into the cabin to get his aviator-type Polaroid sunglasses. When he came out he asked Joey, “Did you get a pair of Polaroids?”

“No, they were too expensive.”

Louis went back into the bunk area and returned with an old set. “You can have these. They’re a little beat up, but they’re good Polaroids. Clean ‘em good then take a look at the bottom when we get into clear water. You won’t believe the difference in these and plain sunglasses.”

“Gee thanks. Boy, these’re just like the ones the pilots in the movies wear.”

“Yeah, they are, and they wear ‘em for the same reason I do. They filter out certain rays from the sun that are hard on your eyes. They also let me see the bottom more clearly, so we don’t run up on a coral head or sandbar.”

Joey cleaned the glasses immediately and put them on. “Wow! I can look right at the sun with these.”

“Yeah, but don’t make a habit of it or you’ll ruin your eyes.” Louis looked in the

direction of the sun. “Sun’s high enough to let me pick my way through the coral heads, so let’s get on out toward Pacific Light.”

“We gonna pull out on the reef?”

“No, we’re gonna start in some shallow water just inside the reef. If the bugs are there, fine. If not we’ll head south and check around.” With that said, Louis eased the throttle forward. The sleek, powerful, twenty-five-thousand-dollar, custom-built boat was soon skimming across the top of the water.

Joey stood on the gunwale and held tightly to the handrail on top of the cabin. The top of the water was like a sheet of glass and soon they were out of Hawk Channel and into clear water. Joey marveled at the coral heads that were so colorful, and at times just beneath the surface. With his new glasses, everything on the bottom became clear and defined. He leaned down and yelled to Louis, “These glasses are really great. I can see everything.”

Louis smiled and yelled back, “That’s what keeps me from putting one of those coral heads through the bottom of the boat.”

Joey straightened back up and began watching the bottom of the ocean again. The boat went between two red buoys, and Joey leaned down again. “Are these some of your friend’s traps?”

“Yeah, but we’re gonna pull some out a little closer to the reef.”

The boat skimmed effortlessly along, weaving its way through buoys and coral heads—carrying its occupants closer to their date with fate.

A mile south of Pacific Light, Louis slowed the boat and brought it alongside a red buoy with an X across the top, marking the end of a line. The first line of traps he had checked, just inside the light, had the same color buoys. The second line had yellow buoys, and the third had brown bullet shaped buoys. “Joey,” Louis said, “pull this trap while I look around for another line.” He stepped up on the gunwale and looked hard, in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree circle. It wasn’t buoys he was looking for. He was always on the lookout for one of the local fishermen—whose lobster he was stealing. He loved Monday, because there were seldom tourists or yachtsmen on the water. When there were too many of either it was hard to pick out the fishermen. There were times when he had to stop pulling traps full of crawfish, because there were too many boats nearby. His biggest worry was that some smart fisherman would slip up on him in a pleasure boat. For that reason he never let any boat get closer to him than a quarter of a mile.

Satisfied that there was no one nearby, Louis jumped back down and was startled a little by Joey’s scream.

“Eeeyow! Look at that.”

When Louis saw that the trap was packed full of crawfish, he smiled. “Bingo, the jackpot. Okay let’s pick her clean and start making our day’s pay.”

The words were wasted on Joey. He already had the lid off and was throwing crawfish in the gunnysack, hanging in a stand next to the hydraulic puller. As he tossed the last two in the sack he said, “Thirty-three, man-oh-man that’s something.”

“Let’s hope the entire line of my pal’s traps’re this full.”

“Boy, if it is, your friend’s gonna be one happy guy when we get back tonight, huh?”

“Yeah Joey, he sure is.” Louis smiled a little crookedly.

An hour and a half later Joey was tying the tenth bag shut, as Louis ran the boat

farther south. Out of seventy traps they had taken ten bags—about a thousand pounds of lobster—a phenomenal amount. Louis Pellit had never built a lobster trap, never stood out in the hundred degree heat of summer dipping traps in burnt motor oil as had to be done every season to combat marine borers, never carried a one of the hundreds of buckets of concrete that had to be poured in each trap to keep them on the bottom of the ocean, never stood out in the yard under lights until the wee hours of the morning, tying buoys and coiling lines, never loaded a single one of the one-hundred-pound traps on the truck to be carried to the boat. The ‘never hads’ could go on and on, but Louis Pellit still would not have done a one of them.

What Louis Pellit had done though, was make a lot of easy money. He by-passed all of the hard work often saying, ‘That kinda work’s for dumb-ass fishermen’—he went straight to the money.

Today was no exception. Perhaps it was though? Louis had never hit them so thick so fast. Ordinarily he would have been heading home with a thousand-pound catch. He was almost to the Ocean Reef Yacht Club in North Key Largo, and he’d never worked that far south. *Just a little farther that guy’s got another line, and the bottom’s the same, so we’ll probably fill another ten bags.*

Greed had his bowline; pulling him into a trap from which there was no escape.

Jesse Finn keyed the mic and talked softly, as though a loud voice might somehow be heard through the airwaves. “Kingfish One, Kingfish Two here, how y’read me, over?” As he waited for an answer he thought, *I sure hope these special CB crystals Joe-Billy got us, work.*

Joe-Billy Hammerstone was Jesse’s brother-in-law. He started helping his uncle drive trucks when he was thirteen and fell in love with the highway. He had been crossing the country for twenty years now, and boasted that he could get you anything you wanted, from a pet platypus to a pistol silencer.

Jesse approached Joe-Billy with his need for a couple of CB radio crystals, so he and another trapper could talk without anyone else listening in. The tall skinny trucker, who wore nothing but white T-shirts and Levi’s shoved down into cowboy boots, just smiled. “No prob atol man, how soon ya need ‘em?”

This was a couple of months before the season was due to open, so Jesse answered, “Month’r so.”

“I’m leaving for LA in the morning, so I’ll stop by Geronimo’s house in Tucson and pick up a couple from him, and have ‘em back here in plenty of time.”

“Geronimo?”

“That’s what he says. Geronimo! Sitting Bull, Running Nuts, Geronimo, what the fuck’s the difference? He’s the best damn electronics man there is. If he says I can talk with my run man when I’m haulin something a little iffy, then believe me, the F fucking BI can’t listen in. They ain’t cheap though, fifty bucks apiece.”

Jesse knew the crystals weren’t costing Joe-Billy fifty bucks. *Probably getting the damn things free*, he thought, *or more likely stealin ‘em. What the hell, if they’ll do the job. . .* He fished five twenties from his wallet. “Get me a couple.”

The radio came alive. “Kingfish Two, Kingfish One here, yer comin in loud ‘n clear, how bout me, over?”

“Same way,” Jesse answered, “like you’re standing right beside me.”

“You in position yet?” Ray asked.

“No, but by the time the sun comes up, I will be.”

“Roger that, I hit my mark about ten minutes ago, and shut down. Skeeter’s were sure glad to see me. They were starving to death till I got here.”

“Wouldn’t be surprised to find ‘em out here too, when I shut down. Been pretty bad so far this season.”

“I doubt that, they’re all right here in this cabin.”

“The sun’ll burn ‘em outa there in half an hour or so.”

“Or they’ll leave sooner if I run outa blood.”

“I’m gonna shut down and take a listen. I’m straight out from my mark. By the way, this baby’s running like a scalded-ass ape. I think our partner’s in for a surprise.”

“Same here. I slipped in next to shore, and as soon as she felt that shallow water she jumped up on top like a race boat. We’re ready for business, King Two. King One over and standing by.”

Ray put the mic back on the hook, then poured another cup of tea. An hour later, dawn burst through the ink-black Key Largo night and lit a clear blue, cloudless summer sky. He sipped hot tea and scanned the water for the thief. “A thousand damn things I could be doing to get ready for the first day of the season,” Ray said aloud, “and here I am again, trying to catch a thief.” He listened with the intensity of a hungry animal but heard nothing unusual—only seawater slapping the side of the boat. *Sometimes*, he thought, *I think I’ve spent half my time on the ocean chasing thieves.*

The speaker crackled and Ray reached for the microphone, as Jesse’s voice came through. “King One, pick it up.”

“King One here.”

“Just spotted a boat out near the light, and he’s definitely pulling traps.”

“Gotcha loud ‘n clear on that King Two, could it be one of the Miami boys pulling his gear for an early start?”

“Don’t think so. Too low to the water to be one of them, and he’s much too fast.”

“That’s probably our boy, then. I’m just north of the Ocean Reef Yacht Club, so I’ll start easing on up the shoreline to cut him off if he makes a run for it. I oughta blend in pretty good with the shoreline, so I should be able to get a good ways up before he spots me. You heading toward him?”

“Roger that. If he looks my way he’ll be staring straight into the sun.”

Louis spotted the brown, bullet shaped buoys about the same time Joey did. “There’s one,” the boy yelled.

Louis was happy to see the small round cork attached to it. He knew this crawfisherman marked the end of the line with a small net-cork. These traps were going to be full and he didn’t want to miss a one. *This’s my day*, he must have thought.

How wrong he was!

So intent was Louis Pellit on preparing to steal the second thousand pounds of lobster that he failed to keep an eye on the horizon. An amateur would never have seen the boat moving slowly along the shoreline, positioning to block Louis’ escape

route. Few men would have picked out the boat coming slowly down the blinding rays of the sun, straight at the two men busily pulling traps.

On a normal day, stealing a normal amount of lobster, Louis Pellit would have spotted them both. He would have said to his helper, 'That's enough for today.' Louis would then have been running wide open for nearby Angelfish Creek—and safety. In his fast boat, escape was always only a short distance away.

But today wasn't a normal day. A thousand pounds of crawfish was more than he'd ever brought across the gunwale of the boat in such a short time. He was already spending the money when Joey pointed. "Hey Louis, look at that boat coming right at us, maybe it's a friend of yours, huh?"

Startled would not describe the electrical impulses that went rocketing through Louis's brain when he heard the warning. He looked straight at the sun through his one-hundred-dollar Polaroids. There, almost hidden in the brilliantly flashing, liquid rays of the sun, was a boat. By its profile, he knew immediately that it was a crawfish boat. It was running slow so it wouldn't be noticed until the last possible moment.

"Get that trap overboard and let's get the hell outa here," Louis yelled as he ran to the wheel and throttle.

Joey was confused and didn't know what to do. He had just removed the nail that holds the lid on the trap, when the huge engine let out a growl as the boat came alive. "Wait," Joey screamed to be heard above the engine noise, "I gotta put the lid back on."

"Fuck the lid," Louis screamed, "get that goddamn trap outa the boat, **Now.**"

Joey was programmed to do as he was told, so the trap hit the water with a dozen or more lobster in it and no lid.

Joey looked back to watch the trap line quickly playing out the back of the boat. He saw the brown buoy bounce off the stern of the boat, and as he watched it hit the water he noticed the boat was behind them, and guessed it to be about a football field away. He had no idea what was going on, but sensed that something bad was happening.

In the wheelhouse, Louis was fine-tuning the boat by adjusting the hydraulic trim tabs, which were mounted on the stern. He slowly lowered them, and knew that when he reached shallow water the boat would rise higher, and run faster. He was keeping a close eye on the bottom, because he knew there were coral heads all through the area. Under normal conditions he would never run this route, even on a clear day, but he realized what was at stake, and was heading straight for the entrance to Angelfish Creek.

Louis didn't see the boat running along the shoreline, on his port side. It was the spray that caught his eye. "**Shit,**" he yelled, loud enough for Joey to hear above the noise of the engine. Louis glanced back at the boat following him. *He's keeping up with me. What the hell kinda power has he got in that tub?*

As he watched the bottom for coral heads, he was trying to judge the speed of the second boat. He could stay ahead of the one behind him, and he knew that once he got into the shallow water, a short distance ahead, the trim tabs on his stern would put the boat on top of the water. *I'll walk right away from both these jerks.*

With his eyes glued to Ray's boat, racing along the shore, he finally said out loud, "My God, that guy's gonna cut me off from Angelfish Creek."

Somewhere deep within his brain, greed still had a deathgrip on Louis Pellit.

Subconsciously the money was still there to be spent. Would a thousand pounds less weight have made the difference? We'll never know. That was money lying there, and Louis never once considered throwing the ten bags overboard.

Jesse's face was a combination of hatred and anxiety as he brought the rifle from the corner of the wheelhouse, and laid it on the shelf in front of him, with the barrel sticking out the open window. *I hope you've given your soul to God, you sorry-ass, thieving son-of-a-bitch, because your ass belongs to us today.*

Sweat was running from Louis in such volume that even his shoes were soaked. He wasn't a nervous man by nature, but at this moment in his life all nerves were on the outside of his skin. With a sickening feeling, he realized he was correct about the shoreline boat. *I'll never beat him to the entrance to Angelfish Creek. I'll stay out here awhile, and then head for Broad Creek. If necessary I'll head for the Bahamas and hole up for a few days.*

"King Two, King One here."

Roger, One. Go ahead."

"He's changed his course and is trying for Broad Creek instead."

"Yeah, I noticed that a moment ago. He's gonna pick up speed as soon as he gets in shallower water."

"Roger that. It's those lifting plates on the stern of that thing."

"Yeah! Our money, so why not have the best of everything?"

"I was fast enough to keep him from getting into Angelfish Creek, but I'm not running quite as fast as he is now."

"Yeah goddammit, he's pulling away from me too. Just a little, but enough to get shallower water under his hull, and when that happens, bye-bye-birdie again."

"Tell you what, just as soon as we get in I'm putting those plates on the stern of this thing, no matter what they cost. As shallow as the water is here, if I had 'em I could probably run him straight to the graveyard."

"Yeah, I'll put 'em on too. They'll let us run home a little faster if nothing else. You know what's pissing me off worse 'n anything right now?"

"That he's outrunning these monsters we've got under the engine box?"

"That too, but mainly because even with us on his ass, he won't throw our damn crawfish overboard. I can see a dozen or so bags in the cabin. If he'd tossed 'em when he first spotted me, he'd be half a mile ahead by now and home free again."

"Yeah, well I guess it doesn't matter, cause he's in shallow water now and picking up speed. The thieving prick's home free again."

"Yeah and with a shitload of our crawfish—again."

"C'mon baby, get up on top," Louis said aloud, "time to leave these shitheads in our spray."

Joey had been wide-eyed and silent the entire time. He sensed Louis begin to relax, so he asked, "Jeez Louis, what's going on?"

"Goddamn pirates. I've been hearing about 'em. They start chasing and shooting, then when you stop they come alongside and demand your lobster."

"Wow!" Joey exclaimed with wide eyes. "Thank God they ain't shooting."

As the last syllable fell from the kid's mouth, he heard the rifle's report.

"King One, over."

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“I’m gonna waste a little ammo, and let the asshole know we’ll be waiting for him when he comes back. Be a one in a million to hit the bastard, but you never know, maybe I’ll get lucky?”

“Hell yes, go for it. I’m too damn far back or I’d be blazing away too.”

“Yes baby, now you’re boogying.” Louis let out a rebel yell when the shallow water increased his boat’s speed. He glanced back at the boat following him and yelled, “You thievin bastards ain’t gettin my crawfish.”

“That guy behind us is shooting, Louis.”

Louis glanced down at the frightened teen, “Don’t worry kid, he’s so far back the most damage he can do is blow off one of his own bow cleats.” Louis was his cocky, relaxed self now, and laughed loudly as he glanced back at Jesse, but kept an eagle eye on the shallow water he was running through. He knew it was what saved them today, but he also knew there were rock piles and other debris through the area. He lit a fresh Cuban and filled his lungs with the smoke he loved. *Keep a close eye on that bottom*, he reminded himself. He smiled when he heard several gunshots, and turned to yell back at Jesse, “Keep shooting asshole, maybe you’ll win a cupiedoll.”

Joey was still very tense, but looking back, he could tell that the *pirate* boat shooting at them was much farther behind now.

“C’mon up kid and enjoy the ride.”

As soon as Joey moved from the cabin to the wheelhouse, disaster struck. The engine that had been running perfectly, suddenly began coughing and sputtering.

“Oh my God,” Louis screamed and lunged at the engine box, throwing it back on it’s hinges. His mind was racing through the many possible problems. Suddenly he screamed, “Oh shit.” The engine was still running, but roughly and Joey was certain it would soon quit. He was standing in front of the passageway to the cabin, that moments earlier had been his refuge. He was startled when Louis lunged at him like a man suddenly gone stark raving mad. Louis shoved him aside as though he were a toy. “**Fuel**,” Louis screamed loudly, as he swung the fuel lever in the cabin from Tank One to Tank Two. “I forgot to switch tanks. Shit, c’mon baby run.” He frantically worked the throttle as he watched the boat getting closer. “C’mon you piece o’ shit, run goddammit.”

The engine finally received the fuel it needed, and the boat once again began the climb to the top of the water.

Joey could sense a difference in the gunfire, but had no idea what the difference was. Had he known, he would have buried himself somewhere in the cabin. What he was too young to understand, was that the gunfire was now slow and deliberate. No more fast, finger pulling volleys. The man firing was deadly serious, and taking careful aim.

Louis knew he’d made a serious error. The time required analyzing the problem, and then switching the tanks, plus the wait for fuel to reach the engine, was critical. The boat was on a full plane again and ready to move away from the threat, when Louis felt the bullet hit him in the back. He felt very little after that.

It had, after all, been Jesse’s lucky day.

The bullet passed through Louis' back and stopped inside his heart. He was dead before he hit the deck. When Joey saw Louis go limp, he screamed.

The boat was flying through shallow water with no one to steer it. He had no idea where they were or what kind of water the boat was passing over. In his young mind he pictured the boat hitting a pile of rocks and exploding. It was an impossible scenario, created in a child's mind, but it saved his life. He reached up and pulled the throttle back, and then huddled back down in the forward cabin.

Had he attempted to outrun 'the pirates' he would no doubt have run aground. They would have probably considered him a full partner to the thieving, and continued shooting. Joey Simms huddled in the cabin and prayed. "Oh dear God, I don't know what's going on, but please God, please make these men go away."

End of Sample