

CHAPTER 1

“The old faiths light their candles all about, but burly truth comes by and blows them out...”

— Lizette W. Reese

1983, The Florida Keys

The morning sun rose out of the ocean, casting a billion shards of glass across the still, summer water. The first wind whispered softly, brushing the golden incandescence, while the calm, backcountry water quivered sensuously from the touch. Kansas Stamps laid the stroke of his fly rod forward with practiced ease and the line arched gracefully overhead in a lazy thirty-foot loop. The bonefish fly soared past overhead, flowing in an almost slow-motion roll as the tapered monofilament leader that held it succumbed to gravity and inertia, straightened out smoothly, and gently laid the small calf’s hair and sparkling lace body on the surface of the glimmering water not three feet from a tailing bonefish. The wisp of a satisfied smile brushed his lips as Kansas pulled the slack from the cast with his left hand, watching for movement in the water where the fly settled, braced but not overly anxious for a change in the tenseness of the line.

He exhaled softly. It was a scene that never failed to provide him succor. The rest of the world could be going to hell in a hand basket, but at that moment it didn’t matter. For a few precious minutes he was part of the wind and the sun and the sea, entwined with nature, at peace with the elements.

Kansas was still enjoying the serenity of the morning when, off in the distance, he heard the drone of an approaching aircraft. He had spent enough time in and around airplanes to know that the oncoming plane was in trouble. Its engine was missing badly, sputtering, catching, then sputtering again. Suddenly, with an ugly finality, the engine quit, returning the stillness to the egrets and herons feeding in the shallows.

The VHF radio on the consol hissed with static and a metallic voice broke the stillness of the morning. “Kansas. Hey buddy, that you in the flats on the end of Big Pine? Huh?”

Uttering a soft expletive, he moved over to the consol and picked up the receiver with his left hand, holding the rod with his right. “It’s barely sunrise and I’m fishing. It better be important.”

“I guess it all depends on your priorities. Hate to drag you away from your communion with nature, but to me this call is important.”

He recognized his friend’s voice. It was Will’s usual banter, but there was a little tenseness around the edges.

“If you look to the northwest at about two thousand feet you’ll see an airplane—you got it?”

Kansas glanced in that direction. The plane with the failed engine was clearly visible. It looked like a low wing, single engine Piper, trailing a thin line of rich, oily smoke – in serious trouble.

“Yeah, got it.”

“That’s me. I’m going to be dropping in to visit. I ain’t gonna make the strip at Summerland and there’s too many freaking tourists on U.S. 1. Besides, the engine’s got a little fire going and a water landing might be a good idea. Hope you don’t mind the interruption, but that’s nice shallow water there where you and your bonefish hang out.”

Kansas shook his head with wonder at the coincidence. Will, of all people. “Listen, I’m in the process of coaxing a really big bone right now. Could you just circle for about

fifteen minutes then check in with me again?”

“He heard the chuckle at the other end. “Screw you and the horse you rode in on. I’m coming down now. This piece of crap just became a glider – and not much of one.”

Kansas knew Will was an amazing character, but in the back of his mind he also realized how dangerous this was—no power, a dead stick landing, coming in and hammering that hard water at no less than seventy knots. On top of it all, Will had been a licensed pilot for less than a year, although he’d sat right seat in an airplane with Kansas more times than could be counted, through dozens of tight spots over the last decade. Their friendship went back to college in St. Petersburg, Florida. They were both taking English Composition – ended up sitting next to each other and struck up a conversation. They hit it off immediately, as if they had known each other forever. Will had a rakish, acerbic wit and yearning sense for adventure that matched Kansas’ perfectly. When it came to graduation, their fellow students were looking for master’s degrees, brokerage houses, or other respectable professions. Will and Kansas just wanted to rip open the fat orange of life with their fingers and gobble the flesh until the juice ran down their chins. They wanted adventure, and they found it in the Florida Keys. Both of them loved the ocean, so in 1971 the crazy duo made a trip down to The Keys to do some diving and partying. They never left. The adventures over the next decade came so fast they could hardly absorb them. They found sunken Spanish treasure, got chased by modern day pirates, ended up in Central and South America for some very high adventures, became friends with a mystical Rastaman, raced across The Caribbean chasing their passions, and found the girls of their dreams – then lost them, twice.

In the oddest damned set of circumstances, the women they fell in love with, fell in love with each other. They lost their wives to their wives, and as if the Gods were just enjoying the irony of it all, they lost the girls of their dreams again, later on, in nearly identical circumstances. So they went back to adventuring and it proved profitable. Kansas still had his stilt house on Big Pine Key and his Cessna 182 amphibian. He had become a bonefishing guide in the process, enjoying immensely what he did, but not making much of a living from it. Will and he had lived together for a year or so after their divorces, but Will had eventually purchased a large shrimpboat and converted it into quite comfortable living quarters. He kept the boat at a marina in Key West. Over the years Kansas had taught him to fly. He eventually got his pilot’s license and was now rated for single and twin aircraft, just like his friend.

They still chased treasure and women occasionally, and hardly a week passed that they didn’t end up in the bars of Key West. There was no question that life had never been dull, but today was turning out to be a tad more exciting than usual.

“Okay Will, no problem,” said Kansas, trying to keep the anxiousness out of his voice. “You can do this. You can do it. Piece of cake.”

Will knew what his friend was up to and he smiled through it all. “You got pom-poms down there with the cheerleading section?”

“Just fly the freaking plane onto the water and we’ll be doing margaritas at Captain Tony’s by noontime,” Kansas replied with just a touch nervous exasperation.

As Kansas quickly reeled in his line, he could imagine Will in the cockpit—puckered, sweating, everything coming apart at the seams around him, but not about to give up – long, blond hair pulled back into a ponytail, that damned fat, droopy mustache he thought was so hip, carrying on a sarcastic dialogue with himself like Woody Allen on steroids while he crashed an airplane into his partner’s bonefishing flats. A hero he wasn’t, but he was the most audacious damned individual Kansas ever known. He smiled at the thought, regardless of the situation.

As the aircraft glided silently out of the sky, the rising sun caught and held it like a glistening silver pendant against the gilded horizon. The plane still trailed a slight wisp of gray smoke, like a broken cord that bound it to the ethereal blueness—beautiful and frightening in the same moment. It soared noiselessly downward, over Big Pine Key, just

missing the tops of the tallest pines on the high ground near the water, and still aimed uncomfortably close to Kansas and his boat.

Kansas stood there, mesmerized but suddenly closer to concerned. “Cutting this a little close, buddy,” he muttered anxiously, as the faltering aircraft cascaded out of the sky, wings wobbling dangerously in the last 100 feet of descent. The plane passed nearly overhead, close enough to make Kansas flinch, then continued airborne for another 200 yards. At about twenty-five feet above the water, Will pulled the yoke into his chest and the plane obediently stalled, the nose rose slightly, and the aircraft flared in a textbook water landing. The tail touched first and the drag instantly slapped the Piper down onto the water. It gave a short leap, like an injured dragonfly trying to escape the bounds of gravity, then buried its cowling in the bright crystalline water. The nose dug hard for a moment, bouncing off the soft, sandy bottom, then came up and settled with a shiver, surprised and shaken, like a young mallard that’s just made its first pond landing. At that point the plane slowly settled into the shallows, water gradually rising about halfway up on the fuselage.

By the time Kansas got his engine started and raced over to the craft, Will was sitting on the roof, dangling his feet in the water. He waved casually, as if he were on a beach somewhere, and yelled over, “I think the fishing’s done for the day—too damned noisy around here. Maybe we could go home so I can change clothes and you can buy me that margarita you promised.”

Kansas didn’t know whether to spit or smile.

That evening, after a day of dealing with the authorities and filling out paperwork with the local Federal Aviation Administration representative, they sat in The Bull and Whistle in Key West, having drinks and celebrating luck, timing, talent, and numerous other elements that are required for survival when you do stupid or dangerous things and they don’t go as planned—which is more often than not the case in the realm of stupid and dangerous things.

“Yeah, I know I should have said no, but McPherson wanted the plane to be worked on by his mechanic down here,” Will said, exasperated. “It was missing a little, that’s all. His charter business is nuts right now and he didn’t have time to go get it, so I rented a car, drove up to Miami, and picked it up for him.” He leaned back in his chair and smiled. “Well, the engine doesn’t miss anymore.”

They were interrupted by the waitress—a svelte little thing with long, dark hair, blue eyes, and a smile that could melt glass. “Would you gentlemen like another drink?” She glanced from Kansas to Will and back again, a definite appraisal in her eyes.

Kansas wasn’t a bad-looking guy. He was dressed in a polo shirt and a pair of Dockers shorts – not tall, maybe five foot, seven, but he had one of those genetically-gifted physiques that often required a second glance from most women. Like Will, his hair reached his shoulders. It was a rich brown, streaked with golden highlights from all his time in the sun. His eyes were a light green with flecks of hazel in the irises. He offered a warm, wide smile to the young lady.

Will was tall, right at six feet. His pale blue eyes reflected both mischievousness and passion, and he, too, wasn’t a stranger to second looks. He had strong but not demanding features – a slightly hooked nose, a bushy blond Tom Selleck mustache, and a smile that carried a slight tilt, which could be either disarming or challenging, depending on the situation. Blue jeans and a flowered tropical shirt were standard mode with him. He had the height on Kansas but he was slender, with a tightly muscled body from the arduous activities of a professional diver.

As the waitress reluctantly departed to get fresh drinks, Kansas finished the remains of his *Cuervo* and limejuice on the rocks, crunching an ice cube in the process. “So, what’s new with you? I realize a man of your many talents has to keep himself busy. Done any interesting ‘flying’ lately? I’m talking about actually keeping planes in the air to their destinations.” Kansas grinned. He was enjoying himself. “And what about your latest treasure scam? Last I heard, you had a new project you were working

on. Lost planes and gold in Cuba. How's that pipe dream coming along?"

Will smiled. He was used to the banter. It was what they did. He was just about to issue a retort regarding Kansas and characters from Elmore Leonard novels when suddenly a commotion erupted on the sidewalk out front. Two fellows—one a little on the burly side, Cuban, blue Guayabera shirt, white pants, slicked-back dark hair, and a heavy mustache; and the other, fairly tall and hard-looking, tousled reddish hair to his shoulders, paler complexion, mean eyes, and dressed in blue jeans and a faded tropical shirt—had a girl cornered outside their car. Apparently they had just pulled up and stopped her. There was an argument—the gist being they wanted her company and she apparently didn't want theirs. The young lady was tanned and tall, maybe five-foot-nine or ten, with long blond hair the color of summer wheat, drawn back tightly in a ponytail. She had on a pair of loosely fitting, light cotton beige shorts and a Captain Tony's T-shirt. She was willowy, but closer observation would have recognized the well-formed muscle groups in her arms and legs, as if she might be a dancer of some sort.

The whole scene took place no more than thirty feet from Kansas and Will. Kansas's eyes lit up. "That's Cass!"

Will, who hadn't been paying too much attention at first, took a second look. "Don't think I know her. But it looks like she's got a situation."

Will was already coming up out of his seat. Kansas was uncharacteristically slow.

"C'mon man, let's go," said Will, a little exasperated.

Kansas rose and sort of shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "I know that girl. Don't think we need to be in a hurry."

By the time Kansas and Will were out of the restaurant, the big Cuban, still standing by the open passenger's door, got tired of arguing and reached out to grab the girl, which proved to be a mistake.

The entire demeanor of the lady changed instantly, and as the man's hand came toward her, rather than retreating, she grabbed it with her right hand, turned sideways and snapped him forward, using his own momentum against him. The guy's eyes opened wide in surprise as her left hand shot out like a snake over his arm and she flicked the back of her stiffened fingers against his open right eyeball, hard enough to pop a balloon. The guy screamed like a child, raising his hands to his wounded eye, which left other parts of his body woefully unprotected. The woman dropped to a crouch, made a hard, solid blade with the fingers of her right hand, and slammed that up between his legs into his groin with enough force to make the Cuban's eyes (the good one and the bad one) bulge like Daffy Duck's. The air rushed out of her antagonist's lungs. He dropped to his knees and rolled into a fetal position, at that point not knowing where to hurt first. But by that time the other guy was moving in on her from the front of the car.

Kansas stepped between them, facing the fellow with the mean eyes, holding up his hands, trying to diffuse things. "C'mon man, we don't need any trouble here."

"Don't need your help," the girl hissed from behind him.

Kansas grimaced, talking over his shoulder, still dealing with the man in front of him. "No, you don't. I know that, and you know that, but he doesn't." Again he addressed the guy. "Dude, just let it go, okay? Just pick up your friend and go. I know this girl, this is not going to get better for you."

Will stood a few feet away, taking a moment to check out the young lady. She was quite attractive, with gray-blue eyes, a wide, sensuous mouth, and a fairly nice figure—long, nicely shaped legs and perky, smallish breasts—but there was a tomboyish air about her that didn't necessarily add to her sexuality. Hell, with what he'd just seen, she was a little scary.

Suddenly, the long-haired guy relaxed some, moving closer. "Listen, we don't want no trouble either," he said to Kansas, almost confidentially. "She got some things that belong to us. We want 'em back. It's not your business, man."

Kansas was watching his eyes. The eyes told you everything about an opponent. They told him this boy was a veteran of "hard arguments."

Mean Eyes took a glance over at Will, weighing him, then a quick look down at his friend, who had gotten to his knees and was just getting some color back, though he was still holding his eye. He had made a choice. “Okay, maybe we just come back another time.”

But his eyes didn't say that.

Mean Eyes lowered his head a little, as if to signify this was over, but in the process he turned slightly and dropped his right shoulder, telegraphing that he was about to throw a punch. The girl was way ahead of him. Before the guy was halfway into the swing, she elbowed Kansas aside and slapped his opponent's arm away, automatically turning the fellow and exposing his side. Then she hammered him in the kidney hard enough to fracture a couple of ribs—he'd be peeing blood for a week. As the guy grunted, clutching up, she side-kicked his knee out from under him, tearing ligaments that would take a month to heal. The man cried out and collapsed on the pavement, groaning in pain.

The young lady turned to Kansas, and sighed angrily, placing her hands on her hips. “You were about to get your ass kicked.”

Kansas held up his hands, palms out. “Hey, I was just trying to help.”

“Did I look like I needed help?”

Kansas smiled in surrender. “Look, why don't we find another bar and have a drink, and you can thank me for being so gallant. I don't want to be here when these guys get themselves together and call their friends.”

“I'm not thanking you for shit,” she replied indignantly.

Will, thoroughly enthralled now, stepped over to them. “Hi, I'm Will Bell. If you promise not to beat me up, I'll buy the first round.”

Cassandra Roundtree, Cass to her friends, leaned back in her chair, propping her feet on the base of the table inside The Green Parrot. She was just finishing her first margarita and was in a much better mood. It was still early and the rowdy evening crowd was an hour or two away. Ceiling fans swirled lazily, catching whorls of smoke from an occasional cigarette and twisting them softly into nothingness as the bartenders and barmaids readied themselves for another night in paradise. An old Jimmy Buffett tune, whispering faintly in the background, caressed the senses and captured the spirit of the coming evening with a song about a lady on Caroline Street. Kansas had introduced Will and related how it was that he knew Cass, explaining that she was part of a new wave of computer analysts. She had worked for the emerging computer company, Microsoft on the East Coast. Now she lived in The Keys, and had a small house on Summerland Key, half of which was dedicated to computer analysis and programming equipment damned near comparable to what NASA had. She worked freelance for several major companies across the country, solving problems and creating programs. He mentioned that she did have a couple of hobbies, or “non-debilitating passions” as she called them—things that you enjoyed which “didn't consume you, or cripple your sense of creative freedom and become identity liabilities.”

As Buffett quit crooning, Will leaned in on the table and focused on Cass with a sage grin. “I'm gonna take a wild guess and bet one of those ‘non-debilitating passions’ is a martial art of some sort.”

Cass shrugged indifferently. “Yeah, good guess. Krav Maga and Jujitsu.”

Will nodded. “I'm familiar with Jujitsu, but Krav Maga not so much.”

“It's a martial art that was developed in Israel. It involves striking principles and counterattacks designed to neutralize your opponent as quickly as possible—aimed at the most vulnerable parts of a person's body. No bowing, no shaking hands, just get it over with—fast.”

A small smile from Will carried new respect. “Well, apparently it works pretty well for you.” He paused. “So, what was this thing about today—those two guys and the collective bad attitude?”

Cass finished her margarita and motioned to the bartender for another. Removing

her feet from the railing under the table, she brought herself forward, putting her arms on the tabletop in a more serious pose. “Has to do with my other ‘hobby.’ Those guys are bunchers, and I decided to put a dent in their operation.”

Will gave her a quizzical look. “Bunchers?”

“Yeah, people who round up or steal domestic pets and sell them to laboratories to be used in experiments. Ugly business, but big money. They got a friend’s dog two weeks ago, so I decided to go after them.” She paused for a swallow of her new drink. “My friend got a partial on their license plates and a look at their van. I went to the DOT office in Key West and sweet-talked the guy who worked there – got the rest of the numbers, and from that I got their location in Homestead. We scoped them out and I waited for them to leave. When they went out for another run, we backed in a U-Haul and took all twenty of the animals they were holding. They kept remarkably good records for assholes, so with the records and the animals’ tags, we were able to find the owners for most of them inside a couple days. The rest are with the Miami ASPCA while they try to find the remaining owners. Somehow they figured out who did it—maybe a security camera I missed. That’s why they wanted to ‘visit’ with me for a while.” She smiled mischievously. “That, and the damage to the inside of the house.”

When Cass finished her brief dissertation, she studied Will for a moment. “You’re Kansas’ partner, the guy who keeps the Cessna 310 out at the Summerland airstrip, aren’t you? I heard about you—new hotshot pilot who works this treasure hunting business with Kansas.”

“I don’t know that either of those are really apt descriptions,” Will said with a shrug, trying to be humble but failing at the attempt—his ego enjoying the offhanded flattery a bit too much.

“Which part was wrong?” Cass said, nailing him with her characteristic directness.

“Yeah, okay. I’m a pilot. I own the airplane.”

“What about the treasure business? I’ve heard a couple of stories. I’d like to shake the fact from the fiction about ‘Mr. Will Bell.’”

“It’s really not much,” he said, attempting the humble thing again. In truth he wasn’t all that anxious to talk about it, because although it looked good from the outside, it actually wasn’t one of his high points. But she was relentless.

“Oh, c’mon, pretend I’m one of those hot tourist chicks you’re hustling on a Saturday night,” she said with a baiting smile, those gray-blue eyes igniting with animation as she teased him. She pulled the band from her ponytail and shook her thick blond hair free. It fell across her tanned shoulders in waves and she turned attentively to him again. “The lights are low, we’re in a bar, you’ve got me on my third rum and Coke, and I’m already getting that sensuous ‘I can’t wait to feel your hands on me’ look. But I need just one more push to win my...heart.”

The normally fairly collected Will was a little taken aback by this woman and her direct assaults. “Hey, I’m not like that...always,” he said, bringing up his hands in typical fashion for emphasis. “How do you know I’m not married with two kids?”

The girl huffed in sarcasm. “You’re married with two kids and I’m the Queen of England here on vacation looking to get laid. C’mon, tell me a treasure story.” She did that Cheshire cat smile again. “From the horse’s mouth. Word on the street has it you found that wreck off the Marquesas last year,” Cass said.

Will sighed. “Yeah, we did, but it ended up being a lot of work and expense for little reward. It had apparently been salvaged pretty well after sinking.” He took a breath and smiled, somewhere between sage and snookered. “Let me tell you, treasure hunting is somewhat akin to the boats required for the endeavor—it can be a hole in the water into which you throw money. If that were the only business I had to rely on, by this time I would be standing behind a counter somewhere saying, ‘Do you want pickles and ketchup with that?’”

Cass chuckled. “You wouldn’t last a day at McDonald’s. They’d have booted you out the door for hitting on chicks and mixing up orders just for fun. I know your type. Not good at being told what to do.”

Will was again impressed with the woman's candidness and intuition. If she just wasn't so damned...what was the word... *right*...all the time.

"Well, the maybe good news is I've been working on a lead for something that I think is promising," Will added, sitting up a little. "It's a challenging situation, but I think there's a strong possibility there could be a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow."

"Would that be the Cuban gold thing?" Kansas said, lifting an eyebrow with incredulousness. "Sometimes you just got to know when to fold 'em..."

Will shook his head, lips pursed in annoyance. "Aahh, ye of little faith. Let me remind you of a quote by none other than the esteemed Henry Kissinger: 'There comes a time in every rightly-constructed boy's life when he has a raging desire to go somewhere and dig for hidden treasure.' Rightly constructed or not, I'm getting that desire again."

"So, what's this all about?" Cass asked.

"I think it's a story for another time," said Will, making it clear he wasn't ready to talk about it, and the conversation faded, then shifted.

After one more drink and a little more history on each other, Cass begged out, saying she had things to do at home—two cats and a dog to feed. Kansas and Will reassured her that she could call them anytime if she had any further problems. Will provided his phone number and got hers. He wasn't sure what to think about this woman, but he wasn't ready to write her off either, and he needed to talk with Kansas first, anyway. She was a cute little thing, but as tough as a carbide coconut.

As Kansas drove him to his boat on Stock Island, Will turned to his friend. "So, what's the story with you and Cass?"

Kansas smiled, running the fingers of one hand through his long hair and around the back of his neck, then stretched, knowing the question was coming. "She had advertised a Coon Cat free to a good home in *The Citizen*. I like Coon Cats so I went by her place. Somebody else got the cat, just ahead of me. We got to talking and, I don't know, we just hit it off and I asked her out."

There was silence for a moment.

"Okay, then what?" Will finally said, exasperated.

"She's a nice lady," Kansas said with an impish smile, his green eyes lighting up with humor. He loved getting Will's goat, and in truth, it was an easy creature to find. "We dated for a while, and got along pretty well. Some parts of the relationship were very good."

"Yeah, I bet."

Kansas turned his head from side to side in a reflexive, stretching motion—something he did unconsciously when he was pensive. "Yeah, nice. But for some reason we just didn't click in the long run. I don't know...she's a very independent woman. Somewhere along the way we just became friends. Maybe I just wasn't ready to take any chances again." He threw a sideways glance at his friend. "You and I haven't exactly had the greatest luck with women. I'm sure I don't have to remind you it was less than a year ago that our crazy Rastaman buddy's 'magic love potion' backfired and we lost the girls we loved to the girls we loved."

"Well, in all honesty, we screwed up on the way it was supposed to be used."

Kansas shrugged. "That doesn't make me feel any better." The last I heard, Carina and Vanny had moved to Saint Kitts. He drew a breath and exhaled hard. "How about a change of subject? What's the deal with your latest quixotic enterprise – the Cuban gold situation?" he said with a grin. "Are you tightening down this pipe dream?"

"Glad you asked," Will said, eager to talk to someone he could trust. "Actually it was our Rastaman buddy, Rufus, who offhandedly helped set this in motion. When I first started getting involved with this I was in Key West, having dinner at Aunt Roses, and he shows up out of nowhere, like he does. Same old Rufus – long dreadlocks, big chocolate eyes, grubby shorts, and a weathered T-shirt. He says something to me about having a new Hobbit quest comin' up, – islands, caves, and truth... Then he gets this serious look and says something like, 'Truth is more valuable than gold, mon, and more dangerous than envy. May the great tortoise let your egg break cleanly and grant you a

moonlit path to the sea.”

“Yeah, that sounds like our mystical pal, alright,” Kansas said with a wan smile. “But I can’t say that makes me feel more comfortable.”

Will ignored the comment and continued. “I know I’ve mentioned the story my dad used to tell me about his friend finding the plane buried in the cave in the mountain, but since then I’ve talked with him about it again, extensively. On top of that, I started doing some research about storms and aircraft lost in Cuba, and it’s led me to a solid hypothesis. I think I know what happened now.”

Will took a breath. “I told you a little about this, but I’m going to run through it again so you’ve got a good handle on the situation. As you know, my dad’s best friend was Cuban-American. He was shot down over Cuba during the Bay of Pigs on the first day of the invasion, April 17, 1961. He was the copilot of one of the B-26s that were supplying support for the landing at Playa Girón. He survived the crash and by some miracle escaped being captured, but he was badly wounded. He would have died from his wounds but for a second miracle—he was discovered by a family supportive of the invasion, and they took him in and hid him. They were once a fairly wealthy family, but Castro had taken much of what they had. In a twist worthy of a made-for-TV movie, they had a daughter—a beautiful young lady, eighteen years old—who helped treat the wounded airman for the first week while his life hung in the balance, and then one more week while he healed enough to travel to a hideout in the mountains. In one of those strange things that just sometimes happen, they began to fall in love. Her father knew the mountains of southeastern Cuba well—the Sierra Maestra. They hid my dad’s friend in the back of an old farm truck and drove deep into the mountains to a cave system. They left him food, there were streams for water, and he hid there for another three weeks while the family arranged for a fishing boat to carry him to Key West. The girl came to visit him, bringing him supplies, and their love grew. When it came time to go, she slipped away and joined him on the beach, where the boat met them.”

Will paused as Kansas pulled up to the dock at Safe Harbor Marina on Stock Island, where Will’s boat was moored. The moon was rising, casting a soft, satiny glow over the water, painting the converted shrimper’s hull and forecastle in chartreuse and shadows. The wheelhouse windows gleamed with yellow incandescence from the truck’s headlights as Kansas turned the key off and rolled down his window. The rich, tangy scent of the sea and the warm night air embraced them like the touch of a loving woman. Kansas turned off the headlights and shifted around in his seat. “Go on, you’ve got my attention. Sounds a bit like a John D. MacDonald/Travis McGee novel.”

Will edged himself up on the seat a bit, relaxing, then continued. “Here’s the interesting part. While hidden in the mountains of Cuba, my dad’s buddy started doing better, and he began exploring a little. On a short hike the day before he was to attempt his escape back to the States, he found a large cave concealed in the dense jungle on the northern side of the mountain, maybe a half-mile from his hideaway. What caught his attention was part of a rudder from an aircraft tangled in the vines at the entrance to the cave. He forced his way in and discovered an old Beechcraft 18 had somehow threaded the eye of the needle and, in a one-in-a-million chance, flown right into the cave. As it hit, the wings had folded and collapsed around the fuselage, the impetus driving the whole plane into the cavern and burying the nose into the back wall. The aircraft was so badly damaged and it was so tight and dark, it was barely possible to get in, but he finally managed to work his way through. It was a mess. There was dust on everything with vines growing into and around the entire structure, but he remembers seeing wooden boxes of some sort inside the cabin. Some were intact, but most were shattered or broken open. To this day the guy swears he saw what appeared to be small, rectangular-shaped objects strewn around the interior, maybe three inches by six inches and perhaps an inch high, but that was a guess. As he stood there next to the wreckage, looking through a huge rip in the fuselage, the setting sun cut through the foliage and splashed the interior of the plane. At that moment he was almost certain he saw a golden reflection through the dust on several of those rectangles. But before

he could do much else, he heard something outside the cave. It sounded like voices, and he got spooked, so he slipped out and hightailed it back up the mountain to his hideaway. He planned on going back, but he never got a chance. He did, however, get the call numbers from the tail of the plane—November, one, two, eight, eight. Those numbers stuck with him, and when he got a chance he wrote them down.”

Will looked out at the dark water, then turned back to Kansas. “After speaking with my dad’s friend this last time, I decided to do some investigation. I’ve got a buddy with the Federal Aviation Administration. I seriously saved his ass once, when we were really young and foolish, and he owed me a favor. Anyway, I had him research U.S. airplanes that were lost over Cuba, including the possibility of a Beech 18 with the call numbers N1288. He got back to me a week ago with some interesting information. That plane disappeared on April 17, 1954, after filing a flight plan with Miami Airport for Cuba’s José Martí Airport.”

Kansas started to say something but Will held up his hand.

“It gets better. There was a tropical storm that moved through the straits that night between Key West and over Cuba. The plane never arrived at its destination. Key West’s Naval Air Station records have a small footnote on receiving a barely audible Mayday from that aircraft, stating a last known position over the eastern end of Cuba. A brief search was instituted, but the plane was never found. Everyone figured it went down in the water.”

Kansas shook his head, amazed, and just a touch enthralled. “Damn, you’ve done your homework. Now you’ve really got my attention.”

Will grinned, satisfied his plan was working. The bait had been taken. “That’s nothing. Here’s where it really catches fire. I went up to Miami and checked out the ownership of N1288. It was owned by Stellar Corporation, set up in 1948, and when I waded through the protective bullshit in the documents one name stood out—Meyer Lansky. You know who Meyer Lansky was?”

Kansas nodded. “Oh yeah, big mafia player in the early to mid-twentieth century.”

“Okay, we’re on the same page,” Will said. “Now, what we’ve got is a plane that crashed in Cuba that maybe had gold on it. I thought about this and began to do more research, primarily wading through old copies of *The Miami Herald*. About the time this plane went down, Lansky was trying to cut a deal with Batista in Cuba to put a new casino in the *Hotel Nacional* in Havana. The other thing that jumped out and grabbed me was a robbery that took place two days before the departure of N1288. In a daring daylight heist, a shipment of gold bullion from the English gold refinery Johnson Matthey, being delivered to the Miami First National Bank, was stolen.” He let that sink in and stared at Kansas. “Five hundred pounds of gold bullion. Five hundred pounds...”

“Yeah, I heard you,” Kansas interrupted with a look of profound comprehension. “I heard you.” He took a breath and expelled it slowly. “That whole story is nothing short of freaking amazing. Son of a bitch! I think you figured this out.”

Will smiled, gratified that he had set the hook. “Now, of course, the question is how a person would find that cave; and then the big question is...is the gold still there after better than half a century? But I have one final ace on this situation, as well. My dad’s buddy said that there was a granite-like cliff about five hundred yards to the east of the cave with the plane in it. In the center of the cliff there is an abutment that rises straight out almost in the shape of a Mayan-featured nose—heavy, sloped, and rounded with what looked much like nostrils on both sides. It’s not really man-made, but it’s prominent enough to give a landmark to start from. If we could find this—”

“Aaahhh, I heard ‘we’ in there just now,” Kansas said cautiously.

His friend nodded. “Yeah, why not? I thought maybe you might like to partner with me on this one. You’ve been spending way too much time at this ‘pretending to be a fishing guide’ thing.”

“Meaning you don’t have the resources to do it yourself.”

Will shrugged. “Well, I am running a little close, and this is a caper that would take some planning and some finances. I’ve given it some thought. We’d probably need a

seaplane so we would have the advantage of mobility and could make a quick exit—maybe not have to worry too much about landing strips or customs if we find the crashed plane and the gold. I was thinking we might talk to Crazy Eddie. He's got that Grumman Goose."

Kansas flinched like he'd been hit. "Oh Lord, not one-eyed Crazy Eddie again," he moaned. "I mean, this is not the '70s anymore and he still thinks it is. You can't just fly and land wherever you want—and not clear customs—especially not in Cuba."

Will held up his hands, realizing that he needed to loosen the drag here. "I admit there are a few bugs to be worked out, and the finances... But man, five hundred pounds of gold. I mean, you could continue to live in the lifestyle you've become accustomed to. At the present price of gold we're talking around four million dollars."

Kansas fell quiet for a moment, running his hand through his hair and around to the back of his neck in that pensive fashion of his. "Even if it was possible, we'd need a reason to be going into Cuba, and all the paperwork to make it legal. It's not easy for Americans to get into Cuba these days, even though the restrictions aren't like they used to be. We would definitely have to call in some favors to make this work."

"Yeah, I know. But I've been thinking about that, too. The easiest way to get into Cuba with the fewest headaches is to represent a professional research group. It allows you the most latitude. We could be working with the Federal Aviation Administration—maybe an organization that tries to close files on lost aircraft for families of missing persons. *Lost Wings*, maybe. We could have been contacted by the family of Robert McCanaly, the actual pilot of the Beech, trying to get closure over what happened to their father sixty years ago, and we could be working in conjunction with the National Transportation Safety Board. I'm sure I can get my friend with the FAA to give us a letter of recommendation."

"You've got this figured out already, don't you?" Kansas muttered with a cautious smile. "We would need some sort of bona fide history—information someone could look up that shows our existence for some time." Kansas paused for a moment, thinking of Cass, the computer guru. "However, there might be a way to embed enough information in the right places to get us by." He paused again and his eyes clouded with distress. "But Crazy Eddie!"

"He may be a little fried, but you know as well as I do, man, he can fly that damned airplane. That gig we did into Bolivia with him proved that. Look, he's pretty much under the radar, got no record to speak of, and we just need him to get us in, move us around, and get us out quickly." Will paused and smiled. "You must trust and believe in people and dreams, or life becomes impossible." Anton Chekhov."

"Yeah," his friend spat back sarcastically. "And, 'Don't let people drive you crazy when you know it's within walking distance.' Jackie Peterson."

"Who's that?"

"My plumber."

"Really?"

"Really." Kansas straightened himself up and tilted his head, fixing his friend with a quizzical, somewhat skeptical gaze. "So, give me a ballpark figure at what this might cost us—the paperwork, bribes, transportation, equipment."

"I'm guessing somewhere between ten and fifteen grand—maybe a little more."

Kansas inhaled deeply, holding his breath, looking out the open window at the huge, white-gold moon hanging in the heavens above them, and wondering how many pacts like this it had witnessed—how many dreams it had been privy to. Pipe dreams... He exhaled slowly with a degree of finality. "Listen, I'll think about it. That's all I can tell you right now."

Will nodded noncommittally, knowing that you never try to force a big fish to the boat. You keep the drag firm, but relaxed enough to give the fish its head until it decides not to struggle anymore.

"I'm good with that," he said as he opened the door of the truck and got out. "I'll talk to you in a few days. Take good care, *amigo*."

As Will watched the truck drive off, wheels crunching on the coral gravel for purchase, the corner of his mouth tilted into a small smile. He turned, quite pleased with himself, and gazed up at that ancient, understanding moon above him. "We're goin' treasure hunting," he muttered with a chuckle. "Oh yeah. We're goin' treasure hunting."