

For Those In Peril On The Sea

by

Colin M. Drysdale

PREVIEW

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This is a work of fiction.

While it uses real locations as the basis for the story it tells, all the characters and events are fictional. Any resemblance to anyone living, dead or undead is purely coincidental. Similarly, while the source of the infection is linked to bioengineering, it is purely fictional and any resemblance to any real commercial or research organisation or activity is purely coincidental.

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Cover Image: Hole-in-the-Wall lighthouse at sunset © 1997, 2012,
Colin M. Drysdale

Preface

As with many people growing up in Britain in the 1980s, my first real encounter with post-apocalyptic fiction was the BBC's six-episode adaptation of John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. From that moment, I became fascinated with the idea that, one day, I might wake up and find the world changed suddenly into something altogether more frightening. Later, during my career as a marine biologist, I began to wonder how I'd cope if this happened not while I slept, but while I was at sea, where I'd know nothing of it until I got back to shore. Thus, the idea for this book was born.

The actual writing of it was inspired by two quite different parts of my life. The first was the time spent studying Blainville's beaked whales around the islands of the Abacos in the 1990s. While there, I became intimately familiar with their geography, and looking back on this time, over a decade later, I realised that, with its network of islands and shallow sheltered seas, it was the perfect setting for this story. While there have been some changes over time (most notably on Matt Lowe's Cay), much of landscape remains the same now as it was then, and hopefully those familiar with it in the present day will recognise it based on my descriptions. I would like to thank all those who I met there; those who both helped with my research, and with whom I became friends. I'd especially like to thank those at the marina where I kept my boat, and those who hung out at the Bistro and Sapodilly's. Sorry not to be able to thank you all by name.

The second part of my life that inspired the writing of this book was the one that gave me the impetus to take the basic idea and finally put it onto paper. This was the three weeks I spent working as an extra on the set of the movie *World War Z*, when it was being filmed in my native Glasgow, in the summer of 2011. There was a surprising number of zombie and post-apocalyptic fans amongst the extras, and talking with them encouraged me to turn my idea of life at sea during a zombie-type apocalypse into a more complete story. Special thanks go to the delivery man, the janitor and the building maintenance guy. You know who you are.

I would also like to thank Stephen Burges, Michele Airns, Barry Nichols, Emily Lambert, Lilian Lieber, Gregor Wright, Sarah Canning, Chris Claridge and Maria: for the time they spent reading early drafts of this book; and for the advice and suggestions that they gave me. These helped improve the story substantially. I would also like to thank Gale Winskill (www.winskilleditorial.co.uk) for her editing and proof-reading skills.

Finally, the biggest thanks of all must go to Sarah for her patience as I developed the basic plot for this book, for her editing advice and for her support throughout the writing process, and throughout my life.

If you are interested in finding out more about the real world locations where this book is set, including an interactive map based around Google Earth, visit www.forthoseinperil.net.

The history of any human conflict is written by the winners. But what if no one wins?

Prologue

'And finally, it's been alleged that a US biotech company has been testing a new rabies vaccine illegally in Haiti. The available information suggests that the vaccine is based on a new technology called "small interfering RNA", or siRNA for short. It is thought that the vaccine is designed to interact with the virus to make it less deadly, increasing the likelihood that anyone given it after they've started showing symptoms will survive. If successful, such a vaccine could save more than 50,000 lives a year. While siRNA technology has been tested on animals, it is not yet licensed for use in humans. Evidence of the illegal trial only came to light when one of the participants fell ill and was taken to a local hospital.

And now, here on KWAD eighty-three point six, the weather for Miami and the tri-county area ...'

'Next on the KWAD news channel, a new strain of rabies has emerged in Haiti. Ten people are thought to have died so far, with a further twenty-five suspected cases being monitored in local hospitals. It seems to be unusually virulent and the source of the outbreak has yet to be identified.'

'Coming up, rioting has broken out in the Haitian capital,

Port au Prince. It was sparked by rumours that the emergence of a new strain of rabies is connected to an illegal vaccine trial, currently being investigated by the FDA. The company alleged to be involved strenuously denies any possible link. Next, on the KWAD nine o'clock news ...'

'Fucking Americans,' Carlos spat the words out. 'Think they can do whatever they want.' Before he could finish something distracted him and he turned to the man standing on his right. 'Hey, turn that down. I thought I heard something.'

Jorges switched the radio off and they both listened. The sound came again, something midway between a scream and a growl. There was a sudden crash, then silence.

'Sounds like our passengers are getting restless.' Carlos thought for a moment, 'You'd better go and make sure they haven't been messing with the cargo. If they have, just blow their brains out. That'll teach 'em.'

Jorges grabbed his Uzi and climbed down from the flying bridge. He hated dealing with the people on these trips, especially when there were problems. They'd picked up their cargo in Haiti two days before, and while Jorges supervised the loading of a couple of tons of cocaine onto the sixty-foot motor cruiser, Carlos had gone into the city. He'd come back a few hours later with half a dozen locals in tow, each willing to pay \$5,000 to be smuggled into the US. This was more than twice the usual rate because of the whole disease thing. People were starting to worry, not so much because of the disease itself, but because of the rioting that was now flaring up all over the place. Those who could afford to were doing their best to get out, one

way or another.

People-smuggling had been Carlos' idea. He'd figured they could make good money on the side. It mightn't pay as much, but it was a whole lot safer than trying to skim off some of the cargo. Jorge had had a friend who'd tried that. They'd found him on the dock one night, sitting in his car with his head in his lap and his eyes gouged out. As long as they unloaded the people before they reached the rendezvous with the boss man, no one would ever know. Jorge wasn't so keen on the idea at first, but hey, money was money, and the more they made on each trip the sooner he could get out of this business and go back to being just another fisherman.

Jorge had looked at the people Carlos had found this time: five men and a woman, all in their twenties, maybe early thirties at the most. The woman was sweating heavily, more heavily than you'd expect even given the warmth of the night. She leant on one of the men as he helped her on board and down into the cabin. Once they were in there, Carlos had locked the door, leaving them to make themselves comfortable amongst the bales of cocaine, while Jorge took the boat out of the harbour. They hadn't heard a sound from the cabin in almost two days, but neither Carlos or Jorge worried about that. Each of the passengers had paid their money upfront and this was no Caribbean cruise. If anything happened along the way, it was up to them to sort it out between themselves.

Then, with Miami only a few hours away, they started hearing strange sounds, audible even above the roar of the twin engines and Jorge went to investigate. He removed the padlock from the cabin door, flung it back and took a couple of steps down the ladder.

'What the fuck ...?' Jorge stared disbelievingly into the small room. 'Carlos, we got a problem down here.'

In the dim light cast through the door by the moon, Jorge could see blood everywhere, smeared across the walls and the floor, even soaking into the bales of cocaine. He could see the body of one of the men, torn to shreds, lying at the foot of the ladder. The outlines of two more bodies were just visible in the darkness further into the cabin.

'Carlos, get your ass down here now!' Jorge was beginning to panic. He knew some people could react violently to taking too much cocaine, but this seemed altogether different. Then he heard a noise in the darkness, a low guttural groan, like a sick or injured dog. He took another step downwards and flicked a switch, flooding the cabin with light. Blood gleamed damply on every surface, while in the corner two figures crouched over the remains of a third, ripping at the lifeless body. One of the figures turned, startled by the sudden brightness. It was the woman, her face contorted with anger and smeared with blood. With a scream of rage, she launched herself at Jorge.

Almost too late Jorge reacted, pulling the trigger of his Uzi. The woman's blood sprayed across the cabin as she crumpled to the floor. Jorge wasted no time firing on the man even though he posed no threat. He didn't lower the gun until the man finally stopped moving, and that seemed to take longer than he'd have expected. It was then Jorge felt something running down the side of his face. He wiped it away and inspected the back of his hand. He was surprised to see there was blood on it. At first he wondered where it had come; then he realised it must be the

woman's.

'Jesus!' Carlos had finally arrived. He looked at Jorge accusingly. 'What did you do to them?'

'It wasn't me. I only shot two of them. They did most of it to each other.'

'Christ!' Carlos looked round. 'This place looks like a fucking slaughterhouse.' He scratched the back of his head. 'I hope the cargo's okay.'

The very thought of what might happen to them if it wasn't made Jorge go cold. 'Carlos,' his voice trembled with fear, 'I don't think we should do this anymore.'

'Yeah, let's just stick to the drugs next time.' Carlos struggled to think of what they should do next. 'We've not got much time before the rendezvous. You'd better get this cleaned up. If the boss man sees any of this, we'll be in big trouble.'

Jorge picked his way through the cabin and spent the next hour throwing oozing body parts into the sea. This was definitely worth more than the \$15,000 that was his share of the Haitians' money. As he worked, he started to sweat, blaming it on the warmth of the night. But something niggled at the back of his mind ... could he have picked up something from all this blood?

'Our top story tonight, on KWAD eighty-three point six; the first case of what is being called the Haitian rabies virus, or HRV, has been recorded here in Miami. A man suffering an intense fever was found dumped outside a hospital in Miami Beach in the early hours of this morning. Tonight, he is being held in isolation as doctors fight to save his life.'

'The rioting that broke out in downtown Miami yesterday shows no signs of abating. Instead, it seems to be spreading to other urban areas. The police are baffled as to its cause but, off the record, a senior police source told the KWAD news team that it could be linked to a consignment of contaminated cocaine. What sort of contamination could cause such violence remains unclear ...'

'Welcome to the KWAD eighty-three point six early morning news. It's now been confirmed that the rioting that's sweeping rapidly through many inner-city areas across the country is connected to outbreaks of the Haitian rabies virus. Here in the US, HRV seems to be even more virulent than in Haiti, and it's causing those infected to attack anyone they encounter. Residents in all affected cities are being asked to stay calm and stay inside until the situation is under control. How the virus got into the US remains unknown, but there is growing evidence that a large shipment of cocaine, smuggled into the US from Haiti, has been contaminated with the virus. Once in the US, the drugs would have been distributed quickly to many urban areas, explaining the almost simultaneous outbreaks in cities as far apart as Las Vegas and New York.

'In related news, the *USS Intrepid* has been dispatched to patrol Haitian waters, to prevent any further shipments making it into the US. It is hoped that if the source of the virus can be eliminated, the disease will burn itself out over

the next few days.

'Meanwhile, the situation in Haiti itself is becoming desperate, with little medical care and a complete breakdown of social order. Rioting has been recorded throughout the country, and it is starting to spill over into the neighbouring Dominican Republic. There, marauding gangs have been reported to be roaming the streets and attacking anyone they meet.

'And now the weather ...'

'Some breaking news, the *USS Intrepid* has been overrun by an outbreak of HRV. The crew detained a dozen people they discovered in a small boat forty miles from Port au Prince early yesterday morning, and it is thought that one of them brought the disease on board. In the close confines of the ship, the virus spread rapidly through the crew and by this evening all contact with it was lost.

'Now back to the unrest here in the US, which is worsening steadily and spreading further afield. Some experts believe it can no longer be blamed on a single batch of contaminated cocaine, and that the virus is now spreading from person to person ...'

'This is the KWAD news studio in Miami. If anyone out there is still listening, please send us help. They're outside! They're trying to get in!'

There was a loud crash in the background and the voice paused for a second. When the woman started

speaking again, she sounded distant, as if she was no longer next to the microphone,

'Oh god, they've got in. Shit, shit, shit! Shoot them! Someone, shoot them. Just shoot them! Shi ...!'

Chapter One

I huddled in the night, trying to keep myself out of the wind and the rain. We'd been outside for six hours, searching desperately for a sign of life in the darkness, looking for the signal that would tell us everything was alright, that we'd soon be safe.

'There. At one o'clock.' Bill pointed ahead of us, 'Did you see it?'

It was another five minutes before any of us saw it again. A flash of light in the blackness, glimpsed only once but definitely there. The rain eased slightly and we were able to see it each time it blinked on and off. That was the signal we'd been seeking. In good weather, it would've been visible from more than twenty miles away, but with all the rain we could've been as close as five miles when we first saw it.

'We'll head towards it, but we don't know what might be out there, so keep your eyes peeled.' Bill's tone was authoritative. 'We've got this far, so let's not screw it up now.'

Bill always seemed to know what to do, and this was probably the only thing that had got us here in one piece. Even then it had been a close call; too close for my liking.

'What's that?' CJ was pointing over the bow, 'Directly ahead. Something's out there, something moved.'

CJ was always seeing things that weren't really there, but tonight I'd give her the benefit of the doubt. I stared into the darkness, straining my eyes, looking for anything that might indicate danger. Suddenly, there was an

explosion of air just a few feet away. I jumped, as did Jon. CJ let out a startled yelp. Jon snorted derisively and clicked on the hand-held spotlight before playing it across the sea. A massive creature had broken the surface just off our right-hand bow. Jon swept the light along the animal's body. As it lay on the surface, floating in the water like the trunk of a gigantic tree, its single blowhole opened again and another powerful breath shot into the night, water droplets glistening in the spotlight's beam.

'It's okay,' Jon called back to Bill. 'It's a sperm whale, just a baby. I think it's checking us out.'

I calmed myself and continued to search for the pale line on the horizon that would be waves breaking against the low finger of rock that stretched into the ocean somewhere ahead of us. This was home to the Hole-in-the-Wall lighthouse, named after the arch cut through the peninsula by the ever-pounding waves. Having made it all the way from South Africa on our way to Miami, the southern tip of Great Abaco, marked by the lighthouse, was our first sight of land since passing Saint Helena almost five weeks before. Given the weather, we wouldn't see the breakers until they were only a mile or so away, which would be too close for comfort.

'We should heave to and wait for daylight.' I turned to find that Bill, as usual, was one step ahead of me. He was already adjusting the sails and changing the course, bringing us to a halt even in the heavy seas.

I considered the others one by one, the people I had spent the last seven weeks with, six of them at sea with no one else for company. I couldn't wait to get to Miami where I could step off the boat and never see any of them again. That wasn't quite true. I'd probably keep in touch

with Bill, but I doubted I'd ever hear from Jon again, and probably not from CJ either. We were just too different, in age, in outlook, in everything.

I'd been sailing around the world for the past three years having set out shortly after I'd left the only real job I'd ever had, working as a teaching assistant at a university. I'd never intended to go into teaching. It was only meant to be a temporary job over one winter, to help pay off some bills. I'd gone into archaeology thinking it would be all about exploring ancient ruins and Indiana Jones-style adventures. The first few weeks as an undergraduate dispelled that illusion but, unlike a number of my classmates, I had liked it enough to carry on.

My first dig was a Celtic hill fort in southern Ireland. It didn't pay but it'd been fascinating, and enough to convince me that it was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. By the time I completed my Ph.D., I was getting sick of the sparse living conditions and the low or, more often than not, no pay. Digs were also seasonal, especially back home in Scotland, and after September, the few meagre jobs that were available dried up until the following spring. Three years after that, I was worse than broke. Up to my eyeballs in debt, I took the teaching job purely for the money, but I quickly got used to having a regular income and the temporary job stretched into eight years of drudgery.

While the students were a pain, the faculty members were worse. Every staff meeting seemed to consist of little more than an exhibition of one-upmanship, cutting put-downs and quibbles over who deserved the office with the most windows. Before I knew it, I was thirty-six and stuck in a

job I hated. I hadn't done any fieldwork in years, and the closest I ever came to any real archaeology was piecing together shards of pottery for a man who openly despised me, in a tiny office with no windows. I worked long hours for little thanks, and the pay, although good at first, hadn't kept pace with inflation, while the cost of everything else had rocketed, and I was back to being broke most of the time.

Since it was only meant to be a temporary job, I hadn't bothered to get to know anyone properly, I hadn't put down any roots, I hadn't started any relationships. Yet, as others had come and gone, I'd remained. My only escape was sailing. When my parents died in a car accident, I took the little money they left me and bought a thirty-five foot sail boat that had seen better days. I couldn't afford to pay anyone else to do it for me, so I spent every scrap of spare time doing it up myself. As I did, I dreamed of cruising exotic coasts and exploring the world. When the economy went south and the university started laying people off, I took the redundancy money, cashed in my pension, sold up pretty much everything I owned and, for the first time in a long time, I followed my dreams.

In three years, I had sailed 20,000 miles, visiting archaeological sites throughout the world. I'd started in the Mediterranean then headed for the Yucatan peninsula and Central America. From there, I'd passed through the Panama Canal to Easter Island and the archipelagos of the South Pacific before moving on to the Indian Ocean. I'd rediscovered my love for archaeology but my money was pretty much gone and I knew at some point I'd need to go home and get a proper job once more. Then my boat was damaged in rough seas while travelling around the

southern tip of Africa and I had put in at Cape Town to make repairs. I'd have still been there if the delivery job hadn't come along when it did.

When I arrived at the shed that served as an office for the boatyard, four people were already there: my three new crewmates and the yard's owner. The first three were strangers but I'd known the last one for almost a month as my boat was in his yard. We got on well enough and since he knew I was broke, he'd offered me the job when it came up. I'd only taken it because I needed the money to make repairs, but it also delayed the inevitable return to gainful employment for a little bit longer. As I entered the office, the yard owner looked up and smiled.

'Hi, Rob. These are the others.' He gestured towards the three strangers. Pointing to the first one, he said, 'This is Bill, he'll be the one in charge.'

Bill was in his late fifties, his face tanned and weathered from a life at sea. He was well-built without being stocky and had a firm handshake. Bill had started life as a commercial fisherman in Maine. When the local fish stocks collapsed, he'd sold up and become a crewman on a charter boat in the Caribbean, leaving behind an ex-wife he'd married too young, then divorced when they'd grown up and realised they'd become very different people. Thirty years later, he was one of the most-respected charter-boat captains in the Indian Ocean, working in places as far apart as South Africa, the Seychelles, Australia and New Zealand. His services were always in demand, but he was now ready to retire and had taken the delivery job to get him to Florida. Once there, he was planning on buying a boat and heading south to reacquaint himself

with the islands where he'd started his chartering career.

'Jon will be the second mate.'

Jon sprang to his feet and grabbed my outstretched hand, greeting me with an over-familiar 'Hey'.

If you hadn't known it from his accent, you'd have guessed he was American just by looking at him. Jon was tall and tanned, with shoulder-length blond hair, and was dressed in that effortlessly smart-casual manner only Americans seem to be able to carry off. Jon had grown up in a wealthy family, playing around on expensive boats at his father's yacht club, and had been expected to go into the family law business, just like his older brother and sister before him. Jon, however, had other plans, dropping out of college after two years when he'd been offered the opportunity to take part in a round-the-world yacht race, his family money allowing him to easily pay the costs that everyone else had to scrimp and save to be able to afford. While his family didn't approve, they put up with it, figuring he'd go back to college after he got the whole sailing thing out of his system. That had been four years before I met him and Jon still showed no sign of having got anything out of his system.

'Finally, this is Camilla.' The owner pointed towards a young, well-dressed girl perched on the edge of a desk.

'It's CJ,' she corrected him quickly.

'Sorry. This is CJ.' The owner scowled at her before continuing. 'She'll do all the galley stuff and be an extra pair of hands if you need it.'

Camilla Jamieson, or CJ as she preferred to be called, was British, blonde, pretty and posh. She was nineteen and in the middle of a gap year that was being spent having, as she put it, 'epic adventures'. She had little real sailing

experience, having finished her exams at an exclusive all-girls school in the home counties only the summer before, but she'd worked as the cook on Bill's last charter trip just to see 'what having a real job would be like'. Bill had grown to like her and, more importantly, her cooking skills; enough to put in a good word and get her the position of cook on the delivery job. She wouldn't need to know much about sailing, just do whatever she was told, and try not to throw up in the soup she was making if the seas got a bit rough.

Bill proved himself to be as good a captain as his reputation suggested. He knew his stuff, knew how to get us to work together and do what needed to be done. Jon got on my nerves. He always thought he knew best and was insufferably pompous on the few occasions he was actually right. How Bill was so patient with him, I didn't know, but I think it helped that Jon looked up to him, almost idolised him. Bill had lived the life Jon wanted so much, and Jon hung on his every word. With me it was different; to Jon I was just some middle-aged guy who could do nothing to help him get where he wanted to go. While Bill offered him the opportunity to learn his chosen trade, he resented the fact that, as first mate, I ranked above him in the on-board pecking order. Maybe it was his youthful enthusiasm, or the way he thought he had the answer to everything, or how he thought he could solve all the world's problems if only people would listen to him, but something about Jon just rubbed me up the wrong way. I'd probably been just the same when I was his age but now, almost a decade and a half later, I was more jaded, more world-weary, and more realistic about how much one person could actually do to change the world for the better.

CJ was okay, and the meals she created were amongst

the best I'd ever had while at sea, but she had a tendency towards the melodramatic, and she was oversensitive to criticism when she got something wrong. She got offended on the few occasions we didn't like her cooking and frequently accused us of taking her for granted, which both Jon and I almost certainly did most of the time.

After six weeks of being cooped up on a forty-four by twenty-foot piece of fibreglass and plastic, I longed to reach Miami, to get away from the others, to get back to the solitude of my own boat. There was nothing like the feeling of being alone at sea and only so long I could spend on a small boat with people I didn't really get on with without wanting to kill them, pitch them over the side or, at the very least, never set eyes on them again.

When he was bored, Jon's favourite sport was needling CJ, calling her 'Cammy' just to annoy her as he'd seen how much she'd hated it the first time he'd done it. He'd make fun of the fact she was a rich girl who was only there to play at being poor but, given his own background, he didn't appear to notice the irony. At one point, I blew my top and pointed this out in no uncertain terms. While I'd apologised the next day, a certain frostiness remained.

At least there was more room than on most boats with a crew of four. The catamaran was designed to sleep eight, ten at a push, meaning we each had cabin to ourselves, somewhere to hole up and hide when being around each other got too much. I think this was the only thing that kept me from throttling Jon, particularly since we'd run into a storm and lost all of our electronics. Without them, not only was it much more difficult to sail, since we had no auto-helm, no radar and no GPS receiver to tell us where we

were, but we also had no satellite television or radios, and so no contact with the outside world. If we had, it would have at least given us something new to talk about rather than having the same conversations, hearing the same stories and having the same arguments over and over again.

The storm had been unexpected and intense: a white squall, a wall of rain, spray and 100-mile-an-hour winds that sprang out of nowhere. The vicious winds tore at the sails and waves crashed over us. The cockpit filled in seconds, and would have carried Bill and CJ over the side if it weren't for their safety harnesses. The storm hit so suddenly we'd had no time to close the hatches and water poured into the cabin from all directions. Once inside, it rained down into the hulls, filling the bilges and the engine compartments, shorting out the electrical system and, with it, the electric bilge pumps. With all the water on board, we lost much of our buoyancy and sank so low that we were almost beneath the waves.

Just as it seemed the boat would flounder and we would all drown, Bill found a course where the waves no longer swept over us quite so frequently. He ordered CJ below to close the hatches and set me and Jon to work on the manual bilge pumps. Soon we were riding high enough again that the immediate danger of being swamped had passed and we could concentrate on fighting the storm. After two hours, it finally blew itself out, leaving us battered and bruised.

As calm descended once more, we inspected the damage. The rigging was loose and most of the sails were split. Both engines had been drenched and neither would start. The batteries had been submerged long enough to

have lost their charge, and without the engines we had no way to recharge them. The electrical system had had such a dousing that none of our electronic equipment would work again until it had been given a thorough drying out; something we couldn't do while rolling around in the middle of the ocean. In my cabin in the left-hand hull, I found all my clothes were soaked. Neither my little FM radio nor my mobile phone had survived their unexpected immersion, and the pages of all my books were pasted together.

We were cut off from the outside world and all we could do was limp onwards. Bill tightened up the rigging and sewed the damaged sails back together. He brought out his ancient sextant so he could work out where we were and in what direction we needed to be heading. After a few days, we had most of the basics sorted ... but only the basics. We still had no engines, no electrical system and no electronic equipment. Bill aimed us for Hole-in-the-Wall as it was the first land we'd encounter on our direct route to Miami and, despite the battering the catamaran had received, we still needed to complete the delivery. At the lighthouse, we could make contact with the keepers and get a message passed to the boat's owners to let them know what had happened.

Chapter Two

We sat off Hole-in-the-Wall for the next few hours, watching the lighthouse flash its signal into the darkness as it had done for more than 150 years. I counted off in my head, one flash every ten seconds. Not many people realise that each lighthouse has its own signature; a unique pattern of flashes and pauses that allows seafarers to know where they are as soon as they see it. The system had been designed in the age of sail, before electronic navigation and the global positioning system. Now, with all our electrics out of action, I could see why it worked so well. The signal was reassuring, it told us exactly where we were, reminding us that there was other human life out there, that despite all we'd been through, everything back on shore was still as we'd left it: cold beers, strangers to talk to, hamburgers, cigarettes, newspapers, a toilet that stayed still while you sat on it ... all the little trinkets of civilisation we never even thought about until we were deprived of them. And in a few days, I'd be enjoying them all.

As the sun rose behind us, we trimmed the sails and headed round the point at Hole-in-the-Wall, sailing past the arch and into the lee on the other side. The rain had cleared and we could see the octagonal houses of the lighthouse keepers squatting at the base of the massive red tower. My heart leapt at our first real sign of land and civilisation. Bill pulled the boat as close to the rocky shore as he dared and Jon blew on the hand-held foghorn. We waited. No one stirred in the buildings up on the hill. Jon blew the horn again, but still there was no response. This was unusual. There should always be someone at the

lighthouse. Sure, it wasn't as important since the lighthouse had been automated, the recently-added solar panels disrupting its once smooth, almost sleek, profile, but still, someone should be there.

'D'you think it's just a bit too early for them?' Jon looked at Bill.

'Possibly.' Bill picked up the binoculars and examined the cluster of buildings. 'There's a truck there so it looks like somebody's home.'

'Should we wait or just carry on?' I was keen to keep moving towards Miami and I didn't want to spend too long waiting for people to get up.

'We really need to get a message to the owners. We're already a week overdue, and they will be worrying about what's happened to us. We need to let them know we're okay and when we'll finally get into Miami.' Bill scanned the buildings again, then turned to Jon and me. 'You two up for a trip ashore?'

'Yeah.' Jon sounded as keen as I was to spend some time off the boat, even if it was just a walk up to the lighthouse and back.

We inflated the small rubber dinghy, fitted the little outboard and lowered it over the side. Jon and I clambered in and started the engine. The dinghy bumped over the choppy waves and within a few minutes, we were tying it to a heavy iron ring set into rocks below the lighthouse. Once the dinghy was secured, we climbed up steps carved directly into the rock. At the top we found a natural stone platform with a narrow concrete path snaking up the hill towards the lighthouse. We walked slowly and unsteadily, our bodies unused to being on solid ground after six weeks on an ever-moving surface. I inhaled

deeply, enjoying the smell of earth after rain. It was the kind of smell you didn't miss, that you didn't even notice until it was no longer there. I drank in the calls of birds and the chirps of insects that flowed from the trees surrounding the path. Neither Jon or I spoke; we were too busy relishing these novel sounds after weeks of little more than the *slap, slap, slap* of waves against the side of the boat and the clinking and clanking of the rigging.

We were at the first building all too soon and I knocked on the solid wooden door. As we waited for a response, we surveyed the property.

'This is quite some place.' Jon shaded his eyes with his hand as he stared out at the land beyond the lighthouse, 'Imagine living all the way out here, you'd go mad with boredom. There'd be nothing to do.'

Being young, Jon didn't yet appreciate how wonderful it could be to be alone, far from any other living person. He looked at the lighthouse and saw it as isolated and lonely. I looked at it and saw a sanctuary from the confusion of the modern world.

After a few minutes, we started to wander around, calling out a greeting to anyone who might be there, but no one replied. We tried the second house, but no one answered. The buildings themselves were weathered but well-kept, and they weren't shuttered or boarded up, meaning someone must still be living there, despite the fact the lighthouse had been automated. The presence of the truck seemed to confirm this. It sat on the hill facing towards a road so old it was little more than a rutted track. I could see that it weaved a path through the bushes for about half a mile to where it disappeared round a corner.

'I'm going to take a look at the truck.'

I didn't know what it would tell us but I followed Jon as he walked over to it. The truck was an ancient pickup, the red paint faded and speckled with rust. There was a large dent in its tailgate and one of the rear lights was broken. Apart from that, it looked in reasonable condition for its age. As we neared, I saw that the driver's door lay open, the glass from its broken window scattered amongst the stones on the ground. There was something that looked very much like blood smeared across the vinyl seats, as if someone had been dragged out by force, and the keys were still in the ignition.

Jon's eyes widened as his eyes shifted from the truck to me and back again. 'What d'you think happened here?'

'I don't know.' As I spoke I felt a sense of unease rising within me.

'What now?' Jon was staring down the road as if expecting someone to appear suddenly.

'I guess we find somewhere to leave a note.'

I headed back to the first house with Jon following behind. Once there, we ambled along the veranda that surrounded it, searching for any clues that would tell us where the lighthouse keepers were. On the far side of the building there was another door. I knocked, but again there was no response. I leant on the wooden balustrade that surrounded the veranda and looked out across the landscape, wondering what to do next. The land dropped away immediately below the building and a set of concrete steps led down to an outhouse. Along its roof, little brown lizards scuttled as they displayed to each other. Beyond that, the land disappeared off towards the horizon in a series of low, rolling hills covered with scrubby bushes. The green expanse of land made a pleasant change after

weeks of nothing but featureless sea.

I heard the door creak open behind me and turned to see Jon with his hand on the latch.

'You can't just go wandering into someone's home, especially when they're not there.'

'It wasn't like it was locked.' Jon was about to step inside when he hesitated, 'What the hell?'

I looked past him into a kitchen that had been turned upside down. Pots and pans were scattered across the floor, interspersed with fragments of broken crockery. A door to a store cupboard lay open, revealing that its contents had been pulled hurriedly from the shelves. A table and chairs were stacked against a second door on the far side of the room and the cooker was pushed up against them as if someone had tried to make a barricade. The walls were covered with red smears, while several pools of what looked like congealing blood lay on the floor. Whatever the people had been trying to keep out must have found another way in.

'Rob, is that what I think it is?' Jon was nervous.

'Yeah, I think so.'

'Where d'you think it came from?'

'I have no idea.'

'Should we check the rest of the house? See if anyone's injured?'

'I guess so.'

Despite this, we remained in the doorway, neither of us wanting to be the first to step inside. Rather than enter, I decided to walk round the outside, pausing at each window to cup my hands against the glass and peer inside. I found no one but I could see the contents of each room were strewn across the floor, and furniture piled up near the

doors. The only difference was that in these rooms the makeshift barriers had been pushed away as if someone, or something, had forced its way in. In all of them, there was red spattered on whitewashed walls, and dark pools on the floor. Once back at the kitchen door, I stopped and scanned the surrounding landscape again. Other than the lighthouse buildings, there wasn't a single trace of human habitation in sight. The solitude that had seemed so appealing when we first arrived now felt oppressive.

'Jesus, Rob, that's a lot of blood.'

'Yeah.' I didn't know what else to say.

'Do you think it's ... you know, human?'

'I don't know. Even if it's from an animal, it's creepy.'

'Fucking creepy. Did you see the way the doors had been barricaded?'

'Yeah.' I was only half-listening to him. Instead, my brain was racing, trying to find some sort of explanation for what we'd discovered.

'So what do we do now?'

'Huh?' This question brought me back to reality. I thought about it for a few second, 'I guess we should check the other buildings. You know, just in case.'

'D'you think it's safe?'

'I don't know, but we should do it anyway. It's the right thing to do.'

'Yeah, I suppose.'

I looked over at Jon and saw he was biting his lower lip nervously. 'You can stay here if you want, but I'm going to check them out.'

'No way. I'm coming with you. This place is really starting to scare the shit out of me. You're not leaving me on my own.'

Jon followed as I walked slowly over to the other house. As I did so, I cast my eyes around, alert to possible signs of danger, but I saw nothing that seemed out of place. I crept around its veranda, peering in the windows. This one looked unoccupied and there were no signs of life ... or of death. Next, I checked the outbuildings, but they were locked. I banged on the doors and called, but no one answered. Finally, I turned my attention to the lighthouse. From where we stood, I could see the door was slightly ajar.

I was half-way there when Jon suddenly stopped. 'I thought I saw something move.'

'Where?'

'In the lighthouse.' Jon grabbed my shoulder as he spoke.

Irritated, I shook him off. 'What was it?'

'I don't know. I just thought I saw a movement.'

I searched the shadows. 'I don't see anything now.'

We moved forward again. Once at the lighthouse, I slowly pushed the door open. Jon jumped as it creaked loudly, the sound echoing around the stone tower. I stepped inside.

'Hello?' My voice sounded odd as it reverberated off the curved stone walls, 'Anyone there?'

There was no reply. I looked round the room. It was dark but enough light came through the door for me to see a set of stairs spiralling upwards. There was nothing else; no sign of anyone; no sign of anything that might be alive.

'Should we go up?'

I looked over at Jon. 'Do you want to?'

'No way.'

'Me neither.'

Suddenly, there was a shriek outside. We ran through the

door just in time to see a small flock of parrots burst into the air.

'I think we should go back to the boat.' Jon's voice wavered as he spoke and I could tell he was starting to get jittery.

I didn't blame him. The place was really starting to get to me too. 'Yeah, let's go.'

Jon looked relieved and headed back down the path. I followed after him, noticing he was moving much faster than he had on the way up. As I walked, I looked back over my shoulder and wondered about what we'd found. Other than the blood all over the house and the broken window in the truck, nothing seemed out of place. Something had happened here, but I couldn't think what. I couldn't help but be reminded of an old poem about another lighthouse, one back home on Flannan Isle. It had been found unmanned in 1900, the table still laid for dinner with food untouched on the plates. All three lighthouse keepers had vanished, and no one had ever found out what had happened to them.

We were about three-quarters of the way down the narrow path when a silhouette appeared on the skyline behind the lighthouse, a large machete clutched in its right hand. Instantly, we were both running, moving as fast as we could over the cracked and uneven surface. Glancing back, I saw the figure pursuing us, screaming indecipherably at the top of its voice.

We reached the stone steps and scrambled down to the dinghy. I fumbled with the rope that held it to the rock, trying desperately to undo it.

'Come on, Rob.' There was a sense of urgency in Jon's

voice I'd never heard before, not even at the height of the storm.

'I can't. The knot's pulled too tight.'

'Here, try this,' Jon held out his Leatherman, the small knife already open. I grabbed it and started sawing frantically at the rope.

'Come on! Whoever that is will be here any second.' Jon's eyes were darting nervously between where I was struggling with the rope and the top of the steps.

'I'm going as fast as I can. Just get the engine started so we're ready to go as soon as I'm done.'

I was about half-way through the rope already and I redoubled my efforts. I heard Jon yank on the starter chord. The engine shuddered, but that was all. He adjusted the throttle and tried again. Again it turned over, but it still didn't catch.

'Careful, you'll flood it.'

'I know what I'm doing, Rob.' Jon never liked it when I gave him advice, but there was a hint of panic in his voice.

I felt the rope separate and I pushed us away from the rocks. Jon was pulling repeatedly on the chord but the engine still refused to start. My eyes flicked upwards. While I couldn't see the path, I knew the figure could appear at any moment and we were still within range of a machete. As Jon continued to fiddle with the engine, I grabbed an oar and started paddling, making short, sharp strokes on alternating sides of the bow.

We were twenty yards out when the engine finally spluttered into life and a look of relief spread across Jon's face. Back on the shore, I could see the figure standing on the rocks just above the steps. He was a tall, black man, his white t-shirt soaked in blood. As we motored towards to the

waiting boat, he waved the machete and screamed something I couldn't quite make out. Without warning, he stopped and sank to his knees, his shoulders heaving as he sobbed. Jon shifted the engine into neutral; the man no longer seemed insane and dangerous, just broken and desperate.

'Should we go back?' Jon asked hesitantly.

'I don't know. I don't think we should risk it. What if it's a trap? I mean, he's covered in blood.' While he no longer looked threatening, the man still frightened me.

All of a sudden, with a speed that was unsettling, the man leapt to his feet and sprang round to face the path. A new shape was outlined on the crest of the hill. I couldn't tell if it was human or animal, or even if there was more than one, and almost as soon as I'd seen it, it was gone. The man looked desperately left and right, as if trying to decide which way he should run but, before he made his choice, two shapes shot out of the bushes. He flailed the machete wildly as they flew towards him but it made little difference. When they reached him, they attacked and, within seconds, the man was on the ground. Even from that distance, we could hear his screams of pain and the guttural growls of the creatures. He struggled frantically, trying to throw them off, but despite his size they were too much for him. His movements slowed and eventually ceased as the life drained out of him, but the creatures kept up their assault, tearing at his body, ripping him limb from limb.

'What the fuck are those things?' There was a look of abject horror on Jon's face.

'I don't know. Let's just get the hell out of here. Now!'

Jon slammed the engine into gear and we skimmed

over the water at full speed, trying to resist the urge to look back. We tied off the dinghy and scrambled onto the catamaran. Bill was standing in the cockpit staring towards the shore with the binoculars,

'For a minute there I thought you were going to go back. Just as well you didn't.'

'Could you see what those animals were; the ones that attacked him?' I wanted to know. I wanted to understand how close we'd come to being attacked ourselves.

Bill looked at me and said nothing as he handed me the binoculars. I aimed them towards the shore and could see two huddled shapes crouching over what was left of the man. As I watched, one of them stood up and I could see what it was. It was a young boy, no more than thirteen. Blood dripped from his face as he stared straight at me. His eyes bored into mine, unblinking, so wild, so animalistic, and yet so human. He knelt back down and started tearing at the carcass again. I watched as he clawed at the man's stomach, opening up his abdomen and pulling out his intestines. He plunged his head into the man's body, reappearing a second later with a large piece of liver in his mouth. I lowered the binoculars and stared at Bill, not believing what I'd just seen. As I did so, CJ came out onto the deck.

'What's going on?'

'Don't know,' Jon shot back at her as his eyes shifted from Bill to me and back again. 'Can I get the binoculars?'

I passed them to him and watched as he raised them to his eyes.

'They're eating him.' Jon was appalled.

'What d'you mean they're eating him? Who's eating who? Give me the binoculars,' CJ held out her hand but

Jon didn't give them to her.

'Trust me. You don't want to see.'

CJ scowled at him but there was something in Jon's voice that suggested he was right and she didn't push it.

As we pulled the dinghy out of the water and hauled up the anchor, Jon told Bill and CJ what we'd found up at the lighthouse. He sounded almost excited but it was probably just the after-effects of the adrenaline from his body's fight or flight reaction. I was certainly feeling a little shaky for the same reason.

Jon was just finishing. 'Jesus, there was blood everywhere ... I mean, a lot of it.'

I felt the need to say something. CJ had a terrified look on her face and Jon needed calming down.

'There wasn't that much really. I mean maybe it was all from one person ...' Even as I said it, I knew in my heart it wasn't true.

Once we were underway and had put some distance between ourselves and the lighthouse, we gathered in the cockpit. We were all badly shaken by what we'd witnessed and for a while none of us spoke, each lost in our own thoughts. It was CJ who eventually broke the silence.

'What now?'

'Very good question.' Bill sat there thinking for a few seconds before continuing. 'No matter what happened back there, there's nothing we can do about it. In fact, I think you guys were very lucky to get back to the dinghy when you did, otherwise ...' I didn't want to think what the otherwise might have been.

After a moment Bill carried on. 'We'll need to report it,

the only question is where. As far as I can see, we've got four choices.' He counted each of them off on his fingers as he spoke, 'There's a small village marked on the chart just up the coast, but there's no guarantee it'll have a police station. Even if it does, it's going to be a small one and I'm not too sure they'd be able to deal with this sort of thing on their own.'

Given what we'd just seen, I was amazed at how calm Bill was, at how clearly he was thinking. My own mind had frozen, able to do little more than replay the same shocking sights over and over again, yet Bill was able to think logically about what we needed to do next, just as he'd done in the storm. These were the times I was so glad it was Bill who was in charge and not me.

'Two, we can sail south and report it in Nassau. Or three, we can continue west and report it in Freeport on Grand Bahama. They're both pretty big cities, at least as far as the Bahamas are concerned, and both will have sizeable police forces. But it'll take time for them to get themselves together and get over to Hole-in-the-Wall.

'Four, we can carry on to Miami, and report it from there. The important thing to remember is that, no matter where we report it, it's going to raise a lot of questions.'

Bill was silent for a second or two. 'Frankly, I'm not too sure people will believe us. We could get tied up in the investigation for days, even weeks. There's nothing we can do for that poor sod back there, so if the rest of you agree, I'd rather report it in Miami than in the Bahamas. That way we won't be stuck in a foreign country while this thing is looked into.'

'It mightn't be a foreign country to you ...' I was a concerned Bill had forgotten we weren't all Americans.

'Good point. But I think you and CJ would still be better off in the US than in the Bahamas. Whatever went on back there, it's going to cause a big stir when it comes out. At least in the US you'll have less of a chance of getting dragged into it. We all will. What do you think?'

Bill looked around at the rest of us.

Jon nodded his agreement, as did I, but with more hesitation. My mind was finally starting to work again and while I could see Bill's point, I still didn't like the fact I might get stuck in an unfamiliar country, far from my boat, while any investigation took place.

'CJ?'

'Erm ...'

'Oh come on, Cammy, make a decision for once; not that it really matters what you think.' Jon sounded irritated.

'Shut up, Jon, that's not helpful.' I couldn't stop myself snapping at him. It annoyed me that, despite what we'd just witnessed, Jon still couldn't resist needling CJ. It incensed me just as much that CJ made it so easy for him. Glancing over at her, I saw the resentment and anger that had been building up within her towards Jon throughout the voyage start to bubble to the surface.

Bill must have seen this too because he sat down and put a reassuring arm around her.

'CJ, it's important that we all agree on what we're going to do.' Bill's voice was calm and comforting, 'What do you think? Are you happy with us carrying on to Miami?'

'I guess Miami would be okay.'

Jon opened his mouth to speak, but Bill held up his hand and Jon thought better of it.

Bill looked round at each of us again, 'Right, Miami it is then.'

'What d'you think happened back there?' I was keen to hear Bill's thoughts. Night had fallen and we were over the shallow waters of Great Bahama Bank, passing between the islands of Great Isaacs and the Biminis. We'd covered half the distance to Miami and we would be there by daybreak at the very latest. Bill and I were alone in the cockpit and we'd soon be crossing the Gulf Stream, an unpredictable stretch of water that could be whipped up into rough pyramids of water at a moment's notice, if the wind started pushing against the northward-flowing current. We were lucky, the wind had been strong enough to keep us moving along at a decent pace, while gentle enough not to stir the waters up too much. It would be an easy passage, the skies were clear and the stars were laid out above us, the silver ribbon of the Milky Way shining brightly in the heavens. This was the type of crossing I usually relished, but I couldn't enjoy it because the events from that morning were still replaying themselves in my head.

It took Bill a while to reply. 'I really don't know.'

I tried again, 'Why would they do that to another person?' I wanted an answer, any kind of answer, something that might explain what we'd seen.

'I don't know. Why do people do any of the cruel things that they do to each other?' Bill stared out into the darkness.

'But this is different. Even in comparison to most human atrocities, what happened back there was vicious. I've never seen anything like it. They were like wild animals.' I stopped and thought for a second, 'No, they were worse

than that. They didn't just kill him, they ripped him apart.' Just thinking about it made me feel sick.

'I know.' Bill turned and look at me, there was a pained expression on his face. 'I know. I've seen a lot in my life, but I've never seen anything like that.'

Even if I'd wanted to I don't think I could have slept that night. I couldn't get the image of the young boy with his wild, staring eyes, out of my head, or the terrified screaming of the man as he was torn apart. I felt there was something deeply wrong with a world where such things could happen. I couldn't wait to get back to civilisation and get so drunk that those images would be erased from my mind, at least for a few hours.

Chapter Three

Sometime in the night the wind shifted around to the west, and with it came a strange smell. It was barely discernible at first, but it grew stronger the closer we got to the Florida coast. Mostly, it smelt of smoke; not wood smoke but something thicker, more acrid, with an undertone of singed flesh. Bill had gone down to his bunk a couple of hours before, and Jon had replaced him on watch. As we discussed what the smell might be, CJ brought out a coffee for Jon and a tea for me.

CJ looked towards the front of the boat, standing on tiptoes to get a better view over the cabin.

'Hey, is that the sun coming up?'

'Don't be daft, Cammy.' Jon took a sip of his coffee, 'We're heading west. The sun rises in the east, doesn't it?'

'Well, there's something going on over there,' CJ retorted. 'It definitely looks like a sunrise.'

She sounded so certain that Jon and I stood up to see what she was talking about. Sure enough there was an orange glow on the horizon.

'Must be some kind of brush fire.' Jon didn't sound convinced, but it seemed logical.

We watched for the next hour. By then, we could make out flames leaping high into the darkness. The fire explained the strange smell, or at least it seemed to, but the smoke didn't smell like a brush fire, it smelt more industrial. I scanned the horizon. The flames were strung out in loose clusters along a stretch of coast about half a mile long, and directly ahead of us. On either side there was

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