

CHAPTER 32

It took everything he had not to shoot to the surface with the object, but his training took over and he slowed his ascent. From twenty feet, he saw the ladder and finned toward it. Clinging to the steel tubing, he handed it to Wood, and tossing his fins on the steel deck, he climbed out of the water, dumped the BC and tank on the deck and went to Wood.

He already had a brush out and was gently rubbing at the surface. Mac could see the luster of the gold emerge. Wood grabbed a hammer and chisel and kneeled on the deck with the object in front of him. Mac was about to stop him, but before he could, Wood tapped the piece and the coral that had encrusted a large portion of it fell away, revealing a snake like figure.

“Give me some room, boyo,” Wood said, setting the chisel into another piece of coral.

Mac backed away, studying the figure that was emerging from the rock. The serpentine shape had the body of a snake with several jewels embedded in it, and the head of what looked like a Mayan god. An intricate pattern emerged as Wood set aside the harsher tools and picked up the brush again. Finally he held it up, but just as he did, a flash from the windshield of another boat caught their eyes. Wood shielded his brow with his hand and scanned the water.

“Son of a bitch, if it ain’t the Brakens,” he said.

Mac followed his gaze and saw a small flats boat, not a hundred yards away. But there was no windshield for the light to reflect from. He looked closer and caught another flash. “They’ve got binoculars on us. Think they saw it?”

“With my damn luck they did,” Wood said. “Best get gone.”

Mac pulled up the ladder and went forward for the anchor. Wood started the engines and signaled he was ready. With no scope, the rode came in quickly, and Wood had the barge heading toward shore just as the chain hit the deck.

“What do you think it is?” Mac asked, rolling the statue in his hands.

“Looks like a god or something to me,” Wood replied. “Old Ned’ll know. Just hope those damn Brakens didn’t see it.”

“Do you think they did?” Mac asked.

“You know what they say: if you can see them — they can see you.”

Mac looked behind them to see if the other boat was following, but it was gone. “I don’t see them,” he said.

“More than likely raced in to set up some kind of trap,” Wood said.

“What are we going to do with it?” Mac asked.

“Ain’t much choice but to turn it in, especially if old Braken’s got a whiff of it. I ain’t desperate enough to melt it or crazy enough to sell it on the black market.”

“But, it would pay off your insurance,” Mac said.

“Not my style boyo,” Wood said.

Wood made a wide turn around the red marker, and they entered Boot Key Harbor. Cruising past the gas docks, he pulled into a side canal, and docked in front of a small trailer. “Ned’s place,” he answered Mac’s question before it was asked.

They tied off, grabbed the statue and Wood’s camera, they stepped up to the dock and quickly followed the crushed coral path to the screen enclosed room on the back of the trailer. Before they entered the small patio, Mac looked back one more time to see if they were followed.

“What do you think that was?” Cody asked.

“Hell if I know, except it looked like gold,” Braken answered.

They were in a small flats boat, its decks stained with fishblood, borrowed from a friend of Cody’s. “What are we going to do?” Cody asked.

“You got a lot of questions,” Braken dismissed him and thought about that very question. With Teqea dead, Cheqea missing and Paglaiano in custody, he needed to figure a way to salvage something from this. The casino wasn’t going to happen. He still had the land to sell, but he needed

Wood to finish the bridge.

They cruised through a a span on the Seven Mile Bridge. Even though the water was calm and glassy, every so often the boat hit a small swell, spraying him with water. They entered a small cut on the bay side and entered a marina. Cody backed the borrowed boat into its slip, nimbly hopped onto the deck, and grabbed the lines arresting the boat before it hit the seawall. Braken leaned against the rocket launcher watching Cody work. The boy was good with boats, but that was about all. He was also thinking how he could lever the knowledge that Wood had found something out there, though, as much as he wracked his brain, the answer of how he could benefit from it eluded him.

“I think we need to pay old Wood a visit,” he said ,and kneeled on the gunwale, using the tower to slowly rise and step onto the dock. He started walking to the parking lot.

“What about me?” Cody asked.

“What about you? How the hell are you going to be any help with this? Wood sees you he’s likely to tear your head off — and with good reason. If I were you, I’d consider myself lucky to be alive.” He continued to the Cadillac, got in and started the engine. He left the parking lot and turned onto the road, which ended at US 1, where he turned right, toward Big Pine Key where he hoped to make a deal with Wood.

“Well?” Wood asked.

Ned was hunched over a workbench, using a magnifying light to examine the statue. They had waited patiently while he meticulously cleaned the figure, using the finest grades of steel wool available to remove the residue of two centuries under the sea. Finally, he stepped away from the bench. Wood took it and held it between them. Ned had cleaned it well enough that the intricate carvings were visible. Mac tried to figure what they meant, and couldn’t knock the feeling that he had seen something similar before.

“Pre-Columbian. Mayan by the style,” Ned said.

“You gonna tell me something I don’t know?” Wood scolded him.

“The name is Chac — god of rain and thunder. He was also important to navigators, representing the four cardinal points of a compass,” Ned said. “What are you going to do with it?”

“Why does everyone keep asking that?” Wood said, looking at Mac. “It’s not going to do me no good. You take it and donate it to whatever museum you think’ll want it.”

“Don’t you think there’s more?” Mac asked.

“Boyo, whatever’s down there is going to stay there unless someone pays me to get it. Even if that canoe was loaded to the gunwales with gold, it wouldn’t pay the cost of bringing it up.”

Mac looked down.

“Nothing stopping you from having a look in your free time, though,” Wood said. “Come on. Old Ned’ll be mooning over this for hours,” Wood said. “Borrow your car?” he asked Ned.

Ned was engrossed with the statue, hovering over his workbench. He nodded without looking up. Wood took the keys from the counter and went for the front door. “Be back to pick up the barge later,” he said, turning to Mac. “Comin’ boyo?”

After a few turns Mac thought the area was familiar. “This looks like the way to Braken’s house,” he said as they turned off US 1.

“Observant too,” Wood replied.

They pulled up in front of the house, left the car and walked up the stairs. There was no answer after several knocks and they turned away. Just as they were about to climb back down, Mac saw the Cadillac pull up. Wood strode down the stairs, looking like he was ready to do battle.

Braken pulled up and drew his bulk from the car. “I was just looking for you. What’d you find out there?”

“Spyin’ on me,” Wood shook his head.

Braken looked uneasy. “Here’s the deal Wood. I need the bridge fixed. That’s all I care about. I’ll keep it quiet about whatever you found if you fix the damn bridge by this weekend.”

Wood took his time. "Your stock is pretty low right now, so you'll have to pay me in advance."

Several minutes later, Wood pulled away with a pile of cash on the seat between him and Mac. "Why didn't you tell him to screw himself?" Mac asked.

"I still got a reputation. This'll pay the bills and get the insurance reinstated. Then we can get on to some real work."

"The police were here looking for you, and Braken and Cody came by too, but I hid from them," Mel said.

Wood went and hugged her knowing he shouldn't have left her alone. "What'd the police want?"

"They said you needed to come down and make a statement about yesterday," she said. "Find anything out there?"

"An old statue. Got some pictures here," he said, setting the camera on the table. "Old Ned's gonna find a home for it," Wood said.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm pretty hungry. Why don't we go by the police station and grab some food afterward?" Mac asked.

"Hmm. I guess that'd be a plan. Might as well get on with Braken's job in the morning. Sooner that gets done the better. We can run by the insurance companies office and drop off that payment too," Wood said.

"You're still going to work for him? They should be in jail," Mel said.

"Things ain't always right. It's a small town and sometimes it's best just to get along. Their time will come, whether by me or someone else," he said, grabbing the camera. "Might as well get this film developed while we're at it."

They walked down to the truck and crammed into the small front seat of the pickup. The ride across to Marathon took a long forty minutes and it was almost five when they pulled up at the insurance agents office. Wood opened the door, taking a bundle of cash with him and went to the office door. A few minutes later, he emerged with a smile on his face and

climbed back in the truck.

“We’re good to go. Maybe we can get on with some descent paying work now. No more Braken’s that’s for sure.”

The lobby to the police station was quiet, and it only took a few minutes before a deputy came out and introduced himself. He took all three statements and was about to let them leave when he stopped suddenly.

“Any chance you can give an ID on the dead guy?” he asked.

Wood nodded and they followed him back to the coroner’s office. Mac shivered when they entered the cold examination room and waited for the deputy to pull out the compartment. Teqea’s body was bruised and dirty, still awaiting an autopsy.

“That’d be a fellow named Teqea. Don’t know his last name. Has a club down in Key West. Bad character if you ask me,” Wood said.

While he was talking Mac stared at the body, focusing on the tattoos. It was then that he remembered where he had seen the pattern carved into the statue: on Cheqea and Teqea. Their body art bore the same patterns as the statue, but had other markings as well.

“Any film left in the camera?” Mac asked,
“Yeah.”

Mac asked the deputy if he could take some pictures of the tattoos. He shrugged his shoulders, which Mac took as permission and went out to get the camera. A few minutes later he had used up the remaining film.

“What was that all about — taking those pictures?” Wood asked.

They were in a booth together waiting for their pizza. Wood and Mac nursed the cold beers in front of them and Mel sipped a coke through a straw.

“Just curious. Cheqea had similar ones. Kind of look like a treasure map or something,” Mac said.

Wood took a sip of his beer. “I keep telling you that treasure business’ll ain’t no way to go,” Wood said.

Mac let the comment go. “So, you think they’ll be enough work for me now?”

Wood nodded. “Plenty out there. Just needed to get square with the insurance. You thinkin’ about staying?”

Both their eyes were on him. “I just might,” he said.