

## Chapter Thirty-seven

### Holes in the Head

*Life is very singularly made to surprise us (where it does not utterly appall us).*

Rainer Maria Rilke

The morning took on a surreal brilliance, sharp-edged and color-saturated. The hole in the jolly buccaneer's forehead, for example, was round and clean, black-red, blue around the edge. The spray from the exit wound had left a plume of blood on the front salon window even before the fellow had slumped to his knees. Some of the larger beads of blood began to run down the glass. Then Waylon saw it begin to run from the entry wound. Jessica had got him in the middle of the forehead—almost between the eyes, but not quite. Maybe that was why she was looking so irritated, thought Waylon. Her shooting just wasn't what it used to be. He burped, and was bemused at the odor of durian, like a stale fart.

"Waylon," she hissed. "Get his rifle! For Christ's sake."

"Oh," Waylon said. He snatched up the weapon as the ex-bad guy toppled to one side, yanking to get the shoulder strap disengaged from the dead man's arm. "Do you realize how *dangerous* it is to shoot a man in the head?" Waylon thought this, but didn't say it. Swelling unreality threatened to spin him out of control. But only for a moment. The blast of a shotgun—once, twice, three times—brought him to his senses. The captain, still standing in the door to the wheelhouse, was dispassionately blowing people to bits. Jessica was lying on the deck going root-de-toot with her gun, while more pistol fire reported from the stern. Then the shooting stopped, and Dit leapt on to the other vessel to finish the surviving machete man with a hatchet. A *hatchet*. Dit had gone berserk. Waylon stood there with the rifle, wondering if the safety catch were on or off and

thinking he should be doing something. He pointed it away from everybody so he wouldn't hurt anyone, and pulled the trigger in a tentative sort of way. He felt the rifle lift as it squandered a burst out to sea. The safety hadn't been on. Anyway, there were no pirates left to shoot, which was okay with him.

“Jesus Christ, Jessie,” Waylon said. “Are you crazy?”

Bat and Dit scuttled the other boat and then asked Waylon and Jessica what they would like for dinner. Dit was pissed off because he'd broken a fingernail. And Jessica was reacting with some heat to another suggestion from Waylon that she tended towards recklessness. “I'm not stupid, okay, Waylon? I knew there was a shotgun in the wheelhouse, and I could see the captain was staying good and close to it. Give me a break. And I'd seen My Bottle with a forty-five automatic this morning.” Waylon was amazed, once more, to discover how well informed Jessica was for a simple traveling girl. And, for a claustrophobic drug addict, how unflappable. She hadn't even spilled her vodka in the course of their nice little massacre.

“We have to go back to Pattaya and report this.”

“Waylon! Don't be stupid.” Now Jessica was pissed off.

“*Mai pen rai*,” Bat told him, smiling at Jessica reassuringly. “These are bad guys. No problem. Forget about it.”

“Just don't worry about it, Waylon. They know what they're doing, okay?”

“We radio,” Dit agreed. “*Mai pen rai*. Radio my *f'en*. In marine police. No problem; they take care.”

But nobody seemed in a hurry to make the call. Everyone was very reassuring and eager that nothing should interfere with this nice dive cruise.

“I guess those guys picked the wrong boat,” Waylon said to Jessica, expressing only part of his real feelings about the matter.

“They're not the only ones, Waylon.” Jessica was starting to suspect something was wrong, she said. Seriously amiss. For one thing, she'd been surprised from the outset that a scow like this would have such sophisticated electronics, including side-scan sonar. And she didn't like the smooth way in which the crew had responded to the pirates. In fact, she had appreciated it—indeed counted on them to follow her lead—but it suggested they weren't the innocent punters they made out they were. Not only that, of course. My

Bottle had worried her from the first time she'd set eyes on him, and it was no coincidence he was on this boat.

Later, Waylon noticed that Dit now had a pair of mirrored sunglasses just like Bat's, although he wasn't wearing them, only keeping them hooked on the neck of his T-shirt. And Bat was limping around breaking in a newish pair of tennis shoes, walking the heels down till they were comfortable. My Bottle, more animated than he'd been the whole trip so far, was on the stern deck stripping an AK-47. He told Dit to issue cold beers to everyone, assuring Waylon and Jessica that these were on the house. "On the boat, yeah?" He laughed too loud and too long at his own joke, which none of the Thais had understood. But everyone was in a fine mood and they laughed anyway. Even Waylon, who heard a hint of hysteria in his own effort. My Bottle went back to sneering, but it was a happy sneer.

Stacked up on deck against the aft wall of the stern cabin were a number of items that looked as though they might have come from Mars. "What the hell are these?" Waylon pointed at a heap of what looked like misshapen green rugby balls bristling with vicious spikes. "Durians," replied Jessica in tones suggesting she'd swap them even-stein for a stack of long-dead rats. The boat was loaded with the things, as it turned out.

That afternoon they discovered yet another element of *Sumalee's* scent. Sun-dried and deep-fried *pla ling mah*, dog's-tongue fish, were about two inches long and made fine salty beer snacks, or whiskey snacks if you preferred, which My Bottle did. The process of deep frying them produced a smell akin to what you'd get if you stewed the socks of an infantry platoon just off on maneuvers. My Bottle appeared addicted to them, while Dit seemed immune to the stench of their preparation. A partnership made in heaven. So My Bottle lit up a big cigar, Dit deep-fried a bunch of dried dogs'-tongue fish to go with the drinks, Bat opened a durian, and Jessica went to the stern to puke. Waylon only felt like it.

Overall, however, he was doing okay. He had been so preoccupied that his lip had never had a chance to start quivering. He stretched out in a deck chair and found himself reviewing recent events. "Better than sex," some girl named Beth from Pasadena had written in Leary's bungee-jump guestbook. Waylon preferred sex, on the whole. There was a moment or two of mad exhilaration once he left the platform, arms spread wide

with total abandon to embrace the earth as it rushed to meet him. But when he hit the end of the cord there was no shock, no sense of imminent death, just a long lagging letdown as more than two thousand interwoven elastic bands stretched to absorb the force of his plunge, delicately lowering him, finally, to dip head and upper body in the pond.

Dripping, then, he was tugged skyward—up and up till he thought he was going to land back on the jump platform. He was twisting and turning as he soared, but at one point he caught sight of Jessica and Oscar and Eddie. “Is this all there is?” He waved and yelled in their general direction. Then it was merely a series of ever-diminishing rebounds, oscillating away at the end of the cord and feeling silly. “It’s like every cell in your body *knows* you’re going to die,” Oscar had told him. “And then you don’t. Man, what a rush.”

But Waylon hadn’t felt as though he were going to die at all. He’d only felt ridiculous, for the most part. He chewed on his lip, thinking it over. It worried him.

But what really worried him, when he thought about it, was that he was on this dive cruise with a gang of killers—even his dive buddy was a killer—and he wasn’t nearly as worried as he should have been. He caught a nap in the sun, and his hangover was a distant memory when he awoke. They ran all day at top speed in a smooth sea, and it was almost dark by the time they dropped the hook on the wreck.

Jessica had a GPS, a hand-held global positioning system, in her bag. Of course she did, thought Waylon. And probably a radar. Maybe even a pool table. Nothing he learned about Jessica or her bag could ever surprise him again. A GPS essentially triangulated off a number of satellites, always in contact with at least four at a time, and could place you on the surface of the earth within a hundred yards or less. Even with a hand-held model. But Jessica hadn’t told their friends about this bit of equipment. They took her pistol from her, but, not knowing her as well as Waylon did, they didn’t search her bag.

As Jessica explained to Waylon, she didn’t want to salvage the stuff until after dark. So she wanted to make sure they arrived on the wreck too late to dive in daylight, but with just enough light, ideally, that they could do a reconnaissance. To this end, she gave the skipper coordinates that took them to a place about a quarter of a mile from where they really wanted to be. Then she had them hunt around with their sonar. Eventually, she steered them right in on it. The wreck they were looking for lay in about

eighty feet of water eight hundred yards from a little island distinguished by nothing more than some scrub forest and a few rocky outcrops. A cove just around the headland made an excellent overnight anchorage in this season, Jessica said. Nobody thought to ask her how she knew that.

“It’s too late to dive today,” she told My Bottle. “It would be dark by the time we got on to the wreck. What we have to do is put a buoy on it now and come back to dive tomorrow. Waylon. You can do a quick dive before dark and tie the buoy on. I’ll come with you.”

“Why you dive on this boat?” asked My Bottle with a chummy sneer, as if to say they were all friends, after all, and they might as well come clean. “No good. Maybe dangerous. For girl, no good.” He looked suddenly thoughtful. “Maybe find treasure, yes?”

“No, no,” said Waylon. “We dive on it for fun.” But that proposition sounded dubious even to him. The guy was probably thinking you had to have holes in your head.

They buoyed the wreck that afternoon. At the last minute, Jessica decided not to go down. The current was too strong. Anyway, what was Waylon worried about? All he had to do was go straight down the anchor line and secure the line to the buoy. They would be right there above him.

Dit helped Waylon into his gear, hands everywhere, twittering about beautiful skin and beautiful hair and making Waylon’s flesh crawl. He told himself to relax, but he was a Canadian and Canadians were inhibited, goddamn it. When Dit grabbed his arms to help him to his feet, he realized Dit had hands like bear traps.

Glad to be off the boat, Waylon hauled himself hand-over-hand down the line, staring into the current, taking care it didn’t rip his mask off. The bottom of the boat, rough with barnacles, was facing him. The line led him down to where the anchor had hooked a rail amidships on what had been the lower deck. Only now, with the boat lying on its side, it was the highest point on the wreck. Getting a firm hold on the rail, he pulled himself head-first over and down into the lee of the current. He tied the line to the buoy on to the railing, and then, squeezing off the rest of the air in his flotation jacket, he drifted to the bottom. Particles of sediment and plankton spun by; a couple of Moorish idols zagged through the beam of his torch. Debris lay strewn across the sand. Two davits

protruded like giant insect legs from what had been the top deck; there was no sign of the tender they'd been used to launch. Aside from that, there wasn't much besides some whip corals and a few fish. The vessel, a motor yacht of some eighty or a hundred feet, probably steel hulled, had slid off a low ridge and come to rest on her side, bow higher than her stern, against a big outcrop covered with coral and algae.

Waylon swam to the stern to find twin propellers and a name. *Dark Moon*. Jessica hadn't even told him that much. Written beneath the name was the word "Panama." The current was running so strong, by the time Waylon made it back up the line, that the buoy had been sucked under the surface. He surfaced with a blinding sinus headache—a pressure block, the penalty for forcing his ears to clear on the way down, something Oscar and Eddie had warned him about.

They anchored in the cove for the night. And as soon as she could get Waylon alone, Jessica pumped him for details of what he'd seen, indifferent to his pain. She couldn't wait. Among other things, she wanted to know which way the wreck was lying and whether the stern doors were clear.

"Did you see anything unusual?" she asked him, finally.

"Jesus Christ, Jessie. Yes. It was *all* unusual. What do you think? I go diving on sunken yachts every day?"

Later, when they went back to the stern deck, they found Dit sitting in the dinghy, which they'd been towing since the afternoon dive. "Jig, jig, *na*?" he tittered. "The *plameuk*, they see my light and they think, 'Big party. Good.' So they come, and now they see this bee-oo-tee-fool little fish, so pretty." Dit had taped a dive torch to the ladder on the stern, and was casting and retrieving a squid jig on a hand line through the pool of light, its fleet quicksilver wobble designed to incite your average squid to recklessness. Coy as trout, several squid were hanging back in a gang to consider matters. Then one tentacled torpedo shot into the circle of light to grab at the bait. "See? Jig, jig. There. Oh!" Once ... twice, it was almost hooked. All caution forgotten, then, it came in for a fatal third try, impaling itself on a double row of pins. A number of its pals soon followed, once they saw how easy it was.

The Thai-style squid salad was great, if a little spicy. In fact it was hot enough to give Waylon hiccups, and Dit found this enormously funny. The captain had joined them at the table, but didn't eat. Nor did he talk. He only drank Mekhong and water and smoked cigarettes. Neither did Jessica eat anything, beyond two spoonfuls of rice and the chicken out of Waylon's curry. She washed the sauce off the chicken pieces in her water glass before eating them. "You can't trust this water, Waylon," she told him. She slung the water from his own glass out through the door and on to the deck, then poured herself three fingers of vodka and downed it. She also appropriated half of his grilled prawns. She ripped the shells from them, one by one, swishing the meat around in her water glass before eating it. Staring provocatively at the smokers all the while, she deposited each of the carapaces in the ashtray. Bat's response was to drop the butt of his cigarette into her glass of water. Dit flicked ashes on the floor. My Bottle just sat and sneered and sipped whiskey from his own bottle of Black Label. My Bottle smoked cigars constantly when he was drinking. Bat and Dit both smoked cigarettes; Bat kept a pack tucked up in the sleeve of his T-shirt. And Jessie made exasperated noises louder than Waylon would have liked. "Do you *have* to smoke those fucking things in here?" she asked, at one point.

My Bottle, the captain, Bat, and Dit looked set to drink away the night, entertaining themselves with singing and arguing. Waylon and Jessica retired to the stern deck to discuss matters.

"Waylon."

"Yes, Jessie?"

"We go after it tonight."

"Jessie?"

"Yes, Waylon?"

"Piss off." It felt good to say. But it didn't work.

"We're going to wait till after midnight. The tide will change in a few hours, and by that time My Bottle and his pals will be obliterated." Jessica had added a little something from her pharmaceutical stash to their drinks. "Sometimes I have trouble sleeping," she told him, when he asked what she was doing with a lavish supply of Rohypnal.

Waylon discerned in himself a peculiar sense of inevitability. Life had become a series of exercises in madness, and some force beyond himself kept insisting he submit. He was going to go night-diving for contraband, he didn't even know what. With a lunatic for a buddy, he was going to do this, right under the eyes of a gang of dubious characters who would probably take the goods off them at gunpoint. He felt that his lip should be twitching, but it wasn't. His leg was jumping a bit. But that could have been mere excitement. "That's frig-all," he told himself. "*That's* frig-all." It still didn't sound quite right. The phrase didn't have the careless confidence that Leary put into it. "*That's frig-all,*" he said again. This time it sounded a shade hysterical. Leary had told Waylon about a report claiming a large proportion of men known to have died while having sex were having sex, at the time, with someone other than their wives. "So tell me, Fosdick. Is this an argument for or against adultery?" Live life to the hilt, or set your course by the actuarial stars? He was so far out on this existential black ice he was fucked no matter much which way he went.

"Waylon," Jessica told him in her most reasonable voice. "I think I can make it. But, if I can't, you're going to have to do it alone."



## Chapter Thirty-eight

### Dark Moon

*A hero is no braver than an ordinary man, but he is brave  
five minutes longer.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Just after midnight, moving as quietly as they could, they loaded their gear into the dinghy and went back out to find the buoy. An unseasonable overcast covered much of the sky. A gibbous moon cast its sheen on the water through occasional holes in the cloud cover.

Everybody had gotten drunk except Waylon, Jessica, and Bat, who had drawn the midnight-to-morning watch. But Jessica had spent some time with him, managing to slip him a mickey finn in the course of events. Waylon was rowing, although they could have probably run the outboard if they'd wanted to. They were at least a hundred yards off the boat, downwind and just out of range of its smell, not to mention the amazing chorus of snores. Other than the faintest thump-thumping of the generator aboard *Sumalee*, the night was still. They proceeded across the glassy swell with little more than the slap of water against the inflatable hull of the dinghy, the dip of Waylon's oars, an occasional comment from some nightbird on the island, and Jessica's quick breathing. As they left the shelter of the cove, a slight chop began to rock the dinghy and, Waylon feared, the current was dragging them off their bearing.

"Start the engine, Waylon."

“It’s too soon.”

“They’re not going to wake up till sometime tomorrow, Waylon. I put enough in their drinks to drop a rhino.”

“You could kill them with that stuff, Jessica. After all they had to drink. Jesus Christ, eh?”

“Why are you whispering, Waylon?” whispered Jessica.

Waylon didn’t answer. He was trying to see the buoy. The island itself was only a blackness against the stars, low to the water and fast becoming indiscernible, except when the moon peeked out from among the scudding clouds.

“More to the right. No, no. *My* right. Waylon,” she said, impatient. They had to shoot a line on the headland and the peak of the highest hill on the island, she’d told him. The buoy should be in a straight line with them. After all, search and recovery and navigation had been her favorite subject. Then they started getting sightings of the buoy where it bobbed in the occasional bit of moonlight. Jessica had been right about the tide—the current had died, and now the white plastic bottle rode on surface.

They tied up to the buoy and prepared to dive. Jessica moved with a kind of anxious languor as they wrestled with weight belts and tanks, fumbled around with fins. The clumsy intimacy of a dinghy required choreography at the best of times.

“You’re on my flipper, Jessie. I can’t move.”

“Well, why don’t you stay on your own side, then? How am I supposed to know where your feet are? I can’t see anything.” She half stood to move away and swung her tank right into him.

“Ow. For Christ’s sake, Jessie.”

“Now, Waylon. You just follow me. Once we’re on the wreck, I mean.” She still refused to tell him either what it was they were looking for or where, exactly, they would find it.

“Jessie,” he asked again. “What are we looking for?”

“Only on a need-to-know basis, Waylon. You’ve come this far. Just *trust* me. Okay?”

“Okay,” he replied, in much the same way, when he’d left the bungee tower, he had surrendered himself to the Void. But this was far scarier.

“You go first, Waylon.”

He rocked gently on the edge of the inflatable, the weight of his tank hooked over the side behind him. Clasping one hand to his mask, regulator mouthpiece in the other, he consigned himself to the depths, performing a back roll, a fine vertiginous topple backwards into the sea. There was no shock as he hit the water—the air and water temperatures were almost the same. But he briefly lost track, in the dark, of which way was up. He switched on his torch as, buoyed by his jacket, he bobbed back to surface. The line was right ahead of him.

Left hand held high to expel air from his jacket, Waylon slipped beneath the surface. It was the same on every night dive—he didn't have enough hands. He had to keep hold of the anchor line, squeeze the expel button on his flotation jacket, and pinch his nose to equalize the pressure in his ears. All at the same time. This was something he'd never got quite right in the advanced course. It was all the more awkward for having a torch dangling from his wrist. Taking it in his left hand, finally, he shone it towards the bottom. Nothing but bits of drifting silt and plankton. No sharks. Statistically, divers stood a better chance of getting bitten by a dog or struck by lightning. So Leary said, and Waylon believed him. Although the statistical sample weren't necessarily diving on wrecks at night. Somehow the cocoon of light didn't seem so cozy without Leary or Oscar at hand. *Dark Moon* began to loom beneath them. Waylon's ears were refusing to clear, and he stopped to squeeze the nosepiece of his mask and blow, wagging his jaws and rotating his head. Jessica, impatient, pushed at him a couple of times, and then went past him down the line.

About the time Waylon's ears cleared, something big bumped him.

No shark, it was Jessica clawing past on her way to surface. In the wild spin of his torch and hers he caught sight of Jessica's face. Her eyes goggled, unseeing, behind her mask; storms of bubbles blasted from her regulator. She was hyperventilating. Waylon grabbed her jacket with one hand, the line in the crook of his elbow. He held his torch steady while jabbing a forefinger at his mask, willing her to look at his eyes. *Settle down.* He let go of her jacket for a moment to thump her hard on the shoulder, losing his grip on the line at the same time. Finally he held her gaze, making gentling motions with one

hand, the other firmly attached to her jacket. They were still ascending too fast, dive computers beeping an out-of-synch warning duet.

They broke surface to find the surface brilliant with moonlight. They were about twenty yards off the dinghy and had to swim back against a light current. They were lucky, Waylon suggested once they'd clambered aboard, that the moon was out and that the current wasn't stronger.

Jessica had seen a huge moray eel, she said; it had been swimming free beneath them. So what? Waylon said. They had learned that morays weren't going to hurt you unless you drove them to it, and, anyway, he thought it was worms that scared her, not snakes or long fish.

"You hurt me, Waylon. Here. Hold my torch." She was still breathing hard, not listening to him, entirely self-absorbed.

He shielded the light with his body, holding it close on Jessica as she extracted a package from the pocket on her jacket and proceeded to pull plastic bag from within plastic bag. "Oh, *fuck*." Demonic in the light from the torch, her face registered a confusion of rage and panic. "Oh, no. Look at this. Oh, no; oh, no; oh, no." She had wrapped her stash of Valium in three layers of protection, but seawater had still got in and the inner bag was filled with a murky liquid. When she held it up to Waylon's light, he could see some of the pills still dissolving. "Oh, fuck," she said. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." Then she hoisted the bag in the palm of one hand, held the neck together in the other hand and, making a face, took a swig.

"You'll have to go it alone," she told him. She was hugging herself, rocking back and forth down deep in the dinghy. She took another hit from her bag. "I'll tell you what to do." And she described what he was looking for and gave him detailed directions on how to find the stuff. She also passed him a twelve-inch crescent wrench. "You'll need this," she said.

This time the descent went smoothly. He settled on the bottom and adjusted his buoyancy till he was gently bobbing on the tips of his fins, breathing deeply and slowly, in and out, taking care to expel all the air before taking the next breath in. Don't gulp;

don't be greedy. Hanging there in the water, he let his muscles go loose and his mind followed.

*Breathe in. Breathe out.*

Slower.

*Breathe in.... Breathe out....*

He allowed himself a minute to calm down—a little bottom time in a good cause. He would save on air in the longer run. He checked his gauges: time 1:33 A.M.; air 2,050 psi; depth eighty-two feet. He had already breathed up some of his air. He had a maximum of thirty minutes to get in, find the stuff, get out again, find the buoy line, and then return to surface. He needed at least ten minutes for the ascent—with all the diving he'd done already, he had to plan for a safety decompression stop. He did not want the bends.

He checked his gear. His dive knife—razor-sharp, a saw edge on the top of the blade, the point, upon Leary's advice, ground down to a chisel—was strapped to the inside of his left ankle. He had the wrench secured with a Velcro strap to his jacket. In one jacket pocket he carried a spool of thick twine and a waterproof chemical lightstick. In the other, he had a nylon net catchbag and an underwater penlight torch for emergencies. An orange plastic lift bag was tied to his jacket. He switched off his main torch, and brought out the mini-light to test it. Then he killed that one as well and, just for a few seconds, he let the night take him. Vague features gradually emerged from the void. Ghostly bits of bioluminescence crawled on the deck—crabs, perhaps. Waylon let one arm drift in the current and watched the trail of sparkle when he pulled it back.

With hallucinogenic clarity, he heard Eddie's voice: "The second rule of safe diving is this: *Never* dive alone." Especially at night, Waylon had to think. Even more especially at night on a wreck you've never dived on before. He was breaking all the rules he'd only so recently learned. Again, Waylon told himself that he was crazy even to consider doing this. There were just too many things that could go wrong. He had only made his first dive a month ago. Less. This was a classic case of Leary's Law: "A confident diver is a good diver. An overconfident diver is a dead diver." Trouble is, about the time somebody gets to the point he's what you might call an almost competent diver, this goes to his head and he reckons he can break all the gosh-darned rules."

Waylon told himself he'd go step by step, keeping a close eye on air and time. He could abort the operation any time he wanted.

Oscar had appealed to another rule, this one a universal law: "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong." Waylon congratulated himself on having the spare torch in his vest pocket.

His main torch was giving him about twenty feet of visibility, and he could make out the wheelhouse to the left, so he went right, swimming along a couple of feet from bottom. Jessica had told him to go in through the doors to the salon from the galley. He swam around the tender to the stern. There were the glass double doors to the salon, just as she'd described them, except now the whole boat was on her side, so the doors lay horizontal, one above the other. "Go to the aft cabin, Waylon," she'd said. "There's just one big cabin in the stern. Go down the stairwell on the port side. You can't miss it." Waylon smashed the glass in the uppermost door with the crescent wrench, and reached in to undo the catch on the lower one. He fumbled briefly before discovering he had to crank a lever up and over to the right. The door opened when he yanked, and he pulled it down and out of his way. There was still something blocking the entrance. A sofa. It appeared to be in pretty good condition. He reached in through the broken door and shoved. It shifted a foot or two. Something heavy slipped and thudded, and then the sofa gave some more.

The general rule in wreck diving was one third of your air going in, one third coming out, and one third in reserve. Do not cheat on your reserve, Leary had told him. Some corollary to Murphy's Law said that that was exactly when something was going to go wrong. All kinds of things could hang you up inside a shipwreck. Waylon estimated he had twenty-seven minutes of air left. About seven more minutes to find the stuff, if he was going to allow ten minutes to make his way back out, and another ten for the ascent. He would never make it, but he wanted to see just how far he could get. He glided in with gentle kicks of his fins, headfirst and on his side so his tank fit through. A big red fish stared at him a moment, as though in disbelief, and then shot past and away into the night.

Blood, also red in the light of the torch, billowed around his head, obscuring his vision. Waylon was suddenly conscious of a cut on his face, a great stinging gash on his

cheek, and another laceration on his hand. He must have sliced himself on glass from the door. The thought of sharks crossed his mind again, but quickly passed in light of more immediate concerns.

The room was a confusion of unfamiliar shapes and shadows. What had been walls were now floor and ceiling. The ceiling had windows. Okay. There it was. Just to the left and against what was now the ceiling but what used to be the port wall. A railed stairwell, with the steps spiraling ahead like a short tunnel and then down to a doorway that dropped into the big aft cabin. When the boat had gone over, all the furniture had jumbled up on the port side. Video cassettes and music CDs were scattered everywhere, and Waylon stood on a wooden combination cabinet and shelves to shine his torch into the stairwell. He checked his gauges and looked at his watch: twenty-six minutes left. He still had time for a quick look in the cabin, at least. Tying one end of his twine on to the upper door handle, he prepared, Hansel and Gretel style, to bring the spool with him into the wreck.

He swam in and around, paying out the line behind him, until he was upside down and there was a door in front of him. The scene stirred childhood dreams, dark subterranean worlds full of mystery, Waylon fearful of their resolution. The door had a regular knob, which he turned and pushed before descending headfirst into a mess of junk. Waylon shuddered. Old bedclothes, clammy and insinuating, clung like ectoplasmic Dits. He performed a careful somersault—utterly disorienting himself for a moment, the bonk of his tank hitting something—to settle fins down and wrapped in his line atop a jumbled pile of duffel bags and other items.

Waylon tottered and banged about the cabin for a few seconds, establishing neutral buoyancy and recovering his balance. Where was the floor? A cupboard lay horizontally on his right. There. Straight ahead. The wall-to-wall carpeting, now floor to ceiling, was already coming away. He grabbed a corner and yanked it halfway down to reveal a steel hatch cover like a wall safe bolted into a three-by-two-foot recess. He had about twenty-four minutes remaining. This was cutting things too fine. He should go back up now.

Waylon decided he would ignore the bundle of rags and a boating shoe he had seen in a corner. And the human skull. With an extra hole where your third eye was

meant to be. No problem, eh? Just some dead guy. *Just some dead guy.* Until very recently, Waylon had seen only a couple of dead people in his life. Part of the bundle of rags in the corner, he noticed, was a ribcage wrapped in a T-shirt.

Waylon abandoned his investigations and turned back to the job at hand. Jessica had told him she'd left a couple of nuts on the hatch cover. Actually there were four. They were stainless steel and came off without a problem. But the heavy plate had been designed to lift straight up, and now it was catching on the bolt threads. Waylon jimmied it along with his dive knife till it dropped, bruising his shin on the way down and coming to rest on one of his fins. The visibility was obscured by sediment, but Waylon poked his torch and his head right into the tank and looked around. Just beyond arm's reach lay two sailcloth bags.

His tank and harness prevented him from going any farther in. There was only one thing to do. They had gone over this general situation in both the advanced open water and the wreck diving courses. It was a simple matter to get out of your jacket and harness, do what had to be done, and then put your gear back on. You could still breathe off the regulator. Waylon had done this any number of times already, in the pool and in thirty feet of open water. In the daytime. With his buddy and his instructors right at hand.

Moving with great deliberation, reminding himself to do everything step by step, Waylon unbuckled his jacket and let it and his air tank slide off, dumping it in the corner away from the bits of dead guy. Taking the pencil light from the pocket, he twisted it on before switching his main torch off and putting it down carefully with the rest of the gear. Next to the skull. *That's frig-all. Just some dead guy.*

The regulator hose wouldn't stretch as high as the hatch. Waylon took a big breath of air and let the regulator fall back on his jacket. Then, sticking the torch in his teeth cigar-style, he squirmed half his body into the tank, stretching to grab first one bag and then the other. He pulled them towards himself, stirring up a cloud of sediment in the process and cutting visibility to a few feet. He squirmed back out to drop the bags, one of which was amazingly heavy. He found his regulator, took a hit of air and then another. He sat back on the junk pile to get his arms through the straps on his harness, shrugging his way back into his gear, securing waist belt and chest straps. Killing the pencil torch,



he raised the other one again. Looking up, he was startled by a swarming colony of giant silver amoebas, agglomerations of air bubbles trapped against the back.

Eighty feet wasn't much different from thirty feet. You could just as easily drown in thirty feet. "Hell," Oscar had said, "you could drown in your own bathtub, if you tried hard enough." The thing was to know your limitations at any given depth and to be comfortable with them. Ninety percent of diving accidents were attributable to panic. So diving inside *Dark Moon* wasn't any different from being in the swimming pool. Just as long as you kept your head. No problem.

Then Waylon's torch started to flicker and dim. The torch, he suddenly realized, that Dit had used for jigging squid. Jesus Christ. His light was going to burn out.

*Stop.*

Breathe.... Breathe....

*Think.* Slow and easy. Relax. That was it. Think. Check your gauges. He still had eighteen minutes—eight minutes to get out and ten for the ascent. But he had only 450 psi left. He was down into the red zone. Not as calm as he'd wanted to think, he'd been burning up air.

Jesus, Jesus. *Relax.* Breathe in. Slowly and deeply. Breathe out. Breathe everything out, clear all the carbon dioxide before taking the next lungful. *In.... Out....* There wasn't all that much more to breathe. He had to get out of there.

Torch dangling from his wrist to cast wild shadows, shedding only intermittent and increasingly dim light on proceedings, he stuffed both bags up through the doorway above him and to the side. His torch had gone a sickly pale yellow. It flickered, and Waylon's fear flashed in disproportionate sympathy.

The backup torch. It wasn't there. He checked both pockets in his jacket, pulled everything out till they were both empty. He went through them again, and again, as though he expected the penlight to appear by magic. He shone the dimming main torch around the cabin quickly, but it didn't have enough juice left to look for anything. He was only wasting time. And air.

The torch died.

*Stop.*

Crushed by the weight of eighty feet of dark sea, trapped in a black labyrinth, Waylon sucked hard on his regulator, breathing deep. He was suffocating. He fought the urge to gulp more air. Calm. Be calm. His mind battered about his skull, clamoring, urgent. Surface, get to surface. Get to hell out of here *now*.

No. *Stop*. Breathe.... *Think*. Never-act-on-the-edge-of-panic. Neveractontheeeeedgeofpanic. Think.

He knew how he had come in, and he was going to go out the same way. No problem. Just follow the cord out. But which way was the door? Up. It was in the ceiling. Simple. He gave his jacket a burst of air. And nothing happened. He could feel the flotation jacket swell, but he wasn't rising. Jesus.

Hung up on something. That was all. But he couldn't *see*. He had his dive knife, sharp as a razor, one edge of the blade a saw; Leary had told him he could cut himself free from just about any line or net he'd ever encounter. But he was crammed into this tiny space. He couldn't go forward, and he could retreat only a couple of inches. He couldn't turn around. So he wasn't able to see what he was caught on, much less cut himself free. Claustrophobia began to ring insistent alarms, threatening to swell out of control. He recoiled from a thought he must not think—a glimmering of how Jessica must feel when she was underwater at night.

*Think*.

Breathebreathebreathe....

*Whoa*. Just stop. Don't do anything. Settle down.

*Think*.

And he thought about dying. He thought of Chloe and thought about how she was alive somewhere, unaware of where he was and what he was doing. And he wondered how she would remember him, if he were to die now. Abruptly he realized he didn't want her to remember him the way he was, the way he had become. What had he become? This was something that merited consideration in its own good time. Right now there were more pressing matters. All that went through his head in a moment, and he was breathing slowly and strongly. He was focusing.

At the same time he encountered the cold realization that this was for real. If he got it wrong, if he made the slightest miscalculation now, he was dead. This was

dangerous. Really and truly dangerous. These things went through his mind as he sat there in the black, hung up, breathing the last of his air, unable now even to see how much air he had left.

For a moment the panic surged back. *Think*. He could drop his gear again, and the bags, grab a few breaths off the tank and then try to swim out. But if anything held him up, he'd be finished. Even if he got out clear, he would have already burned up a lot of his one last lungful. There wouldn't be enough for a safe ascent. And he had to get to the line. If he didn't, with the current up, he might never find the dinghy again and be left to drift away in the dark all night. And the only person who would even know he was missing was Jessica. His buddy. He had to try to keep his gear.

Originally, he had planned to lift the stuff with the salvage bag. Shoving his regulator under the opening, he would have squeezed the purge valve till the bag lifted, and he would have accompanied it to surface. But you don't squander your last breath of air on lifting two anonymous bags from eighty feet. He would have attached a lightstick to the bag in case it got away from him and they had to retrieve it later with the dinghy.

The lightstick. *He still had the lightstick*. He fumbled it out of the pocket and cracked it, watching it begin to glow its ghostly green. Why hadn't he thought of that before? He had to be narked.

Okay. Unbuckle the waist and chest straps. Loosen the shoulder straps. Slowly, cautiously. No problem. Just keep the breather in your mouth. Breathe slowly and deeply. Exhale every molecule. Then take another lungful. Slip out of the harness. Now turn around and find out where you're snagged. Okay, there it is. The octopus hose is caught in the crack of the cupboard door. Lift it away. There.

Working fast, marveling at his own control, he fastened the lightstick to the valve of his tank. That way, if he came up away from the dinghy, or unconscious, or both, Jessica might spot him. He maneuvered his way back into his gear and proceeded up the stairwell, tank and bags clonking against steps and railing, and emerged from the tunnel into the salon. Even with the greenish glimmer from behind his head, he could see the dimmest wash of moonlight leaking through the doors. He cut himself again going out, shoving the bags through ahead of him. He could feel it, though there wasn't enough light to see how badly he was bleeding.

He was still getting air, but he couldn't have much reserve left. A bag in each hand, and guided mainly by moonlight now, he finned back towards the line, praying the hole in the cloud cover lasted.

He found the line.

In a free ascent, when you're right out of air, you jettison weightbelt and anything else you happen to be carrying, and go straight to surface. A good way to get bent. The option, if circumstances permitted, was to oxygenate with a few lungfuls of air, saving the last one or two for a controlled ascent. Leary had told him that you could do a controlled ascent from ninety feet on one breath of air. It was all a matter of staying calm and going by the book. In fact, Waylon had practiced the procedure, with Oscar's acquiescence, from thirty and then from sixty feet. You had to take care not to hold your breath as you ascended, or the pressurized air would rupture your lungs. So you should try to ascend at about a foot a second, hoping to avoid the bends, mouth open, meanwhile, to let the pressurized air escape on its own. But not too fast—you needed enough to get to surface.

Waylon was going up with everything—weightbelt, tank, mysterious bags, even the wrench, which, in his methodical manner, he had secured in the Velcro loop. He gave his flotation jacket a couple of short bursts and started up, a bag in each hand. He tried for another breath off the regulator and got a dry rasp. He was sucking on an empty tank. Like trying to breathe with a plastic bag tight over your face. Eighty feet to go on less than a full lungful of air.

He gauged his rate of ascent by the beeps from his dive computer—every time it started up, he stopped finning till the warning stopped. Another thing he remembered: with the diminishing external pressure, the bit of air left in an “empty” tank might expand, at around fifty-five feet, to the point you could get another breath. Cautiously, he inhaled. A gift from the gods—half a lungful of air. But his computer was beeping again and he forced himself to slow. Although he couldn't see his depth gauge, he looked up to fragments of moon dancing on the surface, and they seemed close. Now his lungs were empty, and the urge to fill them almost overwhelmed him. The blackness was gathering when he broke surface. And he did suck air, again and again. Catching a splash of wave, he started to choke.

“Waylon?” A faint voice. At least she was awake.

A sack in each hand, Waylon rolled on to his back and allowed the current to carry him, wallowing with the weight of the heavier bag, towards the dinghy, away from the buoy, which was dragging in the race of the current. Jessica pulled and he pushed to get the bag up and into the little boat.

“You took long enough. Did you get both of them?”

“Yeah. Aren’t you going to give me a hand, here? I’m tired.”

What the hell was he doing, risking his life for this? He had to be nuts. For a moment, to his amazement, he felt a rush of well-being, an urge to laugh. An echo of a street racer’s motorcycle screaming at full throttle. He put it down to euphoria at still being alive. Maybe this was the thrill bungee-jumping had failed to deliver.

“Let’s see,” said Waylon. But Jessica was utterly intent and he was entirely irrelevant. He felt slighted, considering what he’d just been through and all for her.

“Yeah, yeah. My hero.” She didn’t want to hear about it. “Just hold the torch steady, okay?”

“There was a man in the cabin, Jessie. A dead man.”

“No kidding.” Jessica was completely absorbed in opening the bags. She took something out of the heavy bag and put it into the other one.

“You have to go back down, Waylon.”

“*What?* Are you crazy?”

“Take my tank. And my torch. I have a new plan. You have to go back down. Just go down fast, drop the bag, and then come back up slow. You’ll have lots of time to decompress.”

“Piss off, eh? Jesus Christ. *No way.*”

Jessica explained that he should take the heavier bag and put it back on the wreck. Maybe in the salon—somewhere he’d be sure to find it the next day. And, since he was so worried about having had to come up fast on the last dive, he should be grateful for the chance to make it up on this one. Jessica could be a veritable encyclopedia of safe diving wisdom, when it suited her purposes. Never mind she had it all wrong in this case.

“What’s in the bag, Jessie?”

“Gold.”

“*Gold?*” Jesus Christ. The bag had to weigh thirty pounds. “*Gold?* What the hell’s in the *other* bag, then?”

“I’ll show you when we get back, Waylon. Now just do it. It’s very important.” She explained that they couldn’t just drop the bag over the side; chances were they’d never find it again. And it was vital that they recovered it the next day. Jessica hadn’t been idle while he was on *Dark Moon*. She had it all worked out. They would put full tanks on their harnesses that night, so the others wouldn’t know they’d been out. The next morning, Waylon should stay on the wreck as long as possible, so it didn’t look too easy. Jessica would simply say she was too sick to go down.

“Jessie, if these guys are the kind of guys you say they are—and I have no reason to think they aren’t—they’re going to take that gold right off us.”

That’s right,” she replied.