

The following is an excerpt of the new thriller from Eric Douglas, [*Return to Cayman: Paradise Held Hostage*](#). If you want to find out what happens next, or what's really going on, pick up a copy in softcover or on Kindle. Eric will also donate a portion of all sales through July 31, 2015 to the Cayman Magic Reef Recovery effort.

Return to Cayman

ERIC DOUGLAS

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CHAPTER 1

The air smelled fresh and new, scrubbed clean by a brief afternoon thunderstorm. Now that the clouds had moved back to sea, the sun was bright and strong. That would bring the humidity back, but it wasn't there yet. A passing storm made the landing at Owen Roberts International Airport on Grand Cayman a lively one with rising air and cross winds, but it was nothing the pilots hadn't experienced dozens of times before. They skillfully brought the passenger jet to the tarmac.

The palm trees outside the airport made Mike Scott smile. It had been 10 years since he had been there, much too long in his mind. He had planned to come back sooner, but his career had other ideas. An international photojournalist, Mike rushed from trouble spot to trouble spot. Even the easier days and simpler stories often had a way of getting interesting. And he wouldn't have it any other way.

"Hey man, you just gonna stand there all day? Let's go!" Mike heard a familiar voice call out. He smiled to see his friend Kelly sitting outside baggage claim in a new crossover SUV. Kelly was, of course, sitting in the right hand side of the car.

"What happened to my jeep? Don't tell me you wrecked it?"

"Your jeep? Yours? You sold me that jeep 15 years ago when you left the island. I finally had to retire it. It was just too old," Kelly said with a grin.

"I know, but the times we had in it..." Mike grinned as he loaded his suitcase and dive gear into the hatchback area of the small SUV. Mike climbed in the left-hand front seat and took stock of the car. "I guess this one's comfortable, but it's not like the old jeep."

"Are you done complaining?" Kelly asked. "Can we go now?"

"You in a hurry for some reason?"

"Let's think about it for a second. We're on a beautiful Caribbean island with amazing water surrounding it and cool rum drinks all over the place and you want to hang out in the airport parking lot."

"And more importantly, Tanya's waiting for us," Mike said with a grin.

"And she'll kill me if I don't get you to the party," Kelly said, laughing as he put the car in gear and pulled out into traffic.

Tanya was Kelly's wife. A Russian marine biologist, she and Kelly had been together forever, but they were having a party for their 10th anniversary. When Mike got the call to hold the date, he had finally cleared his own calendar and made plans to return to Grand Cayman. He had been there when the pair first met, he was there for Kelly's marriage proposal and the wedding, so he wasn't about to miss this. It promised to be the party of the year.

Grand Cayman always held a special place in Mike's heart. It was there he had spent a couple years working as a photopro after college before he decided he preferred to photograph people. And later, it was on Grand Cayman that he and his friend Kelly had stopped a greedy land developer from tearing up the coral reef to build a new cruise ship dock.

In just a few minutes, Mike and Kelly were in downtown George Town, passing by the waterfront. Things were quiet, no cruise ships were there, although Mike knew they still regularly made George Town a port-of-call. They would off-load thousands of passengers a day to shop in the stores along the water front and take water excursions to dive or snorkel close to the main harbor. Sometimes there were as many as three or four cruise ships anchored in the harbor, ferrying passengers to shore.

Mike and Kelly passed through town quickly and headed out South Church Street toward their ultimate destination. When Mike made plans to come to the anniversary party, Tanya had told him not to worry about getting a room. They were taking care of that. When Mike was last on the island, the end result of the turmoil was that Kelly was able to buy Sunset House. It was an iconic dive resort they had both worked at, back in the day. Now, he could run it the way he wanted. The way they had talked about all those years ago when Kelly, Mike, and Tanya were young dive instructors full of fire and dreams.

Pulling in, Mike could tell that things were going well. The hotel was on a narrow strip of land, between the road and the ocean. Turning into the parking lot and going down the slight hill, everything opened up. It was compact, but that was the way the guests liked it. The bar, the restaurant and the dive shop, along with the shore entry to a world-class house-reef, were in easy reach. Everything was spit and polished and looked well-cared for. The resort was full with people milling around, but something seemed different. Climbing out of Kelly's SUV, Mike immediately recognized several people. There were dive staff members he remembered from when he was on the island and younger dive leaders he knew from his last visit.

"You shut the whole place down, didn't you?" Mike asked, genuinely amazed at what his friend had done.

"Yep. Everyone here's our guest, not a guest of the hotel. We own this place for the week!" Kelly said. "But don't think you can tear anything up. I know the owners."

Kelly and Tanya originally bought Sunset House with the help of investors, but had quickly been able to purchase the resort outright. Kelly did it the hard way, but he had gone from itinerant dive instructor to businessman and resort owner.

“Hey, I can’t promise anything when you pack this many cowboys into one place,” Mike said while he grabbed his bags from the back. Before he had a chance to carry his bags anywhere, a resort staff member lifted his dive bag onto his back and started heading for a room. Mike stood bewildered for a minute.

“I said everyone here is our guest, but the resort staff is going to take good care of you. Especially you.”

Before Mike could ask what that meant, he heard footsteps coming up fast behind him. He turned to see who was running at him and was nearly tackled.

“Michael! You’re here!” It was Tanya, pronouncing his name with her still-lingering Russian accent as ‘ME Kal’. “The party can finally get started!”

Mike turned and gave Tanya a hug.

“What do you mean the party can finally get started? You can’t be waiting on me. There’s always a party in My Bar.”

Tanya turned to Kelly. “You haven’t told him yet?”

“Told me what?”

“We couldn’t start the party without the Best Man!”

“What’re you guys talking about? You got married 10 years ago.”

“We’re going to renew our vows. Our wedding was pretty small, so this time we are going to do it the way we want with all of our friends. And since you’ve been with us along the way, you’re going to share in this one, too!” Kelly said.

CHAPTER 2

Jay walked through the doors of the Cayman Islands Department of the Environment, stepping from the heat and humidity of the day into the almost-too-cold air-conditioned offices. The Department of the Environment was part of the Ministry for Financial Services, Commerce and Environment, a combination that might seem odd somewhere else, but the environment and the tourism it brought in were key to the financial sustainability of the island.

The Cayman Islands: Grand Cayman, Little Cayman, and Cayman Brac were world-renowned for scuba diving. Three relatively tiny islands just south of Cuba, they attracted divers and vacationers from all over the world. Some came to the island to visit the elegant resorts on Seven Mile Beach and dive as part of their stay. Others came there to do nothing but dive as much as they could. Of course, the cruise ship passengers dived or snorkeled on their day excursions, too. That amount of pressure made protecting the majestic coral reefs, beaches, and marine life a continual balancing act for the staff at the DoE. And that preservation was what Jay had in mind.

At six feet tall, Jay had the looks and bearing of a movie star and he used it to his advantage. An American, he came from money, but he had also been successful building his own software company and he wanted to use his money and influence for the good of the oceans.

“Can I help you, sir?”

“Hi there, ummm,” Jay quickly glanced down to see the woman’s name plate on her desk. “Hi, Trina. I’m Jay. I have an appointment to see the director. I’m Jaylend Taylor.”

“Good to see you, Jay. I’m sorry, Mr. Taylor. I’ll let the director know you are here.”

Trina stood and walked to the closed door of her boss’s office. She was slender and blonde. Jay noted she had the accent and look of an eastern European. Pretty, with shoulder-length blonde hair.

“The director will see you now. Go on in,” she said, holding the door open and giving him a smile. Jay barely gave her another glance as he entered the office. He was focused on this meeting. And he was used to that reaction from women.

“Welcome, Mr. Taylor,” the older Cayman native said from behind his desk as Jay entered the room.

Jay took a moment to survey the room. He had done his homework and *knew* the man he was meeting, even though it was the first time they had come face to face. They had, of course, communicated by email for a while before he made the trip to Grand Cayman as well. Nothing happened without email exchanges anymore. “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me, Mr. Travers. It is an honor.”

Travers was in his late 50s, with gray hair at his temples. He was slight of build and fit, with the dark skin of someone born on the island. Jay knew the minister had been educated in the United States, but had returned home to serve his country. He had worked his way up through the governmental ranks, leading a distinguished career of honesty and integrity. His predecessor in the office of the Department of the Environment had been less-so and when Travers took over nearly 10 years ago, he had cleaned house and put the department on the right track. Jay knew Travers wasn’t an environmentalist who put preserving the environment before everything else, but the man had a solid reputation of caring for the island. He hoped it was all true.

The office was large and well decorated, but not opulent. Teak furniture filled the room with a solid teak desk as the centerpiece. There were two comfortable leather chairs facing it. The walls were covered with photos of Travers with dignitaries and celebrities. Beyond that, it looked like the office of someone who worked. Not a director who let others work for him.

“I hope you’ll forgive me for getting right to business, but I have a very busy day. I know of your software company. In fact, we use some of your products here in our office, but I’m not sure what you need,” Travers said. “How can I help you?”

“Honestly, Mr. Travers, it is how I can help you. As you said, I’ve been fortunate and successful with my company. It has given me the ability to do whatever I want. I could come here to Grand Cayman and enjoy all the luxuries you have to offer and never work another day in my life if I didn’t want to. But that’s not the sort of person I am.” Jay leaned forward in his chair. “I want to set up a coral reef monitoring system around the entire island. It will be a way to monitor every reef we have and to make sure that no one place is under too much pressure from visitors. We could use it to help the dive operations choose where to dive and to let dive sites take a break and recover.”

Jay went on to explain that he would place sensors all around the island, tracking visits from dive boats and gathering information on how many divers were on each boat. If any one site got too many visitors in a year, they could shift to a different site. He also proposed to perform an environmental survey on every dive site on the island to determine if any of those sites were already in peril.

“Mr. Taylor, that sounds like a very ambitious plan, and I appreciate you bringing it to me. We already have scientists monitoring the reefs around the island, but nothing quite as elaborate as you have proposed. I don’t know how we could pay for it, though. It sounds very expensive.”

“That’s the best part of the offer I’m making. You won’t have to pay anything for it. I’ll pay for everything. I’ve been diving here many, many times and I love this island like I was born here. This is my way of giving back,” Jay explained. He sat back in his chair to wait for Travers to think about what he had just said.

Travers was silent for a moment, studying his visitor.

“Mr. Taylor, you have given me a lot to consider. I will have to take this to the Minister, and I’m sure there will be things I haven’t considered, but this is truly exciting. I will also want our scientists to look your proposal over and make sure it fits into our plan. I’ll want you to meet with Tanya Demechev so she can show you what we’ve been doing. Her research may be able to provide a baseline in several locations around the island. It isn’t quite as comprehensive as what you’re suggesting, but I’m sure it will be useful. ”

“I understand completely,” Jay said standing and handing Travers a written copy of the proposal. “I look forward to hearing from you after you have had a chance to talk this over with the Minister and your staff. I’m sure Miss Demechev’s research will be useful as a starting point for what I propose to do.”

Jay left the director’s office smiling. Things were going his way.

CHAPTER 3

“Keep Cayman Pure!”

“Make Cayman Green!”

“Not about money, about the environment!”

A small group of protesters marched in a circle around a young man on a bullhorn in front of the Department of the Environment as Jay walked past. *When will these simpletons ever learn? That’s not the way to get things done. Money is the key to everything*, he thought as he stepped around them.

The young man in the middle of the circle continued to bark out his chants. He was just over six feet tall with a barrel chest, brown curly hair and fair skin. His accent belied his American roots. He was clearly the organizer of the protest. His marchers represented a mixture of young men and women, white and black, who appeared to be both Caymanian and from outside as well.

“We need to stop the destruction of coral reefs and the environment for the sake of greed and the convenience of tourists,” the young man shouted while his marchers waved their signs and marched in a circle. “Grand Cayman can be a shining beacon for the world to see. Not just a playground for the rich and famous!”

“Mister, do you hear me? Don’t buy into the stories they tell you!” the young man shouted at two men crossing the street. “We need to focus on the island’s environment!”

It just so happened the two men crossing the street were Mike and Kelly. Mike paused to listen to the young man for a minute. It was the morning after Mike’s arrival, and they were headed out to make a dive.

“What’re you doing, Mike?” Kelly asked.

“Oh, it’s the journalist in me. I can’t pass up a good protest,” Mike said with a grin. “I’ve covered them all over the world.”

“This one isn’t likely to change the government or overthrow any dictators,” Kelly said, gesturing to the small group. “Come on. We need to take care of business and then meet Tanya. She’s organizing the dive today on her research site and you know she wants to share it with you, too.”

“You’d be surprised what a small group can accomplish when it sets its mind to it,” the protest group’s leader said, approaching Mike and Kelly before Mike got a chance to respond to his friend. “You two don’t seem like the average cruise ship tourists to me.”

“What makes you say that?” Mike asked, curious at the young man’s approach.

“Well, first, the tourists don’t make it this far into town. They only have a few hours on land so they barely make it off of Harbour Drive or they’re off on a whirlwind excursion somewhere. You two are walking with a purpose, but not in a hurry.”

“Impressive,” Mike said. “Go on.”

“You’re both dressed for the island.” The protester looked the men up and down. Both Mike and Kelly were wearing sandals, shorts and, polo shirts. “But you aren’t wearing cheesy t-shirts.”

“Not bad, kid,” Kelly said. “You pay attention.”

“It’s my job,” the protester said, offering his hand. “I’m Bill. Bill Gardner.”

“You’re obviously an American. What’re you doing down here?” Mike was genuinely curious.

“Trying to save the coral reefs. This place is ground zero for economic environmental devastation. We need to do anything we can to stop it,” Bill said. “I’m here for a few weeks to shake some things up and see what I can accomplish.”

“Believe it or not, some of us on the island are doing what we can to keep the ‘economic environmental devastation’ to a minimum,” Kelly said, giving those three words air quotes with his fingers.

“I get that you’re working to keep things from getting too bad,” Bill said. “But I want to turn back the clock and make it better. The banking industry on this island controls the Department of the Environment. It’s all tied together. If they won’t listen to us about saving the environment, we have to put a strangle hold on the economics and tourism until they do.”

“You planning to do that with your huge protest here?” Kelly asked. He had seen more than his fair share of college kids on Spring Break coming down to party and pretend to be activists. He wasn’t buying Bill’s spiel.

“This’s just to let them know we’re watching. I have other plans already in the works,” Bill said matter-of-factly.

“Where are you from?” Mike asked, changing the angle of the questioning. He was a little alarmed at what the young man just said, but didn’t want to press it too hard.

“West Virginia,” Bill said, turning to face Mike, his attitude obvious. “And please don’t tell me you know someone in Richmond.”

“That’s funny, Bill. And don’t worry, I know where West Virginia is. It’s my home, too. I grew up there and went to Marshall University,” Mike said.

“You’re kidding! I just graduated from Marshall,” Bill said, his demeanor changing instantly. His superior tone and stance relaxed. “Hey, wait a minute, I recognize you. You were on campus recently. You were

involved in that big mess with the anthropology department and the Adena burial mound. It was in all the papers. I think I even saw you on campus once or twice afterward. Your name is Mike, right?”

“Yep, that was me,” Mike agreed. “I stayed around and did a couple of guest lectures in the school of journalism.”

“Man, it’s a small world,” Bill said, looking back over his shoulder at his small group of protesters. “Well, look guys, you aren’t the people I’m here to influence, and it seems like my people are losing focus when I’m not there to cheer them on. I need to get back to it.”

“Do what you have to do, Bill. Just stay out of trouble,” Mike said, grinning. “Oh, and Go Herd!”

“Go Herd, Mike! See you around.” Bill trotted back to his group and got them moving again.

“These kids come here with their ideals, but they don’t have any idea what it takes to make the world go around,” Kelly said.

“I know, but remember when we used to be that idealistic? We were going to save the world before lunch and still have time for the parties,” Mike agreed.

“I’m still trying to save the world, mostly because of Tanya. If it weren’t for her, I’ll admit I would be focused on running the business and trying to live my life,” Kelly said. “Not nearly as many parties as there used to be.”

“You got that right.”

“And speaking of Tanya, we have to get a move on. We have to reserve those chairs and tables for the party and then she really wants to show you her latest project.”

“Good point. The last thing we want to do is make her upset this week,” Mike said, laughing at his friend. They began walking a little faster toward their destination. Tanya was a caring person, but she also had a bit of a temper.

“That kid said he recognized you from some story? I thought you were supposed to be writing the stories, not making them,” Kelly said as they crossed the street.

“Ever since that mess here 10 years ago, it seems like I’ve been more and more involved in the stories I’ve been sent to cover,” Mike said with a grin as they walked away.

CHAPTER 4

The last time Mike had been on Grand Cayman, a dive with Tanya had tipped Mike off to the actions of a greedy developer who was tearing up sections of the coral reef surrounding the island in search of a shipwreck full of treasure. At the time, Tanya was an independent researcher who had a small project for the Department of the Environment. The developer found out about Tanya's discovery and torched her lab, destroying all of her records. Once it was all over, however, Tanya was tasked with coordinating the underwater conservation efforts around all three Cayman Islands: Grand Cayman, Little Cayman, and Cayman Brac. That series of events had been a terrible time for Mike, Kelly, and Tanya. Kelly almost lost his life, but like many challenges, with some teamwork and effort, it had worked out well for all three of them in the end.

Today's dive was similar to Tanya's earlier projects. They were completing surveys to check the status of the coral growth, taking photographs and measuring new growth. This time, they would be diving right in the middle of the main harbor in George Town to see the progress the island had made restoring the coral reefs in that heavily trafficked area.

Tanya was standing on the stern of a dive boat, staring at a clipboard and impatiently making notes, when Mike and Kelly came trotting up to the end of the dock. They had loaded their gear on the boat earlier and agreed with Tanya that they would meet her for the dive after their business was done.

"It's about time. You're late," Tanya said, looking directly at Kelly. She was smiling, but there was an edge to her voice.

"Sorry, babe," Kelly said, giving his wife a hug and a kiss. "It's all Mike's fault."

With that, Kelly let go of his wife and quickly moved to the side to talk to the boat's captain. As soon as Mike's feet were on board, the crew began throwing off lines to move the boat away from the dock.

"What am I going to do with you two?" Tanya asked Mike. "You can't even show up for the boat on time."

"Well, ummm, you see it's..." Mike stumbled until he looked Tanya in the eyes and realized she was still smiling, but this time the edge was gone.

“Oh, Michael, it is okay. It is so good to see you two together again,” she said and hugged Mike. “Pashli,” Tanya said in Russian, all business again. “Let’s go!” She turned and left Mike standing by himself.

Tanya had three two-man teams of divers on board. Four, if you counted Mike and Kelly, although they were more sightseers than scientists. An avid underwater photographer since his days as a photo pro on the island, Mike had brought his camera housing along on this trip. Whenever he could, Mike still liked to get in the water and do some diving. He often planned an extra day on a trip, when he could afford the time, to make a dive or two, although the extra luggage required for the housing for his digital camera was a burden. The last time Mike dived with Tanya in Cayman, she had coerced him into bringing his camera along for a possible magazine story on her work. This time, she hadn’t said a word about any publicity. But Mike knew she wouldn’t mind if he shared his photos with her.

The boat captain took them just a few minutes ride into the harbor. The day before, when Mike arrived, there hadn’t been any cruise ships in the harbor. Today, two gleaming white ships sat just offshore, delivering their passengers to the shops along the waterfront with ferry boats. Mike noted a third cruise ship was approaching the island, as well. Modern cruise ships were massive, holding thousands of passengers and nearly as many crew members. They were essentially floating cities and were larger than World War II battleships.

The purpose of this dive was to look at the effects the massive ships had on the reefs in the harbor area. They were also assessing the improvements made by rules the Department of the Environment had put into place. As they geared up for the dive, Mike noted Tanya wasn’t getting ready.

“Tanya, aren’t you joining us, today?”

“No. You and Kelly enjoy this dive. I’m going to stay topside and coordinate the real working divers,” Tanya said. “This is the curse of being in charge. I don’t get to dive as much as I used to.”

“Don’t I know that,” Kelly said, shaking his head and checking over his gear. “I don’t get in the water nearly as much as I’d like. But since you’re here, I get an excuse to play!”

“Glad I could serve some purpose,” Mike said with a laugh.

“Of course. I don’t know how long it’s been since you’ve been in the water. I need an experienced instructor to watch you. And I can’t spare any of my people,” Tanya said.

“Is she kidding?” Mike asked, turning to look at Kelly.

“Honestly, there are times I have no idea. And I’ve been married to her for ten years. Come on, let’s get in the water before she decides we need to be more productive on this dive.”

Mike and Kelly stood and moved to the stern of the dive boat. They pulled their dive fins on their feet at the swim step and did a final check of their gear. Just before Mike stepped off the boat, he heard a high pitched whining sound over his head. He glanced up and saw a small drone coming out across the water. He shook his head. The things were everywhere anymore. Everyone was getting into the act.

Mike took his giant stride out into the water. After a quick signal to the boat's divemaster that they were okay, the dive buddies turned and descended to the reef 20 feet below them.

Mike smiled as the warm Caribbean water washed over his head. He felt totally at ease taking a breath from his regulator. He equalized his ears to the increasing pressure and allowed himself to sink slowly toward the reef. It opened up in front of him, an explosion of color and small reef fish. Mike could see brain coral, staghorn, and elkhorn coral and even some fire coral at a quick glance.

Taking a closer look, Mike realized everything wasn't perfect, however. The reef inside the harbor had taken a beating over the years as boats indiscriminately dropped anchors or large ships brushed against corals as they made their way in, either from negligence or from faulty and outdated charts. Accidental discharges from visiting vessels and storm water runoff had clouded the water as well, reducing the sunlight that fed the coral.

The diveable reefs just outside the harbor had seen better days as well. Visiting cruise ship passengers often got off the boats, took a short ride to the closest dive shop that catered to cruise ship passengers, and got right back on a smaller boat. They never went more than a half mile from their cruise ship before they were underwater. That much diving from that many divers led to its own pressure. Errant fin kicks from rusty, inexperienced divers, hand touches and other wear and tear made it difficult for the coral to thrive.

Realizing the problem, and the threat to Grand Cayman's survival as a tourist destination, the Department of the Environment enacted rules restricting the use of some reefs to relieve that pressure and created a system to rotate dive sites between dive operators all at Tanya's suggestion. Her researchers were documenting the recovery they were seeing for a report on this pilot project.

While the reefs didn't look "virgin" by any stretch of the imagination, Mike could see signs of new growth and recovery. That made him smile. His friends were doing some good.

Mike was content to follow Kelly on the dive. It had been a while since he had dived this area and he knew Kelly would show him the best spots. Mike had his camera with him, his digital SLR camera, in a specially made housing that would allow him to take it anywhere he wanted. And deeper than he wanted to go. And really, he was simply taking photos because he wanted to. He wasn't working. He wouldn't know what to do with his hands if he weren't shooting.

Kelly led them at an easy pace, allowing Mike to pause and take photos and explore as he wanted. The area they were diving was known for coral swim-throughs and Kelly led Mike to several of them. Mike was certified as a cave diver so being in tight spaces with a roof over his head wasn't new for him. Still, it gave him a moment's pause when Kelly led him into a long, narrow tube underneath and through the coral. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Small openings in the reef above them allowed light into the swim-through, keeping it from being completely dark, but those sky lights were much too small for a diver to fit through.

Before they began the dive, Kelly told Mike that he planned to take him through a special swim-through that they didn't share with visiting tourist divers. They might take tourists through swim-throughs that traveled for 15 or 20 feet, short enough for the diver to see the other end, but that was all. This part of the dive was something the dive pros on the island kept to themselves.

When exploring an underground cave, divers tie off a line behind them so they could find their way back out. More than one diver paid the ultimate price for not doing so. In a coral swim-through, there was no turning around. You simply followed it to the other end... even if you couldn't see it.

Once Mike's eyes adjusted, and he turned on his external flash units to light up the swim-through properly, Mike began photographing the coral tube. It wasn't as colorful as the coral outside, since the sunlight was dramatically reduced, but the formations inside were in better shape. There were larger reef fish and soft corals as well.

Mike's exhaled breaths pooled on the roof of the swim-through as he swam along, looking like mercury wiggling above his head, disturbed by even the slightest ripples in the water. The pathway was narrow, making them swim single-file.

Mike noticed the light growing dimmer in front of Kelly. They had reached a section devoid of skylights. Kelly turned abruptly to his left, following the path laid out through the ancient bones of the dead coral in front of them. Mike lost sight of him for a moment as he approached the elbow in the tunnel. For a moment, Mike was alone.

Making the turn, Mike came face to face with a prehistoric creature. A Goliath grouper sat calmly in Mike's way, not blinking and barely moving in the current-less tunnel. In spite of his experience and knowledge, in spite of himself, Mike startled at the sight. The massive fish's gray-green scales were rough and thick and covered with dark black spots and dark green patches. It had huge lips lining its mouth that stayed ever-so-slightly open and its large eyes were set back on either side of its face. The fish's body was built like a triangle, wider at the bottom and narrow at the top with two pectoral fins that barely budged to keep the Goliath in position.

That's an ancient one, Mike thought as he got his breathing back under control. *Must go 1,000 pounds.* Mike could almost hear Kelly laughing ahead of him. Grouper tend to hang out in the same place and enjoy their solitude. Mike was sure Kelly knew the enormous fish would be hanging out in the tunnel. His only satisfaction was knowing the grouper was probably as unhappy at seeing Mike, and Kelly before him, as Mike was with running into him in a blind, dark alley.

Good thing they don't bite.

Ever the photographer, Mike paused for a few minutes to photograph the gentle giant in front of him. The fish barely acknowledged him as Mike moved in close to fill the frame with the animal. When he was done, Mike moved to the side of the narrow passageway and watched the Goliath slowly back into a small alcove in the coral. Mike made his way past and could see light up ahead. The grouper must have been

blocking the light at the end of the tunnel. Mike saw the silhouette of a diver at the entrance and knew Kelly was waiting for him. When Mike got close enough, he could see the laughter in his old friend's eyes. Kelly gestured to the camera and signaled like he knew Mike would want to photograph the Goliath grouper. Mike smiled back and gestured toward his friend, in a way that left no doubt of his feelings about the gag Kelly played on him.

They were only in the tunnel for a few minutes, but Mike instantly felt better coming back out into the light. In his years of diving, he had spent hours underwater in caves, but the feeling was the same regardless. There was always a vague sense of relief when he could see the sun again and knew he could make a direct ascent to the surface. That made the shadow that passed over the two divers that much more disconcerting. They looked up as one and saw what obscured the sun. A massive cruise ship, the one they saw from the distance approaching the harbor, had arrived. Where they hovered, less than 20 feet underwater, they felt like they could almost touch the hull of the massive ship, its gray anti-fouling paint clean below the surface. The ship came to a stop, like it had reached its final destination.

Mike looked at Kelly and realized something was wrong. Behind the mask and regulator mostly obscuring his face, Mike could tell Kelly was angry, but he didn't know why. Kelly gave Mike the signal that they needed to move. They began swimming in the same general direction as the massive ship, heading back toward their dive boat. Kelly took off swimming. Mike did his best to follow, but the large camera in his hands made that a little more difficult.

CHAPTER 5

Tanya was deep in her reports, sitting on the swaying boat and feeling mildly nauseous. A swaying boat at anchor made her feel that way, especially when she was looking down and trying to read. The divers were bringing her consistent numbers and their efforts really seemed to be paying off. She just had to figure out the best way to present it to the Department of the Environment so they continued to support her work and spread their efforts to more dive sites around the island. They had told her if she was able to fix things, or at least improve them, in the harbor, she could improve things anywhere.

Fish populations were up. Coral growth and regrowth were up. There was a greater diversity of coral and fish species, too. Not just more numbers of a few fish, but more types of fish. They still had to figure out the best way to deal with the invasive lionfish, but the lionfish rodeos seemed to be keeping them at bay for now. Several restaurants on the island had added lionfish entrees to their menus and the local divers and fishermen were doing their best to keep the eateries supplied. That was the one case where Tanya agreed, and fully supported, overfishing. “Eat ‘em to beat ‘em” was a motto crossing the Caribbean.

Tanya *felt* something coming up behind her before she saw it. She turned to see a massive cruise ship approaching the harbor. But it was out of position. The ship needed to be 100 yards to its port—the north. It was too far to the south and right on top of the coral reef they were tracking. A feeling of dread came over Tanya. It was right where Mike and Kelly were diving, too.

The radio. Tanya sprinted for the boat’s pilot house. The captain had been dozing in the sun, waiting on the divers to return and was startled to see Tanya come flying up and more startled to see the massive white hull looming in front of him.

“We have to pull the anchor and move!” the boat captain shouted at Tanya. “Dat ting gonna run us down!”

“We can’t move, Biko. We still have divers in the water. Send out the recall. Get them up here, now!” Tanya barked. “I’m gonna call that captain and tell him he’s in the wrong spot.”

Biko, the boat captain, knew Tanya was right and ran to the diveboat’s stern to activate the diver recall system. The boat had an underwater buzzer that gave off a high-pitched squeal when activated. The divers

had long-since been briefed to surface and return to the boat when they heard that noise. It could only mean there was a problem. Tanya grabbed the VHF radio and tuned it to the frequency she knew the harbormaster used to guide cruise ships into position.

“*Island Paradise, Island Paradise, this is the Bubble Blower,*” Tanya said, identifying the ship she was calling followed by the boat she was calling from. The name was written on the massive ship’s bow towering above her. “*Island Paradise, you are out of position. There are divers in the water beneath you and you are on top of protected coral reef. Repeat. You are out of position, Island Paradise. This is an emergency!*”

“*Bubble Blower, this is a restricted frequency. You do not have authorization to broadcast here,*” the harbor master replied immediately. “I show the ship is in perfect position, right where it should be.”

“Rex, it’s Tanya. That ship is in the wrong spot, and I have divers in the water right below it. You know I’m out here. I told you I was coming out an hour ago. I’m sitting right where I always am. If you’re on that ship, look down!”

“Tanya, I don’t know why you are trying to cause trouble today, but I’m going to order you off this channel once and for all. You do not have authorization to be on here. Once this is done, I’ll order an investigation into your actions today. Now clear this channel!”

Tanya slammed the radio microphone down in frustration and turned to the boat captain.

“Is there any chance we’re in the wrong position?”

“None, ma’am,” Biko replied over his shoulder as he scanned the water for the returning divers. “We’re tied off on the only mooring ball on this site. The same one we use every time.”

Two divers broke the surface just behind the boat. They started to ask what the problem was, but immediately figured it out when they saw the cruise ship. Two more teams of research divers in the water and Mike and Kelly were still unaccounted for.

Mike stared upward in horror as the cruise ship’s anchor and chain began crashing into water. They were directly beneath it. He looked around at Kelly and saw his friend gesture frantically for him to follow and then Kelly began swimming as hard as he could. Mike took off. He doubted he could outrun the falling steel, but he wasn’t one to give up either.

A roaring sound filled Mike’s ears. He glanced backward without meaning to, his body reacting to the sound. When he looked back Kelly was gone.

Mike began swimming again as hard as he could, racing against the inevitable.

Where did Kelly go?

And then he saw bubbles coming from an opening in the reef below him. Back into the coral swim-through. The skylight opening was just big enough, but it was going to be close. Mike pushed his camera

ahead of him and tried to make himself as streamlined as possible as he dove for the opening. He felt the gloom surround him as he made a final push forward, the adrenaline rushing through his body urging him forward.

And then it hit. The massive anchor chain dropped onto the coral with the force of a bomb blast. The water transmitted the energy of the anchor's collision with the reef. Mike tumbled in the water as everything grew suddenly dark. He was turned upside down and slammed against the jagged coral. Debris fell all around him. His mask was knocked from his face and he lost his regulator.

Mike was in trouble.

"Island Paradise! You just dropped anchor on my divers and a reef. What are you doing?" Tanya screamed into the VHF radio microphone. "Are you insane? I've got people in the water!"

The force of the anchor chain hitting the water rocked the small dive boat, throwing Tanya, Captain Biko and the team of divers that had made it on board to the deck. As soon as she climbed back to her feet, she was back on the radio. She switched the radio to Channel 16, the emergency channel.

"All vessels, all vessels. MayDay, MayDay MayDay! We have an emergency. The cruise ship *Island Paradise* just dropped anchor on divers in the water. I need help. Six divers are missing. There may be injuries. Please respond!"

"Miss Tanya, the divers are surfacing. I've got two buddy teams on the surface," Biko called out. He was pointing to the two groups of divers and scanning the surface for the third team.

"Who is it? Doesn't matter. Get them on board. And keep an eye out for the last group," Tanya said as she raced for the boat's stern, to help the divers on board. She quickly realized who was on the surface. It was her two teams of science divers. Her people were safe. But that left Kelly and Mike still down there.

"I need help!" one diver called out while he towed his partner to the boat. "Kim's unconscious!"

Without hesitation, Tanya grabbed a rescue float and dove into the water headfirst. She was there in mere moments and grabbed the stricken diver. With the strong kicks of an experienced swimmer she began towing the young woman to the boat, letting the other diver care for himself. As she swam, she checked the diver's breathing and shouted at her to see if she was able to respond at all.

"Kim, Kim! Are you still with me? Come on, Kim, wake up!" she yelled to the girl, just inches from her face.

As they reached the swim step of the boat, Kim began to stir. Tanya handed the girl off to the boat captain and the other divers on board and began helping the diver's buddy out of his gear.

"Phil, what happened?" she asked.

“We heard the recall alarm and started heading back. And then we heard the anchor falling. It was like a wall of water knocked us over and slammed us against the reef. I didn’t realize Kim was out until I started to swim for the surface and she didn't follow. I grabbed her and brought her up.”

“You did good, Phil. You probably saved her life,” Tanya said, treading water at the back of the boat. “Did you see Kelly? Or Mike?”

“Not at all. No idea where they went.”

“Give me your mask,” Tanya ordered the young man. “I’m going to see if I can find them.”

Knowing the others on board would take care of the injured diver and bring everyone on board, she had time to think about her husband and friend.

Tanya hadn’t paused to put on fins so she couldn’t swim down very far, but fear and worry allowed her to swim down 10 feet to look around. Visibility was bad as the anchor and chain kicked up sand, tore coral loose, and threw everything every which way. She surfaced quickly.

“Any sign of them?” Tanya called out to the divers on the boat.

“Nothing yet, Tanya.”

The first dive boat to respond to Tanya’s Mayday call over the radio slowed as it approached the scene. The boat and crew was from *Off The Wall Divers*, a different dive shop from the one she and Kelly owned. In an emergency none of that mattered. All the divers on the island knew each other and most had worked together at one time or another. If not, they had partied together. They were a community and were there to help each other out if one was in trouble. That was what it meant to be a Cayman cowboy. They looked out for each other.

Blind and without any air, it took Mike a moment to pull himself together. Then his training kicked in and he reached out for his regulator. It was still attached, so it couldn’t go far away. He quickly found the second stage mouthpiece and put it in his mouth. With the last bit of air in his lungs he blew out the water and then took a cautious breath in. Air never tasted sweeter, even the dried and filtered air from a scuba tank, than when you were deprived of it.

Mike looked around. Without his mask, everything was blurry. He could only see shapes, but he could see light filtering down from the broken coral above him.

Now where did my mask run off to? He’d had it until he was slammed against the wall. He reached up and touched his face. It was tender and he thought he could see some blood in the water. *That's gonna leave a mark.*

Searching around him with his hands, he found his mask below him and shook it in the water to clear the debris from it. He quickly placed it against his face and pulled the strap in place, exhaling through his nose to clear the water from in front of his eyes. The lens in front of one of his eyes was cracked, but it held and he

could see. Through the gloom and mayhem surrounding him he took stock of his situation. The skylight opening he had just come through was blocked. He thought he could make out part of the anchor chain in the rubble.

That's about as close as it gets. Time to find Kelly and get out of here.

"Tanya, I heard Kelly say something about showing Mike the 'swim-through,'" Biko called to Tanya who was still treading water.

"Jon," Tanya yelled to the divemaster from *Off The Wall Divers*. "Kelly and Mike might be stuck in the swim-through. Do you know it? From the looks of it, the anchor chain dropped right on top of that area."

"We'll get 'em, Tanya. Kelly still owes me money," Jon said with a smile that didn't make it to his eyes. "I'll be underwater in 30 seconds."

Jon Rusho and Higgy Higginbottom grabbed their gear as they jumped in the water, settling straps into place as they fell. They didn't hesitate or resurface. As soon as they hit the water, they began swimming for the bottom, clearing water from their masks as they kicked.

Mike looked around him. A war photographer, he'd been in war zones and seen bombed out buildings before. This reminded him of every one of those times. Except, this was the first time he combined that experience with being underwater. He was in a small "room" in the tunnel, but the hole he had bolted through was gone. Rock and steel lay over his head. To his left, there was rubble and it looked like the tunnel had collapsed. To his right, things still seemed to be stable.

The question in his mind, though, was *Where is Kelly?* If his friend was on the other side of that pile of rubble to his left, or worse underneath it, he couldn't just leave him. And then again, his air supply was limited. He couldn't stay down forever.

They had been nearing the end of their dive, and it had been a relatively shallow one, so he still had air, but there were still physical limits. Mike checked his pressure gauge. He had 1000 PSI in his tank. At that depth, he could probably last another 20 minutes or so. *Twenty minutes to find Kelly and swim out of this mess. Not a lot of time.*

Mike paused for a moment and stared at the rubble pile looking for any sign of bubbles rising through the rock that might signal Kelly was buried underneath. *If Kelly isn't breathing anymore...* he thought. Mike tried to be still and slow his own breathing. It was dark, but his eyes were slowly adjusting to the dim light.

Okay, time to get out of here. Kelly is probably on the surface waiting for me.

As Mike turned to swim away from the rubble pile and out the other end of the tunnel, he hoped, he was startled to see a diver swimming toward him out of the darkness. Kelly.

Mike smiled for a moment, relieved his friend was alive. Until he saw the look on Kelly's face. Kelly gave him the Okay handsignal and Mike replied with the same signal. Question asked and answered. Then Kelly gestured back down the tunnel and then moved his hand on a chopping motion, across the tunnel.

Blocked.

The two men were trapped in what was left of the swim-through. They had survived the falling anchor and chain, but now they might run out of air less than 30 feet underwater.

To find out what happens next, or what's really going on, get your copy of [Return to Cayman: Paradise Held Hostage](#) today! And remember, a portion of all sales will be donated to the Cayman Magic Reef Recovery effort. If you don't know what that is, read this article from [Scuba Diving Magazine](#).

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