

Freeport, Bahamas, 1992 –

It was a typical Bahamian summer's evening: temperature in the mid eighties, humidity close to ninety percent. There was no wind, not even enough to cause a flicker in the citronella candles on the balcony tables. A gentle swell on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, a mere ten feet below the balcony, lapped the rocks and the stilts upon which the restaurant was built.

Pier One was Grand Bahama's best-known seafood restaurant and the best tables were on the balcony. Out there, patrons got the best view of the nightly shark-feeding extravaganza.

A Carnival Lines cruise ship was tied up in the docks a couple of hundred yards away. It dwarfed everything in sight. The vessel was docked rear-end to the restaurant; displaying MIAMI as its port of registration.

Liz had put on a knee-length red cocktail dress. John had bought it for her on a business trip to Zurich, and she knew he loved to see her wearing it. She wanted to look her very best for him. She was missing him terribly and was desperately hoping he would turn up tonight. At least she knew now that he was still alive.

She was sitting at a table by the balcony rail with George and Jill Humphries when Sybille arrived. She was laughing at a joke George had just told them. George was doing his level best to keep her amused; he knew only too well how distressed she had been since John had gone missing. Her smile froze when she saw Sybille, although she was not at all surprised to see her, because she had long since figured out what the click on the line had meant when Jill had phoned her.

Sybille was with a tall, elegant man in a well-cut suit. His hair was dark and his skin was swarthy. To Liz, he looked South American, and knowing that Sybille was involved in trafficking drugs, that was probably a safe bet. Sybille was carrying a large manila envelope.

When Sybille had learned that Liz would be dining at Pier One, she had phoned Uwe and insisted on being given the next table. Uwe had protested that he was fully booked and did not have a table available, but Sybille was having none of it. And Uwe knew better than to argue with Sybille. He was now escorting her, and her companion, to their table.

Sybille stopped at Liz's table and smiled mockingly at her. "Well fancy meeting you here."

"Very funny," Liz said coldly.

Sybille laughed. She walked to her table. Uwe pulled out a chair for her.

She sat down and her escort followed suit. Uwe handed them menus and told Sybille he would send over the drinks waiter.

As Uwe walked back past Liz's table, Humphries caught his arm. "Uwe," he said quietly, "can you give us another table? I don't want Liz to have to sit so close to that Johanssen woman."

George Humphries was one of Uwe's best customers and under normal circumstances he would have been delighted to oblige, but he was always fully booked when a cruise ship was in port, and Sybille had taken his last table. As it was, in order to please Sybille, Uwe had had to disappoint another regular customer who had specifically asked for a table on the balcony to impress the lady he was dining with. He was now sitting in the main body of the restaurant with a face the length of a wet weekend. "I'm sorry, Mr Humphries," Uwe said. "I would if I could, but all my tables are taken."

"Don't worry about it, Uwe," Liz said. "I'll be fine here."

She patted Humphries' arm. "It's all right, George. She can't get up to any mischief with all these people around."

Liz was about to make a start on her lobster thermidor when Sybille tapped her on the shoulder. They were sitting back-to-back, about eighteen inches apart.

Liz frowned and turned. "What is it, Sybille?"

Sybille thrust the manila envelope at her. "Here, read it, and sign it."

Taken by surprise, Liz took the envelope. "What is it for heaven's sake?"

"The agreement."

"What agreement?"

“Come off it, Liz. You promised to sign an agreement, and here it is. So sign the goddamn thing.”

Liz tossed the agreement back. “In your dreams, Sybille.”

“You’ll sign it before the night’s out,” Sybille said. “And that’s a promise.”

DCI Johnson of the Freeport police hammered on the door of Sybille’s apartment. “Police! Open the door!” There was no reply. He hammered again. “Come on, Sybille. We know you’re in there.”

A woman of extremely generous proportions, and wearing a voluminous dressing gown and enormous pink curlers in her hair, had heard the commotion and had stepped out of the adjoining apartment. “Are you looking for that *Johanssen* woman?” The way she spat out Sybille’s name left no room for argument as to what she thought of Sybille.

“Yes, and we’re in a hurry,” Johnson snapped. “Any idea where she might be?”

“Try Pier One,” the woman said. “And when you catch up with the rude bitch, do me a favour and throw away the key.”

Dusk was rapidly approaching and the lights in the main body of the restaurant had been turned on. Fresh citronella candles, to provide both illumination and to keep the mosquitoes at bay, had been lit on the tables on the balcony.

Uwe walked out of the restaurant with a fish box full of frozen whitebait. He rested the box on the balcony rail immediately behind George Humphries, and, with his free hand, flicked a switch on a stanchion supporting the balcony roof. Powerful underwater searchlights cast a ghostly swathe of pale green light across a large area of water.

Affixed to the same stanchion was a ship’s bell, and Uwe rang it eight times. *Ding ding, ding ding, ding ding, ding ding*. The sound echoed across the water.

It was show time, and there was a mad scramble for the balcony rail as people rushed to watch the show. Those fortunate enough to be sitting at tables on the balcony, also got to their feet and hurried to the rail. They knew only too well that there would soon be such a crush that unless they got to the rail quickly, the only thing they would see would be other people’s backs.

Liz had seen it all before, but she never tired of this, and even though she was sitting next to the balcony rail, she pushed her chair back and jumped to her feet.

Sybille heard Liz move, and jumped to her feet. She stood to Liz’s right. Their shoulders were touching. There was nothing either of them could do about it, because there was now such a crush at the rail that they couldn’t have moved if they had tried.

Uwe grabbed a handful of the frozen fish in the box and tossed it over the rail. The sound of it splattering into the water below was heard by all and sundry, because there was now complete silence. He tossed over another handful, then another, then another. Then he up-ended the box, emptying the rest of its contents into the water. Then he turned to go for another box.

The crowd parted good-naturedly to let him through.

Down below, shoals of small fish darted out of the black water and into the circle of light and began to feed on the bait. It was a feeding frenzy, albeit not on big scale. Yet!

Uwe came back with another box and again the crowd parted to let him through. This time, he up-ended the box immediately, contents splattering into the water. The feeding frenzy paused, as the fish scattered, but before Uwe had come back with yet another box, they were back and gorging themselves again.

Again, Uwe upended the box, and again, they scattered.

Uwe put the box down against the balcony rail and stood there to watch. His food was good, excellent even, but this was the reason the punters came. He put on this show seven nights a week, fifty weeks of the year. The show would never be allowed in most civilised countries, because there was no net, nothing to prevent people falling over the rail.

There was movement from the edge of the circle of light and people craned their necks to see what it was. Barracuda were taking an interest. They began to emerge into the circle of light, cautiously. Soon there were a couple of dozen or more, some upwards of five feet long. They assumed positions around the edge of the circle of light, and lay motionless, like sharpened logs. Suddenly, as if on a signal from a leader, they barrelled in. Their prey scattered, but they were not fast enough, and the water began to roil as the ocean greyhounds began their evening feast.

A dorsal fin appeared.

A man’s voice yelled, “There’s one.”

A woman’s voice shouted, “There’s another one.”

Within a matter of minutes, upwards of a dozen sharks were circling. People at the rail were excitedly identifying reef sharks, tiger sharks, hammerheads and makos.

The flash photography was reminiscent of film stars arriving at a movie premier.

The sound of approaching police sirens could be heard faintly over the din.

The sharks circled faster and faster, and then launched themselves into the melee. Now, the hunters – the barracuda – were the hunted. There were shrieks of delight from the spectators as the water boiled and the sharks ripped into their prey, their mouths gaping and their teeth bloody.

The sirens were getting louder.

Sybille elbowed Liz in the ribs and thrust the agreement at her. “Here, sign the fucking thing.”

Liz snatched the agreement off her and tossed it over the rail. “I’m not signing anything, you stupid woman. He’s still alive.”

Momentarily unable to take on board what Liz had done, Sybille watched her precious agreement, a straightforward one-page document, floating serenely down towards the water. And then she reacted ...

Chapter 2

“John, this is positively the last time you drag me off to another country. If you don’t find what you’re looking for in the Bahamas, I’m going straight back to England, with, or without you. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, dear,” John said.

“Don’t *yes dear* me, John, I mean it. You know I don’t want to leave Florida. I love it here.”

“I know, Liz, and I’m sorry. I really am.”

“And why do you need to make more money, anyway. Surely, we have enough.”

“Liz, I’m fifty, and I need to do something useful with my life. And, anyway, I’m sure you’d rather live in the Bahamas than go back and suffer the English weather. I know I would.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the announcement that their flight to Freeport was now open for boarding.

John got the tickets and passports ready. “Do you want a window seat, if I can get you one?”

“John, I don’t care where I sit. Just get me a seat.”

John walked to the Comair check-in desk and handed over their documents. The porter followed him with their luggage.

The desk attendant flipped through their British passports and extracted the I-94 immigration forms. She frowned. “Do you realise you’re in the United States illegally? Your visas expired a month ago.”

John was well aware of it. That was one of the reasons they were leaving. He shifted uncomfortably.

The attendant turned to a colleague at the next desk. “Ted, these I-94s have expired. Do I need to inform immigration?”

Her colleague peered over his glasses at John – a tall, well-built man wearing a double-breasted blazer and button-down business shirt – and shook his head. “Nah, don’t think so. He doesn’t look like a criminal to me. And he’s leaving the country anyway.” He winked at John.

Comair, a city hopping feeder airline, used mostly small twin-engined propeller-driven aircraft, eliminating the need of jetways to board them, and stepping out of the air-conditioned terminal building on to the tarmac was like stepping into an oven. John took his blazer off and carried it over his arm.

At the aircraft, Liz put one foot on the steps, then stopped and looked around her. “I might never forgive you for taking me away from all this, John.”

The aircraft’s seating configuration was two seats on each side, with a narrow aisle between them. Liz, at five-foot-nothing, had no difficulty walking upright to their seats. John, at six-foot-one had to stoop. Their seats overlooked a wing. Liz took the window seat. She had legroom to spare. John had to put one leg in the aisle and the other one under the seat in front of her.

As they flew over the Florida coastline, a voice from across the aisle said, “You people English?”

John looked over.

The voice belonged to a shaven-headed man in his late twenties/early thirties. He was wearing a clean white T-shirt, faded jeans, and elaborately-tooled cowboy boots. He had a gold stud in his ear and a gold Rolex watch on his wrist. His head reminded John of an ostrich egg he had once seen on a business trip to South Africa.

“Yes, we are,” John said. “Is it that obvious?”

“Yeah, kind of. You guys going to Freeport to gamble?”

“No, we’re going to live there.”

“Jeez! I sure as hell wouldn’t want to live there,” the egg-head said. “No sirree.”

“Oh, and why would that be?” Liz said, leaning forward so she could get a better look at him.

“Because you can’t trust anybody. They’re all on the take.”

“Brilliant!” Liz muttered.

They were flying over the Outer Islands, and they stretched away into the distance. Each island was surrounded by pure white sand, and water which turned from aquamarine to emerald green as the depth increased.

“Look at that,” John said, pointing down. “Isn’t that beautiful?”

Liz ignored him.

At ninety miles in length, Grand Bahama was the largest of the archipelago nation's seven hundred islands. Both ends of it were visible as the plane began its initial descent, making it seem much smaller.

The plane made a soft landing and taxied to the airport's little pink and white terminal building, which would have fitted with room to spare on any one of the floors of Orlando International Airport's parking garage.

Three booths were manned in the immigration hall and John headed for the only officer wearing a smile; a large jolly-looking Bahamian woman who seemed intent on enjoying life, despite the job she had been saddled with.

John handed over their passports and immigration forms.

"What's the purpose of your visit?"

"I'm looking for a business to buy into," John said. "I've been trying to find something in Florida, but I haven't been able. I thought I might try my luck here."

"So you're planning to stay awhile."

"Forever if I have anything to do with it," Liz said grimly.

The immigration officer smiled. "Like that, is it?"

"I've told him that if he doesn't find what he's looking for here, I'm going back to England, with, or without him."

"Oh, dear." The immigration officer grinned at John. "Sounds like you're in BIG trouble. You folks bringing capital to the island?"

"It's already here," John said. "It's in an account in Nassau."

"We're always happy to welcome folks with capital."

The immigration officer banged a stamp in each of their passports. "I'm giving you six months. If you need more time, you can get an extension at the immigration office in town. Welcome to the Bahamas."

"It's a damn sight easier getting in here than it is getting into the US," John remarked, as they headed for the baggage-claim area.

"And what does that tell you?" Liz said.

The baggage-claim area was housed in a rusty, corrugated-iron building. A Turkish bath would have been less hot and humid.

Liz caught John looking at the way her hair was sticking to her face. She glared at him. "Don't say a word."

John called a porter with a trolley. They collected their luggage and breezed through customs.

The taxis lined up around the semi-circle forming the airport's drop-off and collection point were American cars circa the 1960s, the era of the Fonz and Happy Days from American TV way back when.

Their porter led them to an ancient Chevrolet, which seemed to have more rust than bodywork. It was leaning to the left, as if the suspension on the left-hand side had collapsed. The driver was huge. Not fat, just huge, and he handled their heavy suitcases as if they were filled with air. When he slammed the boot lid, a pile of rust dropped on to the road. John watched nervously as he slung their golf bags on the roof rack and lashed them down. "Are you sure they're safe up there?" he said.

"Ain't lost nuthin' yet," the big man said.

John had always used a rate of a dollar-a-bag, plus ten percent, when tipping porters in America and he was astounded when the porter asked him for twenty dollars. They had four suitcases and two golf bags, which, according to John's reckoning, amounted to less than ten dollars, but he couldn't be bothered standing around arguing with the man, so he gave him a twenty-dollar bill and climbed into the vehicle.

It was like sitting in an oven.

Liz was sitting on the back seat fanning herself with a Wall Street Journal she had found on the rear seat.

When the driver climbed into the vehicle, the suspension creaked and groaned. He slammed the door. He had to slam it again to get it to close properly.

"Where to?"

John gave him the address. "And would you mind putting the air-conditioning on. It's hard to breathe in here."

"Air con ain't worked in years," the driver said, lurching away from the curb. "Leave the windows down and you'll be fine."

Sitting on a seat that had long since given up trying to support the weight of a human being, John tried to engage Liz in conversation. She ignored him, so he tried the driver. "So what's happening on the island then?"

The driver shrugged his massive shoulders. "Crime's on the increase."

“What sort of crimes?” Liz said.

“Burglaries, rapes, that kind of thing. And some white folks got held up by a gang with Uzis in the Straw Market.”

“What are Uzis?” Liz enquired.

John pretended he hadn’t heard. Which wasn’t difficult considering the gale blowing through the windows.

“They sub-machine guns, ma’am,” the driver said.

“Are you listening, John?” Liz said.

They had made a visit to the island once before, to check it out. Liz hadn’t been happy about it then, but John had talked her into it, and he had rented a luxury duplex apartment in a gated development backing on to a beach on the south side of the island. The development was relatively new and only three blocks had been built so far. Only a handful of the apartments had been sold, so they were not expecting to have many neighbours.

When the taxi ground to a halt in front of their building, John noticed that the meter had not been turned on. “Why didn’t you turn the meter on?” he asked the driver.

“Meter ain’t worked in years,” came the laconic reply.

They all climbed out of the vehicle.

“So what’s the damage?” John asked.

“Seventy-five dollars.”

John couldn’t believe his ears. “*Seventy-five dollars?* For a twenty-minute ride? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No, man, I never kid about money.”

The driver dumped their golf bags and suitcases on the pavement, took the money, got back in the vehicle and drove off in a cloud of smoke.

John stood there fuming.

“Don’t say I didn’t tell you,” Liz said. “Welcome to the Bahamas.”

“Very funny,” John snorted.

“Don’t say you weren’t warned.”

John rounded on her, his eyes blazing. “And what the hell am I supposed to do, Liz? Get us back on the next flight back to Florida just because some bald-headed clown on a plane says something? Wait here, I’ll get the key.”

There was a hotel on the other side of the channel and the sound of children playing in the outdoor pool reassured her. John was taking his time, and she wandered round the back of the building.

Immediately behind the building, was an L-shaped swimming pool with a thatched-roofed bar. There was no one around and Liz walked to the edge of the pool and slipped off her shoes. She dipped her toe in the water, to test the temperature, then she carried her shoes down to the beach, a distance of no more than thirty yards, and stepped into the water. It was warm.

Two people were snorkelling along the side of a rocky causeway forming the entrance to a wide channel, which ran inland past the development.

The apartment comprised the first and second floor of the left-hand end of the building furthest from the channel and access was up a flight of concrete steps. They were about to make a start of carting everything up the steps when a sport fishing boat cruised by in the channel. An attractive young woman in a black bikini sat in the fishing chair on the lower deck, and a middle-aged man in shorts and a sailing cap stood at the controls on the tuna tower above her head. His thick white hair and white beard gave him the appearance of a retired naval officer. They waved and called hi.

John and Liz waved and called hi back.

The kitchen possessed most of the modern conveniences known to mankind, and, in truth, this was one of the reasons Liz had agreed to come; that, and the location. The kitchen led through into a dining area with a marble-topped table and six dining chairs, which then led through into a living area with modern Florida-style furniture. At the far end of the fifty-foot through-room were sliding glass doors leading on to a balcony, which overlooked the beach. On the balcony, which was the width of the living room, was a small dining set comprising a wrought-iron table and four wrought-iron chairs.

There were slatted windows along the long wall of the through room, to allow in sea breezes, and there were ceiling fans to keep the air moving. The apartment was fully air-conditioned.

A staircase from the living area afforded access to the upper floor. This floor contained two double bedrooms, one overlooking the parking area at the front of the building, and the other one, the master

bedroom, overlooking the beach. The master bedroom had its own balcony, and its own en-suite bathroom. There was a family bathroom, with bath and walk-in shower, midway between the two bedrooms.

They dumped everything on the living room floor, and Liz made coffee. They carried it out on to the balcony and sat at the wrought-iron table.

A yacht of sixty or seventy feet in length slid down the channel, heading for the ocean. It was running on its engine. The crew spotted them and waved, then got back to their task of unfurling the sails in preparation for their voyage to heaven-knows-where.

Liz had kicked off her shoes and she was sitting with her feet on the balcony rail.

And she was smiling.

The howl of a multi-engine powerboat hurtling down the channel woke John with a start in the early hours of the next morning. He leapt out of bed, fumbled with the lock on the sliding glass door, yanked the door open and leapt out on to the balcony.

There was nothing to see. There was no moon, ergo almost total darkness, and the boat was long gone. It must have been travelling at an enormous speed because the sound of its engines was rapidly receding. The waves it had created were slapping on the rocks forming the causeway.

