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Tony Groom's best-selling memoir *Diver* is available on-line at www.amazon.co.uk. Copies signed by the author may be had from: www.deep-sea-diving.com

IN2DEEP

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Author's Note

Dedicated to Harry and Snowy.

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The specific terrorist 'spectacular' described has not happened, but that does not mean it could not. My thanks are due to all those who have, by their actions, contributed to this story. They will know who they are, and would perhaps not thank me if I named them.

To 'Miles'

1

The alarm brought him quickly back to reality. Louder than usual, it had to be something large.

Very large.

The green light on the handle of the detector winked, confirming the find. It was definitely metal. The sound never failed to bring with it that buzz of excitement and intrigue. Utter silence for hours on end, then... that sound; the sound that meant it wasn't all a waste of time. If this was the right shipwreck, only one piece of proof was needed. He was looking at a shallow depression that had to be the bronze cannon.

Nick never had trouble with his conscience when recovering items like this. It wasn't stealing, it was retrieving. After all, this piece had been on the seabed for hundreds of years and if he didn't rescue it, who would? This was an area no one else would dive, it was too sensitive. He wasn't justifying his actions. It was lost, now it's found, simple. Nick struggled to keep his excitement down. He had a buyer who would pay a quarter of a million pounds for a Spanish bronze, 'Long Nine' cannon. Just a few more nights' work were required to retrieve it.

Nick's breathing started to tighten; the oxygen was running low. He reached down and gave a squirt of the pure O² from the emergency bottle into the counter-lung on his chest. Every diving regulation in the world said this was the time to stop, but Nick had reasons for ignoring the rules. Maybe a quarter of a million reasons. It was time to head up to the surface and come back the following night. It was four in the morning anyway.

Instead, he dug away with the trowel, working to expose that classic cannon shape.

Small fish darted in to snatch and search the sand and sediment as it drifted up around his headlamp. Even if it wasn't a cannon, it was a large lump of brass or bronze and was worth money. It wasn't exactly what he was looking for, as pirate booty would always be preferred. But there was something romantic about the history, the violence, the sheer beauty of these old weapons that collectors around the world couldn't resist. Then, something interrupted his dark, submersed world of absolute silence.

Nick flicked the ear-piece off and froze.

Holding his breath and standing motionless on the seabed, he listened.

There it was, in the background, the distant sound of an engine; the almost imperceptible murmur of an inboard diesel. This was something big: not big as in a big ship with slow ponderous revolutions or the oh-so-slow thump of a fishing vessel, but something with higher revs; a faster, more powerful craft. It was getting louder. That's why he always used a re-breather. No noise, no bubbles.

Shit! Time to move.

A quick clove-hitch around the cannon, then release the buoy, but not all the way up. It was made to sit three metres off the bottom, invisible from the surface, but there were ways to find it again.

The compass told Nick it was north to the anchor, hand-over-hand along the cable to the quick release. Keeping the mouth-piece clamped in his teeth, he took the diving set off, then clipped it to the anchor cable. He attached his tiny military metal detector to the diving set.

One final look around. Good. With one hand on the rope leading up, he knocked the quick release off with a rock. The rope and anchor cable slowly drifted apart. Taking a good breath of oxygen, he turned off the quarter-turn valve on the mouthpiece, making the diving set watertight, then spat it out. Nick moved slowly up

the rope to the surface, unflustered and breathing out all the way. Less than thirty seconds. Easy when you'd done it so many times.

Near the surface, the ghostly shape of his yacht loomed into focus above. He took in the strange, almost flat hull just abaft amidships and the two-furled propellers behind which hung the long rudders. She was fast and... unique.

Having anchored stern-to for this very reason, he released the rope and swam to the ladder. Up and onto *Orelia's* bathing platform at the rear and off came the face mask.

Turning out the headlamp and taking great care to stand on a towel, he snatched another from the pulpit rail. The radar repeater by the wheel revealed the offending blip. The collision alarm was sounding its rhythmic warning; it was set to ten miles. Whatever it was, was still two miles away to the South. Close, but enough time... just.

Slipping out of the fins and shorty wetsuit, he pulled up the boarding ladder and jumped naked into the cockpit. Then he hit three digits on the auto-pilot: 285 degrees. The gentle whine of the auto-helm kicked in. The wheel came alive, searching port and starboard, trying to keep the course but, as yet, *Orelia* wasn't making any way.

Nick pulled on the self-furling mainsail halyard. The large triangle of white sail magically appeared from the mainmast. A quick pull on the out-haul to set it tight, then steal a look at the radar. One and a half miles. Whatever it was, it wasn't hanging about. It was on a collision course with Nick's slow moving yacht. Maybe it was heading from the Moroccan coast to the Isla De Alboran. Unlikely, he decided, as the island was a military protected area.

It looked like those aboard the approaching craft knew he was there, so he reached down and switched on the sailing lights. He then jumped back onto the bathing platform and undid the anchor line that was streaming

out slowly astern. He clipped an old water container full of rocks to the wetsuit, mask and fins and lowered the lot gently over the side. It sank and was gone, about twenty metres north-west of the ditched anchor. *I might even get that one back*, he thought. There was now no evidence that anyone on board had been diving.

Picking up the towel, he jumped back in the cockpit. The vessel was a little over a mile away and Nick could see the port and starboard steaming lights bearing down on his position. *They have only just switched those on as well*, he thought. This was not looking good.

Orelia was beginning to pick up her course now that she had a little drive from the mainsail. A glance at the instruments told him there was only about five knots of north-easterly wind. He let the main sheet out a tad and she began to slip along. A quick pull on the roller-furling jib sheet and she was just touching two knots. The cockpit was dry enough, so he slipped below to pull on some shorts and a T-shirt. Nick had taken to shaving his head so that his wet hair couldn't give him away. Putting the towels into a pre-filled sink of water, he settled into the navigation seat and studied the chart. He looked at his watch and wrote 04:11 next to *Orelia's* present position, then drew a 'cocked hat' next to 03:10 and 02:10. To the casual observer, it would look like the yacht had just been on a normal passage.

Finally, it was off with the waterproof headlamp, drying it on the paper towel and hanging it up on its home, a cup hook by the radar screen. Everything on board must have a home, then you just had to pick it up, not look for it first. The foreign engine noise was getting louder. He did some quick calculations, ten or so minutes to cover the two miles; whoever it was, was making twelve to fifteen knots. He squashed his face and scrunched up his eyes with his fists to make it look as though he was just a tired mariner on a long passage.

Bump. Someone was alongside; Nick's cue to go up on deck. Looking through the porthole there was a glimpse of dark, wooden hull alongside. He switched on the

saloon light and went stumbling on deck looking sleepy, with just a shade of anger.

"What the...!" he shouted, until he saw the guns. Then his mood changed, hands raised, non hostile.

Two Moroccan customs men were on board, pointing their ancient, wooden-stock rifles at him. He could see the younger one had no magazine, and no bolt. So, this one was harmless. The other had a bolt, and was sporting a rusty bayonet. *Nice touch, he thought. The blood poisoning would probably kill you. He may have one up the spout as well.*

They were both sweating profusely and motioning him back down into the saloon. Nick just had time to glance over at the launch; it was old, tired and dark, with a dated fisherman's wheel-house. One thing was for certain, its speed didn't match its appearance. He led them down the companionway stairs; easy does it, no sudden movements. Once below, the boat rocked to starboard; was that another passenger boarding?

Nick looked up through the companionway. Someone used a dull torch to search around the cockpit and peer over the stern to the bathing platform. Then a naval officer of a sort came down into the cabin. Four gold rings on the shoulders, gold leaf on his cap. A bit over-kill for the skipper of a launch. He wore a side-arm in a leather pouch. Nick humoured them, played along. The launch revved its engine again. So, a fourth one had stayed on board. The yacht rocked as it motored away.

"What can I do for you, officer?"

Nothing. The man's eyes were everywhere, moving all around the cabin. He clocked the bottle of Johnnie Walker in its home in a recess above the saloon table; his eye lingered on it for a moment. Nick nodded at the bottle: "Would you and your men like a drink, sir?"

The tiniest inclination of the head, and Nick took it to mean yes. Seeking permission to move, he went over to the saloon table, reached into the well in the middle and brought out four plastic glasses.

He poured two generous measures and was about to pour the next one when the boss said "Two!" That made it clear. Only two would be indulging tonight; maybe his boys weren't old enough? Nick picked up the glasses and offered the biggest to the boss. He nodded, meaning, put it down there. Nick had a decent pull on his glass then placed it on the table.

The boss had four medal ribbons on his chest. Looking like an Admiral of the Fleet, his hands were behind his back like all good officers; his chin was slightly raised in a superior manner. He had the look of the desert about him, combined with that modern, more wealthy appearance and the golden skin colour; North African/Arab, Nick guessed. He was about 5ft 10ins, his hands were small and, if not exactly manicured, they had never done any labouring work. He had a thin and perfectly straight scar on his forehead above his right eye, like a knife wound, not an accident. Under his immaculately tailored uniform he was probably quite fit, a good shape to him if not exactly a muscle bosun. Nick realised the man was not as young as he first thought; he was difficult to age, maybe 35.

Over at the navigation table, his visitor turned on the flexible light and looked at the chart carefully; bending down close to it he examined *Orelia's* position, checking maybe, to see if someone might have made notes about where they were heading or what they were up to. *There's nothing for you there, mate*, Nick thought.

The officer opened the log book and studied the pencil shorthand for course made good, speed and wind. Turning his attention to the brass chart dividers he picked them up; instead of squeezing the top part to make them open, he pulled them apart as a kid would with a compass at school.

This guy's never been to sea, thought Nick. The officer then made a show of walking the dividers across the chart, but hadn't set them on the latitude scale next to *Orelia's* position. So what was he measuring? Nothing; this was all for show, for Nick and his boys to see. The

man nodded as if all was well, keeping the dividers in his hand as he proceeded with his tour. He picked up his whisky and downed it in one. He didn't flinch, and that was also for show.

"Passport." The man spoke in heavily-accented English.

"Oh, yes sir, of course, right away." Nick moved to the chart table and opened the drawer. Immediately, the officer's hand was on his arm, guiding him backwards out of the way. The man rummaged through the drawer although the passport was right on top. He had a quick look at the back pages, but Nick suspected he was looking for something more interesting, some sort of trophy. Perhaps he would settle for a bottle of J.W?

The intruder rummaged around inside the drawer and reached for a packet of unopened Marlboro. He looked over at Nick.

"Please, please help yourself."

The man opened the cigarettes, put one in his mouth and slipped the packet into his trouser pocket, along with the brass dividers.

That's two things he's managed to pilfer and he's only been on board a few minutes. From his top pocket, the officer pulled a Zippo and proceeded to light up. Nick decided to let his strict no-smoking rules go on this occasion.

The thief put the Zippo down on the chart table and continued his detailed study of the cabin. Lifting a cushion here, opening a drawer there, he looked into the sink full of washing and curled his lip up in distaste.

What or how much does he want, apart from what he can half-inch? Nick decided to try and open up communications and cut to the chase.

"Would you like a...?" A palm came up in the international sign for stop, shut up. Nick started to get peeved. How long was this imposter going to keep this up?

The man moved forward to the heads and shower. He switched on the light inside the tiny compartment and Nick could hear him rummaging around. Didn't these

people know about running on batteries? Nick took the opportunity to look at the two decidedly nervous guards; they hadn't taken their eyes off him. He smiled at Bayonet Brains, but got no reaction. If it got nasty, he'd be the one to watch. He had the eyes of a shark: soul-less black pits without a hint of humanity.

The younger one was a puppy, trying to look tough. His gapped, almost gawky teeth were permanently on show. Nick could break this one in a second, and the guard knew it, too. He could tell by the way Gappy kept a safe distance. Nick was fit and solid, built like a rugby player, with the scars showing all over his shining pate and on most parts of his body. He knew he looked lived-in. Nick smiled at the young man and he looked away. *Good*, he thought, *he's beaten already*.

The pretend Admiral made his way further forward searching and rummaging around. In the forward cabin, just above the anchor locker, he found the safe.

"Bring." Nick was encouraged forward. The boss signalled for the safe to be opened.

Nick shook his head, pleading, "Why, what have I done?"

The boss uttered his first recognisable sentence. "Open, Mr. Nick."

Nick opened the combination safe, but before he could put his hand in or step back his vision swum in confusing swirls. He collapsed to his knees. Up until then, there had been no warning of violence, no hint of trouble. Now his eyes were watering and he could feel something warm running down the back of his neck.

There was a loud exchange between Bayonet and the Admiral. Nick, slumped on his knees, could feel the anger rise in him as his vision started to clear. He tried to come to his feet, but stopped as the bayonet was pushed hard into his back. Had it not been so blunt it would have pierced his skin. All three were talking excitedly and the boss was pulling everything out of the safe.

Through the mist of his water-filled eyes Nick could see that the boss already had his old Navy Rolex on his wrist. In the meantime, Gappy was in the safe and had something in his hand. The boss whacked the guard's arm with his now-drawn pistol.

From his knees, Nick watched as the Admiral trousered the 1,560€ he knew the roll of money amounted to. He and the boss made eye contact, then Nick saw him nod towards Bayonet.

"Hey!" was as far as he got in protest. He heard as well as felt the thud of heavy rifle butt on the back of his head.

Nick lost all interest in proceedings as the floor raced up to meet him.

2

Nick drifted slowly into consciousness, then opened his eyes and tried to move. The pain was so intense he had to lie still again. White noise filled his head and hissed like an angry cobra. He focused on a fire extinguisher and slowly realised he was lying under the chart table. He remained in the recovery position, thinking about his situation. His ear was in something wet and sticky; the smell of blood was close. Something covered one of his eyes and it was damp. Things began to make sense again. Gradually the images and events replayed. The Admiral, his Rolex, the man with the bayoneted rifle; it must have been Bayonet Brains who'd hit him. And they'd taken his money.

Waves of nausea rose from deep inside. He tried to swallow, but there was no moisture in his mouth; it felt like it was stuffed with cotton wool. Taking slow and deep breaths, he lay still until the sickness abated. Looking along the deck, he saw his wrists were tied around the corner leg of the chart table. Water gurgled along the fibreglass hull like the sound of a free-flowing stream over rocks; that meant the boat was still under way. He had to get free, and soon. What time was it? The Bremont was gone from his wrist. How long had he been out? They couldn't have been gone that long as there was no daylight coming through the companion way.

They had used some old sail ties to secure him. He edged forward on his hip towards the knot he could see, then realised his ankles were also tied to the ladder down to the cabin. He could just get his teeth to work on

the granny knot. The tears came as he moved. A rest, then as the throb subsided he tried again. Soon, there was a loose bite in the knot and he undid the first half-hitch, then the next. He eased his wrists out, and was free of the table leg.

The next move proved to be a mistake when he tried to sit up. The excruciating squeeze behind his eyes was so intense he thought he would pass out again. He let out a loud, gut-wrenching animal yell to help him stay awake. His eyes felt like they were throbbing in time to his heartbeat, which was pumping away like a sprinter's legs. He cupped his hands to his face and felt the wet towel bound around his head. Hands red, red and wet, he lifted it off and was shocked to see the volume of blood. It was all over the cabin floor. Whoever had put the make-shift bandage round his head had saved his life.

Nick freed his feet and shuffled over to the galley on his backside for fear of standing and repeating the agonising stabbing sensation. Opening a drawer, he got out a new tea towel and wrapped it tightly around his head. Delicate exploration with his finger tips revealed a lump the size of a tennis ball. It wasn't so much the lump that hurt; it was more that his brain felt like it was pulsating.

With the tea towel tied on, he shuffled back to the companion ladder and contemplated getting to his feet. If he got this bit wrong and collapsed again he could be out for hours. *Orelia* could run aground, or worse, he could bleed to death. He swivelled round and swapped position from arse to knees, and had to wait again for the sickness and pain to recede. Steeling himself for what would be the considerable challenge of standing up, Nick grabbed the saloon ladder with both hands and tried to pull himself upright. His knees were wobbling as he was bent over in a half-crouched position, head bowed, like an old man leaning on two walking sticks. Nearly upright, with lights still flashing in his tightly-clenched eyes, he yelled: "JESUSSSS!"

Sheer bloody-mindedness had him grip the ladder and refuse to let go. He waited; the flashing lights started to diminish. His breath came in short, sharp urgent gasps. The back of his eyes now ached, his head felt as though there was an ocean of surf sloshing around inside. He decided to hold on and wait, frightened to open his eyes in case that unbearable sensation came back. The sickness seemed less when it was dark. Upright and hyper-ventilating and with his knuckles white with the effort of hanging on, he risked opening one eye. To his left he could see the radar screen above the chart table, but it was off. Above the navigation station the clock read 05:41.

One step at a time, up the ladder then into the cockpit. The wheel was still moving in small increments to keep the course. Gingerly stepping over the coaming he looked around; no near lights in the pitch dark. No sight of land ahead or any ships nearby, thank God. All that was visible were the four, white, quick flashes from astern, the lighthouse on the island of Alboran.

It looked as though they had not touched the autopilot and *Orelia* was still ghosting along on the same heading of 285 degrees. Next he moved to the helm and looked at the radar repeater, they had left it turned on. The 360 degree sweep revealed no ship echoes nearby. There was Isla de Alboran almost dead astern, right where it should be. With bloodied fingers he switched from ten to twenty-mile range: a few huge ships way out to starboard, nothing else. They'd gone.

On to the thirty miles range, and... *what was that?* A smaller blip at twenty-six miles, moving away towards the African coast, heading straight for a bigger ship. Soon the two contacts merged into one. If that was the boss and his mates, he had made a big error and headed west, the same direction *Orelia* had been sailing whilst he had been out of it. Had they gone south-east, or straight into the Moroccan coast, they would have been out of his radar range or lost forever in the scatter of the African coastline. If that was them, of course, and it was a big ask. Now he had just one big echo, but it was something.

Apart from that, the Med was pretty dead so early in the morning. He switched on his GPS and could now see exactly where he was. The echo sounder showed deep water and the breeze had dropped even more throughout the night.

He punched in 250 on the auto-helm. The self-furling main was now a godsend; he rolled it neatly away into the mainmast, then completely furled up the jib.

For some reason, it didn't seem to hurt so much with only one eye open.

He chastised himself aloud: "What a fucking state to get yourself in, Carter."

Nick checked that both throttles were in neutral, pushed the two start buttons for the main engines and listened to them cough into life. No time to let the diesels warm up.

A quick glance below to be sure his lifting keel was up, and he pushed the twin throttles to full ahead. The yacht dug her tail in and the white water churned up behind. She was the only forty-footer he knew that had twin, lightweight, turbo-diesels.

Orelia was a one off. Built by Macgregor yachts in California, she had performance under sail and engine. He opened the transom valve and just over a ton of sea water ballast poured from the hull. As the water emptied, the yacht grew lighter and the speed kept on climbing. He couldn't kid himself that it would make a pretty sight; a yacht was never going to look right motoring so fast. By definition it had to have a lot of weight down low so she could carry the sail area. She was working hard to reach ever increasing speeds. Twelve knots and the bow wave was huge; fourteen knots and it was like she was trying to drive herself under water, pushing out a massive wake.

Then, with the ballast emptied, the nose started to lift, very slowly as the flat hull amidships started to come into play. She laboured away until she climbed up onto the surface of the water. With less wetted area and less

drag, the engines were no longer struggling. The black smoke she was making faded.

Finally she was planing, skimming over the dark surface, and the shackles were off. The engine note eased and she bumped along on top of the near flat calm sea instead of through it. He had once had twenty-two knots out of her like this. Nick loved to see other yachties' faces when he passed them at this speed in a flat sea and no wind. The noise was doing his head no favours, though. He would also be eating up fuel at an alarming rate, and now he only had credit as a means of paying for it. He set George the auto-helm, and checked it could hold a steady course.

Nick adjusted the radar and narrowed the angle that the alarm would go off to just ahead of midships on both sides. Now if anything got in that area ahead of him, he would hear the high-pitch warning.

"If I ever get hold of those thieving..." he muttered, and stared into the darkness as his imagination acted out what he would do to the piratical trio.

For now, look after yourself, he thought. Checking the radar again and sure there was no craft or danger ahead, he went to patch himself up. He would never normally leave the helm going at such a speed and especially in the pitch black, but these were not normal times.

Water must come first. Lacking a saline drip, he needed lots and lots of fluid to start to replace the volume of blood he'd lost. He guessed his blood pressure was already low, hence the dizzy spells. Tentatively, he went down the steps to the galley, got a two-litre bottle of water and drank as if his life depended on it – which it did. He then shuffled over to the chart table and switched on the main radar screen, turned the alarm volume up to full and turned his sailing lights off.

"Darken ship please, Carter."

Next stop was the heads, where he caught sight of his reflection; it stunned him. One eye was puffed and swollen, his face was covered in varying stages of dried

and wet blood, and his shaved head had a few more battle scars.

“Bastards!” he said bitterly. Opening the cabinet, he took out the pain killers, and popped two, then another two.

Still in shorts he stood under the shower and turned it on. The cold was a real shock, but certainly livened the senses. Carefully un-wrapping the tea towel, he put his head under the flow. The water in the white shower tray turned red and for the first time his head no longer felt like it was on fire. The blood spiralling down the plughole reminded him of the shower scene from *Psycho*. Watching his reflection in the mirror, a semblance of the person he knew began to appear. Turning to try and see the back of his head, he could just see the huge lump; it had a deep, half moon shaped gash in the middle, but it didn’t appear to be bleeding badly now. The red blood cells were finally doing their bit and starting to clot.

“About bloody time,” he muttered.

Nick stared at his sorry, beaten reflection and spoke aloud again: “You’ve been robbed, son; I can’t believe you’ve allowed yourself to be mugged, and on your own boat. How did you let this happen?”

As he stood looking at his mirror image, a stark thought overwhelmed him. He froze and stared at himself. He was consumed with the sort of feeling that comes when you realise you’ve left your wallet on the train; the shiver they say you have when someone walks over your grave. That startling, horrible dawning, that something was seriously amiss.

Nick dropped his soap in the shower, and ran slipping and skidding in a cocktail of water and blood, forward to the safe. It was a big mistake. His head felt like someone was blowing up a balloon inside it. Grabbing both sides of the door to the forward cabin and with eyes screwed tight, he waited. The noise in his ears subsided. He opened his eyes and peered through the fog as his vision slowly cleared.

The safe was empty. On the floor, there was paperwork everywhere, with smatterings of blood on them. *Orelia's* owner documents, his yacht master certificate. Nothing else. His body tensed up.

Her pendant! It had definitely been in there. He looked at it almost every day. Now it was gone. Sod the money and the watch. Mariyah's pendant had been the most important thing on his boat, and maybe in his life.

Whatever happened to him, he would get it back.

3

When sailing the length of the Mediterranean from Cyprus to Alboran a few weeks earlier, Nick had worn the pendant every night whilst on watch. Sometimes he would catch himself tumbling it between his fingers, re-living some cherished moment. He had found it on a wreck dive seven years before in the Mediterranean. It was just after his Navy and North Sea escapades. He'd given it to her as an engagement present about a year before they got married, and she'd loved it.

Mari never went anywhere without it. He knew it was very old and probably worth a lot of money, but as soon as he met her, he knew it was for his girl.

The pendant also had a secret. Nick first suspected it opened not long after he'd found it in its near-perfect state. It seemed to have an almost indiscernible rattle. Maybe not even a rattle, an inner movement, a slight vibration when it was shaken. There were random wavy lines etched into the shell, but no apparent way that it opened. It had frustrated him for years.

In the end, he'd taken it to Musto, a street gold vendor come-jeweller he'd got on well with whilst working in Cyprus on an EOD job for some ex-Navy lads. Sometimes Nick would take on minor Explosive Ordnance Disposal jobs. This gave him the chance to catch up with the lads, to make some money, and, most importantly, to cadge more diving gear.

Whenever Nick was in town, he would sound out Musto by taking him little pieces of gold and jewellery he found on the dive site. Never once did Musto break Nick's

trust or disappoint with his workmanship. He was always amazed at the old boy's knowledge of antiquities, and the work he turned out with such ancient hand and pedal-driven tools.

Whenever Musto presented him with a finished piece and the final bill, they would barter for half an hour or so. Then Nick would give him roughly double what they'd settled on. In these sort of situations, some people paid only what they were asked and thought they had had a result. Nick's reasoning was different; if you find someone good, pay them well and keep them on your side.

He had already returned twice to Musto's and on both occasions the old jeweller had just shaken his head. On the last visit he had intended asking for the piece back. Maybe it was all in his mind. Maybe it didn't open. It had been three months since his last visit, but when he walked into the shack, Musto was beaming. Clearly, he had cracked it.

Musto summoned his petite wife to fetch the piece, and she came back carrying it on a blue velvet cushion as if she were delivering a crown to her king. But it was still in one piece. Nick's heart sank. Then Musto dismissed his wife and performed a little miracle. He opened it. Theatrically he shielded his movements with his delicate, almost feminine, jeweller's hands. Then he showed Nick the trick of it. It was brilliantly simple and yet unfathomable at the same time.

Nick then presented the piece and its secret to Mari. She eventually took to wearing it all the time, but at first took some persuading to even put it on.

"It's too nice to wear everyday."

"Right, I'll have it back then."

For a long time, Nick, Mariyah and Musto alone knew that it opened. But one other person had the total trust of the couple, and they would both enjoy the teasing of Smudge.

Mick Smith, or Smudge (as he was inevitably known in the Navy), was Nick's partner, his best buddy and his shipmate. Their trust in each other was total. They had

dived for mines and sat alongside 1000lb bombs during air raids together in the Falklands Conflict in 1982. Then they had found themselves working as a team again in the first Gulf war of 1990-1, where they were caught up in some pretty hairy mine clearance operations. Also, in the Navy, they had spent months living in cramped decompression chambers undertaking deep saturation dives. They knew each other's likes and dislikes, weaknesses and strengths. At one time they knew one another so well they could finish each other's sentences. Smudge stood a few inches taller than Nick at six foot one. He was tall and fit although Nick took great pleasure in calling him a lanky streak of piss.

Like Nick, Smudge was now out of the Navy - or officially anyway. It seemed to Nick that the only difference was that he no longer wore the uniform. Smudge now worked for the MoD in the secret back offices of Northwood in London. He was meant to put together naval procedure diving and mine warfare books, but Nick knew he spent most of his time scouring ancient charts and documents looking for virgin wrecks. It started out as a bit of a hobby but it was now how both of them made their fun-money.

Although Mariyah was the only person he would allow to call him 'Mickey,' he would make a pretence at not liking it, but secretly he would melt, especially when she used her high-pitched little-girly voice.

Both of them had been in love with Mariyah. If Nick was struggling to get some chart or sensitive information or equipment out of Smudge, her head would go to one side and she would flutter those huge dark eyes, saying, "Oh, Uncle Mickey - pleeease tell us, go on."

The time for the unveiling of the secret was not organised; it just happened. The three were sitting on the boat in Malta. They'd just had Christmas dinner and were wearing party hats made from old charts. They had also done some damage to a shipping order of cheap local plonk.

After twenty or so attempts, Smudge had reached the point where he was convinced it was one big wind-up, and that, what he called, *the mysterious gonad*, did not open. He had fiddled with it for two hours before announcing:

“That’s it. It doesn’t open. You’re winding me up.”

“How much?” asked Mariyah coyly.

“How much what?”

“How much do you bet I can open it?”

“You can’t open it because it doesn’t open.”

She smiled, “How much?”

Nick was too drunk to get involved, but was happy to sit and watch the two people closest to him go through their ritual. Mari looked over at Nick and, although no words were exchanged, he knew she wanted his blessing to open it for their closest buddy. Nick just nodded; they understood each other.

They finally settled on a bounty of £100. She was only allowed to shield her hands with the logbook, and he was not allowed to cheat by moving the book, or from his seat. If he broke these rules while she was doing her magic, he would forfeit £200. Smudge had proposed she have two minutes to get it open. Then he wanted his cash. They agreed, and shook on the deal. Nick had to be the judge and jury. Mariyah was smiling as Nick started the stopwatch.

“Go!”

Nick counted down the last five seconds. Mari was still looking serious and fiddling with the pendant behind the logbook.

With one second to go, she shouted, “Stop!”

Nick stopped the watch.

Smudge was jubilant, “See... see! I told you it was a wind-up. It doesn’t open. I knew it, I knew it.”

Mariyah let him enjoy his moment as he rolled about on the saloon settee. When he sat up, she lowered the logbook with a satisfied grin. There it was, lying on the table, not in two, but four pieces.

If that wasn't shocking enough for Smudge, in the middle of the four pieces was a perfect ruby, the size of a large pea. It was gently rolling about the table with the motion of the boat. Mariyah's hands made a cup around the pieces so that it couldn't escape. Smudge was stunned. Nick and Mari looked at each other. She put her hand under the table searching for his; they gripped each other tightly. She was loving it. Smudge slowly reached across and picked up the four pieces.

What really threw him was that it was solid gold inside. He had known it was metal because of the weight, but he hadn't expected that. Now Smudge looked at the outside and could see what Nick had done. He had simply dipped it in some kind of dark blue stain or dye. It had the effect of making it look like a cheap oval trinket.

Smudge was suddenly sober. He looked up at Nick.

"Where the fuck did you find this?"