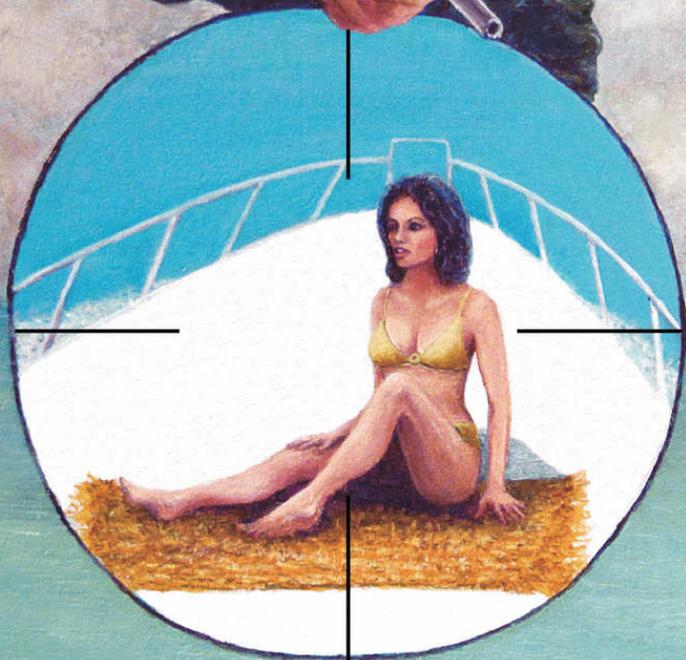


# Hunter's Choice



*A Matt Hunter Adventure*

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**Greenstone Publishing  
Rapid River, Michigan**

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## by J. C. Hager

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## Killers

**W**EBB LOOKED OUT THE DOOR at the now-lighted parking lot. “Here they come. Let’s get the engines going and start casting off the lines.”

He jumped to the flybridge and started the engines. Matt spotted a group coming from the parking lot. It looked like more than the expected four. But he went forward and began to cast off the various lines. He got back to the aft deck just as the women reached the boat. Matt thought he had remembered the daughter of the wallet picture as dark-haired like Webb, but this girl was blonde and the woman with her had long, light brown hair. He saw in their faces that something was wrong.

Two men loomed out of the shadows from behind the women and Webb’s men and motioned everyone into the salon. As Webb stepped off the ladder from the flybridge, one of them shoved a gun roughly into his side. The other man grabbed Matt and pushed him into the salon.

“Get into the boat. One fast move and you’re dead,” said the second man, a swarthy, mean-looking Latino in a dark sport coat. He carried a silenced pistol. Despite the gun in Webb’s ribs, Matt could see his urge to attack, his need to protect his family almost overpowering good sense. With a physical posture that reflected his decision, Webb quelled the urge and obeyed the gun-carrying men.

“Who sent you?” Webb asked as the men pushed the seven of them down onto the various couches in the salon. Having them sitting made

it difficult for a fast attack on the gunmen who stood at both ends of the salon. The hum of the engines created an undercurrent for the ensuing silence. Webb's wife clutched his right arm. His beautiful daughter sat on his other side, looking terrified. They wore light sweaters, and in the better light below, Matt could see they also wore wigs. Some dark hair peeked out from beneath the daughter's blonde wig. Al and Ray were also on the larger couch, openly glaring at the gunmen. Matt and Tanya sat together on the couch across the salon. They, at least, didn't have a coffee table in front of them. The two dangerous-looking men spoke Spanish to each other. While the one who had ordered everyone below stayed behind, the taller gunman left the salon. Soon, the *Reefer* was moving slowly out of the marina. They were making a wake as they turned left at the marina opening and were on plane before they were past the south end of the marina's sea wall.

"I asked who sent you?" repeated Webb.

The gunman leaned against the counter that bordered the steps to the lower part of the boat, his eyes and the set of his jaw indicated an innate cruelty. The scars on his chin and across his left cheek and his black, ponytailed hair heightened the impression. He could have been handsome except for his thin lips and weak chin. "I am supposed to say *hola* from some people you know in Maracaibo and your capital city."

He ended his speech with a tight grin that made him look even more sinister. His dark eyes showed no emotion.

"Whatever you are being paid, I'll double it and get you to wherever you want to go in the world," said Webb.

"We have a job and you know what happens if we do not do it well. The people who were watching your women are still watching those other women eating their Key lime pie. Fools. We saw what was going on from the bar area. We knew they would lead us to you sooner or later. Those other guys will not be fooled forever. So, we must be well out to sea before they wise up."

The boat slowed and broke plane. Matt couldn't see anything but knew they had not exited Government Cut yet. Not with such smooth water.

The gunman noticed Matt's curiosity and said, "We got another boat off Fisher Island that will be following. They are my brothers. We need to be sure they know it is us."

"What do you want with us?" asked Tanya.

"I just want you to be quiet and not to move. When we get out on the ocean, we will tell you everything you need to know."

*There's death in his eyes,* Matt thought.

“Let me talk to Cortada,” Webb said. “I can work this out. You don’t want to hurt us. It can destroy a lot of people.”

“I got orders from my boss, who has an arrangement with some very important people in Washington who say you got to go and your files with you. You can make it easy or hard. It’s up to you. I don’t care. My brothers don’t care. We’re poor fisherman, we do this right and we’re fixed for all our lives and the lives of our children. Raoul, up on the bridge, is my wife’s brother. Once we’re out in the Gulf Stream, you’ll tell us where the files are and face an easy death. Anything less and you’ll watch some bad things happen to these women. And that’s all you need to know.”

Ray lunged at the man.

Two shots spit out of the gunman’s silenced pistol almost in unison, both piercing Ray’s heart. He collapsed in mid-leap and sprawled across the coffee table, dead so fast he shed little blood. Both bullets passed through him and lodged in the back of the padded leather couch. Carla screamed and crawled across her father to get away from Ray’s body. Al started to stand but slumped back into the couch, his hands open in a gesture of surrender.

The semiautomatic, silenced pistol scanned the group, defying anyone to move.

Matt saw the two shell casings on the champagne colored carpet. He saw the two holes in the brown leather couch identified by small tufts of white padding. They were less than six inches apart and made finger-sized ripped holes. Death had become supercargo on the *Reefer*. The slightest wrong move meant instant retaliation.

Webb, suddenly and unexpectedly calm and relaxed, moved his daughter next to his wife and left some space between himself and them, keeping them away from Ray’s body. His expression turned nonbelligerent as he said in a conversational tone, “Ray was probably embarrassed that you got the drop on him. How did you do it?”

“We just drove up and asked for directions. When they came close, we had the guns on them. They were nothing. You should hire more competent people,” said the man from Maracaibo.

Webb spoke in a near whisper, “I’ve got stuff on Cortada and half the top people in Venezuela. The same goes for major players in Washington who control the drug interdiction programs. I even have people that help me in the Coast Guard, Air Force, and ATF. Without me, your boss is in deep trouble. So, why is he doing this?”

"Not my call. You can talk to the man if you want to. I get no pleasure from this. I don't want to hurt beautiful women, but you must believe that I will if you don't tell us what we must know."

"Can I get up and use the phone?" asked Webb.

"Okay, but move slowly and don't even think of coming at me."

"What's your name?" asked Webb as he rose slowly.

"Carlos," said the gunman.

Webb moved toward the satellite phone located on the counter near the couch that Matt and Tanya shared. As he edged between Carlos and Matt, Matt palmed the tiny Beretta in his pocket, then crossed his arms, concealing the gun under his left arm.

Carlos noted Matt's movement and fixed his eyes on him. "Don't move again—even to cross your legs. I will give you no chance to even get your legs under you. Do you understand me?"

"Sure. You're the man with the gun," said Matt.

Carlos stood fifteen feet away. The Beretta with its short barrel was not very accurate even in a shooting vise. Carlos's gun looked like a 10mm or .40 caliber, more than three times the power of Matt's. He had just fired two shots offhand with deadly accuracy at fifteen feet in a half-second. Too fast to appreciate the coordination and physics that went into the almost instant killing of a human being. Matt turned his thoughts from Carlos's ability and advantages to ways to put lots of little holes in him.

Tanya moved closer and buried her head in his neck, helping hide the pistol she'd noticed him slip under his arm. She sobbed but, between sobs, whispered to Matt, "I can help."

Carlos watched the movement and dismissed it, more interested in Webb on one side of the salon and Al on the other. He moved farther back into the boat, decreasing the angle between his potential targets. In doing so, he put part of the counter between himself and Matt's lower body.

Tanya moved away from Matt.

"Can I try to help him?" asked Tanya, indicating Ray. She was trying to establish a dialog with the killer and move in a way that would get Matt closer to him.

"Just sit down and be quiet. That man is dead. You can't help him. If you move again, I will be forced to shoot a very gorgeous woman," said Carlos as his eyes moved up and down Tanya.

Webb had placed a long distance call. He spoke in Spanish. The conversation started with some heated Spanish invectives that questioned the family and profession of the mother of the person on

the other end of the satellite connection. Tanya blushed a bit, and Carlos smirked. Even Webb's wife could not completely suppress the smile that creased her lovely face; either she understood Spanish or her husband's ass-chewing ability, or both.

Webb's call did not seem to be going well. He cajoled and then made major threats. Matt couldn't follow all the Spanish, but he understood Webb's stiffening jaw line and his crushing grip on the phone. Webb slowly unscrewed the phone set from the satellite cable connection with his left hand, a careful and dexterous movement. To show animation and strength with one hand and subtlety and dexterity with the other was an effort of impressive coordination. With the cable disconnected, Webb put his hand over the phone set. He was going to throw the set at Carlos.

Matt was in a bad position. Webb stood between him and Carlos. Webb could be shot in front and in back if he attacked Carlos with their present positions. Matt needed to change the alignment but had no idea how.

Al saw most of what Matt had seen. He knew Webb would not go meekly into the Gulf Stream. He shifted his feet closer to the couch, preparing to pounce.

Carlos saw this and brought up his pistol. He yelled, "Sit down and cross your feet out in front of you. Señor Webb, hang up and get back on the couch. *Ahora*, now!"

Webb released the phone and put the hand set back on to its cradle. Carlos motioned him back with the gun and moved further into the salon. Sideways to Tanya and Matt, only ten feet away now, he reached into his sport coat pocket, pulled out several white plastic cable ties, and threw them on the coffee table next to Ray's body. He turned to Tanya.

Matt stopped breathing.

"Put these on their wrists and ankles. Start with him," said Carlos, pointing at Matt.

Tanya picked up the plastic strips and turned to Matt.

"Do you want their hands in front or in back?" she asked Carlos.

"In back, but be careful and do nothing fast," warned Carlos.

Tanya moved between Matt and Carlos and bent over to help as Matt placed his hands behind him. No one in the room except Tanya saw Matt move his gun and right hand behind him. Carlos could not help but watch as Tanya's slacks tightened across her bottom as she appeared to work on Matt's wrists. She kept Matt's feet under him and pushed the plastic end through the slit on the opposite end, surreptitiously twisting the plastic

so the smooth side, rather than the serrated side, slid against the locking teeth. She moved deftly and smoothly while ensuring that Carlos was distracted by her other moves.

Tanya then crossed to the other couch to tie up the others. Mrs. Webb and Carla sat quietly, numb with fear and despair. Webb glared and looked ready to launch another futile attack when Tanya winked at him. Webb looked into her eyes and relaxed.

With his captives restrained, Carlos moved closer. Six feet from Matt, he stopped and leaned against the end of Matt's couch. The boat's rolling through larger waves announced their arrival in the Gulf Stream. Carlos seemed to relax a little as his plans were working. Carlos licked his lips and leered at Webb's daughter. "I am very impressed with your ladies, Señor Webb. Beautiful women. Maybe we can make a deal with them and let you watch." Tanya finished securing Webb and Al—as ineffectively as she had Matt—and ended her work standing at the far end of the salon, near the door and as far from Carlos as possible.

"I've done them, now do you want to do me?" A tantalizing pout flitted across Tanya's face. She moved into the doorway and held her wrists together. She raised an eyebrow and smiled before turning around and holding her hands behind her. "Do you want my hands behind my back too?"

She did a half turn and gave Carlos a hip shot.

Carlos, assuming his prisoners were properly bound, moved toward Tanya with another cable tie in his free hand. He was focused like some bucks Matt had stalked.

As he passed, Matt smoothly brought up the gun and shot Carlos twice, the tiny slugs impacting just above the right ear. He fell at Tanya's feet, touching Ray's extended hand. His legs jerked and drummed on the carpet, the silenced weapon pinned under his convulsing body.

The noise, even from the Beretta .22, thundered in the salon's close quarters. Mrs. Webb and Carla, so horrified they couldn't bring in the air it took to scream. Webb moved first and clamped his freed hands on their mouths, shaking his head and quietly urging them to silence. He rolled the still shaking body, snapped up Carlos's gun and went outside. Raoul had heard the shots and started down from the flybridge, but Webb stopped him with three shots while the man had both hands on the ladder's railings. He caught the man as he fell and dumped his body along the starboard side of the deck.

Webb rushed back into the salon. Al, now free, leaned over to check on Ray. Tanya helped Mrs. Webb and her daughter into the master stateroom,

trying to block the gruesome figure of Carlos, with one eye a bloody lump on his cheek and the body still shaking.

Webb had the sport coat of the man he had shot. He threw it to Al. “Put this on, turn up the collar, get up top and keep the boat on whatever course we are on. We’ll keep the lights low and the flybridge covers will make you hard to see clearly. Check the radar to find the other boat. We need to know where they are and if they can see us.”

Al retrieved his pistol back from Carlos and returned it to his shoulder holster. He struggled into the sport coat and went topside.

Matt slouched on the couch in shock, staring at Carlos’s last quivers. He had shot Carlos without hesitation, knowing he had no choice if they weren’t all to die. He also knew the Venezuelans would have abused the three women before killing them. Matt had reacted like a deadly animal facing another deadly animal—fast, unequivocal, and final. No threats, posturing, or mercy, and there shouldn’t have been any sorrow. Matt would have preferred to maintain a civilized posture while trying to negotiate, but he knew Carlos already had his kill switch thrown. The outcome was not in doubt, only the time and place.

Tanya shook him. He still had the little Beretta in his hand, the hammer cocked. Tanya took it from him, broke it open, and removed the live shell from the breech. She dropped the magazine and replaced the unspent shell in it. She lowered the hammer, pushed the magazine into the handle, and put the pistol in her slacks. She stroked Matt’s hair and said, “You’ve saved us all.”

He did not look up, his mind still trying to sort out his feelings.

Tanya went to the liquor cabinet and poured some Crown Royal into a small glass. She brought it to Matt. He drank it. It burned all the way to his stomach, breaking his stupor.

In the master stateroom, Webb told his wife and daughter to stay put until things were cleaned up. When he returned to the salon, Matt and Tanya had wrapped Carlos’s head with towels to stop the small amount of blood from his eye. There were no exit wounds and his dark hair hid the entry points. After they had the head covered, they dragged the bodies out onto the darkened aft deck and put them against the aft gear locker, covering them with an awning tarp. When they returned, Mrs. Webb had started cleaning. Without the brown wig, her short, blonde hair looked stylish. Matt noticed how easily she moved despite the boat’s side-to-side rocking and forward bounding motion. They all worked but said little. The blood disappeared, and a blanket and throw pillows covered the holes in the leather. With the cleaning finished, Webb motioned everyone to the liquor cabinet.

Webb's wife came to Matt and took his hand. "We owe you our lives, so don't be sad. Let's rejoice in being still alive."

"I'll get over it," Matt said with a shrug.

She looked at him with luminous blue-gray eyes above high cheekbones and a model's smile. She kissed his cheek and said, "I'm Karen. Our daughter is Carla."

She went to her husband and kissed him too, before turning to Tanya. "You are a wonderful actress and very brave. Thank you."

Tanya accepted a cheek kiss, also, and smiled.

Karen went to her daughter in the stateroom.

"Let's go to the bridge and figure out what we are going to do with the boat that's following us," said Webb.

They darkened the salon to just the galley lights and, with no aft lights burning except the mandatory stern and running lights, climbed the ladder to the flying bridge.

The sea, fairly calm for the Gulf Stream in December, sported well-spaced, two- to three-foot swells—the light southeast wind did not build significant waves against the north-flowing current. The waves further slackened with the decreasing winds. The moon shone brightly ahead, but high enough to avoid silhouetting them. Through binoculars, they could see clearly the moonlit other boat about a quarter mile behind them, directly in their wake. Miami's sky glow silhouetted the other boat and spotlighted many of the city's taller buildings. But how much could the other boat see of them? The after deck would be out of the moonlight and also shielded by the brightness of the stern light that came from the top of the flying bridge and shined more out than down.

Webb spoke, thinking out loud, "We can probably outrun them, but not their radio or their radar. We can set this radar and pick up Bimini from here, but so can they. At some point, they planned to stop this boat and pick up Carlos and Raoul. I don't think they had planned to take anyone else back. They wanted my files or to know where they are. Maybe the other boat was a ploy to make me think they were totally prepared to kill us all. But I would bet they planned to eventually kill us and scuttle us. They must know I have a lot of good friends and support at Cat Cays—they wouldn't pull in there or even Bimini. They may have planned to anchor off Bimini, but that would be a risk and I bet they plan to be done with their work before dawn."

"So, what's our best course?" Matt asked.

"I'm thinking...maybe too deeply. They were fisherman with guns and orders. Cortada, their boss, knew this type would scare me most because

they are too dumb to be disloyal and think about a double cross. I've used the same type for the same reason. I want that son of a bitch Cortada to die a bad death. I think I will drop him alive from a plane into his own courtyard so his family can see some blood too!"

"We got our guns back, and we've got their guns; let's stop, turn on lots of lights and when they come in, we do them." Al smiled at his own dramatic bravado.

Matt nodded. "I've got my deer rifle aboard. Only twelve shells, but a lot more firepower than a Beretta. It's got a scope on it. I think I could make a good shot, even at night from a rolling boat at fifty yards."

Webb held up a hand. "They might have AKs and RPGs for all we know. They had a silencer, that's big-league hardware. We're too close to Miami for them to blow us up or to have a fire. We're only a few miles north of the cruise boat lanes. We have to be on a half dozen radar screens right now, not to mention the DEA and Coast Guard planes that can cover the whole area from 30,000 feet. They're counting on the normalcy of two boats going to Bimini using the buddy system. Even if they raft up for a while, they wouldn't cause any concerns on any radar. I doubt you can distinguish two boats tied together. Then after a while, if only one boat goes on, who's to report it?"

"The way things've been going today? Most likely nobody," Matt agreed.

Webb continued, "I bet they plan to tie up together and scuttle us. After we go down, they go away. They may even have something to help us go down, like a shaped charge or something that would make a hole, but wouldn't cause a flash or fire. They know boats, so they would know how to sink one. They would stay off the radios. I say we run another ten or fifteen miles or, they come up on us, slow down, stop, make it look like we have the information they want. If we can distract them enough to get close, we can just shoot the shit out of them. It's either that or we run for it."

"I vote for taking them on as plan A," Matt suggested. "And running if things don't go our way as plan B. If they have RPGs here, they could have backup people they could call in Bimini. Maybe we can capture one or both of the brothers and get some information."

Webb nodded and looked at Al, who also nodded. "Okay, we try to sucker them in. If they get suspicious, Tanya, we'll need your perfect Spanish. With our hailer, your voice should confuse them a little."

"I can handle that," Tanya said.

Webb continued, "Matt, you cover them from the lounge area in the front of this flybridge. It's dark and you'll get a good view if we stay a little

sideways. There's too much chop for the marlin bridge and they might see you. Let's have the whaler ready to go in case they do have a rocket or a fifty-caliber that can put big holes in us. I'd like to take them alive. They may know who Cortada has been working with, though I wouldn't hold my breath. Worst case, they'll tell us how to get to Cortada, and I can get some people working on that when we get to the Cat Cays. When the time comes, I'll take the helm, and Al can be on the aft deck, he's good with a handgun. He can have several all loaded and cocked. That's a lot of fire-power, unless they have automatic weapons. They won't see you, Matt; so you take them out if they make a fight."

Webb turned to leave, "Right now, I need to talk to Karen and Carla. I've got another distraction in mind."

"I'll come along," Tanya said.

Webb and Tanya went down the ladder. Al sat in the helm chair with the boat running as Raoul had set it. The autopilot button glowed. The seas, almost flat, shone silver under a silver moon. The lights of Miami on the western horizon made it hard to see the lights of the boat behind them—though not on the radar.

Matt put his hand on the helm chair and watched the instruments with Al.

"Can I ask you a question?" said Matt.

"Sure," replied Al.

"How did you get away from the people that nabbed Webb?"

"A little luck and a little planning. We rented the truck from a farmer who lived just north of St. Ignace. We left him our rental van and gave him several hundred to use his truck for a few days. He's an uncle of a person Ray knew. No way did we want to have the cargo we had in a vehicle everyone could identify. I figure from what Webb told us, they just let us go because they were looking for a Lincoln and everyone you know seems to drive a four-by-four pickup. Anyway, we didn't know Webb was in trouble until he contacted us in the Keys."

"Why did you come down there?"

"You didn't hear this from me, but seeing how you just saved my ass for a second time, I'll tell you. Webb knew people were watching the boat and the marina. He has someone working around the marina. We were to get rid of whoever was watching and find out who he was working for."

"So you met Ron Miles?"

"Yeah, but we couldn't get much from the asshole. He was a weird buckaroo. He tried to put a karate move on Ray and got taken out by

accident. Ray was not a good person to attack. He was small but had boxed professionally in Detroit and liked to hit people. We did our disposal tricks and took his boat too. That boat's now in Cuba running Canadian tourists around. Webb set it up. He wants to get in good with some of the top Cuban resort people. He thinks that Cuba will be the best tourist area in the hemisphere sometime soon. Did you know that craft was a Grand Banks, and somebody painted over the beautiful wood to make it look more like a fishing trawler?"

"Too dumb," Matt said, shaking his head.

Al continued, "It had more electronic stuff than a TV studio. Had to be CIA or some other government bunch. It was way past the DEA budget. Plus, they wouldn't have had a person like that asshole working a stakeout."

Webb and Tanya came up the ladder. They went over the procedure to work the hailer. She could use it from behind the helm console and out of sight of a boat coming from any quarter except directly aft.

"We'll put them off our port rear quarter. We want them to see the aft deck but not real good into the flybridge," said Webb.

"I'll tell them to put their hands up or be shot," Tanya said. "Al will have them covered from the deck. Webb will run the helm. And, Matt, you'll be forward with the rifle."

"Karen's agreed to being on the aft deck, looking like she's been beaten," Webb said. "Actually, she suggested it as a distraction. I think she didn't want to be outdone by Tanya. She likes being the star."

"Could be dangerous," Matt said.

"She knows. It's a good thing she doesn't have her tights and a tutu... okay, when they get close, we'll turn on the deck lights. They should be looking at Karen more than Al, who is about the same size as Raoul. Karen's trying to make her darker wig look like Raoul's hair. If it doesn't work, Al can just wear a hat."

"Al, why don't you go down and see how she's coming with that wig," suggested Tanya.

Al left. Matt followed. Karen and Carla began working on Al. The too-small wig made him look like he was being attacked by a light brown Lhasa apso. They laughed, as much from nerves as the foolishness of the wig, then gave up and gave Al a fishing hat with a long visor. Matt found his Remington, checked it, and gave it a few dry fires to reacquaint his finger with the trigger. He put the ammo pack in a pocket and donned a dark sweatshirt. He grabbed a dark towel from the bathroom shelf and moved to the flybridge with the rifle.

Webb pointed at the rifle. "Mind if I have a look?"

Matt handed it to him.

Webb examined it, worked the bolt, placed it against his shoulder, and scanned the horizon through the telescopic sight. "Fine rifle you've got here. You ever shot from a boat or over water?"

"No, and it worries me. If they get close enough, it won't make any difference. This is very powerful. It puts out a bullet that goes faster than 3,000 feet per second. If they close to less than fifty yards, the bullet'll reach them before the recoil brings the gun up. I can almost watch the bullet hit. Simple point and shoot."

Matt went to the flybridge's lounge, just ahead of the helm, little more than a padded seating area. Matt set up on the port side. The U-shaped Plexiglas windscreen had openings on the bottom and sides. Matt wrapped the barrel with the towel and rested it on the window frame. He peered through the scope, but the boat's motion proved too bumpy. He decided to shoot using only the sling for bracing. He tried several shooting positions. From his knees wasn't bad and gave good concealment. But standing gave the best sight picture and allowed the smoothest compensation for the boat's rolling. He would wait on his knees and, when the boat stopped, stand up if necessary.

"We're better than halfway across," Webb said, apparently enjoying the excitement and challenge. "This is about as smooth as you will find the Stream. I think we're ready. Let's go on with the show. I'll go down and get Al and Karen ready. Carla will work the lights. It's better if she has something to do. We will need the light off fast if they start shooting and we make a run for it."

Webb went below, leaving Tanya and Matt alone on the flybridge. Matt held her tightly to him and kissed her deeply. Moonlight bathed the ocean around them. The boat cut through the small waves with animal-like smoothness. They watched the radar. The other boat's blip jumped closer with each screen refresh.

Tanya picked up the overhead microphone and turned a switch. Her voice came over the boat's speakers when she announced, "They're coming up on us."

In less than a minute, Webb stood at the helm, turned off the autopilot, and slowed the boat.

Tanya and Matt watched Al loosely tying Karen to the flybridge ladder. He ripped her blouse off her back. He squirted ketchup from a plastic bottle to fake bloody marks across her back. He didn't overdo it. The effect was very good. Karen said something, and Al pulled down her slacks. Matt tried not

to stare at her toned body in her nearly flesh-colored lace panties and bra. She looked up the ladder and winked at Tanya.

The sea battle was to begin.

The big Hatteras broke plane and quickly settled and stopped. The other boat was less than two hundred yards out. Matt cursed himself for mental vapor lock as, at the last minute, he remembered he had unloaded the rifle at the Sea School. He moved to the forward lounge, sat down, put three shells in the Remington's magazine—the most it would hold—then pushed the shells down and slipped a fourth shell into the breech. He brought the bolt forward, putting on the safety out of long habit. He couldn't see well enough to read the exact power setting on the scope. He twisted it to about halfway up, four or five power, as a good magnification for a moving target less than one hundred yards away. He could locate the boat quickly and spot any people on it.

The other boat came up smoothly and turned on a powerful light secured to the top of its solid roof, which covered its center console.

"So much for outrunning it, it's a thirty-some-foot Intrepid, it's got us by fifteen or twenty knots," Tanya whispered to him.

Matt scanned the approaching boat. A center console design. Good news, as it left no place for the operator to hide. He couldn't see the motors well, but knew there would be two or three big outboards. As they slowed, Matt picked out two men standing at the console. Less than fifty yards away and coming in slowly.

Webb took the microphone, switched to boat speakers, and said calmly, "Lights."

The *Reefer* lit up like a Christmas tree. Al waved and turned his back to the boat. He made a slow effort of untying Karen's wrists. She squirmed and cried. The sight reminded Matt of a movie set from a B-movie horror scene. Webb turned the idling *Reefer* slightly to port with an expert engagement of the starboard propeller. The subtlety was perfect. Matt had a clear view of the approaching boat, and the Hatteras offered itself to a stern approach.

Matt heard the outboards reversing and then idling. The boat was very maneuverable, and the driver skilled. The engines engaged again, and the boat slid up to the side of the *Reefer*. One man put over two white bumpers and tossed a rope to Al who now had Karen in front of him, mimicking tying her hands behind her. A masterpiece of choreography—Karen, in her panties and bra, with her slacks at her ankles and the remnants of her blouse around her arms, presented a striking tableau.

Al grabbed the line and bent over the cleat as he secured it. Karen fell forward onto the deck. The men moved to the side of their boat for a better view of the nearly naked woman. When they were a few feet from Al, he brought up his pistol and held it in the feet wide, two hand, straight-armed, classic Weaver stance.

Tanya's voice came over the hailer speaker in Spanish, "Put up your hands now, or you will be shot."

Completely surprised, the men raised their hands. Matt moved from the forward part of the flybridge to the aft, where he unzipped part of the plastic covers and poked the rifle out, covering the two men from above and only fifteen feet away. Webb bounded down the ladder and also held a pistol on the men. When Webb was in position, Al, staying out of all lines of fire, boarded the smaller, lower boat and took the guns shoved into the men's belts. He expertly searched both men, finding another pistol on one man and knives on both. He pushed them to the deck and looped the plastic cable ties around their wrists and ankles, correctly allowing the little plastic teeth to achieve their one way grip. In less than two minutes, he had both men trussed securely on the aft deck of their boat.

Webb told Carla to turn off most of the lights. Darkness again settled over the ocean. The moon and stars reappeared in the dark sky. They were alone on the water. With little wind, the two boats thumped gently against the bumpers between them.

Webb helped Karen up. She pulled up her slacks and wore her ripped blouse like a queen's robe over her arm. Webb kissed her. She gave him a sexy look and went into the salon.

Webb got on the *Intrepid*. There was enough light to see the men. Webb bent low and spoke to them in Spanish. They tried to look tough, but Matt could see their fear from the *Reef*. Webb looked around their boat. He gave a satisfied snort when he opened one of the forward lockers and pulled out chains and mushroom anchors.

"Put these on our dead guests from Maracaibo and put them over the side so our new friends can watch. Then I'll help you put weights and chains on them," Webb ordered Al, pointing at the bound brothers

Al made quick work of the two dead Venezuelans. He then carefully slipped them over the stern of the *Reef*. The two men in the *Intrepid* saw it all.

"What do we do with Ray?" asked Al.

"I'll get him home to Detroit if you think it is what he would want," said Webb.

“I don’t know, he always knew the risks. Having his body won’t make his family feel any better, and it’d create a lot of problems and expense. If it was me, I’d say the sea is just fine.”

“Then do it. I’ll try to make sure his family makes out okay,” said Webb.

Al weighted Ray and gently put him over the starboard side, out of sight of the two prisoners.

Matt and Tanya watched all this silently, overcome by a sense of unreality.

Tanya finally refocused her mind on business. She checked the radar and GPS, switching them to various ranges. To their south, cruise ships formed an almost straight line. Matt checked the GPS against their previous course settings. They’d drifted almost two miles north. The Gulf Stream’s current was moving them at three or four knots, they couldn’t feel the movement.

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