

The Blacktip Haven great room looked like a boat yard had exploded in it, and Wally Breight, his round, cat-like face in its permanent smile, was in heaven. Orange life rings and faded green fish nets and begrimed boat fenders hung from white-painted rafters. The dark-wood-and-brass bar was wrapped with lacquered ropes of varying size, overhung with nautical signal flags and crowned at either end by head-sized channel marker lights—one green and one red. In the room’s center was a random assortment of worn, yellow nautical-themed couches, armchairs and a pair of beanbag chairs, filled with post-scuba-dive guests, drinks in hand, all babbling at once about the eagle rays and sharks and triggerfish they had seen on the reefs that day.

At the bar, Wally sipped his bourbon, ran a hand through his shaggy, reddish-brown hair, still unruly from the day’s dives. An empty lowball glass sat on the bar beside him, courtesy of happy scuba divers—his happy scuba divers. He had brought them down from Big Chicken Divers in Marietta, Georgia, a small dive shop in the shadow of the fanciful sixty-foot-tall chicken perched atop a fried chicken outlet on U.S. 41, which served as an area landmark, and they were celebrating the end of a great week on Blacktip Island. As the group’s leader and organizer, Wally had spent a week herding them around the little Caribbean island’s reefs by day and entertaining them around the bar by night. It was a lot of work, but it had its perks, among them

free diving, lodging, and food for the week. The next day was their final diving day. The guests would fly back to Atlanta the following morning, giving Wally a day to enjoy the island on his own before heading home, too.

Leading these groups for the dive shop had become second nature, his de facto vacations. As ever, his mind drifted to how he could turn it into a full-time gig, leading dives during the day, shooting the breeze over drinks in the evenings, and never having to go back to an office or traffic or stress. Or shoes. But you didn't just walk away from a career-track job with benefits. No matter how miserable that job got. Was getting. Was. Yes, time on Blacktip was the life. He just needed to figure out how to get more of it.

At the far end of the room, Elena Havens, the resort's owner, was holding court, looming, pale and gaunt, over the seated guests, booming out bits of island gossip and tall tales about her life. She had bought the resort and moved down from Montreal years before. Wally imagined himself in her place, regaling the room every night with stories—true or not. A Jackson Browne song started from speakers behind the bar.

Elena tossed her head twice, pulled her gray-streaked black hair back out of her face so it flowed mane-like down her back. She turned a complete circle, her sleeveless, tie-dyed dress sweeping across the dark wood floor planks, bare feet, with orange-painted toenails flashing. Making sure everyone was watching her. She studied the gathered guests, blue eyes bright, her thin, pale arms waving for emphasis as she launched into her next story.

“I'm the ‘warm and tender mystery,’ you know.” She scanned the guests, waiting for recognition. “Jackson wrote ‘Under the Falling Sky’ about me.”

She said it casually, as if it were an idle thought, though Wally knew it wasn't. She swung her arms wide, taking in the entire lounge and bar area, a queen ensuring all eyes were on her.

“*And ‘Our Lady of the Well.’* We were together in Jamaica at the time, so I’m fairly certain I’m ‘Jamaica, Say You Will,’ too.”

Guests’ mouths hung open. Several smirked, not buying the tale.

Wally smiled. He heard the story every time he brought Big Chicken groups to Blacktip Haven, and it grew with every telling.

“He’s the one who came up with *Calypso Aru* as the name for The Haven’s dive boat. I introduced him to J.D. Souther, out in Laurel Canyon. And a doe-eyed, young girl singer named Linda.”

The dubious guests rolled their eyes, chuckled. Elena grinned. She knew her audience, and the hook was set. She pointed to one of the chucklers, motioned for him to stand.

“Here, get that photo album down for me.”

She pointed to the top shelf next to the bar. Puzzled, the man lifted the thick, spiral-bound notebook down and handed it to Elena. She grinned again, a cat playing with an unsuspecting mouse, and flipped open the yellowed cover. She thumbed through several pages, then set the book on the coffee table in front of the man. He stared for a moment, and then his eyes widened. He stared from the page, to Elena, then back again.

Wally knew the photos the man was looking at. He himself had been the unsuspecting mouse his first time here. The man was standing open-mouthed, eyes scanning four black-and-white photos with lacey white edges, of a twenty-something Elena by the Troubadour club stage beside Jackson Browne and Linda Ronstadt.

“She telling the truth?” Janine, one of Wally’s divers, settled onto the bar stool next to him, tucked her curly, dark hair behind her ear, brown eyes on his.

“About *all* of that? I doubt it.” Wally laughed. “But she *does* have the photos.”

Janine laughed, too. Waved a thin finger at his nearly-empty glass.

“Another?”

Wally paused. A drink with Janine was tempting. He could get used to this attention, too. But he was working and couldn’t afford to be hung over. Plus, getting involved with clients usually got messy.

“Thanks, but I have dives to lead in the morning.” Wally finished his drink and, slid the glass across the bar.

“Tomorrow, then.” Janine smiled, eyes lingering on his. “After diving.”

Wally said nothing, slipped out the lounge’s back door, careful not to distract from Elena’s performance. Above, the stars glowed like a sequined bowl. Among the trees, small yellow lights flashed, fireflies echoing the stars.

The next morning Wally led the twelve Big Chicken divers around The Pinnacle. The thin limestone spire, blackened by weather, rose from the ocean depths at the island’s northern point, breaking the surface and extending up 100 feet into the air. Underwater, The Pinnacle’s sides were clustered thick with giant barrel sponges, long green strands of wire coral, and clumps of black coral, looking like underwater fern groves. Janine at his side, Wally led the group 100 feet deep, then slowly spiraled his way shallower, pointing out hawksbill turtles, a free-swimming green moray eel, a school of black-and-yellow gobies in a brown barrel sponge cleaning a brown-banded Nassau grouper.

In the shallows Wally found them a nurse shark with its head under a ledge, pairs of black-and-yellow French angelfish, and multiple lionfish, the Indo-Pacific invasive species wreaking havoc on Caribbean reef fish populations.

Back on the boat, several divers told the crew about the lionfish.

“Y’all need to go down there and spear ‘em,” Brady, a bank manager from Woodstock, said. “That’s what they do in Cozy-mel. And the Keys. Save the reefs from ‘em.”

“We don’t spear *any* fish,” Booger the captain said. Tall, thin, with dreadlocks to his shoulders, he towered over the divers. “Elena’s policy. All th’ other dive ops do, though. We’ll get word out. Somebody’ll get ‘em.”

The second dive was a shallow reef, near the public pier. Wally again led the group along long coral fingers, showing them gray stingrays in the sand, jut-jawed blue-screwled filefish hovering nose-down beside purple sea fans, a spikey brown burrfish resting motionless in a green coral bowl. And more lionfish.

A sadness washed through Wally. This was the last dive of the trip. His last dive anywhere for a while. After a day off tomorrow, it was back to Atlanta and his public relations job from hell. He pushed that from his mind, and concentrated on enjoying what time he had left on the island. He was almost successful.

At dinner that night the divers were still talking about lionfish.

“Tons of those things on the reef today,” Janine said. “I don’t understand why y’all won’t cull them. You should see the divemasters in the Caymans go to town on them.”

“We live and let live here at The Haven.” Elena Havens pulled up a chair, joined them at the table “We’re a sanctuary of peace and keep negative thoughts to a minimum. That includes killing fish, no matter what kind.”

“Seems like that’s taking ‘eco-friendly’ too far,” Brady the bBank manager said.

“Everybody else just kills ‘em. Toot-sweet.”

“We don’t kill anything here.” Elena gave Brady a daggered look. “We run a 100 percent eco-friendly operation and won’t tolerate reef crashing or fish harassing or actions of any kind that might have a negative impact on the reef. That’s why we require you to use coral-safe sunblock. Here, the fish aren’t just friends. They’re our family.”

Wally smiled at the exchange. He had heard this speech before, too. It was familiar, a well-worn family argument during the holidays.

“Well, what about the fish we eat every meal?” Brady said.

“*That* we ship in from the U.S. There’s no killing done *here*. We don’t eat family.”

Wally wandered to the bar for another glass of wine. Elena followed him.

“You seem down tonight,” she said. “Lionfish got you bummed?”

“No, no. It’s . . . just I wish I didn’t have to leave.”

“You say that every time you’re here.”

“Yeah, but this time I mean it.” Wally ran a hand through his too-long hair. Work had kept him so busy he hadn’t had a chance to get a haircut for more than a month. “My job . . . I’ve about had it. I’m *so* tired of running interference for a bunch of yahoos and their damn foxes.”

“Foxes? You lost me . . .”

“Chattahoochee kit foxes. Endangered in north Georgia. The Pan-Appalachian Wildlife Society raised money to buy land to save their habitat. I’ve been taking flak for PAWS for the last nine months, with no days off.”

“For saving foxes?”

“For killing fish.” Wally took a deep breath, dived in. “Chattahoochees are little mini-foxes. They need open grassland and love rolling hills. PAWS raised enough money to buy either a too-small bit of suitable open land or big swath of forested land totally unsuited to the foxes. Some brain-dead committee opted for the big swath. Then they chopped down all the trees to create open grassland. Environmentalists went ballistic.”

“I’ll bet.” Elena looked horrified.

“Then it rained. A lot. With no forest to retain the rainwater, mud from the runoff flowed downstream, into the ‘Hooch, then into the Apalachicola River, clogged it, and wiped out a major Gulf sturgeon breeding ground. The whole southeastern U.S. is out for blood. That’s when PAWS hired the company I’m with to . . . ameliorate the situation. I’m good, but how in the world do you spin that positive? I mean, they’re paying me well, until the fines and legal fees and lawsuits wipe them out, but I’m exhausted. Leading these groups is one of the few bright spots in my life. There needs to be more of this and less of that. I’d stay here in a heartbeat if I thought it could pay the bills.”

“It’d certainly give you a cleaner conscience.”

“That, too. You wouldn’t happen to need an investor or another dive guide, would you?”

“No to both.” Elena laughed. “You’d be surprised how often I get asked that. And life down here, running a resort and a dive operation, is rougher than most people realize. Something’s always breaking, or going wrong, and on an island this small, you better be able to handle all that yourself. While you’re down looking at the pretty fish, we’re running around like chickens with our heads cut off trying to keep everything running smoothly.”

Jessie the chef wandered past, long brown hair tucked in a neat bun. She nodded agreement, winked a gray eye at Elena.

“I’d take that over facing the Coastal Conservation Association and the Gulf Fishery Management Council attack dogs.”

“Well, it’s good to have a daydream.” Elena patted his shoulder, and walked back to the guests, shaking her head.

Wally wandered out to the pool and stared at the diamond-bright stars, too depressed to try to mingle with a roomful of gabby divers. Or Janine.

The next morning, he said goodbye to the guests, waved at the Blacktip Haven van rolling down the two-rut track leading to the main road and the airstrip farther up the coast. After he saw the twin-engine Islander bank right over the resort, headed for Tiperon, he borrowed one of the resort’s rusty one-speed beach cruisers and headed down the track to explore the island on his own, hoping to lift his spirits. He pedaled north, past the island’s other resorts on the west coast, past the island’s lone store, and the now-deserted airstrip, then on past the big cement public pier. Farther than he had ever explored on Blacktip, mind already sorting through what he needed to do first back at work.

North of the pier, the road turned west, then north, then back east in a broad sweep, The Pinnacle 100 yards offshore, from this angle looking like an eroded obelisk. He passed a low wooden building at the water’s edge, roadside sign declaring it the ‘Tail Spinner Restaurant and Bar.’ Past that he was surprised to find a ring of weather-worn bungalows, all built in different styles, seemingly at different times, with whatever building materials happened to be available. In their center was a larger building, screen porch along one side, looking as if it had once been the heart of a resort. Crushed-stone pathways lead around the central building and out to each cottage like spokes in a wheel or strands of a giant spider web. ‘Noboddie’s Inne’ was stenciled in flaking red letters on the building’s side.

Beyond the bungalows was a small wooden dock, a blue twin-engine boat bobbing beside it, protected from the waves by a fringing reef. Near that was a low, cinderblock building. Peeling teal paint over the building's door read, 'Going Under Divers.' Wally coasted to a stop, leaned the bike against a palm tree, and wandered over for a closer look.

"Lookin' for a room?"

The voice boomed out in the island lilt Wally had grown to love, startling him. In a rolling, bow-legged gait, a man stepped from the central building. He had a dark complexion and closely-cropped, gray-flecked black hair. Torso short and round, with thin arms and legs seemingly too long for his body. Threadbare shorts and a faded blue Spider Man t-shirt.

"No, No. Just exploring." Wally stepped toward the resort buildings to meet him halfway. "Never wandered up here before. Didn't know there was another resort on the island."

"Nearly ain't." The man laughed, setting his belly bouncing. "Business dyin' off. And what guests we do get, they don't stay long." He held out his hand. "Vinson Noboddie."

"Wally Bright." Wally forced himself not to comment on the man's last name. "Why don't they stay?"

"Can't dive." The man pointed to the boat tied to the dock. "Boat needs parts. Parts cost money. Owner can't afford 'em. Truth be told, he lost the taste for the business. When folks dive somewhere else, they stay somewhere else."

"What's wrong with the boat?" Wally walked to the dock, with its lone palm tree, wondering how anyone could lose the taste for diving. The boat needed a coat of paint and some cleaning, but otherwise looked in good condition. '*J-Valve*' was scrawled in orange cursive script down its side.

"One of those engines broke. Can't run through the reef safe with one engine."

“So . . . the owner’d just need someone to pay for repairs and drive the boat for him . . .”

A plan was forming in Wally’s head, a plan so perfect he was almost afraid to say it out loud. Worst case, he would buy an entirely new engine. And he could learn to drive a boat. How hard could that be? He’d watched it done enough. And working outside, he could lose some weight.

“Just.” Vinson laughed again. “Yeah, just that.”

“And if there were someone who could get the boat operational again . . . and could take out your guests, that person could revive both businesses.”

Vinson’s eyes narrowed, sizing Wally up. A bemused smile crept across his face.

“A person *could*. Not enough guests come through my place to keep him—or her—in business for long, though.”

“Not a problem,” Wally said. “The person I’m thinking of is great at public relations. Owns part of a dive shop. Brings divers down all the time. Could even double the number of groups coming down. And *his* partner’d be happy to send them.”

Wally had savings. He could sell his car and condo. And his shares of Big Chicken Divers, such as they were. Hank, the other owner, wouldn’t mind. The Going Under Divers owner couldn’t want too much for this little shack and boat.

“Don’t know why anybody’d do that, sight unseen.” He squinted at Wally again, scratched at the stubble on his cheek. “Back in the day, though, it *was* a grand life.”

“I’ve seen it. It looks perfect! A little sprucing up, some fresh paint, and it’ll be great!”

Vinson grinned at that.

A parrot squawked overhead. Wally looked up to see a pair of them, green with red cheeks, in the palm fronds, and blue sky behind them. Like something from a travel poster.

“Ol’ Smackie’s two staff’d be happy to have jobs again,” Vinson said. “Problem’ll be who your Tiperon partner is.”

“Why do I need a partner?”

“Law. Any business got to be at least sixty percent owned by a Tiperon citizen.”

“So . . . I’d need someone to put up sixty percent of the cost?” Wally raised his eyebrows at Vinson, gave him a knowing smile.

“Oh, I don’t got that kind of money,” Vinson chuckled.

“The current owner?”

“Done with divin’. He gets a reasonable offer, he’d sell today.”

“And there’s no way around the partner rule?”

“Usually’s just a paper partnership. With the expat shoulderin’ all the expense and the local taking a cut of the profits.”

“People sign on for things like that?”

“Only folks who wanna have a business here.”

“Okay. So, what’s the best way to find a partner?” Forty percent of the profits and all the expenses was brutal, but if that was the only way to get the operation running, it would be worth it. The money would come.

“Most folks on Blacktip who wanna be in the dive business’re already in it.” Vinson stared across the lagoon. Smiled. Made a sound between a snort and a laugh. “Ferris Skerritt’s always game for a business venture, but he can be a wily one.”

“Wily doesn’t matter,” Wally said. “I just need that paper partner. Me and the staff’ll handle the daily running of the place.”

“Ferris may be your huckleberry, then. Just watch the i-dots and t-crosses on anythin’ you sign. And don’t tell him I sent you. He’s a suspicious sort, and we don’t always see eye-to-eye.”

“And you’re good with me running the diving business?”

“Boat needs repairs I don’t got money for. Needs staff I don’t got money for, either. No dive op to pull folks in, I got to sell my cottages. So, yeah, you, anybody, restartin’ the dive op’d be win-win. ‘Sides, I run a hotel, not a dive boat.”

“Any way to look at the place’s books, see what kind of business they did?”

“Oh, sure,” Vinson said. “Smackie gave me the keys so I could look after the place.”

He went to the central building, came back with a set of keys, and led Wally to the tiny dive shop. Several small brown spiders scuttled across the white tiled floor when the door swooshed open. More hung from high rafters. Wally brushed three off the counter.

“Don’t worry ‘bout them,” Vinson chuckled, “They the security system.”

The computer wasn’t password protected, and soon Wally was scrolling through the Going Under Divers financial records. ‘Smackie’ the owner had pulled out most of the funds, but the records showed a steady income and reasonable expenses before he shut the place down.

“This looks like a damn-viable business,” Wally said. “Why’d he give it up?”

“Got tired of livin’ on this little rock. Less than 200 people, not a lot to do. That, and diving’s a rough life. Takes its toll, physically.” Vinson winked at Wally. “Makin’ more money now on Tiperon, doing less work.”

“How do I get in touch with him, see if he wants to sell, what he wants for the place?”

“Oh, he wants to.” Vinson chuckled again. “I give him a call right now.”

Moments later Wally was talking to Smackie Bottoms. Yes, Smackie wanted to sell the operation, from the boat down to the paperclips. Yes, it had always been a good business, but he

was getting too old to run it, and none of his kids wanted anything to do with it. Or Blacktip Island. After some brief haggling, he and Wally had a verbal agreement. He would send papers to Wally in the U.S., and Wally would wire money to Bottoms' account on Tiperon. It happened so fast, so naturally, Wally had to sit, regain his bearings after the man hung up.

“Guess you got you a dive business,” Vinson said.

“I guess I do.” Wally ran his hand through his mop of hair. Once he had the big stuff settled, the details would fall into place. And he wouldn't need a haircut as urgently as he had thought. “Now, where do I find this Ferris Skerritt?”

A half hour later, Wally was sitting at the Sandy Bottoms Beach Resort bar, pitching his off-the-cuff business plan to a pale, older, potato-faced man with a bulbous nose, pocked, and riddled with crimson spider veins, and eyes that could have come straight from a taxidermist's workshop. His thinning, too-black hair was swirled back across his skull, and his boney shoulders jutted underneath an oversized polo shirt. His hands, on the bar top, were delicate things, long and thin and covered with liver spots, with untrimmed yellow nails like ragged talons.

“Oh, I'm perpetually interested in, ah, little bits of business.” Skerritt spoke slowly, jaw barely moving, his words slipping past his teeth in a series of hisses so low Wally had to lean in to hear him. “Such enterprises keep me occupied.”

“Well, this would help the island, too,” Wally said.

“I do try to . . . reciprocate with the community whenever possible.” Skerritt's lips parted in something between a smile and a grimace, revealing uneven teeth as yellow as his nails.

“I have the funds for the purchase. And startup expenses. I just need a Tiperon partner. On paper. You'd get the standard percentage of the profits.”

“An arrangement of that nature could be, ah, amenable,” Skerritt hissed. With every, ‘ah,’ he opened his jaw wide, as if he wanted to swallow the bar and everything in it. He picked his nose with a yellowed claw, then wiped his finger on his pink shorts as if Wally wasn’t there. “Benefit all concerned. We’ll need to draw up papers, make things . . . legal. For the authorities. How long are you here?”

“I leave in the morning. Could you overnight the papers to me in the States?” As frail as Skerritt looked, Wally wondered if he would live long enough for the sale to go through.

“I’ll get the, ah, ball rolling this afternoon. We just need to allow time to have them drawn up . . . properly. Boilerplate, but with a few scuba-specific wrinkles. We’ll do the standard Blacktip Island handshake deal for now. All that’s necessary on this little island. Paper contract’s just a, ah, formality. For the authorities.”

Skerrit held out his hand. Wally took it. It was cool, sweaty, limp, as if Skerrit had handed him a gutted mackerel. Skerrit smiled his yellow-toothed smile again. Wally let go after a second.

“I’m at Blacktip Haven. And on the 10:15 flight tomorrow, if you can get things finished that soon.”

Wally pedaled back up the coast toward Blacktip Haven, smiling. Despite Vinson’s warning, Skerrit had seemed fine. Socially awkward, perhaps, and a bit fawning, but nothing like the shark Vinson had made him out to be. With a vocabulary and gift of gab Wally appreciated. And there would be plenty of time to look over any contract before he signed it.

That afternoon at Blacktip Haven, Wally fought to keep his excitement hidden. He was about to own a dive charter company. On Blacktip Island. His dream job. Leading dives all day. Relaxing in a hammock by the sea, book in hand, in the evenings. But he needed to keep it to

himself until the deal went through. Until he had a chance to sort things out with Hank at Big Chicken, free up the money he had invested there. He sized up the new guests in the Haven's great room, imagined himself entertaining them the way Elena did.

"You'll break your face, grinning like that."

Elena had sidled up next to him.

"It's been a good week," he said.

Elena studied him, eyes questioning.

He had to tell someone. And he needed to let Elena know before he moved down, since they'd be neighbors now, part of the same small community. Friends who could help each other when needed. He took a deep breath, lowered his voice.

"Look, this has to stay just between the two of us . . ."

"Oh, of course." Elena leaned close, gray hair brushing against Wally's arm. "That's the Blacktip Island motto, you know. Everyone says it; no one abides by it."

"You know that rundown dive shop up by Noboddie's Inne?"

"Going Under? That went under? Sure."

"I'm buying it. With a local partner and everything. It's a dream come true!"

Elena could have been playing poker, her features stayed so blank.

"You sure you know what you're getting into?" she finally said.

"The financials look good, and Vinson seems a good sort. It'll be a rough ride at first, sure, but I'll be doing what I love. Having an adventure. For the love of the game, you know?"

"Oh, it'll be a rough ride. Who's your Tiperon partner?"

"Ferris Skerritt. He's drawing up the papers now."

Elena's expressionless face didn't change.

“You sign anything yet?”

“I’ll go over it with a fine-tooth comb.” Wally chuckled. “Don’t worry about that. I’m not as dumb as I look.”

Elena gave him a dubious look.

“Divers are a limited resource on an island this small,” she said. “You have a plan to attract more?”

“I have an idea or two percolating in the back of my head. Having Noboddie’s Inne’ll help draw them.”

“You’ll get some pushback from other dive ops is what I’m saying.”

“Oh, I’ll sprinkle rose petals. How much animosity can there be in a place like this?”

Elena grunted and walked to the gathered guests.

The next morning Wally leaned back on the splintered airstrip bench, hands behind his head. He had a Tiperon partner and a contract in the works. Vinson had given him a list of needed boat parts to ship down, and a promise he would talk to someone named ‘young Harry’ about making the repairs. Things were falling into place nicely. He smiled while watching the twin-engine Islander bounce down the grass landing strip, taxiing to the shack that served as a terminal.

He was about to start a new life in paradise. Despite Elena’s warning. Sure, the boat work would be physically demanding, but that was part of the attraction. He had been sitting behind a desk for far too long, nose to the grindstone, and wasn’t getting any younger. Besides, he would hire staff to do most of the heavy lifting while he manned the dive shop and led dives.

He would sit down with Hank at Big Chicken Divers as soon as he got back, catch him up on what was happening. If he didn't want Wally's share of the dive shop, he would know someone who did. Yes. This would be perfect. Things would work out. They always did.