

THE COMING

By Susanne Marie Knight

Prologue

August, 1943

Over the din of the B-17 bomber's ascent into the air, the radio decided to squawk, emitting a familiar voice.

"This is 'Flying Mamba.' Position confirmed. Hey, Johnny boy, whichever dumb bastard said 'War is hell' obviously never pulled duty in the Bahamas! Heaven on earth! Am I right, or what? Over."

Captain Jack Harrington grinned at his former co-pilot's comment on their now-completed "dream" assignment, and signaled his radio operator, Keith Watkins, for C channel to reply.

Glancing out the window at the almost identical bomber flying in close formation, Jack gave a quick salute to his friend. "'Flying Mamba', this is 'Sweet Revenge'. Bad news, Nat. You have the wrong war. General Sherman, late of the Civil War and perpetrator of that quotable quote, had more on his mind with his march to the sea than we did on this babysitting gig. Over."

Naturally, Lieutenant Ian Baker of the Royal Australian Air Force, stuck his two cents in--or whatever the hell it was they used for money down at the bottom of the world.

"Now, sir, I do believe it's my duty as co-pilot to correct you. Our RAF students, British or otherwise, aren't young children--or ankle-biters--as we Aussies like to say. And after all, the flight training school on Nassau is the finest in the Caribbean."

Flight training school. Christ, what a waste of valuable time for an old-timer like Jack!

The foul taste of bile rose up in his throat, and truth be told, he was hard pressed not to spit it out. Out the window lay the golden sands and crystal waters of the Bahamian islands chain. Beautiful, yes, but how in good conscience could a man fritter away the days on this semitropical paradise when there was so much work to be done? When the horrors of war breathed hot and heavy day in and day out? When death was as close a companion as his sweaty regulation undershirt?

He grimaced. Bottom line here: the fate of the free world was so uncertain, he literally burned with the need to get back in the thick of things, whether in Europe or the Pacific arena. Thankfully, the layover at his next destination, Bermuda, would be brief. By this time next week, he'd be flying daylight bombing raids with his unit over in Ridgewell, England.

"Sir? Is everything all right?" Baker's blond mustache bristled concern, and he tapped Jack on the shoulder to recall him to the here and now.

Annoyed, Jack checked his instruments. Damn altimeter gauge was stuck again. "Cut the 'sir' crap, Baker. I'm doing my bit for *your* king and country. So tell me again why I have to drag your sorry ass to Bermuda?"

Two other members of the crew, Salvatore Scarpelli the navigator and Danny Flannery the bombardier--twins in spirit not birth--wagged their bushy eyebrows and nudged each other in the ribs. Their captain's anger was legendary.

Everyone knew that, including Jack.

He ignored the byplay to settle his wrath against the prune-dried Aussie. Had to take it out on someone, so it might as well be the person responsible for separating him from his co-pilot and best damn friend a man could have: Nat Terrell.

In fact, if Jack were a superstitious man--which he wasn't--he would have claimed Nat as his own personal good luck charm. With Nat by his side, Jack had twenty-three successful missions to his name, or rather to his plane's name, "Sweet Revenge."

When dealing with the enemy, any revenge was sweet.

"Not my country, precisely, er, Captain." Baker calmly tapped the altimeter gauge until it righted itself. "Needn't get cranky, mate. This wasn't a hardship tour, now was it? Plenty of time to sunbake to a crispy brown."

Which he had, to his skin's leathery detriment.

Nat's voice fought static to be heard on the radio. "Boys! Boys! Play nice now, why don't you? On the same side, no denying that. Ian, you'll have to forgive my pal, Johnny boy. He's still put out 'cuz that cute Bahamian honey preferred my butt to his! Over."

Scarpelli and Flannery couldn't hide their guffaws. And big men like them certainly knew how to laugh it up. Jack stared them into submission, causing them to shuffle apologetically and bury themselves in busy work.

Baker, on the other hand, lifted a sun-bleached eyebrow and stroked down his prickly mustache, all the while studiously regarding Jack.

"Don't jump to conclusions, Baker," Jack warned. "It's my pal, Nat, who's harboring illusions." He gestured to Watkins, the radio operator, for an open channel. "Nat, you ol' sot, you got the story wrong. That honey fancied *my* bedside manner, not yours! Over."

The rough edge that had niggled Jack since breakfast in downtown Nassau suddenly smoothed out. Locking horns with Nat always had that mellowing effect on him. Neither the deafening drone from the four turbo-supercharged engines nor the biting cold from high altitudes disturbed his complacent mood.

But that Aussie sure was a burr in his side. Hell, if only Nat were here instead. Jack shot a look of sheer displeasure at the co-pilot.

And why not? At thirty degrees below, a man was entitled to growl like a bear.

Over the intercom, he spoke to his men. "Okay, heads up everyone. Time to put your air on. We're at 10,000 feet and climbing." Oxygen masks were necessary at that altitude since the inside of the B-17 wasn't pressurized.

He stretched in his seat and cracked his knuckles. Unusually tall for a pilot, he often felt cramped behind the controls.

Once again, he checked the skies. Still no clouds in sight. A picture perfect day for a routine flight to Bermuda.

“Course position?” he requested from the navigator.

Just as promptly, Scarpelli relayed the information.

Damn good men, all of them. Usually the B-17, or Flying Fortress, as it was affectionately known, had a crew of ten. But because “Sweet Revenge”, with sexually suggestive nose art, had been tasked to train raw recruits from British, Canadian, and Australian forces, Jack was down four men: tail, ball turret, and two waist gunners... and, of course, his regular co-pilot, Nat. They would all be replaced once he reached England, of course, but these men, including Watkins, Scarpelli, Flannery, and Chuck Ziegler the flight engineer, were like family--the family Jack had never had. Not a close one, anyway. Not with a passel of step-kin with him being odd man out.

But his military family, that was a different story. They all pulled together under the hazard of enemy fire.

A team. They had been a *team*. So why the hell did the wing commander reassign Nat at the last minute?

Baker adjusted the strap on his oxygen mask. “Fancy yourself to be a ladies man, do you, Captain? Lud, I love ‘em myself. Especially your Southern Belles with the delectable accent.”

Jack grunted. The oxygen had a somewhat metallic scent to it. Usually didn’t bother him, but today it seemed to dry his throat. Damn it all, he’d give anything for a smoke.

But that would have to wait until they landed. Instead, he popped a stick of chewing gum in his mouth, and savored the spearmint flavor. Belatedly, he remembered to offer one to Baker.

“No, actually, I don’t care much for women, other than in the bedroom, that is. Can make a man cut his own neck, in a manner of speaking.”

He’d seen it happen often enough, not only with his stepsisters’ discarding boyfriends hand over fist, but with his stepmother destroying his dad.

Baker’s blond eyebrow arched up again in an unspoken question.

“Just look at your Edward VIII,” Jack explained. “What’s he now, the Duke of Windsor? He attended that damn party Command threw for us the other night, remember? Eddie looked as healthy as a wax candle, didn’t he? One minute he’s king of the British Empire, and the next he’s assigned as governor of the stinking Bahamas! And all because of a woman.”

“You sound bitter, mate,” Baker had the nerve to say.

Jack shrugged. “Never let them get under your skin, that’s my motto. Women. Nothing but trouble.”

Baker took his time chewing on his piece of gum. "I disagree with you--"

"Captain!" Flannery called from his position. "There's something out there at two o'clock high."

A luminous mist appeared high in the sky, growing larger with each passing second. By all that was holy, what in Christ's name was it? Silvery grey, this cloud or fog ominously spread in all directions, blocking out the sun, ocean,... damn, even the horizon itself.

"What the hell?" As Jack glanced at his instruments, his heart almost lurched out of his chest. Never mind the damn cloud, the magnetic compass on the control panel spun like crazy!

Baker confirmed the malfunctioning compass, then heaped on more bad news. "Gyros and locators not working. All flight instruments out. Whatever this is, Captain, we're in for a rough ride."

Flashes of purple lightning vividly seared across the sky in front of them. Or what would have been the sky had everything not blended together in a sea of shimmering grey haze. The very air hung heavy with the acrid stench of burned ozone and octane gasoline.

Almost as one, the crew broadcasted their terror through the intercom. Navigation no longer was sure of their position. The flight engineer doubled over with vertigo. Damn it all, everyone even started to take on a strange greenish glow.

Christ, what was going on?

Through the crackling of heavy static, Ned's voice radiated his panic over the airwaves. "'Sweet Revenge', this is 'Fly... Mamba'. Good God, Johnny, what... happening to you ...? Disappearing right before... eyes! Where the... What's happen... Over!"

Then... there was nothing. Nothing at all. Disorientation and an odd sense of separation from self enveloped Jack. For all he knew, they'd been cut off from civilization, plucked from the sky, and tossed out into a vast cosmic dumping ground.

A wave of nausea hit at the same time a tremendous gravitational force yanked the B-17 deeper into the cloud. Watkins lay unconscious next to his radio. Baker slumped down on the malfunctioning controls, his blazing blue eyes hidden in the shadow of his thinning blond hair. No crew member made a sound. Only the roar from the turbo engines disturbed the eerie quiet of their unnatural grey cocoon.

Jack had one last thought before passing out. "End of the line for us, ol' girl. Too bad we couldn't fly more missions." He spoke to the bomber as it continued its flight without benefit of pilot.

"May God have mercy on our souls."

Chapter One

Present Day

Gramps was dying. He knew it, and she knew it. Larissa Parish sat next to him on the bed and lifted his age-mottled hand to her cheek.

“I’m here, Gramps. Just flew in.” She tenderly gazed at his sleeping face, painfully aware that soon he would be gone. Totally and completely gone.

Blinking back tears, she adjusted her tortoise-shell eyeglasses, tucked the homemade comforter under his chin, then leaned over to kiss the top of his balding head. She *was not* going to cry. Getting away from her job had been darn difficult, but she didn’t travel over 2,200 miles for Gramps to see swollen eyes and a reddened nose.

“Are your arms tired?” His voice wavered, but his eyes retained their mischievousness. “Quite a flight from Baltimore to Great Falls.”

“Gramps! That joke’s ancient!” Despite her grief, Larissa smiled at the old man who had been such an important influence on her--as an adult and as a child.

Dad had died young, leaving an all female household. Mom had coped as best as she could, but with three young girls in varying stages of development, she often left the youngest one, Larissa, in his capable hands.

Now frail and weak, Gramps lay motionless under the covers as if even that scant weight was too heavy for him to tolerate. A slight odor of camphor filled the air, probably from an applied ointment to ease the pain from his weary body.

She quickly sobered up. “I brought you some flowers. Carnations.”

The floral scent and the carnations’ fringed petals did much to bring a bit of cheer to the sick room. She held the bouquet for Gramps to sniff.

“Mom told me... you weren’t doing well.”

“Thank you, child. I’ve been better. But I appreciate your coming.” His raspy coughing racked more than his emaciated frame. The bedposts actually shook. “Here, let me look at you. Just the sight of you does a body good. Heaven on earth!”

With effort obvious in every movement, he sat up and slowly sank back against the pillows. Lifting a long lock of her hair, he tut-tutted. “Pretty as a picture, but you still hide behind that mane of hair of yours. Larry, you’ve got to fix yourself up. Go to the beauty parlor. Get a permanent. Get contact lenses instead of those heavy-framed eyeglasses, why don’t you?”

Not comfortable with society’s rigid ideal of beauty, Larissa never paid attention to the cruel whimsy of fashion. Growing up in Montana, she didn’t have to worry about New York’s Madison Avenue dictates on what was in or out.

Besides, where she worked, beauty definitely was not an asset. To get ahead, a person had to use her brains--no ifs, ands, or buts about that.

Another coughing fit stopped Gramps’ list of her deficiencies. “Child, I’m afraid you’ve

dithered too long. I'm not going to be able to keep my promise to you, like I did with your sisters."

Try as she might, Larissa couldn't keep her throat from thickening. And her eyes stung with unshed tears. She had to keep her composure. She just *had* to. Glancing around his airy bedroom, so chockfull of mementos from bygone days, she settled her gaze on the bureau where a treasured photo of his World War II bomber squadron was displayed.

"Larry? Are you okay?"

Sniffing, she turned away from him, took a deep breath, then faced him with a smile. He was the one dying, and he was concerned about *her*.

She swallowed her sadness. "I'm fine, Gramps. What promise are you talking about?"

"Why, to walk you down the aisle for your wedding! Don't you remember? I promised all you girls that, right after your dad passed on. Of course, Molly and Ellen were older, but you were just five."

Animation sparkled the green of his eyes. Green, the color of an emerald rainforest. She inherited her brilliant eyes from him.

"Good God, girl," he scolded. "You're a full twenty-eight years old! Why haven't you married? In my day, a girl that old was on the shelf--"

More coughing.

From a pitcher, she poured water into a cup and held it to his lips. "Drink, Gramps. You need it."

She filled another cup and also gulped down lemon-flavored water. "Don't worry about me not being married. I've looked around, believe me. No guy can measure up to you."

Marriage was something she had no interest in, anyway. She liked her life just the way it was: all work and very little play. The closest thing she had to a family life was when she took the time to fly back to Great Falls for her occasional role as maiden aunt to four nieces and nephews.

Larissa mentally corrected herself. *Single* aunt was more precise than maiden.

As Gramps shook his weary head, he sighed. "Kissing butt, as usual, Larry! Tell me, do you butter everyone up at that hush-hush government job of yours?"

As a signals analyst with the National Security Agency, Larissa's job wasn't to "kiss butt," as Gramps crudely put it. She spent her days... and very often nights studying and decoding some of the millions of electronic communications generated around the world. Maintaining national security was never more of a challenge than it was right now. Her agency's purpose was to protect the country's information systems and to collect and decipher foreign intelligence. No insignificant task.

In fact, her work was more of a life's mission than a job, so having a husband just wasn't part of the equation. Besides, men had a habit of loving and leaving. Not only had she experienced that tendency first hand, but also watched her older sisters suffer through infidelity as well.

Before she had a chance to answer, Gramps held her gaze and squeezed her hand with surprising strength. "Larissa, I want you to promise to do something for me. My last request."

Gramps never called her "Larissa" unless it was really serious.

"Promise me, child," he continued. "I've thought of nothing else these past few days."

"Of course, Gramps. Anything--"

"I want you to scatter my ashes in a particular spot in the Caribbean."

Oh my gosh.

Words of surprise couldn't get passed the lump in her throat.

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Gramps waved an unsteady hand. "Morbidity, and all that. And, well, I know we've all depended on you too much, child, being the most responsible one and such. But you're just the girl to do this. Anyway, can't ask Molly--she's a sickly thing. And Ellen's had it pretty rough with the divorce. So I'm asking you, Larry."

Larissa stared off into space. Death was never an easy topic to discuss.

"Larry, I truly want this. Remember me telling you about Johnny--the best friend a man could have? He always said I was his good luck charm." Gramps gave a slow chuckle. "That's him in the picture, next to me."

Slipping her glasses down on her nose, she looked again at the black and white photo of the bomber squadron. Close to a young Nat Terrell, stood a tall, dark, hunky guy, and by his devilish grin, she could tell he had no shortage of self-confidence. Typical pilot. Just like Gramps! In fact, machoism was probably part of a pilot's job description.

Gramps patted her hand. His touch felt warm and reassuring. "Did I ever tell you how the plane Johnny and five airmen were in, 'Sweet Revenge', actually disappeared right before my eyes?"

Not trusting her vocal cords, she nodded. Even as a child, the mystery of the vanishing plane had titillated her imagination.

He related the story again, anyway. "They were on their way to Bermuda. I was in the other plane, 'Flying Mamba'. I heard them squawk about their instruments running amok, and watched them vanish into nothingness. God, I went crazy searching for them. Later, Headquarters sent plane after plane out after them, but no dice."

Gramps sighed. "Well, I never told anyone this. All these years, and I never breathed a word. Guilty, I guess, in view of what happened. You see, without Johnny knowing, I requested time off to go back stateside. 1943, it was. We were in Nassau at the time. Your granny, bless her heart, had sent me an SOS. She wrote me that she was pregnant, and we, well, you know, we weren't married."

"Gramps, you little devil!" Funny how she'd known him all her life, yet here was an unsuspected side of him. And of Grandma, too.

"Yeah, well, I had a reputation back then, as did Johnny. I always called him Johnny boy!" The grin on Gramps' face tickled Larissa more than his unexpected news. "But I

loved your granny, so I did right by her when I got home on leave. We settled here in Great Falls, next to the Air Force Base... Malmstrom now, and she straightened me out. Yeah, she stuck by me, all those years. What a sainted woman she was."

Gramps wiped a tear from his eye. "I've got to tell you though, Larry. Granny saved my life. If she hadn't written me about her condition, I would've co-piloted that bomber. Disappeared with the rest of the boys." His eyes lost their focus. "For more years than you have to your name, I've been walking around here as guilty as sin."

"No, Gramps. You can't feel guilty. What was meant to happen, happened."

He shrugged, setting off another round of coughing. His insides must've felt like a punching bag.

"Anyways, hell, I figure my ashes should be scattered in the same spot theirs are. I've got the coordinates. It'd be a type of 'coming home party.'"

For a long moment he was quiet. "Will you do it, child? Will you promise?"

Wow. The reality of impending death hit her full and square in the midsection.

Willing her lips to keep from trembling, she smoothed his remaining grey hair off his brow. "Of course, Gramps. You know I'll do it."

As he'd said: she was the responsible one. But she fought off a shudder just the same. "But I'll make a deal with you. Let's postpone this trip for as long as possible, okay?"

"Larry, you're such an optimist. Always were." Gramps gave a faint smile. "I'll do my best."

A gentle sigh, a fluttering of his eyelids, and soon he was sound asleep.

Larissa silently blew him a kiss, then tiptoed from the bedroom. The shudder that she had so successfully squelched before, returned to rattle through her, shaking her teeth. For she had promised her grandfather to do the very thing that she had always feared more than anything else in the world.

She gulped down pure terror. It had a bitter taste. The scattering of ashes wasn't the problem, but the journey itself was, traveling to that spot in the Atlantic. Or Caribbean. Or wherever the heck it was that the bomber had disappeared.

All that ocean and one tiny boat.

Oh my God!

Hunched over, she fought an attack of the dry heaves. Goodness, her skin must've turned a nauseous shade of green. There was no other way to get to Gramps' intended gravesite. Not by plane, car, train, bicycle; no, nothing else. It had to be by boat, over miles and miles of deep, endless sea.

Larissa bit her lip, inadvertently drawing blood. Sometimes a person had to face her demons head on--whether she wanted to or not. Well, this was going to be one of those times for her. She *didn't* have a choice. One day, very soon, she'd have to entrust her life to a rickety, floating bath toy, maneuvering through deadly waters filled with sharks, seaweed, and brine.

She took a long breath to calm herself, then wiped the sweat from her palms. Okay, bravery didn't come easily. This was something she'd have to work on every second while out on the open sea.

The important thing here was to do this for Gramps.

Gramps. Tears, long denied, now flooded her eyes. Dear Gramps wouldn't be with her much longer.

Avoiding her mother who was downstairs baking cookies in the kitchen, Larissa headed for the spare bedroom to indulge in a good cry.

* * * *

Standing on the deck of the forty-three foot luxury yacht "Adolphus," Larissa held onto the railing with clenched fists. As the yacht cut through the dark waters of the Atlantic, salt water spray cooled her bare arms even as the sun, high in the sky, relentlessly sizzled down on her. Perfect weather for late April, perhaps even ideal. Certainly it was a boater's delight.

But all she could think about was the deep, bottomless ocean. As crazy as it sounded, she'd have given anything in the world to be safe back at her workstation in Fort Meade, Maryland, pouring over computer printouts of electronic signals!

"Hey, Larry! Care for a swim? I'll help you overboard!" Abigail Abernathy fluffed up her stylishly coiffured golden head of short curls and made her way over to the railing.

With a viselike grip, she grabbed Larissa's upper arm and yanked her toward the watery grave below.

"Thanks, but no thanks."

Disengaging herself from her friend's unyielding hands, Larissa had to wonder whether Abby had been serious or not. One never really knew with Abigail. Physically, she was perfection personified, but well, the facts had to be faced: she could be a stone-cold bitch.

"You're no fun." Abby turned her back on the vast expanse of sea, to bathe her full-figured, bikini-clad body in the sun. "This whole trip is turning out to be a bore. Can't we just dump your grandfather's ashes now and head straight for Nassau? I mean, honestly, he won't know the difference, and I just can't wait to hit the casinos."

Larissa tightened a fastening on her lifejacket--just to make sure it didn't come undone--then walked on the deck to the pewter funerary urn where Gramps' remains rested. She didn't take Abby's words personally. After all, it had been Abby who so generously offered the means to carry out Gramps' last wish--by using her brother's yacht.

Then again, she probably just wanted a vacation from the agency.

"Avery says we'll be at the right spot soon, Abby. Ten more minutes or so." Larissa checked her favorite Star Trek watch. Funny how time had no meaning out here on the open sea. "Your brother also asked me to convince you to wear your lifejacket, but I told Avery no one on earth had the power to make you do something you didn't want to do."

“True, true.” Abby pouted her ruby-red lips. “But you’re no slouch in that area either, Larry. How long has it been that we’ve known each other, two years now? And how many times have I told you Avery is just dying to go out with you? He’s a millionaire, you silly little fool. Why, if you’d just snap your fingers, he’d be yours for the taking. And then we’d be sisters!”

Larissa couldn’t resist a dig. “Maybe that’s exactly why I’ve never dated him.”

Caressing the smooth surface of the urn’s classical Greek design, she turned around to stare out at the ocean. If a girl was looking for a flaxen haired, hazel-eyed Adonis, well, she supposed Avery was okay, in an overbearing way. But as a lifetime partner?

She silently shook her head. No, Avery and his luxury yacht held no appeal. At least, not for her. And besides, what would he want with a no-frills, near-sighted, work-oriented, computer nerd?

Well, no-frills except for her rosy lacquered toenails. She gazed down at her toes and wiggled them. Every woman had a weakness: a pretty foot was hers.

For her levity, she received a punch on the arm.

“There, that’s what you get for disappointing me. As if I could believe you wouldn’t want me as your sister.” Abby punched the same spot again. “I’m not going to give up hope, though. Still plenty of time left on this *pleasure* trip to change your mind. Honestly, Larry, why do you think he agreed to take us here, anyway? We may be siblings but Avery never does anything from the goodness of his heart.”

She batted her lashes. “Like I do.”

Facing into the wind, Larissa adjusted her prescription sunglasses as the breeze whipped back her hair. The sound of waves splashing against the hull of the yacht, the smell of briny sea water, and the cool ocean mist hovering over her body--the sea reached out and touched her soul, using the five senses as an intimate lover. It was heaven here, truly heaven, except... it would’ve been infinitely better if they’d had their feet planted on terra firma.

“Why do you hate being on the water?” Abby’s curt voice cut through Larissa’s meanderings.

Larissa sighed. It was so hard to put into words the primordial fear she’d had ever since childhood.

“Well, it has something to do with the depth, I think. When I was a kid, just the thought of going down and down... without finding bottom would turn me into a blithering idiot. After all, the nearest ocean was about a thousand miles away from Great Falls.” She shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe I had a past life where I drowned, like those people on the Titanic.”

“Hmnm.” Abby stroked her chin as if her thoughts were on another topic. “Ooh, here comes Avery. Come on, take off that lifejacket and let him see what a cute bathing suit you have on.”

Abby usually didn’t approve of Larissa’s wearing apparel. She glanced down at her grey

spandex suit, but most of it was hidden by the floatation device. If Abby liked it, maybe it showed too much skin.

“Too bad it’s not a bikini, Larry.” Determined to have her own way, Abby pulled on the lifejacket strap.

“Abby, cut it out.” Larissa slapped at her friend’s intrusive hands.

Goodness, maybe she should’ve gone ahead and rented a darn boat no matter what the cost. Sometimes Abigail Abernathy could be one huge pain in the neck. Although they often commuted together from the small community of Odenton, Maryland, thankfully they also didn’t work together at Fort Meade. Obviously too many hours in each other’s company put an uncomfortable strain on their friendship.

“This is the spot, ladies. Halfway between Nassau and Bermuda.” Avery Abernathy, skipper of the “Adolphus,” extended his lanky arm out to encompass the ocean as far as the eye could see.

About an inch shorter than six feet, he was an imposing male, with a wavy mane of burnished hair and a low brow resting over hazel eyes. Whether he was romantically interested in Larissa or whether that was a figment in his sister’s imagination was unknown. Just going by outward appearances, she would have thought he preferred glitzy, glamour types. But he’d always behaved appropriately toward her.

“The crew will be cutting the engines right about... now.” On cue, the engines went dead. Pleased, Avery winked at her.

Overwhelming silence assaulted their ears. The engines quieted and the yacht now motionless, this noiseless state was too eerie to be normal. No birds, no insects, not even the wind disturbed this absence of sound.

He leaned on the railing and gave her an easy smile. “Glad my schedule was free so I could help you out, Larry. I know how hard it is for you to get away from that critical job of yours.”

She returned his smile. “Thanks again, Avery. I can’t tell you how much this means to my family.”

Most people didn’t understand the importance of electronic surveillance, including Mom. Nearly every telephone call back home ended with her denigrating Larissa’s job and pleading for her to return to Montana.

No earthly way. Early on, she decided not to go Molly and Ellen’s route. Perhaps that was why Larissa had pushed herself so hard in school: to get a ticket out of Mom’s small town mentality.

But Mom wasn’t the only one who had a grudge against the agency. More often than not, daily newspapers included at least one article by critics claiming the agency’s resources were used to spy on civilians and conduct economic espionage. Total hogwash, of course. Why couldn’t they understand protecting classified information and decoding enemy messages were so very vital to U.S. security? Still, it was a pleasant relief to be in the company of someone who appreciated her and her colleagues’ work.

But right now, her work involved something even more important than intercepted conversations, communiqués, and other electronic transmissions.

Avery removed his captain's hat as a sign of respect. "It's up to you, Larry."

Abby also turned to face the ocean and sobered her expression.

Right. Perhaps Larissa raised the pewter urn to the sky too eagerly, but she couldn't wait for the yacht to start up again. A zillion miles from land, it was unnaturally quiet floating on top of the sea.

"Gramps," she called out, her voice radiating into the distance. "Gramps, do you hear me? We miss you here, but as you wanted, your last wish is about to be carried out. Your ashes are now mingled with your missing friends."

Unscrewing the silvery lid, she said a brief blessing, then poured the remains into the ocean.

"Are you going to throw in the urn, too?" Abby asked.

"No, I think I'll keep it--"

The sea had other ideas. The boat abruptly lurched to the side, causing Larissa to lose her balance... and the urn. The urn's shiny top and base hit the water with a savage splash to slowly filter down and down and down.

Watching helplessly, she started shivering.

"Honestly, what's going on, Avery?" Abby hung on to the railing as the crest of a wave crashed against the wooden deck, soaking all three of them.

"I don't know." His simple words conveyed his confusion. "Let me tell the crew to--"

"Compasses don't work!" shouted a voice from the cabin.

Then suddenly, ominously, a grey cloud rolled in, overshadowing the pristine blue sky with hurricane-speed winds. Pulsating dark purple lights split the heavens, producing flashing, jagged lightning. A mechanical, burned-out odor filled the nautical air. Because the yacht was without power, it tossed and pitched on waves which had risen without provocation.

Good God! What was happening?

Terror radiated from Avery's golden eyes. "Larry, Abby, get inside the cabin! And Abby, you put on a lifejacket, pronto."

Fighting the force of gravity which so desperately wanted to throw her into the ocean, Larissa moved away from the railing to take hold of Avery's strong hand. Would her age-old nightmare finally be coming true? Would she soon plummet downward, headfirst into the water?

She shook off her panic. No time to think about that; she had to concentrate on her actions. Avery's hand was warm, a lifeline between her and the ocean. But, as he pulled her toward him, another wave, humongous in size, smashed into the boat and plucked her from his grasp.

Airborne. Weightless.

For a few precious moments, she was lifted up, while her sunglasses took off in the opposite direction. Helplessly flying up into the air, she struggled to return to the yacht. But that was not to be.

The last thing she heard before hitting the turbulent seas was Abby screaming her name.

Then nothing. The bitter cold of the water came as a shock, but not as much as the realization that her life would soon be over.

A kind of peacefulness settled through her even as her lungs struggled to cope without oxygen. A losing battle for her lungs, of course. Still, she faced her demons head on-- and won. She wasn't afraid anymore.

As the final bubble of air trickled from her mouth, Larissa smiled for the last time. At least she'd accomplished her goal in coming here... and now she'd be with Gramps for all eternity.



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