

Through the Looking Glass

A Red McKenna Novel

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Read this first chapter in the next installment of the Red McKenna Series.

Prologue

It was hot. The bodies stank of feces and urine. The big man had been putting up with this for hours, and figured there would be hours more before he could be picked up.

As you'd expect, doing the deed was the easy part. The hard part was getting away with it.

Where were the damn sharks when you needed them? There wasn't much else he could do until the sharks came.

Killing the men had been easy.

SCUBA diving to the bottom in the Straits of Florida, just West of the outer edge of the continental shelf, where the water was well over a hundred feet deep, they'd had no chance. They'd been so concentrated on digging that bell out of the sand, that they didn't notice he was no longer helping.

He backed away, and waited until they lined up side-by-side with their backs to him. A couple of cuts with his dive knife, and their air supply was history.

By the time they realized they were under attack, it was too late. There was no way they could live long enough to reach the surface.

Not when it was that deep.

He just swam a few tens of feet away, and watched them drown. When they stopped thrashing, they just settled slowly and peacefully to the bottom.

By that time, the air in their tanks was exhausted, and the boiling rush of air escaping through their severed lines had slowed to nothing. It was all peaceful and quiet.

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He'd have to work fast, though. Already, the bodies were beginning to drift with the current. Here, outside of the Gulf Stream proper and so close to the bottom, the current was pretty slow, but it was there.

He dragged the bodies individually over to the yellow line running from the mushroom anchor on the bottom up to the buoy dancing in the waves on the surface, and clipped their belts to it. At least he'd know where to find them.

Then, he swam back to police up the site. There wasn't much. They'd done all their survey work, sent off their data, and just came out for one last dive to pick up this bell.

There was nothing like a great honking chunk of brass with a name on it to cement your claim to having found a Spanish treasure ship worth

The big man didn't know how much it was worth, but it was more than he could spend in a few lifetimes.

At the last minute, the big man had offered to come along with them and help moose the bell out of the sand. It was now actually loose, just sitting in a depression on the bottom.

He'd pick it up later.

He didn't give a damn about salvage rights, or the historical significance of the wreck. He wanted those silver ingots, and no questions asked.

With the bell gone, the wreck would be a lot harder to identify if somebody else found it. He figured he'd have years to locate the holds, and pull ingots up one or a few at a time. It would be like his own private retirement fund.

* * *

He knew Wheeler, the Harvard professor the corpses worked for.

Wheeler would get so choked up about his post-doc students

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drowning that he'd probably never come back to the wreck.

Nobody else would, either. It was a hundred-sixty feet down, well out of the range of amateur divers.

Wheeler would publish the location and identification – he had photos of the bell on the bottom with the ship's name clearly visible – so no other team of archeologists would try to excavate it without his permission.

It was safe from legal treasure hunters, too. You couldn't salvage the treasure without running crossways of the Federal Government, which by law owned all the unclaimed wrecks in U.S. territorial waters.

You could only do it illegally, and he would be first in *that* line. Come to think of it, he already was.

* * *

The only equipment left on the bottom was the air-powered dredge and the two air-lift bags the corpses had brought with them to help bring up the bell. They figured they'd need only one, but had brought two just in case.

That was lucky, because the big man could use those air lift bags to bring up the bodies. Getting them the last foot and a half over the gunwale into their launch would be the hard part.

He could handle it, though. He was strong from years of underwater salvage work. The kids had been tough and wiry, but not very heavy.

As young, active marine archeologists, they weren't very big, and had no body fat to speak of. He'd strip off their equipment before hauling them aboard.

They'd weigh practically nothing, then.

After retrieving the bodies and all of the equipment at the wreck site, the big man motored out in their launch past the continental shelf to where the bottom was several hundred feet

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down.

He then made sure to vent all the divers' tanks, and bundle the equipment so it would all sink to the bottom *en masse*, and stay there. Then, he dumped the lot.

Human bodies, however, aren't so easy to dispose of. For that, he needed the sharks.

He figured the best place to find them would be right along the continental shelf, where upwelling currents would feed a vibrant marine community, which would attract the sharks.

He'd been waiting and waiting with nary a fin in view. It was time to dump the bodies and hope the smell diffusing through the water would attract the sharks.

* * *

An hour later with still no sharks, the big man was becoming desperate. He cut a long slice in the side of his hand, from his little finger practically to the heel, which bled profusely. He then hung it over the side to drip into the water.

That did the trick! Within ten minutes, two sharks – no, three sharks – showed up to see what was what.

They quickly found the naked bodies floating in the water. Without questioning what two naked humans were doing floating in the Caribbean Sea, the sharks went to work cleaning up the mess. It was their job, and they did it as mechanically as a janitor mopping up a floor.

They didn't whistle a merry tune, as a janitor might, but it's hard to whistle when you're a shark.

The big man had bound his still-bleeding hand in a handkerchief as soon as he saw the sharks approaching. He wished he'd been faster because two of the monsters glided right past his hull – right through the dilute cloud of blood in the water – before discovering the naked bodies.

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His heart rate did not get back to normal until he was sure the sharks had finished their work. Then, he'd skedaddled out of there.

The big man had barely enough fuel left to reach the rendezvous point to be picked up. He then pointed the launch's bow toward the middle of the Gulf Stream, and sent it off at idle. It would run out of fuel not far to the East, and then drift with the 'Stream.

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