

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. At the bottom of 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 even 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.

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, but it was more than he could spend in a few lifetimes.

At the last minute, the big man had offered to come along 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 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. Wheeler would get so choked up about his post-doc students 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 actually 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 the launch would be the hard part.

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 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 the two monsters glided right past his hull – right through the dilute cloud of blood in the water – before discovering the naked bodies. His heart rate did not get back to normal until he was sure the sharks had finished their work, and he 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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It was late May.

Red (aka Judith McKenna) was settled into her life as a telecommuting computer jock. Every morning, she got up at seven o'clock in her Boston apartment, and worked out in her weight room for an hour. She was still keeping her six-foot, three-inch body in top form in hopes of making the Olympic tennis team next time around, instead of just being an alternate.

After her workout, she took a shower, then ate a light breakfast while her computer booted up. She then gave herself one half hour to scan the morning newspaper before jumping into email. She'd acquired Doc Manchek's *Wall Street Journal* habit, and had it delivered outside her door with a guarantee that it would be there before she woke up.

Morning chores done, she'd immerse herself in the nuances of Doc's Wavelet program, trying to understand what he'd designed it to do, and how. At noontime, weather permitting, she relaxed for a half hour sunbathing nude behind the ten-foot privacy fence on her roof.

Fixing a light lunch afterward, she'd spend the afternoon working on the Web interface she was developing as the front end for Wavelet. It was the job Doc's company, Scottsdale Systems Technology, had hired her to do – in between managing short-term development projects for various SST clients, such as the Department of Defense.

All the while, she tried not to think about her disappointing weekend in Santa Clara with Greg, or the fact that she hadn't a clue what to do for her Ph.D. thesis, despite her supervisor Patricia Dacy's daily telephone calls cajoling her to get off her freckled behind, and at least pick a school to apply to. Except for her weekly Saturday chores, she hadn't been out of the apartment for nearly two months.

After helping her solve the mystery of her father's disappearance, Doc had, true to his word, flown her home from SST headquarters in Scottsdale, Arizona to Boston in his new plane – an experimental two-place private jet he'd designed with state-of-the-art technology, such as thrust vectoring, not available on other private aircraft. He "forced" her to log flight time as pilot in command, while teaching her cross-country navigation skills. He had not had to tie her up to do it, but kiddingly asked her if she wanted him to.

She secretly enjoyed the notoriety of having – before ever taking her private pilot’s written exam – logged more time as pilot in command of a high-performance, complex, *jet* aircraft than most private pilots log in their entire lives.

Pat had arranged for her to complete her undergraduate courses by passing final exams after studying the material on her own. Trying to get anything out of the last three weeks of her senior year as an applied-mathematics major at Harvard, after a month chasing ghosts around the southern tier of states plus a week’s R&R on her stepfather’s hundred-foot motoryacht in Florida, was useless.

She went home, pulled out her textbooks, threw some homework assignments in the mail, and aced the final exams. Done. Complete. End of story. She was officially a Harvard graduate.

She kinda liked that. It had a ring to it, but she promised herself to lose the accent.

Anyway, every day Red stopped working on Wavelet promptly at five o’clock (except when she found herself making *really* good progress, which meant she was really having fun and kept going until way past her bedtime), and prepared a sumptuous dinner. As often as not, she called Doc’s houseman, Sam, in Scottsdale to compare recipes, get cooking advice, or just chat.

Between phone calls to Sam, her mom, her friend and assistant Bonnie at SST’s main office (ostensibly about progress on development of her deceased natural father’s mine, but mostly to gossip about goings on among her friends at SST), and to her protoge, Gwen (about Gwen’s progress as a robot programmer; Doc wasn’t working her too hard, was he?; how was Eve? Were they still passionately in love?), she felt no need for additional outside contact.

Every day or so, Doc found an excuse to call Red up. His usual excuse was to check on Wavelet progress, but he always spent most of the conversation on other things. Was she working out enough? He gently urged her to get out more. She needed to practice on the new red Triumph motorcycle she’d bought to match the leathers he’d bought her ‘way back in Daytona, Florida, when she thought he was just some random motorcycle bum who’d stopped to help when her car broke down, instead of the multi-millionaire technical genius he turned out to be. That was before he’d completely changed her life.

Doc always ended by reminding her that she still had a desk at SST any time she wanted to move back to the Valley of the Sun. Red recognized it for what it was: a veiled renewal of his open invitation for her to marry him any

time she chose to.

Instead, she treated him like an older brother, pestering him about what projects he was working on. How was the Worm-robot development project coming? And, she made sure to get the latest scuttlebutt about whom he was dating.

She liked to compare whom he was *actually* dating, which was mostly female Arizona State University physics and astronomy grad students, to the litany of supermodels he was linked to in the supermarket tabloids. She'd glance at the tabloids every Saturday morning when she did her grocery shopping for the week. If there was a story about Doc, she'd bring a copy home. Doc did actually meet the supermodels, and actually escorted one or two to charity events that would have bored the ASU grad students to tears.

Red got a kick out of the occasional tabloid article speculating about where she'd disappeared to after making national headlines tracking down and capturing the serial killer who'd gotten his start ten years earlier by shooting her father, and why she was in seclusion. By holing up in her apartment, she'd tried to make herself uninteresting to paparazzi, but with only limited success.

Saturday was her day to go out. She did enough shopping Saturday morning to carry her through the week. Then, she'd drive her motorcycle to the airport for a couple of hours of flying lessons. She took these at a little rural airstrip well away from the congestion surrounding Boston's Logan International Airport.

Often, she'd end up at a biker bar she knew on the way back to Boston. It was mostly a Harley crowd, but nobody was going to harass the beautiful, tall redhead, who just wanted to dance and have fun. She always came alone, would dance with anyone, and left alone.

She studied for her Federal Aviation Administration written exam on Sunday. SST had supplied her with a set of CDs carrying a complete self-study course, which she enjoyed very much. She expected to take the test for her private pilot license in a couple of more weeks. Then, she'd start studying for the written test for her instrument rating, and then her commercial ticket. It would take longer to pass her flight tests, but she had time. Doc had made it quite clear that he planned to move her up the ladder at SST, and gaining experience as a test pilot was to be part of her training.

On the other hand, Red's stepfather, Mark Shipton, wanted her to eventually take over his privately held oil company. For now, what she learned at SST would help her run Gulf States Petroleum later, but everyone knew that Doc

and Mark would eventually arm wrestle over her career track.

Red didn't care who won the arm-wrestling. *She'd* decide what she was going to do when the time came, anyway. But it gave her a warm, fuzzy feeling to know that her favorite stepfather and her *ersatz* big brother both wanted her by their sides enough to compete for her.

Life had settled into these greased grooves, when the doorbell rang at approximately quarter to ten on a Tuesday morning. It startled her because the doorbell hadn't rung since April, when Mark's security consultant had shown up to upgrade her system.

The doorbell rang a second time while Red tried to remember how to call up the feed from the video camera the security guy had set up outside her door. She got it squared away just as the busty blonde wearing a black leather jacket and carrying a knapsack over her shoulder pressed the doorbell for the third time.

"Cheryl?" Red asked into the microphone, recognizing the face on the screen as that of her freshman roommate. Unlike a lot of college roommates, they'd actually been close friends.

Seeing Cheryl brought back memories of how much fun they'd had exploring the Boston area together. Red had grown up in Maryland, and Cheryl had lived in a small city on the Massachusetts North Shore, near the New Hampshire border. Rooming together in Cambridge had been the first time either had lived in a major city. At the time, they'd been practically inseparable.

Their friendship was neither strange, nor coincidental. They'd noticed each other while waiting in the long, interminable lines outside the registrar's office on the first day of registration, when they had to do everything from getting their student ID cards to registering for their first classes.

It's not surprising that they got together, since they were both unusually tall – for women – and both tended to be tomboys. In a world where tomboys are the exception rather than the rule, they gravitated together.

Red's tomboyishness arose from spending so much time with her adventuresome father when she was little. Cheryl's mentor had been her brother, who was seven years her senior. When Cheryl heard about Red's father disappearing, they became instant soul sisters because Cheryl's older brother had been lost while diving on a wreck off

Florida. His body had never been found, either.

Unlike Red, who'd grown up missing her father, Cheryl's grief was fresh. Her brother had disappeared only a year before. She still had crying fits when something reminded her of him.

Before the ink was dry on the dorm assignments, they'd insisted on being reassigned to share a room. They had, however, drifted apart when Red moved into her own apartment after their freshman year. Cheryl became immersed in her archeology major, and Red studied applied math, so they no longer had classes in common. Red hadn't seen Cheryl in over a year.

"Yeah, Judy. Can I come in?" Cheryl was the only person in the Universe, beside her mom, that Red allowed to call her "Judy."

"A woman named Pat Dacy at Scottsdale Systems Technology in Arizona said I should talk to you," Cheryl continued. "She seems to think you have the answer to my research problem."

"Sure," Red replied. Rather than trying to figure out how to use the system to buzz Cheryl in, Red bounced over to the door, and pulled it open for her long-lost friend.

When Red appeared at the door, Cheryl's eyes popped. "Hey, girl. You grew *muscles*."

Surprised by the greeting, it took Red a couple of seconds to realize that she hadn't worn a stitch of clothing since Saturday, and she was still stark naked. It was warm, she lived alone, and felt more comfortable nude, anyway. Cheryl was studying every freckle covering every ripple of muscle.

It was too late to cover up, now, and there wasn't anything Cheryl hadn't seen before – except perhaps Red's more mature muscles. Red's freckles were the same, except no longer showing tan lines.

"I'll take that as a complement, I think," Red replied. She pulled Cheryl inside and closed the door quickly, even though she occupied the whole top floor, and so was unlikely to accidentally flash any of the neighbors.

"Sorry to be flashing you like this," Red apologized. "I live alone, and forgot to cover up before answering the door. If you'll wait a minute, I'll go put something on."

“Don’t on my account. You know I prefer skin, too, but I share an apartment with a bunch of prudes, so I don’t get to wear it, much.”

“You used to be so skinny,” Cheryl observed, inspecting Red like a side of beef. “You were like a toothpick with boobs. Actually, more like a shish-kabob skewer with boobs, you were always so tall. You’ve filled out nicely!”

“So, what’ve you been feeding this thing?” she asked, patting Red’s fiery pubic bush familiarly.

It was the same old Cheryl: frankly and unashamedly raunchy. Red had always enjoyed that trait in Cheryl despite, or perhaps because, she tended to act more reserved, herself. Cheryl brought out a side of her that she enjoyed taking out of the closet, but seldom found the opportunity to. It was more fun when shared with friends. Come to think of it, it was the same side she liked exhibiting around Doc.

“Not much, recently,” Red admitted. “I’ve had a couple of bad relationships, and not much since.”

“We’ll have to fix that!” Cheryl said emphatically. “But, not now.”

“I assume you didn’t come here just to inspect my freckles,” Red opined. “What’s this research problem you have? How did you end up talking to Pat, and why did she send you to me?”

“Well, I can see that I *should* have come here to inspect your freckles, and should have done it sooner, but you’re right. I started calling SST last week because I’d heard that they had a program that might help me map how currents affect underwater debris fields.”

“Ahh! Wavelet! No wonder Pat sent you to me. My main job at SST is to find new and unusual applications for Wavelet in fields outside traditional fluid dynamics, and figure out how to make the software accessible to scientists and engineers outside the computational fluid dynamics discipline – CFD for short. ‘So, that’s why you came to Tuco!’”

“What?”

“It’s a game I play with Doc Manchek, the guy who wrote Wavelet in the first place. We both like to play around with literary trivia. That one was from Sergio Leone’s *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*.”

“Oh, yeah. I saw that. You haven’t changed much. You always were the smartest one in the room, even when the

room was full of professors.”

“Don’t exaggerate. Besides, I’m not the smartest one in the room when Doc’s around.”

“Hey, you’re in love with him! I can tell by the sparkle in your eye when you talk about him.”

“No, we’re more like big brother and little sister.”

“Bullshit! I can see your nipples getting hard.”

“Stop it, or I *will* get dressed.”

“Okay. Just funnin’.”

“So, what do you think you need Wavelet for?”

“Well, you remember that I got my degree in archeology, right?”

Red nodded.

“For my directed research class, I worked with this team that was doing underwater archeology. It’s the same team that my brother was working with when he drowned. We go down and excavate sunken wrecks, cities that have been submerged by sea-level rise, and so forth.”

Red nodded that she was still following.

“Well, after graduation, the professor offered me a research-assistant job. He suggested I do a Master’s thesis on how debris fields get to be the way they are.”

Red nodded again, waiting for the story to unfold.

“Most of the most interesting wrecks are ships that went down in storms. When ships go down in storms, however, their contents often end up getting spilled, then moved around by underwater turbulence on their way down. When that happens, we have thousands of bits scattered all over the bottom. What we’d like to do is be able to start from the debris field, which we see empirically, assume a turbulence, and work back to where the bits were in the ship when it

went down.”

“So, you need Tuco’s Wavelet program to solve the CFD problem to calculate the trajectories of all those little bits. What you may or may not know is that you also need Tuco’s ability to use fuzzy logic to deal with the chaotic turbulence field.”

“Fuzzy what?”

“Did you happen to discuss this problem with one Doctor Michael Always-Sticking-His-Nose-In Manchek at SST?”

“Yeah, he’s the one I started with. My professor had read about this Wavelet program, and said I should call him to find out if it could help us. Dr. Manchek passed me along to Pat, who asked me a bunch of weird questions, and said she’d get back to me. That was yesterday. This morning, she called back, and told me that the person who had the answer to my problem turned out to be my old fuck buddy, you! She said I should come over here to talk to you. It’s funny, though: she said I shouldn’t call ahead. She knew you’d be in, and I should just come over here and ring the doorbell. What’s that about?”

Red closed her eyes, and shook her head.

“It’s the kind of thing they’re always doing to me. I don’t know whether they do it to everyone else at SST, or whether they just like to pick on me. I know Doc likes to, and I’ll bet that ex-hippie grandma, Pat, gets a charge out of it, too.”

“Doc probably noticed that you were an archeologist from Harvard of approximately my age. He also noticed the fact that your problem seemed to require my particular talents to solve. So far, pretty straightforward.”

“But, this is where it starts to get thick,” Red warned. “Doc is a Zen sage who practices an obscure mental discipline that only a handful of people understand. Part of this discipline involves practicing the ability to see connections where other people just see coincidences. Doc doesn’t believe in coincidence.”

“He could have just sent you directly to me, but probably sent you to Pat, who’s his finder-of-all-information-about-people go-to gal, because he had a hunch about who you were. These hunches seem to just float down to him from

some cosmic interaction pool.”

“You make it sound like he’s some *Star Wars* Jedi knight, using The Force!” Cheryl laughed.

“Yeah, well, it’s really spooky to see him do it in front of you. It’s a nice plot device in a movie, but to see him do it in real life makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck. You start looking for where he’s hidden the mirrors!”

“Anyway,” Red continued, “Pat used that – probably about twenty four hour – period between the time she first talked to you, and when she called you back this morning, to check you out. By this time, she knows the name of your first grade teacher, your bust size, and more about you than you remember, yourself. She for damn sure knows that you and I were friendly enough to put vegetables in our cunts, and dance naked around our room to Bon Jovi records. I know that because she told me that she knew it about me, and she’s obviously made the connection to you.”

“Wait a minute,” Cheryl interrupted. “How’d you get all that out of the little I told you?”

“Because I practice the same Zen discipline Doc does,” Red replied ominously.

“Now,” Red continued, “we have to surmise what’s going on in their diabolical minds that made her want you to come over here to see me without the courtesy of a phone call.”

Red stopped a minute to let all those facts and inferences settle into a complete picture in her mind, with the gaps filled in by hypotheses marked in yellow highlighter. She stared at the floor with lips pursed, then suddenly nodded.

“There are two things those miscreants are trying to get me to do,” she explained. “One is to get out more, and see more people. Another is to find a problem for my Ph.D. thesis. I’m thinking that they’re thinking that they can kill two birds with one stone.”

“They know that there’s no way I could ignore your research problem. If I tried to do so, they’d simply point out that it is exactly the kind of thing they pay me to do, and order me to work with you on it. They don’t think they’ll need to because it’s what I told Doc I wanted to do before I knew who he was.”

“Hunh?”

“Don’t ask. It’s a long story that makes this one look straightforward. Some weekend, we’ll go down to

Provincetown, lie out on the nude beach with a bottle of wine, and I'll tell you the whole sordid tale.”

“Anyway. They knew that, one way or another, I'd put my heart and soul into your problem. They're also thinking that you'll drag me out of this apartment, and force me to meet people and have fun. They probably have a theory that your surprising me naked will make our renewing our friendship more likely. In fact, I'll bet Doc is trying to push me into a full-blown lesbian relationship with you.”

“What? Why?”

“I'll cut this short in the interest of actually accomplishing something on your project before next Thursday. I once told Doc that I wasn't a lesbian. I don't think he knew then about our private parties back in the Freshman dorm. I've never mentioned them to him, but I'm sure he's got copies of the grocery receipts on file by now. Or, at least Pat does. Who knows what information he had then?”

“Anyway, I told Doc I was not a lesbian. I said I liked men, which I do. A lot. He said that one day I'd be able to say with equal certainty how I feel about women. He said I just hadn't tried, yet, and until I did, I wouldn't know.”

“He sounds like a very smart man.”

“He is. Infuriatingly so,” Red concluded.

“So,” Red continued, “he hopes that by pushing you at my bed, he'll get me to check you out, and thereby find out about me.”

“Well, why make him wait?”

“Aw, shit! He's doing it, again. Why can't he ever be wrong? So, now it turns out that you're lesbian, or bi, or whatever, and he knew about it before I did.”

“Hey, girl, maybe those sessions had nothing to do with girl sex to you, but they did to me. I've always loved sex play with you, and I've always wanted you to stop playing, and do it for real. So, if your boyfriend wants me to make a woman out of you. Why not now?”

“Shit! No. I don't need this.”

“Why not? It’ll be fun!”

“He can’t always have it his way. Not on this,” Red said angrily, and stomped off to her bedroom.

Less than a minute later, she was back wearing a short wrap-around dress made of Chinese silk that came to just above her knees. It was probably the fastest thing to put on in Red’s closet, but Cheryl noticed that, although it would keep her from being arrested, it would still cause traffic accidents if she wore it walking down Charles Street.

“So, no playing. Judy’s turned over a new leaf,” Cheryl teased. She knew her friend too well to be more than slightly disappointed.

“Look,” Red pleaded, “I always liked playing with you, too, and after two months of nothing to love but my fist, I’m ready to fuck a chair. But, I’m at work right now. Maybe some other time.”

“By the way, Doc gave me a new nickname that I kinda like. I’d like you to use it, too. Please call me ‘Red.’”

“It suits you. Red. I like that.”

“Sometimes, though, I’m Mistress Judith.”

“Ohhh! Sounds kinky.”

“Right now, Mistress Judith insists that we tuck up our libidos, and think about the fuzzy logic of chaotic flow fields.”

“What?”

“See? You have much to learn, grasshopper.”